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Columns

Signs of our times: How about less flash, more substance?



Dan Franch

By Dan Franch

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I was in the Chicago area for unexpected reasons last month. While there and during my daily walks around my parents' neighborhood, I was struck by several things.

Many cars and trucks were too big for the garages, and some were as high as the



houses. Some houses had five vehicles in the driveway, which seemed more than

there were people inside. And despite the not-so-cold weather, there weren't many

people outside, be it at 4 in the morning, any time during the day, or 8 at night. It

made me think of Clarisse McClellan in Ray Bradbury's FAHRENHEIT 451. The





streets were empty. The houses were dark with maybe one light on. Except for those

walking their dogs, where was everybody?

But what really caught my eye were the signs on people's lawns, and I'm not talking

about the "Vote For" signs because of local elections. The signs that caught my eye



were personal statements.

I even received a recorded warning while walking in an alley past one garage. It informed me that I was being captured on video. Sure enough, when I looked up,

there was a camera and speaker near the roof.

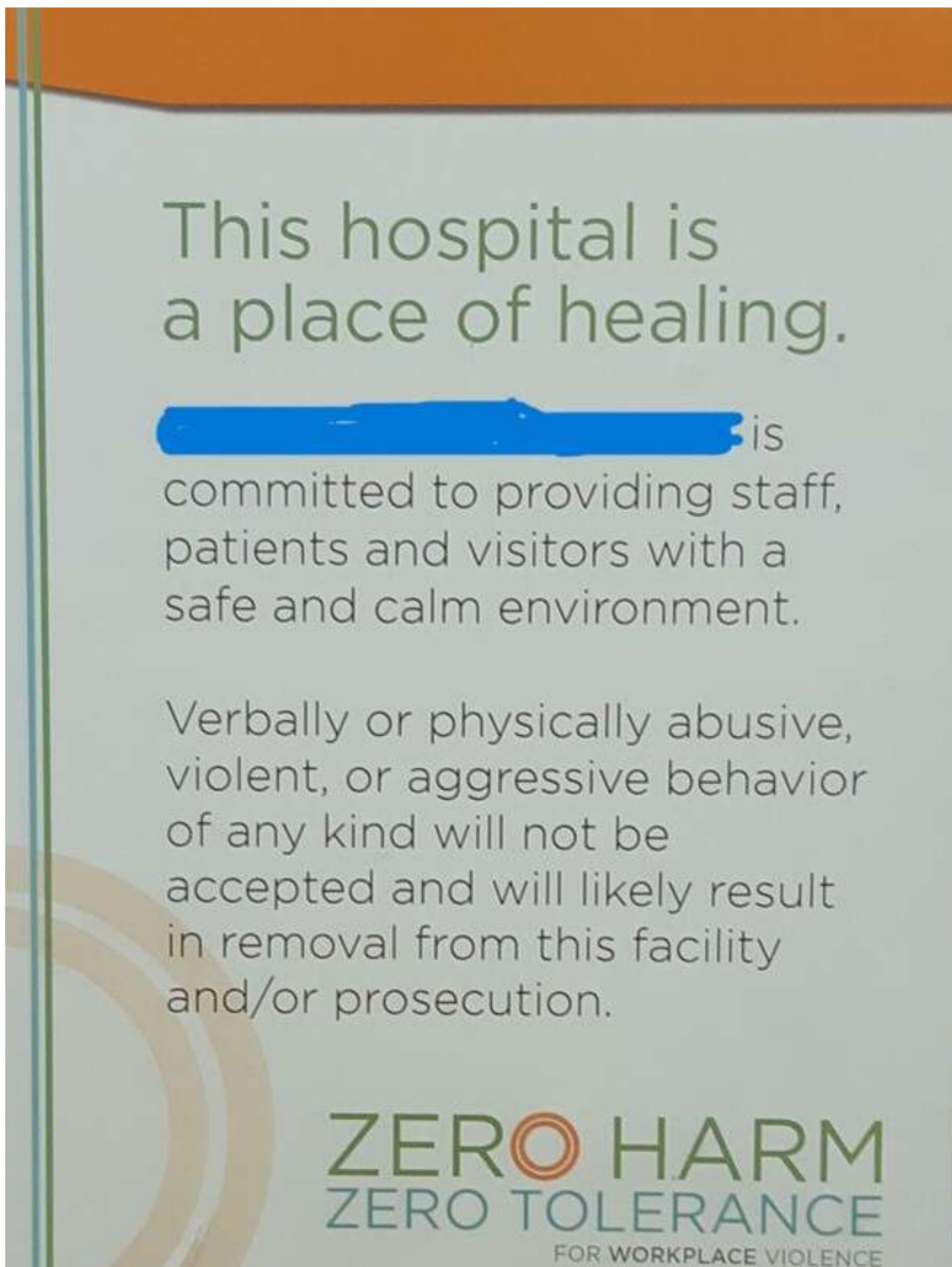




Anyway, and back to all the signs.

They warned of trespassing and guard dogs, One sign had the barrel of a gun on it

claiming I should beware of the owner, not the dog. I'm not sure if he was jesting or



A sign in a hospital warns that aggressive behavior will not be tolerated. The name of the hospital has been obscured. *Courtesy of Dan Franch*

being honest. “Feel lucky punk?” I didn’t want to test my luck.



Some signs proclaimed the owners’ stance on science, women’s rights or other more liberal views. Others focused on religion and freedom and other more conservative views. And some seemed to be fed up with both sides.

Even the local park district was in on the act with signs telling people what they couldn’t



do. It was a relief to see that having fun wasn’t among the forbidden activities.

My favorite was a “Do Not Trespass” sign on a tree, a plastic chair tied to the tree with a sign warning of dogs approaching unannounced, plus an American

flag in the background (I got a kick out of that). When I took a picture, the neighbor



A suburban yard sign declares a family's values. *Courtesy of Dan Franch*

came out to ask what I was doing. He was friendly enough and understanding when I

told him I lived in Europe and found all these signs funny.

What is it about Americans and our need to trumpet our allegiances? It's not just

signs. There are flags and sports paraphernalia and bumper stickers, too.



Why do we feel a need to take a stand or make a statement or pronounce ourselves

and our views to the world (or at least our neighbors)? Such chest-beating divides

more than unites.

It says, "I'm this," as if one slogan defines us. How limiting.



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Then I read a sign at a hospital forcefully declaring that abusive behavior would not be tolerated and wondered, “What in the world is wrong with us?”



A suburban family declares its key values in three words on a yard sign. *Dan Franch*

Less flash, more substance is what I say.

Blustering displays (or a need for hospital signs like the one I saw) are rare in Europe. Flags are rarely flown outside houses except on national holidays. People



rarely wear sports team paraphernalia other than on match day and paint their

faces

with their national colors during international competitions. That's the extent of it.

And there are no signs in people's lawns. For the most part, people keep their political and social views to themselves.



There's a sense of humble pride rather than boastful aggrandizing. Finesse is how I

define it. European pride is sincere, deep, and personal — something felt inside, not

worn outside.

It brings to mind the end of the Star Spangled Banner at sporting events when



Americans hoot and holler as the song ends. “O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave” ...

It’s as if we are insecure or unsure and trying to convince ourselves of our assumed

superiority. America is undoubtedly superior in military might to any country in

Europe, maybe even all of Europe combined. But it is certainly not any freer, and I



can't say it's any braver.

Again, it makes me wonder why we need so many signs and bumper stickers and

flags to let everyone know where we stand. If Americans are so free, why do people

feel the need to put so many warning signs in their yards? If Americans are so brave,





why is so much fear shown by having cameras and warning signs?

Look, I'm not anti-American, and I'm not sharing this to insult Americans. After all,

I'm an American, too. It's just that, in the words of John Spence, "Sometimes you need to distance yourself to see things clearly."



I've lived outside the US since 2000, and every time I come back, I see it in a new way.

This time, I noticed all the signs.