

Dusty Turner 2 – Peace Party

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Let's go to a party. No, not a birthday party or bowl game party. This is a special event in a very rural community. This party is helping to promote peace in the world, one personal encounter at a time. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about Dusty Turner, organizer and promoter of annual motorcycle rallies including one in Cedar Vale, Kansas. These yearly motorcycle rallies have brought dozens of people to Cedar Vale and raised money for local community needs. These rallies are promoted through an online forum of Moto Guzzi motorcycle enthusiasts.

The fun of the motorcycle ride and the interaction with the community has been a win-win relationship. "The mayor of Cedar Vale said she has seen an uptick in civic pride because outsiders are showing an interest in their little town," Dusty said.

This motorcycle rally worked so well that it sparked another idea. In addition to the Moto Guzzi online site, Dusty was on another website which had a political subforum. As sometimes happens with discussions on the Internet, it became a site of bitter conflict. "People hate each other over politics," Dusty said. The atmosphere of the discussion was toxic. Dusty wondered if something could be done about it.

"I'm half Lakota," Dusty said. "In our history, there were tribes who were at war with each other, but once each year they would call a truce and get together for a few days," he said. "I wondered if this would work for us," he thought.

Dusty decided to try this far-fetched idea with those on the website. In 2018, he invited the people on the website to come to Cedar Vale for a face-to-face gathering. "We need to get out of our echo chamber and meet face-to-face," Dusty said.

He scheduled this gathering for September. Remarkably, people came.

"I called it the Peace Party," Dusty said. "We had 25 people come from across the country." Believe it or not, they came from places such as Chicago, Dallas, LA, Portland, and as far away as Canada and New Zealand. These were people who were already interacting anonymously online but had never met in person. In many cases, they were on polar opposite sides of the political spectrum, and had engaged in bitter online exchanges.

For this gathering, Dusty used the same model as his motorcycle rallies. The participants were called Adventure Riders. They interacted with local citizens, camped and ate together, and had time to spend with each other. Just as with the motorcycle rallies, a portion of the proceeds went to local needs and jars were set out to collect donations.

"We raised about a thousand dollars for the community," Dusty said. However, it was not the financial results which Dusty found most impactful.

His most meaningful aspect was seeing people connect on a personal basis. “I watched people who had called each other names for years shake hands and give each other a hug,” Dusty said.

This initiative also exposed these participants, many of whom come from urban settings, to rural life. “I am introducing these sophisticates to small town America so they can see why people in rural America feel left behind,” Dusty said. “I’m trying to raise a little money for Cedar Vale and expose these city people to real small town America,” he said.

“We are reconnecting and learning how to communicate with each other again,” Dusty said. It went so well that there is interest in holding this gathering annually. Dusty is seeking support to make this happen.

“We are doing something fun and interesting, and it is working,” he said. “It’s not just me, other people are involved,” he said. This remarkable gathering is happening in the rural community of Cedar Vale, population 526 people. Now, that’s rural.

Let’s go to a party. No, not for a birthday or bowl game. This is a party which intends to overcome division and help people find common ground. We salute the Adventure Riders and the community of Cedar Vale for making a difference by hosting this remarkable gathering. To them I say: Party on.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.