

The logo for The Des Moines Register, featuring the newspaper's name in a classic, blackletter-style font. The text is positioned above a photograph of a modern, multi-story office building with a glass facade and a prominent corner structure.

## Activist: We need to hear candidates debate community values

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BY HUGH ESPEY • SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER • NOVEMBER 29, 2007

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'Tis the season for presidential politics, and with it, the debate over what values propel voters to the ballot box.

A recent debate in Florida claimed to represent and display the interests of so-called "values voters." The dissection of the nation's "moral values" took up a good bit of ink following the 2004 elections. And we're all familiar with the "family values" that guided policy throughout the '80s and '90s. But in all this talk of values, why are so many core American values consistently missing?

Instead of concentrating on people's individual moral decisions, or their family life, we should focus on our collective values, the ways we can move forward together and the policies that work toward the common good. We need to reintroduce to the debate the ideals of equality, opportunity and fairness. And we need to acknowledge that our individual stories and circumstances add up to a national community best positioned to solve our problems together. In short, we should be talking about our community values.

This is the idea that we share responsibility for one another, that our fates are linked. Embracing community values means believing that we prosper as individuals and as a people when our politics and policies reflect that we're all in this together. Whether described as interconnection, mutual responsibility or loving your neighbor as you love yourself, community values are core American values. When we're at our best, we look out for one another and won't accept leaving people behind as we strive toward prosperity.

What do these values look like in practical terms? Take our environment. We all know that our individual actions can harm or protect the natural resources on which we depend. We therefore accept a shared responsibility - to ourselves and to one another - to look after the environment together.

This kind of community-spirited approach has policy implications, embodied by the debate over local control in our rural areas. Viewing the issue through a community lens, we understand that one large factory farm cannot be allowed to pollute everyone's water, and that decisions about when or where such farms can be located need to be community decisions, weighing the pros and cons for the whole community - not one individual's gain.

A community-values approach is important for urban and suburban areas as well. Des Moines and its suburbs are interconnected and interdependent, so our governments and people have to work together for the best results.

This country has a long history of understanding and honoring the idea of community values, of uniting our diverse society to accomplish common goals and move our society forward together. That story is embodied in our national motto of E Pluribus Unum - "From Many, One." We've exhibited it in our cooperative efforts to overcome common challenges including World War II, the Great Depression, childhood diseases, the denial of civil rights and even winning the race to the moon. In embracing community values, our culture rejects selfishly pursuing individual interests at the expense of others.

That is why the Heartland Presidential Forum on Dec. 1 in Des Moines is so important. It is the only presidential forum where people from all walks of life will join together to talk about real issues and the need to address those issues in a way that is good for all of us.

It is time to embrace our community spirit and to reject the "go it alone" mentality that tells people it is acceptable to harm our natural surroundings for personal profit, or to pit city against suburb for political gain. We can apply this same approach to health care, immigration, education and the array of other issues that face our country.

Together, we can rediscover our belief in the common good, recognize that we are indeed connected and redefine what "values" really mean in the political debate.

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