Storm Warning

In the all-American suburb of Suffolk County, N.Y., anti-immigrant politics spawned routine violence – and, ultimately, a shocking murder. What's the lesson for American states and communities increasingly intent on "cracking down"?

By Bob Moser

Introduction

The enduring power of unchecked hate consumes the spirits and the lives of both perpetrators and victims. When communities, counties, countries ignore the rise of hatred, do little or nothing to counter it, or dismiss it outright, it eventually brews violence and death.

When the Center for New Community was invited to Suffolk County, Long Island in 2001 to begin working with community and religious organizations and leaders in their emerging efforts to counter vicious anti-immigrant activity, clear warnings had already been sounded about the potential for violence. While various anti-immigrant factions competed for support and media, it was the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) that helped light the fuse of hatred in Suffolk County and laid the groundwork for the story that follows – an account tracing the arc of hatred across a decade and a generation, and ending in senseless death.

Early on, Newsday reporter Bart Jones aptly described Suffolk County as "ground zero" of the nation's growing anti-immigrant movement. In the years following, FAIR's influence there was strong and steady, seeping into the crevices of mainstream politics and policies, and eventually roping in the County Executive himself, who saw political opportunity in the heat of hate. All the while, the kids of Suffolk County soaked up the rhetoric and rationale for immigrant bashing from adults who were adept in the practice. In their teens, those kids gave little thought to "Beaner-hopping" – assaulting Hispanic immigrants in their midst. As a result, Marcelo Lucero was stabbed to death on a November evening in 2008. The hatred that had been brewing for years took life itself.

Storm Warning is exactly that – a warning to all who would take lightly the potential impact of anti-immigrant activity, of the hatred and racism that permeates the anti-immigrant movement. The Federation for American Immigration Reform and its allied organizations – including the Immigration Reform Law Institute (IRLI) that is advancing harsh anti-immigrant public policies from Phoenix to Fremont and in states across the nation – are adept at appearing "mainstream." They are not. For locales only now on "the front edge" of anti-immigrant influence Storm Warning is a sober reminder of where FAIR's influence can lead. For locales immersed in anti-immigrant activity, it will hopefully serve as a wake-up call to what lies ahead, and evoke great courage among those who seek to counter that activity.

The Center for New Community is grateful to Bob Moser for conveying the Suffolk County story so powerfully. We are grateful, as well, to all those who stood up and stood fast in this decade-long effort to counter FAIR and all the manifestations of the hatred it helped seed in Suffolk County. Their witness and commitment is and should be an inspiration to all those who seek to build community in the face of hatred. It is to them and to the tens of thousands of leaders like them across the nation that Storm Warning is dedicated.

Read it carefully, and prepare well.

The Reverend David L. Ostendorf,
Executive Director

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NEW COMMUNITY

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Cover photo: Site where Marcelo Lucero was fatally attacked in 2008.

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by Bob Moser

On June 21, 2010, voters in the eastern Nebraska city of Fremont joined the growing ranks of American communities approving restrictive laws targeting undocumented workers. By a 57-43 percent margin, Fremonters passed a hotly debated ordinance that would make it illegal for businesses to hire undocumented workers and for landlords to rent to them. Unless the law is overturned in court—as similar measures have been in Hazelton, Pennsylvania, and Farmers Branch, Texas—no one in Fremont will be able to rent or lease a dwelling without first acquiring an "occupancy permit" from the local police.

Local officials like to tout Fremont, a city of 25,000 whose largest industry is meatpacking, as "livable and progressive." But the reality of Fremont, like so much of Middle America, has been very different from that melting-pot myth: Until this decade, the town's population was more than 95 percent white.

In a story that's been repeated in hundreds of small towns and large regions across the country since the early 1990s, Fremont's comfortable homogeneity began to be threatened, seemingly overnight. More than 2,000 Latinos have moved to Fremont over the last decade, many of them recruited to come and work for the Fremont Beef and Hormel plants. The presence of these outsiders has inspired a volatile mixture of irrational fear, courageous support and outright bigotry from locals who've never lived through a demographic change like this.

Like anti-immigration activists everywhere, proponents of a crackdown in Fremont insisted that they weren't motivated by nativism—or worse. "It has nothing to do with being racist," said a former Hormel plant worker, Clint Walraven. The problem, he insisted, was economic: Fremonters were "footing the bill" for local services while undocumented workers sent their earnings back to Mexico. But at the same time, city officials were warning that Fremont would be spending millions to defend its anti-immigrant law in court—meaning city job cuts and property-tax hikes if the ordinance passed. (Farmers Branch, a Dallas suburb about the same size as Fremont, spent a reported $4 million unsuccessfully defending its laws.) The other economic argument often used—that "they're taking our jobs"—also seemed like a less-than-pressing issue in Fremont, where the unemployment rate is about half of the national rate, at slightly less than 5 percent.

The notion that Latino immigrants "don't pay taxes," and that they don't boost local economies in the United States, has long been a staple of the anti-immigrant propaganda spread in communities like Fremont by the nation's most powerful nativist group, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). Founded by John Tanton, the godfather of America's anti-immigration movement, FAIR and its affiliated network of advocacy and legal groups have been "assisting" grassroots anti-immigration efforts around the country since 1978. Under its umbrella of smaller affiliate organizations, FAIR provides "concerned citizens" with organizing help, financial assistance, and a bevy of arguments and slogans ranging from questionable economic statistics to outright racist fear-mongering. Tanton, setting the tone in 1997, said that immigrants coming to America will be "defecating and creating garbage and looking for jobs." Current FAIR president Dan Stein has opined that "Immigrants don't come all church-loving, freedom-loving, God-fearing. Some of them firmly believe in socialist or redistributist [sic] ideas. Many of them hate America, hate everything the United States stands for."

In Fremont, FAIR's legal arm, the Immigration Reform Law Institute (IRLI), wrote the law that voters approved in June. The chief author was former Kansas Republican Party Chairman Kris Kobach. Representing IRLI, Kobach also drafted Arizona's controversial immigration-enforcement law, which has become a template for similar legislative measures in at least ten other states. He also defended the Farmers Branch and Hazelton anti-immigrant ordinances in court.

As with Arizona, Fremont's new law raised an immediate hue-and-cry from civil libertarians, including the ACLU and former Republican Congressman Bob Barr of Georgia, who said IRLI's ordinance reeked of "Big Brother-ism" and was "un-American."

"[T]he grossly disparate and overly broad manner in which Fremont's citizens have chosen to address this problem ought to worry Americans everywhere," Barr wrote. "The fact that such an ordinance could be enacted and supported proudly by the majority of citizens in any part of the United States … should serve as a clarion call to Americans everywhere that the very foundational principles of our country and our Constitution are in imminent danger."

With Arizona-style legislation spreading at the state level, and Fremont-style legislation at the local, there's more at stake than constitutional principles. The often intolerant rhetoric broadcast by anti-immigration activists in communities like Fremont—and scripted by FAIR and its affiliates—doesn't merely lead to unconstitutional legislation: It has also, across the United States, led to violence against both undocumented immigrants and U.S. residents who "look like them."

Between 2003 and 2007, as "grassroots" anti-immigration movements proliferated across the country—especially in formerly homogenous communities like Fremont with large increases in Latino population—the FBI reported a 40 percent rise in hate crimes against Latinos. Those statistics represent only a fraction of the violence aimed at Latinos, since few undocumented immigrants are willing to come forward to report that they've been victims. And with moves like Arizona's and Fremont's to involve local law enforcement more closely in immigration enforcement, even fewer anti-Latino hate crimes will likely be reported in coming years.

Fremont officials say that no hate crimes have been reported in their city. But the Fremont Tribune has documented several instances of legal Hispanic residents being told to "go

Anti-immigrant protest sponsored by Sachem Quality of Life

home" to Mexico. One Hispanic woman, not long before the June 21 vote, reported being shoved and hollered at by an elderly white man in a grocery store. The push for anti-immigration laws divided the community, with tensions felt in all directions: One proponent of Kobach's ordinance complained that folks on the other side were calling him a Nazi.

Where does it all lead? What becomes of American communities where anti-immigration tensions escalate as they have in Fremont, with the situation brought to a boil by national groups like FAIR and the IRLI?

Look no further than another quintessentially "all-American" place: Suffolk County, N.Y. From 1980 to 2000, this vast suburban stretch of Eastern Long Island—once a largely white outpost for folks who disdained the scary diversity of New York City— saw its foreign-born population grow more than 72 percent. Young, native Long Islanders were fleeing. The white population was aging. And here came this "flood" of immigrants. (Hispanics made up 12.6 percent of Suffolk's population by 2005.) Years before Fremont began to feel the impact of heavy immigration, Suffolk County residents were struggling with it.

For states and smaller communities currently "getting tough" on the undocumented residents in their midst, the story of what happened to Suffolk County is essential reading.

It's a story of how "concerned citizens" organizing anti-immigration groups spread hateful rhetoric that fosters violence, whether they intended to or not. It's a story of how politicians who use anti-immigrant fury to further their ambitions end up bearing partial responsibility for the violence. It's a story of how restrictive laws against undocumented workers give official sanction to hate and violence. And it's a story about how the pernicious messages of national anti-immigration groups filter down to local debates—and inflame local passions.

For communities from Fremont to Arizona, from Farmers Branch to Northern Virginia, the story of Suffolk County is a storm warning—an all-too-vivid example of what happens when an atmosphere of hatred toward undocumented residents takes hold to the point where young folks believe there's nothing wrong with brutalizing the people who are, the adults say, ruining everything.

November 8, 2008, looked like just another Saturday night in Suffolk County. It was the tail-end of a historic election week, just four days after Barack Obama was elected president, spawning hopeful talk of a "post-racial" era in America. It was the kind of spooky, misty Long Island night when streetlights cut narrow arcs through the fog, when the sky itself seems to be pressing down on you.

On different sides of the cultural divide in Suffolk, weekend leisure activities were in full swing. In the working-class village of Patchogue, two childhood friends from Ecuador—one working construction, one employed by a dry cleaner's—had met up around 2 p.m. and proceeded to blow off steam with the aid of beer and weed. At the train station the next town over, a rowdy bunch of kids from Patchogue-Medford High School were tossing back beers, play-wrestling, firing BB guns and—the boys, at least—getting amped up for another night of "Beaner-hopping," the slang term for hunting Hispanic immigrants to mug and assault.

Jeffrey Conroy, a 17-year-old star athlete at Patchogue-Medford High, had a slightly politer way of putting it when, the next morning, he confessed to what he'd done that night. "We would go Mexican hopping," Conroy told detectives, "which is looking for Spanish people to beat up." Just one week prior to the Saturday night that would change his life, Conroy added, "We snuffed a Mexican on Jamaica [Avenue] near my house. We knocked him out cold."

Suffolk teens had been "Beaner-hopping" for years. In a county whose "grassroots" anti-immigration organizing and anti-immigrant laws became a national model for FAIR and other nativist groups, teenagers had clearly gotten the message from their elders: Brown

people were dangerous and less than fully human. Attacking them was acceptable. Meanwhile, the victims of these routine assaults feared coming forward and exposing themselves to police as undocumented—especially after the heavily restrictive laws passed by local councils and the county legislature. Those laws gave official sanction to the notion that the undocumented weren't welcome in Suffolk County. And they made the odds of getting caught and convicted for assaulting immigrants seem impossibly remote. The "Spanish" were fair game in Suffolk County.

So it was no surprise, that Saturday night, when three Patchogue-Medford High School students turned a BB gun on two Latino men outside a convenience store. Marlon Garcia told police that when he ran to the aid of the other man being pelted from an SUV, the young men shouted racial slurs and turned fire on him, leaving him bleeding as they sped away. Garcia dialed 911 and identified his assailants. "They just let them go," he said. "The police did nothing."

The three teenagers ended up at the Medford train station later that evening with Jeffrey Conroy and friends. After the boys set off an alarm with the BB gun, they briefly fled to a local park. That's where one of the gang, Anthony Hartford, called it: "Let's fuck up some Mexicans."

Conroy's friend, Michelle, told him: "Don't go with them, you'll get in trouble." Conroy would later claim that he only expected a ride to another friend's house when he climbed into 17-year-old Jordan Dasch's SUV around 11:30 p.m. But the wrestling, lacrosse and football star had participated in several immigrant-jumping sprees by this time. He was hardly in unfamiliar territory when Dasch's SUV pulled into Patchogue around midnight.

"We agree to go to Patchogue because there are always Spanish guys walking around down there," 16-year-old Nicholas Hausch later testified. "We saw a Spanish guy walking on a street near a Jewish temple and everyone … got out to run him down." They never caught the man, so they decided on a different tactic. After parking near the library, adjacent to Patchogue's Latino barbershop and money-wiring store, Hausch testified, "We all got out of the SUV and began walking looking for Spanish guys to beat up." Soon enough, "we saw two guys and realized they were Beaners as we got closer to them." The teens—six of them white, and one the child of an African-American mother and a Puerto Rican father—"were all popping off at them," Hausch said, "Calling them Beaners. I yelled out, 'What's good Beaners?'"

The Ecuadorian friends, Marcelo Lucero and Angel Loja, were less than a football field's length from their destination: one of a cluster of white-shingled apartment buildings where many of Patchogue's Ecuadorian and Salvadoran immigrants live. After their day of revelry, the two—who between them had lived in Suffolk County for more than 30 years—were going to watch a movie with friends. But then, Loja later testified, "I noticed that this group was coming. They didn't have good intentions. They looked furious."

> ***"I noticed that this group was coming. They didn't have good intentions. They looked furious."***

They sounded furious, too. "They shouted, 'fucking Mexicans!' Fucking illegals! Get out of this country!'" Loja testifed.

As the seven amped-up teens came nearer, one of them demanded money from Lucero. He told them they should work for it, like he did. When he was called a "nigger," Loja came back at the kids: "I'm not a nigger, you are," he said to the one mixed-race member of the gang, 17-year-old Jose Pacheco.

That fired up Pacheco, Conroy and friends even more. Kevin "Kuvan" Shea tried to shake down Lucero, yelling, "I got a gun, give me your fucking money." Then, Hausch testified, "The guy said he didn't have any. So Kuvan punched him in the nose." Blood gushed from Lucero, who was now flat on the ground.

"Look, he's bleeding on one punch," Shea boasted. "He's not even worth fighting."

But soon Lucero was up off the sidewalk pavement. He and Loja removed their belts and started swinging them wildly, trying to ward off their assailants. They managed to

Members of the Lucero Foundation regularly meet to discuss hate crimes in the community

back the teenagers into the parking lot of the apartment building they'd intended to visit. That's when Loja decided it was an opportune time to flee. But Lucero wasn't ready to back away.

"Kuvan yelled out, 'Surround them,' " Conroy later told detectives. They "tried to surround the Spanish guy [Lucero], but couldn't because he was swinging the belt trying to keep us away. The other Spanish guy was there and was also holding his belt.

"I had already taken out my knife," Conroy said. This was a small, black folding knife that his friends said Conroy typically kept stashed in his waistband. "The Spanish guy continued to swing his belt, and when we didn't back down he swung the belt at Nicky and I went towards him with my knife in my right hand extended outward. His back was to me and as I ran towards him he turned to face me. He was about four or five feet from me, I continued to run towards him and stabbed him once in either his shoulder or chest. … I said to Nicky, 'Oh shit I am fucked; [I] stabbed him."

Hours later, in the clinical calm of the Patchogue Police Station, Jeffrey Conroy learned that the man he'd stabbed was dead. The cops told him that he was being charged with manslaughter. Conroy's first question, upon hearing this news: Was it going to interfere with wrestling season?

Even in Suffolk County, where several incidents of anti-immigration violence had been reported since the late 1990s, the murder of Marcelo Lucero came as a jolt. It didn't fit with the community's image of itself—but then, neither did the hundreds of thousands of Latino immigrants who'd moved here over the last two decades. Suddenly, many Suffolk residents' harsh response to the newcomers had tangible and dire consequences: A man was dead, and in the words of the Rev. Allan B. Ramirez, a fiery champion of Long Island immigrants, Suffolk was gaining a national reputation as "the Selma of the North."

Suffolk had once embodied the American dream. Long Island, America's first suburb, represented the antithesis of New York City: sprawl, elbow room, car culture—a place where middle-class folks could own their own home and patch of land. White middle-class folks, that is. When the suburbs first arose after World War II, federal housing policies encouraged strict segregation in those rows of identical homes. Deeds forbade selling to nonwhites. The nation's first suburb also became its most segregated.

"People have chosen to live in Long Island because it's not like the city," says DuWayne Gregory, the lone African American in the Suffolk County Legislature and head of the local Hate Crimes Task Force, which was organized after Lucero's murder.

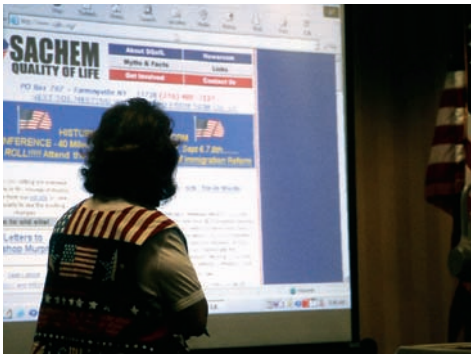
Much of Suffolk—a vast county with a population greater than Philadelphia—still looks and sounds like an Eisenhower-era time capsule." Here on the easternmost, less-posh side of Long Island, "Joy-see" accents remain sharply pronounced. Driving down the main strips of Medford or Patchogue, where all seven teenagers charged in the Lucero murder lived, the landscape often looks like a 1956 newsreel—except for the occasional Starbucks, mosque or bodega. But the Latino population in these towns, according to the most recent census, is now 24 percent.

When larger and larger numbers of immigrants started coming to stay in Suffolk, in the mid-1990s, they began to replace the younger whites who were leaving the island, with its high housing prices and dearth of high-paying jobs. But that didn't make them welcome. The island's perennial housing shortage meant that accommodating a growing population wasn't easy in the first place. But there was something deeper at work in Suffolk: an extension of the suburban mentality that brought folks out here in the first place.

The first response was simply to try and run the immigrants out. In the bedroom community of Farmingville, just up the road from Medford and Patchogue, about 1,500 Mexican workers came for work in the late 1990s. Led by a New York City schoolteacher named Margaret Bianculli-Dyber, who claimed she and her daughter had been threatened and laughed at by men waiting near their Farmingville home for work, a group called Sachem Quality for Life (SQL) began to loudly protest the "influx" in 1998.

Carlos Morales, a native of Mexico City who came to Farmingville "thinking it would be an adventure" in 1999, first encountered SQL members later that year. Early one morning, as he waited on a street corner for a job, "A group showed up, shouting things, waving flags in our faces. I didn't know what they were saying," says Morales, who had not yet taught himself English. "But I knew that something was wrong."

Something was very wrong. Sachem members had taken to confronting day laborers waiting for a pickup in Farmingville, waving signs and American flags. They were hollering loudly, saying what others were too polite to say. After FAIR picked up on the friction in Suffolk and sent a field organizer to help build the group, SQL became a model for other local "grassroots" anti-immigration groups around the country. Through billboards, rallies and protests, SQL spread a message that toxified the increasingly charged racial



As far back as 1998, anti-immigrant groups like Sachem Quality of Life, organized activities to incite xenophobia

Marcelo Lucero's barber shop on Main Street in Patchogue

Hostility to immigrant integration often places migrants in vulnerable situations

atmosphere in Suffolk—claiming, among other things, that Latino immigrants were spreading diseases, committing sexual assaults, and causing a rise in crime in the area (ignoring statistics that said otherwise). Group spokesperson Ray Wysolmierski called the immigrants' arrival "an invasion and occupation"—language borrowed from FAIR—and the immigrants "terrorists."

As SQL's message spread, its political influence grew far beyond its membership, estimated at about 400. Bianculli-Dyber testified before Congress in 2000, offering much the same set of arguments that are still being peddled by immigration "reformers" today. "We are in real fear of losing our community," Bianculli-Dyber testified. "We are a small working-class blue-collar community. To most of our citizens the biggest investment we'll ever make is our house. If our property values continue to drop because of this problem we will have nothing.

"After the initial influx of illegal aliens learns that virtually no immigration enforcement is likely, no arrests, no deportations, they will phone home, or write home and let their friends and family know the situation. This will result in a second influx of illegal immigrants. After the girlfriends and wives begin to arrive, they will realize that a baby born here is automatically a citizen, regardless of the status of the parents, and that that baby can apply for welfare, AFDC, food stamps, etc. We'll have a mini-baby boom and demands on local social services will increase. As the children enter schools there will be a demand for bilingual teachers. School costs will rise and with it our already high property taxes. … Our little town will become a ghetto, unrecognizable by those who once lived there…"

When the county legislature approved a day-labor hiring center, Bianculli-Dyber's group helped block its construction. SQL members packed county legislature and town council meetings to push restrictive legislation. Meanwhile, anti-immigration politicians in Suffolk were picking up on SQL's often-nasty message—and FAIR's—and turning up the rhetorical heat in a way that made racial violence even more "acceptable."

In August 2001, county legislator Michael D'Andre of Smithtown commiserated with Farmingville's concerned citizens by saying that if his town ever had a similar influx, "We'll be up in arms; we'll be out with baseball bats." Six years later, another county legislator, Elie Mystal of Amityville, seconded that idea: "If I'm living in a neighborhood and people are gathering like that, I would load my gun and start shooting, period. Nobody will say it, but I'm going to say it."

"But I knew that something was wrong."

But long before Mystal's outburst in 2007, plenty of people in Suffolk were saying it: in protests, in council meetings, at dinner tables. And the occasional reports of anti-immigrant violence—the tip of an iceberg, as it turned out—did nothing to shame people into silence. In September 2000, two local racist skinheads lured two Mexican day laborers to a warehouse where the white assailants stabbed and nearly beat them to death with crowbars. In the aftermath, when a moderate Republican legislator, Paul Tonna, helped organize a racial-unity rally in Farmingville, SQL members rallied in front of his home, yelling racial epithets at the legislator's adopted children, one a Native American and four Mexican-American. Two weeks after the near-murders of the two day laborers, SQL staged a national Day of Truth event, covered by CNN and featuring some of the nation's most radical anti-immigration activists.

A few days after the event, an SQL member was arrested for making threats against a local immigrant family.

No politician rode Suffolk's anti-immigrant wave—or embodied its spirit—like Steve Levy. The fiscally conservative Democrat had been espousing the FAIR approach since 1988, when as a county legislator he co-sponsored legislation to make English the official language of Suffolk. In 2004, a few months after he was elected county executive, Levy attended a meeting sponsored by one of the two groups that formed when Sachem Quality of Life broke up, the Greater Farmingville Community Association, and made it clear that he'd follow through on his tough-on-immigrants campaign rhetoric. Levy would subsequently attempt to deputize county police officers as immigration agents (the local police union ultimately

Members of the community who are immigrants often find themselves isolated

Carlos Morales was interviewed by the Justice Dept. and the FBI about violence against immigrants

blocked this effort), orchestrate raids on apartment houses where day laborers lived, push legislation cracking down on businesses that employ undocumented workers, and go after unlicensed drivers—among other measures.

As Levy—who harbored larger political ambitions—pursued his anti-immigrant agenda, he consistently refused to meet with immigrant-rights advocates, denouncing them as "the one-percent lunatic fringe." Like SQL leaders, he made dire predictions about what would become of Suffolk. At a forum in 2006, Levy said that women crossing the border to give birth in the United States "free of charge" were having "anchor babies." He warned that local Southhampton Hospital was on the verge of closing its maternity ward because of the high number of births. (The ward remains open.)

Levy's efforts did little, if anything, to stem the incoming tide of immigrants. But they made him one of the "local heroes" FAIR likes to promote to folks in places like Fremont, Nebraska. In 2005, along with the mayor of Danbury, Connecticut, Levy founded a group called Mayors and Executives for Immigration Reform; representatives from both FAIR and one of its affiliate groups, Numbers USA, spoke at the group's launch in Washington, D.C. Levy also became a national media figure, appearing on Lou Dobbs' CNN show and Fox News' O'Reilly Factor, among others.

Every time Levy said, or did, something harshly anti-immigrant, the more popular he seemed to become. In 2008, the Republican Party didn't even put up an opponent against him, and he was re-elected with 96 percent of the vote. (After an unsuccessful bid to change parties and run for New York governor as a Republican this fall, Levy is up for re-election and likely to win another term as county executive in November.) Levy made himself the voice of the so-called "silent majority" in Suffolk, standing up for their outmoded version of the American dream.

"People who play by the rules work hard to achieve the suburban dream of the white picket fence," Levy told The New York Times in 2007, explaining his latest housing raid. "If you live in the suburbs, you do not want to live across the street from a house where 60 men live. You do not want trucks riding up and down the block at 5 a.m., picking up workers."

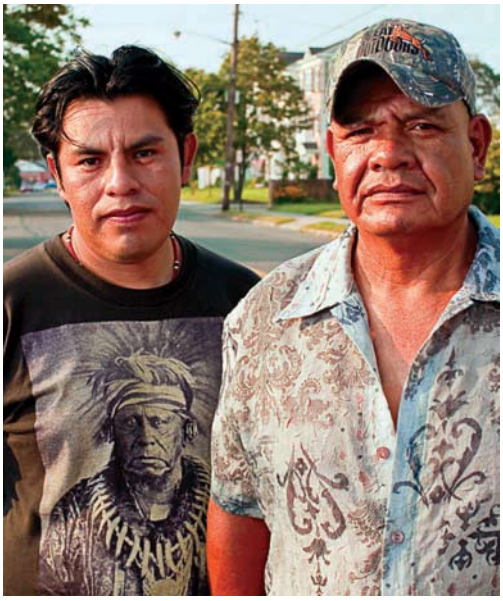
"The atmosphere changed because of him," says Legislator DuWayne Gregory. "He really inflamed emotions. He met with some of those extremist groups. It's really irresponsible. And he's never really accounted for his sins. I mean, George Wallace, even Strom Thurmond—they said they're sorry for some of the things they did. But here's Steve Levy: 'No, I wasn't wrong.' "

Even Levy was shaken by the news that seven local high-school boys had killed an immigrant on that foggy Saturday in November 2008—and the subsequent reports that they'd engaged in a 14-month "Beaner-hopping" spree, assaulting and robbing at least eight other Latino men. But the county executive's denunciation of the killers as "white supremacists," and a pro-tolerance speech at the boys' high school, were undercut by his complaint to a local paper that Lucero's murder would have been a "one-day story" anywhere else, and a "joke" he subsequently made at a local restaurant about deporting the workers in the kitchen. Levy compared the PR difficulties he was having after the murder to the discomfort of a colonoscopy. And he steadfastly denied any link between the wave of anti-immigrant violence in Suffolk and his administration's targeting of undocumented immigrants.

"Advocates for those here illegally should not disparage those opposed to the illegal immigration policy as being bigoted or intolerant," Levy said. Lucero's murder, he insisted, "wasn't a question of any county policy or legislation; it was a question of bad people doing horrific things."

"He met with some of those extremist groups. It's really irresponsible. And he's never really accounted for his sins."

Legislator DuWayne Gregory describing Steve Levy (pictured above)



"Words have consequences. And hateful words have hateful consequences. In Suffolk County, hate has trickled down to a new generation of Americans."

Janet Murguia

Earlier this year, at a Martin Luther King Day breakfast, Levy joked that under an anti-bias law passed in Suffolk after Lucero's killing, "Even Shaniqua could file a complaint."

Others, with their community now looking like a 21st-century Selma in earnest, went into denial mode after Lucero's murder. "Racial strife doesn't exist in our high school to any large degree," insisted Patchogue-Medford School Superintendent Michael Mostow. "These are not kids with violent pasts."

Actually, the seven Patchogue-Medford students arrested in connection with Lucero's murder had, between them, robbed and assaulted dozens of Latinos. (All six of the teenagers ultimately pleaded guilty to multiple charges including gang assault and armed robbery.) And they were not alone. The pattern had been visible, to anyone who wanted to see it, for years: Teenagers, sanctioned by the hostile atmosphere their elders had created, had been routinely victimizing Latinos. It had been an open secret since 2003, when five teenagers set fire to a Mexican family's house in Farmingville. The family narrowly escaped death. The teens showed no remorse, one of them offering a simple justification for the crime: "Mexicans live there."

After Lucero's murder, it became more difficult to ignore the fact that "Beaner-hopping" was a regular pastime for many of the youthful heirs to Suffolk's suburban dream. The gut-punch of the murder served as a wake-up call for many in the community. "The sad reality is that racism seems to be a national pastime of sorts in Suffolk," wrote the Long Island Business News. Hate-crime forums attracted a few local Latinos, including Carlos Morales, who were willing to speak up about the assaults they had endured—the routine taunts, spitting, drive-by shootings and vandalism that had become part of life for immigrants in Suffolk County. Police vowed to learn Spanish and encourage immigrants to report crimes against them without fear of deportation. Some politicians, like Levy ally Jack Eddington of Patchogue, apologized for getting "out of hand" with their denunciations of the newcomers and now supported law-enforcement reform to protect the immigrants.

The county's anti-immigrant legislation dried up. The U.S. Justice Department launched an investigation (still ongoing) into discriminatory policing practices in Suffolk. And county legislator DuWayne Gregory formed his hate-crime task force, hoping to undo at least some of the damage that more than a decade's worth of immigrant-bashing had done in Suffolk County.

Like most Suffolk residents, "I wasn't really aware of an undercurrent of hate-crime activity going on," Gregory says—even though he himself had been the victim of a hate crime as a youngster. "There had been the incident in Farmingville several years prior [in 2000]. But other than that, it was a lot of issues and debate over immigration in general, hyped-up emotional stuff about that. The Lucero murder brought it to the forefront.

"With the Obama presidential election," Gregory says, "I thought things were different. I was pleased because I saw young people coming together and supporting an African-American candidate. It wasn't just black kids; it was Hispanic kids and kids of all races. Because they grew up in a different world from the one you and I and our parents grew up in. It's a more integrated, more diverse world. And to see that a group of our young people behave like this just threw that off-kilter, you know?"

Janet Murguia, president and CEO of the National Council of La Raza, summed up the lesson of Suffolk in a press conference after the murder: "Words have consequences. And hateful words have hateful consequences. In Suffolk County, hate has trickled down to a new generation of Americans."

The boys who went "Beaner-hopping" on Nov. 8, 2008, were the sons of a teacher, a butcher, a store clerk, a deli owner and a former K-Mart operations manager. Conroy's mother had taught at a local Christian school. They were quintessential Suffolk people. And so, disturbingly, were their children.

While many Suffolk County

residents had spent more than a decade trying to ignore the anti-immigrant violence in their midst, nobody could turn away when Jeffrey Conroy went on trial in March for first-degree manslaughter as a hate crime. The strapping, crew-cut Medford boy, the star athlete with a swastika tattoo and the chiseled good looks of an Abercrombie & Fitch model, had become the visible symbol of the legacy Suffolk County's anti-immigrant movement had bequeathed to the future—a legacy of hate, of divisiveness and suspicion, of children who've grown up viewing "Beaners" as something less than human.

It took two weeks to seat a jury. A stream of potential jurors disqualified themselves because of their passionate views about the county's immigrants. "I have strong opinions about the lack of immigration policy," said one potential juror who identified himself as a school bus driver. "I'm very old-fashioned about it. What I have, benefits, salary, was all done legally."

Jury selection was like a community self-examination. Some said they couldn't be fair to Conroy because they empathized with

Lucero. “I’m an immigrant myself and I know how hard immigrants work and struggle,” said one potential juror.

“My dad has a huge opinion about illegal immigrants,” said another. “They have become my opinions as well.”

Once the jury—mostly white and middle-aged—had finally been selected, the only real suspense was what the trial might reveal about the nature of “trickle-down hate” in Suffolk County. Four of Conroy’s accomplices on that November night had already pleaded guilty to lesser charges and agreed to testify against him. Along with others who’d been hanging out with Conroy earlier that Saturday night, they provided chilling testimony—not just about the incident, but about the attitudes these kids held about the “Beaners” they were hunting and assaulting.

Seventeen-year-old Anthony Hartford’s confession to police, which was entered into the record of the trial, spoke most clearly about the casual attitudes of the attackers—and the frequency of the attacks. “The last time I went out jumping Beaners was Monday, November 3, 2008,” he told detectives on the morning of Nov. 9. “There was a Beaner on Jamaica Avenue near my house and Jose, Kevin and I started popping and Jose punched him so hard he knocked him out.

"I don’t go out doing this very often," Hartford said, "maybe only once a week.”

Maybe only once a week.

Prosecutor Megan McDonnell painted a grim portrait of Conroy as part of a gang that “hunted Mexicans for sport.” Their violent spree had begun at least 14 months before Lucero's murder, with the vicious beating of an immigrant named Luis Pina Tigre. Conroy had been involved in several of the attacks. In December 2007, Jose Hernandez was assaulted three times in one week; in one incident, Conroy had held a pipe in one hand and smacked it against his palm, telling the victim, "We're going to kill you." On June 24, 2008, prosecutors said, the teens had attacked an immigrant named Robert Zumba, kicking him and restraining him while Conroy cut him repeatedly with a knife.

Conroy’s defense had little to work with. Attorney William Keahon constantly invoked Conroy’s friendships with a diverse bunch of high-schoolers. It was an attempt to demonstrate that, despite his racist tattoos and pattern of “Beaner-hopping,” Conroy couldn’t have committed a hate crime because he wasn’t a racist. Testifying in his own defense, Conroy, in a flat, emotionless manner, concocted a far-fetched story designed to prove

a legacy of hate, of divisiveness and suspicion, of children who’ve grown up viewing “Beaners” as something less than human.

that—despite his having confessed to police and producing a bloody blade after his arrest—one of the other boys had stabbed Lucero.

It didn’t work. After closing statements made on what would have been Marcelo Lucero’s 39th birthday, judgment was swift: Conroy was found guilty of first-degree manslaughter as a hate crime, along with first-degree gang violence and a lesser conspiracy charge. On May 28, as his father exploded with rage in the courtroom, Conroy was sentenced to the maximum 25 years in prison.

But the hatred that had killed Lucero, the intolerance that had spread like a virus for more than a decade across Suffolk County, cannot be locked away with Conroy. Just ask Carlos Morales.

On an early April afternoon, during a break from Conroy’s trial, Morales took me to the murder scene. The spot where Lucero’s 16 years on Long Island came to a brutal end was no longer marked with flowers and crosses in the apartment-building parking lot, as it had been for months after the murder. Empty Doritos and Fritos bags scuffled across the pavement in the chilly breeze. Only one pedestrian passed by. Just across Railroad Avenue, the Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church sat silent. Just two months after Lucero’s murder, the church had been broken into and vandalized. A big hand-drawn sign was left for the worshippers: "You're Not Welcome Here."

Lucero died about 20 feet from Railroad Avenue, in an area that was once Patchogue’s Salvadoran neighborhood. It’s just a few blocks from the downtown strip, where Morales and several others had reported being assaulted by teenagers. In recent years, the area has been gentrified with pre-fab apartments, with many of the big old apartment buildings torn down. But old rusted warehouses remained. Across the adjacent railroad tracks, the little green shelter known as the Patchogue Train Station sat idle.

Lucero died here to the sounds of racial slurs and insults. He was murdered brutally by the boys of Suffolk families who still, after almost

Local law enforcement discusses police investigations

Main St. in Patchogue, NY

two decades of working and living here, could see him only as a “Beaner.” He was murdered, physically, by Jeffrey Conroy. But he was also murdered, in a larger sense, by the local and national activists who made anti-immigrant hatred a mainstream view in Suffolk County. He was murdered by the decent people who didn’t speak up. He was murdered by the same irrational fears and nativist politics that have sprouted up across America, from San Diego, California, to Fremont, Nebraska, to Farmers Branch, Texas, to Fairfax County, Virginia.

And he was murdered by the same pattern of violence seen elsewhere in America: young men acting on their elders’ apparent wishes. Four months before Lucero’s murder, a chillingly similar incident had happened in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, another community roiled by debate over an “influx” of immigrants. Four Shenandoah teenagers were charged with beating Mexican immigrant Luis Ramirez to death. As in Patchogue, they were not stereotypical white-supremacist thugs; three of the four played on the local high-school football team.

The rhetoric has cooled in Suffolk County. Pro-immigrant groups like Welcoming Long Island, the Central American Refugee Center (CARACEN-NY), Organizacion Latino Americana (OLA) and the Long Island Immigrant Alliance have flourished in the aftermath of Lucero’s murder. A news site, Long Island Wins, provides daily coverage of immigration issues on behalf of "Long Islanders of goodwill." Groups like the Workplace Project (Centro de Derechos Laborales) and Jobs with Justice fight for immigrant workers' rights, alongside several church groups. The murder also prompted Suffolk's undocumented immigrants to organize their own group, the Lucero Foundation. The group meets regularly, often joined by local police representatives and elected officials.

Sachem Quality of Life is history. Documentaries about Farmingville and the Lucero murders and Who Killed Marcelo Lucero?, a play written and performed by Suffolk County residents, have raised national and community awareness of the wages of hate. More hate crimes are being reported in Suffolk—on balance, a good sign, since it means that immigrants are less afraid of the police, even if they’re still being targeted. But the lingering effects of a decade’s worth of anti-immigrant politics won’t soon be washed clean.

Some anti-immigrant activists continue to fan the flames. After Conroy was found guilty, Margaret Bianculli-Dyber, the former Sachem Quality of Life instigator, had sharp words for Lucero's mother, who had traveled from Ecuador for the trial. "I'm sorry his mother is crying, but that is the consequence of her actions of not telling her son to stay home where he belonged," said Bianculli-Dyber, who also objected to the hate-crime conviction. "When you're dead you're dead," she said, "whether the person killed you screaming out racial epithets or whether they shouted, 'I love you.' "

Others, says Morales, remain in denial. When your county has been portrayed nationally as a hateful place, there’s a tendency to be defensive about it. Recently, Morales told me as we stood at Lucero’s murder site, he went door-to-door in Port Jefferson, the higher-end Suffolk town where he now lives, helping Welcoming Long Island organize a local affiliate to assist immigrants' transition into their new community.

“Why do you want to do that?” he says the "more polite" people asked, at door after door. “We have no problems in Port Jefferson.”

Morales, who was assaulted by a different group of teenagers in Patchogue just two weeks before Lucero’s death, shakes his head. “It’s so amazing to me that people are so reluctant to see the reality.”

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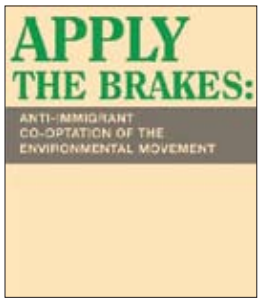

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