

## **FROM THE EDITOR: Stand against the madness**

June 28, 2009 6:00 AM

I drove to work Thursday morning and saw women from a local gardening club on their hands and knees, sprucing up the grounds at Peter Francisco Square in downtown New Bedford. Later, I talked with editors and reporters about a story concerning the theft of a New Bedford man's motorized wheelchair and the outpouring of generosity from people who wanted to make sure he got a new one.

And I smiled at Standard-Times reporter Curt Brown's yarn about Dartmouth's animal control officer Sandra Gosselin, who for years stopped traffic along Faunce Corner Road to allow a mother duck and her brood to cross the road safely.

I couldn't help but think how nice it all was. And I needed all that, just to balance the scales.

In New Bedford, hope and despair take turns with you. You walk on a sunny day at Buttonwood Park or Fort Taber, you see the kids playing basketball in a neighborhood park in the South End or watch a scalloper steaming out of the harbor and you find yourself believing in the possibilities of the place.

And then you remember that the past month also has seen a near-riot on Tallman Street and three killings, and you wonder what kind of place nurtures and sustains the violence that people do to one another here.

We can talk all we want about the economic development possibilities from the presence of UMass Dartmouth or the fledgling alternative energy industry that is developing here, but until we find a way to correct the social breakdowns that plague us, this community will never be what it should.

I do not know what to say to the 150 people who caused a near-riot when city police tried to ticket a kid on a mini-bike over on Tallman Street and then complained angrily because some got roughed up as people interfered with what police were doing. I don't know what to say to people who dump their trash in back of their homes or in the street because they have so little regard for themselves or others.

And I feel like a failure as a writer because I can find no meaning or explanation for the grotesque mayhem that has produced three deaths in less than three weeks. One man is dead because he tried to intervene in a North End bar fight and got clubbed from behind by suspected gang members. A 32-year-old got killed in a convenience store robbery on Coggeshall Street by a gunman who shot him and then ran off without so much as a nickel. And then a 41-year-old wound up dead at a VFW post because people took guns to a memorial gathering that was held to remember another victim of gun violence.

I shudder at the homemade shrines to the murdered young men of this city who have been become the pathetic icons of a culture that celebrates their deaths and too often ignored them in life.

I wish I had an answer for any of it, but I don't. I remember the summer of 2006, when I spent too many weekends in the newsroom working stories about the latest horror on the streets, and the fury I felt at the futility of it all.

I do not understand how people can let their 14-year-old sons and 13-year-old daughters hang on the street corner and raise so much hell that the neighbors are afraid to leave their apartments.

I do understand fear and menace, but I do not understand how entire neighborhoods can tolerate the drug-dealing, violent criminals who ruin entire streets for law-abiding people who are trying to earn a paycheck, pay the bills and raise their families.

Too many of us rail against the illegal immigrants who have moved here and work low-wage jobs to send money back home but tolerate the home-grown sociopaths who give an entire city a dark stain in the eyes of many people across the commonwealth.

The mayor and the City Council can fix the streets, clean up the litter and enforce the housing codes. The district attorney and the judges can try to lock up the thugs who have the illegal weapons. The churches, schools and social service agencies can try to show people that there is a better way. But unless we are willing to police ourselves, to demand more of ourselves and to stand together against the madness perpetrated against us, this will be a city where despair, not hope, carries the day.

Perhaps it will take an activist like Curtis Sliwa and his Guardian Angels to show us that we have the courage and the means to take back our streets. Perhaps it will require a mayor like Rudy Giuliani to test the limits of our civil liberties and authorize police to frisk and hassle the thugs who plague too many neighborhoods in this city.

But salvation always comes with a cost, and hope must be willing to pay it.

Bob Unger is editor of The Standard-Times. He can be reached by e-mail at [runger@s-t.com](mailto:runger@s-t.com) or by phone at (508) 979-4430.

undefined