

By Bill Donahue

Photos by Tristan Spinski for The Washington Post

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On a quiet evening in June, I planted a Black Lives Matter lawn sign on the village green in my hometown, Gilmanton, N.H., population 3,758. Then, as I crouched low in the grass, shooting a photo of the sign, I made sure that our town hall, the two-story white clapboard Gilmanton Academy, built in 1894, loomed large in the background.

Erected to house a long-vanished private school, the Academy building has, for the past three decades, been the civic soul of our town, which sits in New Hampshire's Lakes Region, amid piney forests and sheep pastures and rolling hills. Numerous Fourth of July dances have been held at the Academy, and once every four years we stomp the snow off our boots and file up the Academy's worn wooden staircase to take part in a local rite, New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary.

My plan was to use the photo to promote a Black Lives Matter rally that I'd be hosting in a few days on Gilmanton's green. I was allying with the decentralized racial justice movement, which decries violence against Black people, because I wanted to suggest that, even in a tradition-bound small town, change is possible. My neighbors have long baked pies for one another and run errands for the sick; I hoped that conscientious racial inclusion could come to be regarded as just another form of caring. But I knew that I was taking a controversial stance. In Gilmanton, as of 2019, 96.5 percent of the residents were, like me, White. In November, 57 percent of the voters here chose to reelect Donald Trump. Meanwhile, the political gap between rural and urban America continues to widen. According to Decision Desk HQ, a website focused on elections, voters in the country's least dense counties picked Trump by a margin of 35 percentage points, up from 32 in 2016.

Rick Notkin, a retired nurse and gun advocate who carries a gun in accordance with New Hampshire's open-carry laws.

After I carried my sign home and announced the rally on the community Facebook page, the vitriol flowed in. There were over 300 comments in the first 24 hours. One of Gilmanton's most outspoken Black Lives Matter advocates, a 32-year-old legal assistant named Grace Sisti, was being savaged in one of many side threads: "this whole virtue signaling stunt will turn this whole town against you," wrote a woman named Rita Canole, whose children attended school in Gilmanton with Sisti. "Think this thru. ... you have lived here your whole life and [will] probably spend the rest of it here. ... don't make people remember you for this."

"Grace Sisti is a radical leftist," proclaimed another local, Rick Lucas, in a two-sentence post. "These are the facts!!"

My event listing was soon deleted, and I discovered why when I ran into the website moderator, who told me, “You were getting threats, and so was I.” I was a little terrified, but on June 20, when 90 people gathered on the town green here to mark George Floyd’s suffocation by lying in the grass for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, there were no counterdemonstrators. The only opposition came from a couple of hooligans who shouted sarcastic remarks as they sped by in a car.

Still, as the presidential election neared, the situation grew stranger. In October, one local conservative — Phil Wittmann, a selectman in neighboring Alton — took a swipe at me in a letter to our local paper, the Laconia Daily Sun. “While taking a nice Sunday drive through Gilmanton,” Wittmann wrote, “I passed a house where a man who used to be a reporter for the Arab Muslim News Service, Al Jazeera lives. ... On his front lawn he proudly displays a Black Lives Matter sign. Most people now know that Black Lives Matter is a Marxist organization bent on destroying the American family and way of life.”

A snowy scene in Gilmanton.

Wittmann has a good memory. I’ve done some writing for Al Jazeera America, and in 2015, while I was covering a Trump rally in New Hampshire for the news service, he denied my request for a man-on-the-street interview. But how did he know where I lived? And how was I to stomach his letter’s scary suggestion that, amid the coronavirus pandemic, our rural county had become nothing but a constellation of isolates holed up in their respective homes, Googling one another as they lobbed decimating insults over the Internet?

I settled in Gilmanton in 2015, after being a lifelong summer visitor, guided by a belief that the place was, even compared with other New England villages, a sanctuary of idyllic beauty and calm. My ancestors have been coming here during summer since the late 19th century, and in writing a locally popular 1993 memoir, “Gilmanton Summers,” my grandmother, Jane Scriven Cumming, evoked a sweet antique world appointed by kindly, approachable neighbors. “Every evening at dusk,” she wrote, “old Mr. Valpey stood on a little ladder to light the lantern.”

For rural liberals like me, Joe Biden’s win certainly didn’t usher in a new era of sweetness and light. Belknap County, which comprises Gilmanton and 10 other towns, and is home to 61,000 people, proved itself the Trump-friendliest county in New Hampshire. All 18 of the politicians we just sent to New Hampshire’s very large state legislature are Republican, and before you call them New England moderates, consider that when the delegation met in December, in a small room, it made protective face coverings optional, in defiance of a statewide mask mandate. And delegation chair Michael Sylvia is pressing his fellow legislators to impeach New Hampshire’s Republican governor, Chris Sununu, the Trump supporter who’d imposed the mask mandate. “Simply, we are violating the rights of our people,” Sylvia recently explained to the Concord Monitor. “This is not something that we can tolerate now or in the future.”

Belknap County is crackling with pronouncements like Sylvia's these days — with righteous political declamations that seek to foreclose all dialogue. I've been guilty of high-flown rhetoric myself. In my worst moment on Facebook, in June, I lashed out after a friend posted a meme I deemed racist, saying, "This makes you look like an a--. Take it down." I've worried that Gilmanton has become a casualty of Trump-inspired Internet sniping, so in the days after the election, I embarked on an experiment. I began approaching the myriad locals who, in writing, have attacked me and my political allies. I wanted to know whether liberals and conservatives can still even talk to each other in rural America, and I wondered: What if we took the dialogue offline?

The author in snow.

The selectmen's meetings in Alton take place on the first and third Mondays of each month, just off Main Street, in the red brick town hall near the True Value hardware store and Alton Village Pizza, and when I step inside in late November, the selectman who insinuated that I'm a jihadist, Marxist family wrecker is easy to spot. Slight and wiry, with a white beard and glasses, Phil Wittmann, 72, sits behind a wooden placard bearing his name, discussing last weekend's "Stop the Steal" rally in Washington. "I have some friends who went," he's telling a neighbor, "and they're supposed to send me some photos."

I linger behind him, quiet, obsequious, awaiting an opening. "Um," I begin when Wittmann makes eye contact, "I think we've met before. And you wrote about me in the paper, actually."

"That's right," Wittmann says, chuckling. "I did."

His manner is jaunty. He seems to have cast aside the squinting skepticism that shrouded our 2015 encounter, opting instead to relish the rough-and-tumble of politics. Is he making a show of bravado for the Alton voters now filing into the room, pre-meeting? It's not clear, but when I offer to treat him to breakfast, he says, "Sure," and gives me his number.

When I call Wittmann the next day, I leave a message — and then begin studying up for the interview. Wittmann's political priority, I learn, is defunding the Lakes Region Planning Commission, an agency that fosters multi-town cooperation on environmental issues. His approach — I think of it as "Alton First" — has thus far failed to stop the commission, though, and as I read about Wittmann, it's his wife who comes through in bolder strokes.

I settled in this little town guided by a belief in its friendly spirit, and even now, as our political divide hangs on, I can still see that friendly spirit glimmering at times.

Chris Wittmann runs Cats in the Cradle, a quaint online shop that sells antiques and handcrafted soaps, each bar "a work of art," according to the website, "beautifully packaged with nostalgia in mind." The accompanying photos seem straight out of my grandmother's book: Here's a lissome

circa 1900 beauty in a white bonnet; here's a woman trundling her worn milk pail out of the barn. Chris Wittmann's prose, meanwhile, is incendiary — more alarmist, even, than her husband's. At least, it is in a letter she sent recently to the Baysider, a local paper. Writing of the “trained Marxists” running the Black Lives Matter movement, Chris Wittmann says that for them, “It's all about their hatred for President Trump, eliminating America as we know it, and mob rule.”

The idea that anti-American troublemakers are poised to shatter our pastoral dreams is nothing new, of course. A century ago, misguided patriotism precipitated a crackdown on labor organizers and Asian farmworkers in the American West. And the current fears about the racial justice movement are of a piece with what I witnessed at that 2015 Trump rally I covered. That was the one where a man in the audience rose to infamously tell our future president, “We have a problem in this country. It's called Muslims.” As Trump expressed tolerance for this view, the man stepped up his anti-Muslim rhetoric, asking, “How can we get rid of them?”

And so I want to ask the Wittmanns: Can't our pastoral dreams accommodate racial diversity, and how can we soothe such fears? How can we get past seeing the monsters that simply aren't there? But when Phil Wittmann calls me back late that night, there's a hesitancy in his voice. “I've done some thinking about your interview request,” he says, “and I'm going to respectfully decline.”

Headstones in the Smith Meeting House Cemetery in Gilmanton.

I reach out to a few more of my local right-leaning critics, asking to meet for an interview. All of them ghost me, though, and eventually I have to recognize that the silence is stemming not only from what I've said and done but from who I am. I could never claim to be “from” Gilmanton.

My grandmother's book is still being reprinted by the local historical society, sure, and in the 1970s, when I was a kid, I spent scads of time here, swimming in Loon Pond and training for cross country on the back roads. Whatever patriotism that's in me was shaped here in Gilmanton, at the Fourth of July parades, when the firetrucks paused in front of the Academy building and a deep solemn voice (was it the fire chief?) intoned, “Will you join us, please, for the singing of our national anthem?”

Still, I was just another affluent summer person when I was a kid, a flatlander from Connecticut. And after I finished college, in 1986, I spent nearly three decades living in Portland, Ore., a city known for its liberalism.

When I landed in Gilmanton I was single. But then in 2018 that, too, changed. I logged on to the dating app Bumble and found a public interest lawyer situated in the crunchy, left-leaning outskirts of Burlington, Vt. Michele is Mexican American. She told me this in an early text,

adding, “Trump calls us an infestation. It isn’t just that he doesn’t see us as humans. He is a corrupt, greedy, power-hungry man with no morals.”

On an early date, Michele explained how, in law school, she came across graffiti slurring minority students and then decided it was time to embrace her racial identity. She legally changed her last name. She’d grown up Michele Coker, but Coker was a name her father adopted for the convenience of having an American-sounding name. He was born an Olvera, and in 1995 Michele Coker became Michele Cristina Fontana Olvera.

Michele Olvera, the author's girlfriend, is Mexican American. She moved in with the author in Gilmanton last summer. The town, as of 2019, is 96.5 percent White.

Late last summer, Michele moved in with me, just in time to help stack firewood for winter, and now she’s running a few miles on Gilmanton’s back roads most mornings as she navigates the trickiness of being Latinx in lily White northern New England. When I decided to host that Black Lives Matter rally, I was animated in part by the alienation Michele sometimes feels here — and by the hopeful sense that our community could become richer, more robust and vibrant, if it grew more diverse.

But was there reason for such hope? In the years I lived in Portland, Gilmanton had, like so many American small towns, lost some of its neighborly cohesion. The Gilmanton Corner Store closed the year I arrived, and it had been a mainstay of the community for 75 years. During World War II, Gilmanton soldiers sent letters to the store so they could be posted on a community bulletin board.

The population of Gilmanton — 1,010 in 1970 — has nearly quadrupled over the past half-century. There have been no Fourth of July dances since 2003 when a vaunted volunteer organizer retired, and since 2018, the town hall has been locked during business hours. Visitors have to buzz at the door and then confer with clerks from behind bulletproof plexiglass. Septic permits are now a big deal in Gilmanton, and the zoning laws have gotten quite finicky.

There have been positive changes, too. Small farms are enjoying a renaissance here, and these days we’ve got a bustling farmers market and a nonprofit, Gilmanton’s Own Inc., that sells local food and crafts in a small storefront. The town dump and the post office are, as ever, splendid places to chew the fat with your neighbors. Yet local consensus holds that something essential has been lost here, and blame for this loss falls quite often on outsiders. In particular, it falls on the many newcomers who emigrate here from Massachusetts. There’s an oft-invoked slur for these folks — “Massholes” — and on the Gilmanton Facebook page they get copious grief. “Do you know why it’s so windy in New Hampshire?” read a recent post. “Because Massachusetts sucks.”

The Gilmanton Academy, which houses the town offices.

The opposite of a Masshole is an “old-timer,” an individual whose roots here go generations deep — a person so at home on our rugged, granite-strewn hills that, on a cold winter’s night, he can spend hours outside tending to the livestock without ever donning a jacket. The old-timer looms large in local mythology, and when I finally land my first interview with a political foe, I’m not shocked to hear Dick Burchell, a 77-year-old former Belknap County commissioner, speak of old-timers. “The people I’m closest to,” Burchell says, “the people I tried to represent, they’re traditional. They’re hard-working and down-to-earth. They’ve never made a lot of money, and now the forces of our economy are tilted against them.”

As Burchell sees it, “There’s such an imbalance between these working-class people and affluent second homeowners. There’s a real difference between their local conservatism and a more global way of looking at things.” Black Lives Matter, Burchell believes, is a “myopic” organization that’s “fomenting violence” to serve a globalist agenda. “There’s some very powerful forces driving it,” he says, “Wall Street establishment types. Globalization works for them.”

We’re meeting in Burchell’s lavish modern wood house, which sits at the end of a long dirt road in Gilmanton Iron Works, a satellite village. It’s late on a November afternoon, and the light filtering down through the leafless maples lining Sunset Lake, just outside the window, is dim and gray. I’m masked and eight feet away from Burchell. Still, there’s a convivial feel to our talk, even though I’m painfully aware that we’re just two White guys talking about Black people. When I stepped into the half-darkness of Burchell’s living room, he quipped, “Welcome to the gloaming.” And now he’s canted back in his brown leather easy chair, a large, white-haired man in a green zip-up sweater. He’s in fragile health, recently treated for kidney issues, but still he’s expounding on his worldview in ruminative, deliberate tones.

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“We’ve become increasingly fragile as a society,” Burchell continues. “The hypertension surrounding race these days is totally unnecessary. And what’s being ignored is that you can be marginalized in ways beyond race. There are people who’ve been here for generations, and they’re working two jobs and just getting by.”

Burchell isn’t one of these people, though. He moved to New Hampshire in the mid-1980s and earned a handsome living as a real estate agent. Then, late in life, he became an inveterate writer of letters to the Laconia Daily Sun. One of his most frequent targets is a Democratic politician, Ruth Larson, who in November lost a bid to become a state representative.

Larson, 72, is a lawyer and lifelong seasonal visitor who became a year-round New Hampshire resident in 2010. She's an avowed Black Lives Matter supporter, a feminist and an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ rights. After Phil Wittmann attacked me in print, she bought an advertisement in the Sun to declare that his letter exuded "both bigotry and a complete lack of understanding of journalism. I count Mr. Donahue as a friend," she continued, "and as an ally attempting to offer an alternative to the narrow and obsolete views of you and your allies."

In his Sun letters, Burchell has called Larson "an extremist" and "screechy and preachy" and complained that she doesn't believe in either the Bible or the U.S. Constitution. Now, in the gloaming, Burchell surprises me, revealing that he and Larson used to be friends — "when she first moved here," he says, "before either of us got involved in politics." He gestures across the lake, for both of us know that Larson lives on the opposite shore, a half mile away. "My wife and Ruth have spent a lot of time together," he says. "They've gone kayaking. Until covid came along, the ladies who live nearby would all get together on Tuesday nights and drink wine and rip at their husbands."

Listening to this, I remember a letter Larson wrote to the Sun in early 2020, pre-pandemic, inviting Burchell and eight other conservatives who've lambasted her in print — "frenemies," she called them — to join her for breakfast or lunch on the Democrat's dime. Only one "frenemy" accepted the offer, and it wasn't Burchell. Now, his demurrals saddens me. There's just a sliver of water between these two avid rhetoricians. Gingerly, I offer a proposal. "What if we got Ruth involved in this conversation?" I say. "We could just call her and ask her to come over."

Burchell doesn't warm to the idea. "No," he says, shaking his head, "my sensibilities are nothing like hers. I was brought up to be respectful. I'm not a sledgehammer. Talking with Ruth, it just wouldn't work."

Two weeks after meeting with Burchell, I write Larson for a response. But by now Burchell's health has worsened. He's back in the hospital, and Larson elects not to comment. "I am quite friendly with his wife," she explains, "and I want to be sensitive to her."

Not long after that, Burchell passes away, a victim of renal failure. Larson expresses condolences by sending flowers to his family.

In November, 57 percent of the voters in Gilmanton chose to reelect Donald Trump. All told, I write to 13 detractors. They've shown great swagger on Facebook, but now they're ducking me, almost en masse. What's going on? To be fair, I'm more or less ambushing them. An average of 350 million photos go up on Facebook every day. They're public pronouncements, but almost none of them elicit a call from a journalist.

Paul Oman, an online epoxy salesman who scored 25 likes casting doubt on my September Black Lives Matter rally, declines my request for an interview. “I’m working my tail off and I want to keep a low profile,” he says.

When I reach out to a man named Scott Febonio, I expect a little more fire. Febonio’s profile photo captures him shirtless, his six-pack impeccable, and on the community page he’s positioned himself as the stone-cold voice of sobriety. When one local contested the notion that Black Lives Matter is a terrorist group, Febonio wrote, “when they show up and destroy your property and drag you out of your home you may think differently. Open your eyes its happening all over the country this is not up for debate.” Later, going after another Black Lives Matter supporter, Febonio typed, “please move... back to Mass.” Never mind that his interlocutor was a lifelong Gilmantonite.

In responding to my request for an interview, Febonio writes, “I don’t support mainstream media or news organizations that are corrupt.” He goes on to suggest that I “write an article about the corruption and Fraud that is occurring. Talk about the overwhelming evidence and demand this be investigated for the good of our country. I challenge you to stand up.”

Intrigued, I write back, wondering whether he is referencing the presidential election or a “wider pattern of fraud and corruption.”

“Please don’t insult my intelligence,” he replies. “Have a good day.”

The Center Congregational Church next to the Gilmanton Academy.

Eventually, I meet with Rick Notkin, a 65-year-old retired nurse and gun advocate whose vanity license plate reads BEARARMS. When I slide into the booth to meet him at T-Bones, a steakhouse in our county seat, Laconia, the restaurant is nearly empty. He has a 9mm Smith & Wesson holstered on his right hip — fully legal per New Hampshire’s open-carry laws. “Is that gun loaded?” I ask, trepidatious.

“Well, I hope so.” Notkin’s voice is cheery and gentle. “Because if it’s not, it’s really useless.” He tells me that, as a bespectacled Jewish boy growing up outside Boston, he was repeatedly bullied. For a while he thought the answer was Gandhian nonviolence. Then in college he happened to watch an old movie, “The Incident,” which sees an injured vigilante taking action against two thugs terrorizing passengers on a New York City subway car. The film’s hero, played by Beau Bridges, slams his plaster arm cast at one of the villains until he is unconscious. Watching it, Notkin was transfixed. “I thought back on all the times people beat me up and nobody did anything.”



Today, Notkin packs his sidearm each time he steps into Temple B'nai Israel, in Laconia. "There have been a lot of attacks on Jews historically," he explains, "and on churches of many faiths." His gun has spurred controversy at the synagogue, and personally I feel for his congregants. Then Notkin tells me that he spends 10 hours a week running the synagogue's soup kitchen.

"Do you carry your gun when you're ministering to the homeless?" I ask.

"I carry it all the time," Notkin says patiently, "but that doesn't mean I'm raring to shoot somebody. I'd use it only if I was threatened, or someone I love was. If I went to my grave never having shot somebody, I'd be fine with that."

Our luncheon chat is doing what dialogue should do: It's making me see my opponent as complex and human. But there's a formality to it, a careful, distant tone, and it's set a full 11 miles from my home. The place I care about most is the town that I live in. I want a spirited, uninhibited back-and-forth with a Gilmanton neighbor on the other side of the political fence. So I'm happy when I get a warm reply from local conservative Valerie Cote, whose Facebook screen name is Tocho A'Hagi. "Would not mind speaking about politics," Cote writes. "Thank you for reaching out!"

Valerie Cote, a U.S. Air Force veteran and retired iron worker.

Cote, 61, is a retired Air Force staff sergeant who spent 16 years as an iron worker. And, though we've never met, I'm familiar with her house, since it sits on a road I frequently bike on. A sign out front bears the silhouette of a gun-toting sniper along with the words, "If you can read this you're in range!"

Cote is wearing camouflage pants as she greets me at the door. There's an orange bandanna wrapped around her long, gray hair, and her white German shepherd, Makwa, is leaping joyously at her side. Maybe I'm supposed to feel threatened by the sign and the dog, but Cote is gracious in her own brusque, unrehearsed way. "Coffee?" she asks me, her smoker's voice redolent of her native Boston.

"Coffee'd be great," I say. "Cream, no sugar."

I'd contacted Cote because she followed up my rally announcement with a post asking, "Are you tired of anti-law enforcement nonsense?" In her kitchen, though, Cote is charming me with her unabashed saltiness. In describing the old days in Gilmanton, she says, "We used to shut the lights off at night and just drive in the dark."

She moved here in 1983, a decade after undergoing a turbulent identity struggle. Her great-grandmother was a Mi'kmaq Indian, and when she was 16 she read "Bury My Heart at

Wounded Knee,” Dee Brown’s unsparing account of White people’s mistreatment of Indians in the 19th-century American West. When her history teacher delivered a different rendition of what happened — “it was just ‘the Indians scalped everyone,’ ” as she remembers it — Cote initiated a heated argument and then abruptly quit school for good. “I slammed the door and broke the glass on the way out,” she says. “They were lying to me. I was done.”

With flourish, Cote had, like Michele, doubled down on her racial identity. And now I ask her if she feels any solidarity with the Black Lives Matter notion that historical wrongs must be righted.

“I can understand that people are a product of where they come from,” she says, “and the inner city, where drugs are available left and right — it’s a lot like an Indian reservation. But the question is, ‘How do you pull yourself up out of it?’ Charles Payne” — she’s referring to a Fox Business Network host who is Black — “he went to school carrying a briefcase when he was a kid. He got picked on, but he didn’t let that stop him. Look, white privilege exists only if you let it exist.”

A basketball court in town.

Her toughness goes all the way to the core, I see now. It’s an ideology. And her husband, John Boutin, knows this. When he wanders into the kitchen, a stout, white-bearded man in black sweatpants, he makes a smirking reference to the warning sign on the lawn. “It’s not a joke,” he says. “Once, when a guy came here to talk to me about life insurance, she got her gun out.”

“I only shot in the air,” Cote says. “I didn’t even know who the guy was.”

“He never came back,” Boutin says, raising his eyebrow.

Days later, when I tell a couple of Portland friends about Cote and her warning shots, they’re horrified and suggest that, simply by communing with such a gunslinger, I’ve slipped over to the dark side. For me, though, what stands out is the delightful twists and turns of my 2½-hour meeting with Cote. It’s her telling me how she used to see her elderly neighbor, a farmer, sitting on his tractor “curled up like a burnt boot, but still out there every day. That’s the Gilmanton that I don’t want to go away.”

It’s her telling me how she lets her old neighbor’s son, also a farmer, tap the maple trees in her woods for syrup. And it’s Boutin coming back into the room when we’re two hours in and saying, “This is a great conversation.”

Great conversations are rooted in courage and trust. We need them to keep our nation civil and stable, and during the past few weeks I’ve seen just how difficult it is to make them happen.

Over and over, I've been stonewalled and reminded that a lot of people would rather say cruel things online than talk in person.

When I talk to my city-dwelling friends, they're inclined to write off places like Gilmanton as unfortunate red splotches on the map — as places that should be visited only briefly, if at all, and only during the summer holidays. Many of the people who breached the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 were, after all, self-proclaimed patriots from small towns not too different from Gilmanton.

But I live here. I settled in this little town in the hills six years ago guided by a belief in its friendly spirit, and even now, as our political divide hangs on, as fraught as ever in the early days of the Biden presidency, I can still see that friendly spirit glimmering at times. On the day after Cote and I meet, she will post a picture of us, masked, on Facebook along with a note celebrating the good questions asked on both sides. One of my critics, an arch right-winger who said no to an interview, will applaud in the comments section with an emoji of an American flag.

Belknap County, which comprises Gilmanton and 10 other towns, proved itself the Trump-friendliest county in New Hampshire.

As Cote and I keep talking, she pours me a second cup of coffee. There's a happy, loose-limbed, neighborly vibe in the room as night falls outside her window. Squinting into the gathering darkness, I feel as though I can almost see old Mr. Valpey out there, lighting his lantern.

Eventually, when Cote and I say goodbye, she urges me to stop in next time I'm coming through on my bike. And I just might do that.

Bill Donahue is a writer in New Hampshire.