

Opinion

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Mike DeLuca President and Group Publisher

Wendy Metcalfe VP Content & Editor in Chief

John Breunig Editorial Page Editor

STAMFORD ADVOCATE

EDITORIAL

Senate must approve police legislation

There was nothing easy about the process that led the state House of Representatives to approve a bill Friday morning on police reform. The emotional debate lasted all through the night and the bill survived a major challenge before it was finally OK'd by a divided House, 86-58, on a nearly party line vote.

Difficult as the process was, it's a necessary step forward on the road to legitimate accountability. Now the Senate, in its special session, needs to follow suit and approve the measure, which should then be signed into law by Gov. Ned Lamont.

This, after all, is the main reason the Legislature is meeting at all. There were other actions taken by the House, on absentee ballots and health care, that were also necessary, but they passed easily and should just as quickly be approved by the Senate. But it was the protests against police brutality and overreach that were heard around the state and beyond that led the Legislature to this point. It is time for change.

The police reform bill would make sweeping changes aimed at holding officers accountable for misconduct, including by making them answerable to a new inspector general and local civilian review

boards. The bill would also mandate new standards for the use of force and limit the ability of police to make searches during motor vehicle stops.

It is not, as proponents have made clear at every step of the process, "anti-cop." No one is suggesting that police officers don't have difficult jobs that sometimes require quick decision-making in life-or-death moments.

Opponents of the bill have said it would hurt recruitment, and cause good officers to leave the force. They argue that anyone not on the front lines of public safety has no idea what happens in the heat of the moment, and has no business offering second guesses.

With due respect, it's likely that police and their supporters would make a similar argument about any proposed reform. In fact, other, less controversial aspects of the reform legislation — such as the discontinuation of a program where local police use military surplus equipment — have been similarly fought. The police don't want reform, and it's their

right to push back.

But lawmakers need to stand strong. The awesome power society grants to police officers must come with oversight, and it is well within lawmakers' rights to decide we need more of it. Changing the conditions under which officers can use deadly force, as the bill does, is a necessary step forward.

So, too, the most controversial aspect of the bill, the removal of qualified immunity for officers who face lawsuits, which was nearly removed from the bill overnight. As one advocate said, if officers don't violate people's

rights, they will have nothing to worry about.

The task now goes to the state Senate, which can either pass the measure in full or, since the House has adjourned, pass nothing. Such an outcome would be a tragic missed opportunity. The people who have filled the streets in protest since the death of George Floyd have demanded reform, and the Legislature is meeting to fill that purpose.

It cannot go home empty-handed.

LOOK AT IT THIS WAY

A season to remember

When I think of Michael Ego, I rewind to a moment of him leaving a New York Mets game at Citi Field in 2017 with seniors from his baseball reminiscence program at River House Adult Day Center in Greenwich.

"The satisfaction is seeing people with this terrible disease enjoying themselves and laughing," he said.

"Even if it's for a short period of time."

It was Michael's expression that revealed his resolve to help more people suffering from dementia by tapping baseball memories as therapy. He might as well have been Sandy Koufax winding up to hurl fire, or Jackie Robinson digging in cleats to steal home.

He wanted to share his cherished perspective, like Vin Scully calling play-by-play for anyone listening to a Los Angeles Dodgers game on the radio.

Michael, former director of the University of Connecticut's Stamford campus, believed baseball could be a balm for sufferers of memory loss. He was a Dodgers guy who wanted programs like his to become a national pastime.

He occasionally expressed mild frustration that Major League Baseball had not embraced the mission. Michael's death Jan. 27, 2019, at age 68, though, did not end that cause in Connecticut, or on his other favorite coast.

River House Executive Director Donna Spellman pledged Friday that meetings in the Cos Cob offices "will forever be known as the Michael Ego Baseball Reminiscence Program," and continue to launch every other Wednesday with singalongs of the national anthem and "God Bless America," and pause for "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" during the seventh-inning stretch.

Last week's salute to the belated Opening Day of this pandemic-truncated season even featured hot dogs for those whose participation wasn't limited to Zoom. Spellman experimented with other sports during the off-season, but it was like playing catch with hockey pucks.

"That was a lesson learned. Nothing shares the excitement of baseball as a culture in and of itself," she said.

Michael's sister, Kimi, admits she was never the baseball fanatic he was (though she accurately refers to the Houston Astros as "The Cheaters"). Nevertheless, she has come in from the bullpen.

Kimi is helping out with a similar baseball therapy program started by the Los Angeles chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). One of her favorite parts of the program is when participants are asked to recall favorite diamond memories, so she shares some of her own. At their core are childhood Sundays at Dodger Stadium with her family. Their father, a California native who was incarcerated in the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, loved to keep score and take photos. Years later, he was chosen to be a "fantasy photographer" and wound up documenting Dennis Martinez's July 28, 1991 perfect game, just the 13th in baseball history.

Then there was the time Michael convinced his sisters to get him a ticket to the first game of the 2017 World Series at Dodger Stadium. After the Dodgers won the game, though they lost the series to "the Cheaters" Michael had another request for his sisters.

"Take me to the airport now. I gotta get back to Connecticut."

I saw Michael the following evening back with his students at University of Connecticut in Stamford, where he hosted a talk by Sports Illustrated writer and author S.L. Price, who grew up in Stamford. Michael wore the expression of a 10-year-old who'd just gotten away with skipping school for a day game.



Michael Ego, the former director of the University of Connecticut Stamford campus, with his sister, Kimi, at Bobby Valentine's restaurant in Stamford in 2016.

Kimi is already thinking outside the chalk box, envisioning programs bringing together Little Leaguers and retired players.

The bench is getting deeper. Jon Leonoudakis, who started the L.A. program with input from Michael and others, drafted former Dodger star Ron Cey for Friday's BaseballALZ session.

In the first half of the 1970s, Leonoudakis spent his teen years in the family business selling parking spaces at Candlestick Park in San Francisco ("It was a dump, but it was our dump"). With an IMDB resume packed with documentaries about baseball (and one on the fabled studio musicians "The Wrecking Crew"), Leonoudakis has some of the mojo of legendary baseball owners such as Bill Veeck (who once sent 3-foot-7 Eddie Gaedel to the plate) and Charlie Finley (who failed in his bid to use orange baseballs, but helped usher in the designated hitter).

Leonoudakis expanded baseball reminiscence programs to engage military veterans, and got participants moving. Seniors started playing catch with plastic balls, vets in wheelchairs took swings ("They started trash-talking each other, it was great"), and a pair of 95-year-olds picked up bats for the first time in three-quarters of a century.

Recognizing how baseball engages the senses, he hands the seniors baseballs so they can feel those "108 magical stitches."

"They're supposed to give them back when they're done." He laughs generously, blowing the punchline, "but some hold onto them."

He's encouraged by interest from cities such as Chicago and Cleveland, and embraces Zoom for offering solace to seniors with limited mobility. For all his films and projects with Disney, he says, "This is the greatest job I've ever had. I can sit in a room with people and we all talk about baseball, we talk about our lives. We connect."

I never asked Michael to name his favorite player, so I threw the question 3,000 miles to Kimi. He never told her either, but the former teacher made an educated guess. She recalled him once proudly wearing a No. 42 jersey and sharing a quote that greatly impacted him when he made a presentation at the Sport, Mental Health and Dementia Conference in Scotland.

"A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

Like Jackie Robinson, Michael Ego continues to have impact.

John Breunig is editorial page editor. jbreunig@scni.com; twitter.com/johnbreunig.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A rally to support Stamford police

To the editor,

On Sunday, Aug. 2, several Stamford residents are hosting a rally in support of our police. This is not a political event and all who support our police are welcome to attend.

We have received positive response from most of our community and the surrounding communities. There is much division in our country as of late and we're hoping this rally will help unite us and support our police officers. The vast majority of officers are good police officers and upstanding citizens. No doubt there is a small element who shouldn't be police officers.

The Stamford Police Department does an outstanding job protecting our citizens and their property year after year. It is truly a department our citizens can rely upon. This is true for most police departments around the country. Even before all the unrest police have been taken for granted and most people are not aware of the sacrifices the officers and their families experience. Our rally is to show the officers we citizens care and appreciate their services.

We hope everyone can put their personal feelings aside and join us in supporting our excellent police department. Stamford, for the most part, is a safe and friendly community and this partly due to the fine work of our police department.

Those interested in attending we will be staging on Aug. 2 at 12:30 p.m. at the rear of Stamford High School. We will proceed to 805 Bedford St. (the site of the former police station). Since we are expecting a large turnout we also recommend parking at the Forest Street garage.

Anthony Lupinacci, Stamford



Occupation should have consequences

To the editor,

In the aftermath of the illegal "occupation" of Latham Park and the illegal blocking of traffic on Bedford Street, there have been no arrests and no citations issued to the perpetrators of these civil disturbances.

It strains credibility considering that this is the same city which so aggressively issues parking fines. But apparently, according to our authorities, letting one's parking meter lapse is more worthy of sanction than blocking traffic and selectively allowing vehicles through the roadblock based on the color of the driver's skin.

The city's elected administration, in its absurd refusal to ensure that these illegal acts carry consequences, is not de-escalating anything but rather only encouraging further lawlessness.

Gregory Lodato, Stamford

Grateful for nonprofits

As a board member of Fairfield County's Community Foundation and Stamford resident, I am writing to express our gratitude to 21 outstanding Stamford nonprofits for their work during the COVID-19 crisis.

Fairfield County's Community Foundation's COVID-19 Resiliency Fund awarded these Stamford nonprofits grant funding: Building One Community; Domestic Violence Crisis Center; Domus; Dovetail; SIP, Inc. (subsidiary of Charter Oak Communities); Exchange Club Parenting Skills Center; Family Centers, Inc.; Future 5; Housing Development Fund; Intempo; Laurel House, Inc.; Mill River Park Collaborative; New Neighborhoods, Inc.; Saint Joseph Parenting Center; Schoke Jewish Family Services; SilverSource, Inc.; SoundWaters; Stamford Health System; Stamford NAACP; Food Bank of Lower Fairfield County; Rowan Center; and Women's Mentoring Network.

These Stamford organizations played important and distinct roles in Stamford's response. They helped Stamford weather this challenging storm more smoothly and worked collaboratively with other partners.

The Community Foundation launched the Fairfield County COVID-19 Resiliency Fund on March 18 to support frontline nonprofits. Nearly \$2.5 million has been raised from donors throughout Fairfield County, which were able to quickly deploy this funding to support nonprofits such as the aforementioned group of organizations. To date, more than \$1.9 million has been distributed to 154 local nonprofit organizations, reaching more than 260,000 of our region's most vulnerable residents — that's a quarter of the entire population of Fairfield County!

The Community Foundation has been very impressed with the way our region's nonprofit sector immediately pivoted in response to this public health crisis and we are honored to support their important work.

We are indeed lucky to have such a strong nonprofit sector here in Stamford County.

Edwin Ford of Stamford is a board member of Fairfield County's Community Foundation.