**Case Study: Dahlonega, Georgia**  
May 2020

The Bridging Divides team conducted interviews in Dahlonega, Georgia with the goal of helping community members tell their own stories of resilience. Toward that goal, BDI has outlined four broad observations of local community response to two events and the surrounding time periods of heightened tension that garnered national attention. In the first event in 2017, a local developer posted signs on a downtown building with KKK symbolism, in an effort to pressure the town council on prior zoning decisions. In a second event in 2019, a local resident with long ties to white nationalist organizations organized a Pro-Trump branded rally, ultimately attracting less than 50 rally attendees, two to three as many counter-protestors, and 600+ law enforcement in response to the event. While certainly not the only points of tension or unity, these events offer a snapshot of community response and an opportunity to highlight the complexities of a specific local context.

The following observations are based on in-person and phone interviews, desk research, including on social media, and other reporting or documents provided in the course of discussions. These observations are not a comprehensive after-action review or an assessment of right and wrong action. Instead, we hope the details below will help other communities consider their own context and even take steps to address tensions. We also believe highlighting concrete community actions around challenge events can help to make other guidance and resources more relatable, thus serving as essential tools to other localities.

*BDI is incredibly grateful for the local leaders, citizens, and students in the Dahlonega community who gave generously of their time to make this project possible.*

**Observations: Community Response**

**Key actors were identified as a deciding factor, via locally-focused, early, and personal actions.** In both 2017 and 2019, key leaders in Dahlonega took action quickly and specifically to reduce visible elements of tension. These actions were often person-to-person or behind the scenes, but noted by other residents.

- Several interviewees indicated that the University of North Georgia President personally appealed to the local developer to permanently remove the KKK sign in 2017.
- In 2019, several individuals who personally knew Congressman Doug Collins called him directly to share that his name was used on rally promotional material, urge him not to attend, and to speak out against hateful rhetoric - which he did in subsequent statements and comments.

**Information sharing and consistent communication seemed to build trust, help with planning, and address challenges as they arose.** Though there was some initial confusion around the nature of the rally in 2019 and source of the signs in 2017, community members, local leaders, and local media ultimately shared and reinforced key information and understanding of events.

- The County Sheriff maintains an active Facebook page and regularly shares video updates with significant reach - communications on the rally were one of many videos posted to the community. Dahlonega’s Mayor also posted Facebook messages, cited by several interviewees as key in informing their decisions around the rally and feeling informed.
- News articles in both the Atlanta and local newspapers accurately covered the 2019
rally organizer's past convictions and white supremacist ties.
- Mainstream political groups communicated person-to-person, to help affirm details of the rally organizer's past as legitimate concerns.
- When city officials passed two short term ordinances ahead of the 2019 rally, based on credible threats from state sources, officials and local media quickly communicated specifics about what was and was not allowed.

Alternative, creative approaches to rejecting and minimizing hateful rhetoric were seen as effective, while still protecting free speech. Dahlonega community members shared a wide variety of opinions on the value of protest and public statements in rejecting hate, yet many pointed to methods they felt were impactful:
- Local businesses tied yellow ribbons around the town square ahead of the 2019 rally, as part of a Lumpkin Loves campaign to symbolize that “hate has no home amid our hearts of gold” ahead of the 2019 rally.
- Several student groups and local organizers planned a boycott of businesses owned by the developer responsible for the KKK sign - drawing on wide-spread dissatisfaction with other, unrelated business practices.
- Some local papers chose to return funds and refuse an advertising purchase for the 2019 rally, after learning the full extent of white supremacist involvement.
- Interviewees reported hearing that individuals quickly reserved the town pavilion on the day of the rally to prevent contentious groups from reserving instead.

Communities appeared to successfully mobilize around indirect concerns to build a broader coalition, yet underlying disagreements persisted when not addressed. Economic concerns about reduced tourism from bad publicity helped to mobilize action across ideological divides. Though reducing short-term, visible risk, the coordination left some feeling even greater tensions than before.
- Businesses, community leaders, and the university mobilized around the risk to the town’s reputation as a quaint tourist spot, a “little Asheville.”
- Local leaders and regional editorials urged people to ‘stay away’ rather than protest the planned rally.
- Yet for historically marginalized groups, indirect mobilization seemed to normalize hate, allow fear to grow, or dismiss risk as “outside groups.”
- 600+ police in riot gear caused some fear on the day of the 2019 rally, while initial Facebook posts from regional law enforcement gave the impression of protecting “one side” more than another.
- From multiple perspectives and ideologies, Dahlonega residents worried about “doing such a good job of preventing violence” that they may attract more protests in the future.

In conclusion, there are no easy answers. Dahlonega’s experience - in 2017, 2019, many months in between and many since - shows each community will have their own unique response to the challenges at hand.
The Bridging Divides Initiative at Princeton University works to mitigate political violence in the United States by laying the groundwork for a more coordinated response and supporting local communities to build resilience. For more on BDI, go to http://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu