

## Jonesborough Flag Retirement Ceremony Sunday, 10/27/24

Good afternoon. First, I wish to apologize for my unfamiliar accent. My family is not from here. Almost four years ago, we decided the Colorado area we had called home for three decades had changed its' character too much for us to be comfortable. So, the search began. 89 towns and cities in the United States met 13 parameters that we were looking for.

Parameters like the number of churches, the quality of the elementary schools (even though our kids are grown, how a town raises its' youth determines the future), a traditional Main St., voting history, a College nearby which can attract fun restaurants and events, a tourist town, historical significance, reasonable cost of living, health care nearby, low crime, an airport close-by, walking trails, and a strong local newspaper.

Remarkably, 6 of the 13 finalists were in Eastern Tennessee, an area that neither Kim nor myself had ever traveled to. So, we loaded up the car and travelled seventeen hundred miles to check and see where we could find America.

The America of Norman Rockwell. The America of tradition, civic pride, and having each other's back. The America where your desire to fit in and respect those that came before you determines your acceptance. It seemed only right to start our search in the Oldest Town in Tennessee. Never had been to Tennessee, but as we got off 11E and approached Main...we both knew we were done looking. Those flags...

Those (precisely) 141 small flags that adorn our lamp posts. Yep...141.

Those flags waved us in for a landing on that cold January morning in 2020, and soon we had moved into what my dear wife initially called "That brick monster".

On one of my walks last year, I noticed a few of those 141 flags were struggling. Some were torn, and some were even missing from their holders. I asked City Administrator Glenn Rosenoff if "someone" could come and fix those flags...and the next thing I knew Mayor Vest was announcing Dana Helvey was appointed to the Flag Committee. Funny how things work out here in small town America.

There's about a half dozen of us on the Flag Committee, all led by a woman who loves Old Glory more than anyone...Ruth Verhegge. (Ruth please stay comfortably seated while we all give our thanks). Post nine-eleven, Ruth and many other fine people like Terry Countermine and the late Mayor Tobie Bledsoe helped to start the Jonesborough flag project down at the place called the Cranberry Thistle. Donations from the populace established the flags as mostly self-supporting, a tradition that lives on today.

Since I walk downtown regularly, I was happy to help maintain the flags. Committee Member Rick Gibson taught me the ropes of keeping the flags in good repair...and he told me something else. He said "Dana, after a while these flags will talk to you". Truer words never spoken. I call our 141 flags "the ladies". They get themselves all furled up in a tight ball from time to time. And unfortunately, after a time... the sun, wind, and weather take their toll. We then must retire that flag and allow her to eternally rest, as recognized by today's ceremony.

Things happen to you when you attend to these ladies. As I jaywalk back and forth to unfurl a flag on the sidewalk opposite...many cars stop and allow me to cross. Others will honk as they pass...and many people just wave and smile as they go about their business. Walking downtown, one also gets to meet new people to Town. Some need directions, others are lingering, ready for a chat. The Corner Cup had a badly ripped up flag that needed to be replaced. I met a couple from Tallassee enjoying their coffee, and the view down Main. As I got out my ladder to reach the tattered flag, the fellow said, "maybe you should keep this one up". I looked at him, and he continued "Sort of reminds me of the Country right now. All ripped up, but still trying to wave". A week later, while putting up some new flags on West Main, a young lady with out-of-state plates came by slowly. She had her window down and yelled "Oh God...ANOTHER Flag??". She must have recognized that I was old, and thus probably hard of hearing so she circled back and yelled out the same comment again, but even louder..." Oh God...ANOTHER Flag??". To which I yelled back..." YES, PRAISE GOD, another flag". She sped off.

Then came the great flood of 2024. As so many did in this area, we volunteered at a food distribution center. A fellow came driving up, and I could not tell if the truck or him had more mud on them. He asked for a bit of food and water for his family, so I led him inside the building in Limestone to help him pick out some items. After a bit, he looked at me and said, "You're not

*from here*” (I get that a lot, I told you earlier I talk funny) ...then he continued “but you sure look familiar”. We did that thing we all do... going down our respective lists of what we do, and where we go without a match. Then, my mud-encrusted friend gave me a broad smile and said “Hey wait, I drive through Jonesborough to get to my job. You’re that flag guy”. Then, he said “Come on here, I got something to show ya”. He raced towards his truck, forgetting the box of food we had been filling up. He reached into the bed of his truck...and proudly brought her up. As I gazed at the symbol of our Country, soiled by mud and still attached to a broken pole, my new friend said, “It was the last thing I was able to save, before the porch gave way”.

We all have stories about what this flag of the United States of America means to us individually. But I wonder...what do each one of us, mean to our flag? For those that believe that this flag is alive and worth fighting (and dying) for, we might also ask... what do **we** mean to that flag? So, let’s ask ourselves...

Is our flag not asking us to stand for something, and proudly fly?

Is not our flag teaching us that when our friend is all furled up, confused, or lost...we need to stop...and give them the opportunity to fly again?

Is not our flag simply asking us to wave as much as we can to each other, for as long as we can? So, Jonesborough, these flags love to wave. Maybe they’re asking America to see how much Jonesborough waves to each other. So, people...let’s just wave. America...needs to be like Jonesborough.