

Boone: A Community of Peace?

Part 1 – Checking On Eligibility

For centuries, when Native American tribes journeyed into the High Country, they set aside their rivalries for the short season when the medicinal herbs that grew here could be harvested, according to Page Bryant in her 1994 self-published, “The Spiritual Reawakening of the Great Smoky Mountains”. In the 19th Century, some slaves who escaped from Piedmont plantations came to Jefferson Mountain near here to find a safe refuge. Even today, vacationers seek to escape the heat of summer and the frantic bustle of urban life by coming to Boone whether for a week or a season. Is Boone intrinsically blessed as a Community of Peace?

With our first drive down King Street last summer, my husband and I quickly got the impression that, while Boone seemed to be not a sleepy town, it certainly seemed a peaceful one. People are friendly and open. There’s little if any graffiti jarring and scarring public places. The ASU students’ Subarus, the locals’ pickups, and vacationers’ BMW’s seem to dance down Blowing Rock Road with perhaps an uncommon amount of mutual generosity. Is this apparent harmony only skin deep, or is Boone really an oasis of peace in what many consider to be a world of chaos and general meanness? With such questions in mind, I set out to see if I could find some answers.

“If there were such a thing as an award for recognizing a town as a Community of Peace, what qualifications would be used to determine that?” was the first question I posed as I met with a series of well-known Boone community leaders. Next I offered them an even more challenging question: “If Boone were nominated to receive such an award, what evidence would there be that it should – or should not - be considered eligible for such recognition?” I found a variety of perspectives when I spoke with:

- Boone’s Mayor, the Hon. Loretta Clawson
- Watauga County Sheriff, Len Hagaman, Jr.
- The City of Boone’s Chief of Police, Dana Crawford
- Director of the High Country United Way, Linda Slade
- Director of the High Country Council of Governments’ Workforce Development Division, Adrian Tate
- Director of ASU’s LGBT Center, Mark Rasdorf
- Co-founder of the Mountain Peacemakers organization, Joanna Weintraub
- Director of Development at Hospitality House, Todd Carter
- Local author and international speaker on peace, Robert Roskind, with local graphic artist, Tommy Lee

Somewhat predictably, the qualifications each proposed varied to some extent with their position. Chief Crawford and Sheriff Hagaman focused on the importance of security – physical, criminal, economic and even spiritual. Mayor Clawson and Mark Rasdorf pointed out the importance of adhering to civil discourse when contrasting views and values arise. “We’ve been raised here in the South to be

courteous,” the Mayor pointed out. “We don’t get in each other’s face. If there are uncomfortable differences we can’t resolve, we just avoid one another. People just get along well here.”

Overall, nearly everyone I spoke with felt that Boone should be considered as qualifying for the fictitious award I was proposing. Most pointed to the exceptionally low incidence of crime and violence we enjoy in this area compared to communities of similar demographics. Chief Crawford pointed to statistics in the 2012 Boone Police Crime Report which show murders – 0, rape – 0, business burglary – 0, arson – 0. “We have very few crimes against persons in Boone, and not even much against property,” he said. “What there is usually involves mixing anger and alcohol.” Whether it stems from effective law enforcement or a generally peaceful culture, many other communities would envy Boone’s quiet lifestyle.

When violence does occur in our community, whether by the hand of nature or man, the surge of aid and concern can be tremendous. Witness the spontaneous response of Boone residents to the slaying of Deputy Sheriff William Ronald Mast, Jr. last July. “We had so many people offering help to the deputy’s family and condolences to our whole department for the rest of the summer, it became... overwhelming, actually,” commented the Sheriff with a mix of pain and wonder on his face. He noted that real violence is so rare in Boone that people remember and speak of specific events for years afterwards. Could that be said of Chicago, I wondered?

Interfaith peace activism has not been very strongly supported in Boone, for the chief reason that it seems to be irrelevant here. According to the 2009 US Census, some 86% of Watauga County residents consider themselves to be Christian, yet there are also 18 other faith communities serving some 900 of our neighbors with spiritual paths that include Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Unitarian, Pagan, and even those who count themselves as non-religious. Several of these smaller groups have existed in Watauga County for decades, a testimony to mutual acceptance and something beyond tolerance of the diversity among us.

Mark Rasdorf felt that being a Community of Peace should require just such a constructive approach to difference, “Being a place where we celebrate all spiritual paths and treat each other with civility. A place with an active intent to cultivate peace and unconditional respect among people of all walks of life.” He noted that the gays, lesbians and trans-gender persons he works with on the ASU campus report little incidence of active homophobia either on campus or in the town. “The ‘organic nature’ of Boone seems to influence everyone,” he said. “People of similar values gather here. It leads to kindness in all people, and a pace of life that is less rushed.” Some might say that the “vibration” of this place both lends it to being a place of peace, and attracts only those who seek such a place.

That sense of being a place set apart from the rest of the world was mentioned by several I spoke with. People come here on purpose, whether for education, recreation or anticipation of a better life. If they can afford to live here, whether by wealth accumulated elsewhere or the ability to find adequate work, they unpack, settle in, and try to contribute who and what they are to the peaceful matrix of life they find in the High Country. Most both add to Boone’s remarkable character as a Community of Peace, and find themselves influenced by its positive lifestyle. Others, however, don’t find that to be the case. They experience the hole more than the doughnut – the not-so-peaceful shadow side of Boone. We’ll explore that dimension next Sunday in Part 2 of this series.

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Coordinator of United Religions Initiative, a global interfaith peacebuilding organization (www.uri.org) since 2008, and was active in Soviet-American Citizen Diplomacy. She is a member of the Boone Unitarian Universalist Fellowship where she will present a talk on the subject of Boone: A Community of Peace? on Sunday, January 27.