

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Orlando Mass Murder Reaction: Celebrate And Memorialize The Lives Lost

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"....We grieve the brutal murder and horrific massacre of innocent people -- We grieve for those who lost family members and friends..." – President Barack Obama

Our territory is no stranger to the sobering effects of gun violence. The headlines every day mark another life lost, another family broken, another small in-island community shaken. Yet, as a community, we remain unfazed. Immune, almost.

Early Sunday morning/Late Saturday night, our sister city in a state well known to families across our territory was too rocked by the very violence plaguing our home. With one exception: it was an ISIS-inspired, hate driven attack against the LGBT community. The

attacker was misguided, the attack was senseless. The violence tore through the fabric of the Orlando LGBT community, and, by extension, our Nation's LGBT community.

Families awoke not to hear of their son or daughters night of reveling with friends. Not to see their gleeful faces and witness cheery reminiscing a night of fun and frivolity. Not to feel their touch or hear their voice. These families awoke to text messages of panic and heartbreak. Phone messages of terror and violence. Photos and live videos of desperation and an all too apparent and so forgotten truth: violence, no matter who it targets, can come as unexpectedly as a thunderbolt.

The LGBT community endured and celebrated together in Pride events across the country. In the nation's capital, where I reside, thousands marched towards the Capitol Building and consolidated in front of the White House; singing songs of togetherness, friendship, and peace. While we may not have been the direct targets of this act, we feel for and grieve with our friends as if they are with us here.

Those eager to politicize this. Those quick to point the finger and attention at the perpetrator. Those wishing to target the groups, ideologies, and faiths that the attacker (mis) represented. Do not follow them.

Celebrate and memorialize the lives lost. Cherish their memories. Be mindful of the families and friends left behind. Focus on peace and harmony. Do not let these newly welcomed angels drift into an abyss of subconscious thought. Keep them active and alive in your mind.

We as a community at large ought not to be so immune to gun violence. It should not be treated as "normal" or "expected." It should not be a typical expectation of being a Virgin Islander, a Floridian, or an American citizen. It should only be seen and understood for what it is: an evil warranting the full and unhindered attention of all those holding the power to stop it. Do everything you can to chip away at a reality that has now shaken this nation 16 times. Do everything you can to shed a societal level of immunity to the real effects of gun violence.

Hold your children close. Hold your friends close. Hold your LGBTQ family close. Cherish them. Cherish the memories of those lost in this act of violence and others past. Take this horrendous incident and mark it as the final straw that finally broke the belief this has to be a norm.

The attack may have rocked a community in Florida, but it struck just as powerfully at the heart of our Territory, and our Nation.

Virgin Islanders at home and here in the United States, do not take this just as an attack on LGBT Americans in Orlando, Florida. Take this as your wake-up call. Before it's too late.

Submitted by: Adrian C.R. Gillem, Virgin Islander, Crucian, Proud LGBT American living in Our Nation's Capital.