

Chimney Rock Demonstrates Why America Must Stay United

I remember a trip to Ireland. As we flew in, gazing down at the countryside below, the parcels of land were divided by stone walls, separating neighbor from neighbor, farm from farm.

But later, when I returned during harvest season, everything was completely different. The stalks of wheat were so tall that you couldn't see the stone walls anymore. Abundance concealed the divisions, and the countryside was verdant.

This came to mind recently as I was thinking about the state of our own nation. Post-election, I see little indication we are resolving our profound cultural, red-blue divide.

Search the internet, and you'll find advice on how to disown family members who voted differently than you did. When did politics become more important than loving your own family? Something's gone terribly wrong.

President John F. Kennedy famously proclaimed, "What unites us is greater than what divides us." A similar sentiment was expressed by Benjamin Franklin after he signed the Declaration of Independence, when he's reported to have said, "We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

As Russia, China, North Korea and Iran pose critical challenges to our nation, I wonder if that's still true. Have we forgotten that, ultimately, we're all in this American enterprise together? I fear we have.

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I believe the extraordinary relief efforts following this year's hurricanes offer America a shining example for the right way forward. Ministries and civic-minded corporations nationwide came together and worked around the clock to bring hope to the victims of Hurricanes Milton and Helene. Many are still there, swinging hammers and tacking up drywall as recovery efforts continue.

Residents of Chimney Rock and Lake Lure, North Carolina, refuse to endure a dispirited Christmas. Indeed, many had lost their homes and businesses. Some were living in trailers. Others were staying with relatives. When they let it be known that, despite all the damage, they still wanted to celebrate Christmas, we knew it would take a collaborative effort. A unique coalition of nonprofit and corporate partners stepped up to make it happen. CityServe International was joined by Spokes of Hope, World Vision, Paula White Ministries, 180 Disaster Relief, Every Life Counts, Love & Life Foundation, Good360, Medic Corps and Delta. Corporate sponsors and contributors included Earth Breeze, Jockey, Public Square and 360 Cookware.

The festivities began on Dec. 12, with a Christmas gift giveaway to local school children. Over 1,000 families participated. Then, just a few days later, more than 3,000 residents and visitors gathered in nearby Lake Lure to enjoy a concert featuring Jonathan Cain of Journey. They also received a special holiday message from Pastor Paula White.

"I let President Trump know that I was going to be here today, and he saw the pictures from the first time I came," White said. "He said, 'Please send my love to the people of Chimney Rock and Lake Lure, to the people of the great state of North Carolina and let them know that we're here for them.'"

That assurance that they hadn't been forgotten meant more than words can say. But the emotional highlight of the week came as folks gathered in Chimney Rock on Main Street for the

Christmas tree lighting.

Keep in mind this is a tourist-dependent town that had been closed to the public for nearly three months now. Yet the entire crowd joined hands to pray and sing Christmas carols.

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When the tree lit up, the crowd applauded. They knew it was no ordinary Christmas tree; the townspeople had decorated it with colorful items retrieved from the flood, a recognition of the devastation, but a declaration that hope is not lost.

Each ornament stood as a powerful symbol of their determination to transform what the storm had meant for evil into symbols of faith, hope and love.

For one Chimney Rock family who'd lost everything, it was a night they will never forget. They were checking out the ornaments on the tree when their children spotted something. Incredibly, items from their own home they thought they'd lost forever were hanging right there before their very eyes.

When their mother saw the dangling ornaments, she was simply overcome. Her children embraced her as she began to sob, consoling her as she wept.

I have no doubt that the resilient residents of Western North Carolina will prevail in the difficult months ahead. Their ability to nurture a sense of gratitude should inspire all of us to rise above our petty differences and reunite our nation.

They stand as living proof that President Kennedy was right: What unites us as Americans indeed is greater than what divides us.

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