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Commentary: Grassroots activism has made a difference throughout history



By **LESLIE HOYLE GUERRA**

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Today, many Americans are disillusioned by the Trump administration as it challenges the democratic norms and civil liberties that we hold dear. Our democracy is at stake. In my opinion, our leaders in Washington and in the State of Florida are not upholding justice, equity or even the truth. Many grassroots organizations are collaborating and converging to speak out and mobilize. Citizens are demanding to be heard over issues such as immigration reform, gun violence, human rights, voting inequities and economic equality.

So how do we push back legally yet forcibly? The answer lies in grassroots activism.

If history teaches us anything, it is that when the courageous masses persistently unite for a common cause, history can be rewritten. For example, my group, Seismic Resistance, a political action committee formed by eight passionate individuals, seeks to support grassroots movements by exposing and dismantling false patriotism and corrupt leadership through bold action and unwavering truth. Our messaging involves engagement through social media, digital billboards, mailers and support from like-minded individuals.

"The goal of Seismic Resistance is to provide unbiased, fact-based information about the issues of the day to the voters of tomorrow," said Lynn Moira Dictor, the leader of the group and former Seminole County Democratic Party chair. "We have seen so much excitement when we rally around the truth and the preservation of our democracy. We want more and more people to be part of this movement."

We are looking at our nation's history for proper guidance. Grassroots activism is a tool that has been used throughout history to cause social and political change. Rather than a top-down approach, this type of activism is characterized by starting at the local level in response to the needs of the community. Some of the most transformative changes have occurred when ordinary people have organized together through means such as rallies, sit-ins, protests, hunger strikes and mass demonstrations.

Those historic benchmarks include the women's suffrage movement that began in the mid-19th century out of the broader women's rights movement. Over decades, advocates employed such methods as petitions, public demonstrations, organized marches and legal challenges until the movement finally achieved victory with the ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 18, 1920, when women were finally granted the legal right to vote. At its peak, the movement had over 2 million members.

This movement also laid the framework for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which passed after many years of nonviolent protests and civil disobedience campaigns. This Act prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin in public accommodations, employment and federally assisted programs. Later, the Act was expanded and fine-tuned with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement, founded in 2013, came to be seen as an extension of the civil rights movement. It has its roots here in Central Florida after a jury acquitted George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin. The movement has led to police reform bills and the removal of Confederate symbols in some states.

Other examples can be found in history and endure today. Grassroots efforts to address environmental issues and to influence global politics have proven successful and are ongoing. Mothers Against Drunk Driving was founded in 1980 by Candy Lightner and has succeeded in strengthening DUI laws across the nation. Efforts to combat sexual abuse and harassment led to the Me Too movement, started in 2006 by Tarana Burke and instrumental in increasing support, understanding and accountability for victims of sexual violence.

Now this is our time to protect democracy from the threat of dismantling our institutions, guardrails and laws. We must reclaim our voices and reshape the future from the ground up.

Leslie Hoyle Guerra is the membership chair of Seismic Resistance.

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