

## Find meaning in Mollie Tibbetts' death in ways that uplift all of Iowa

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The death of University of Iowa student Mollie Tibbetts matters a lot to Iowans. We're passionate about what happened, and that passion is igniting our conversations in person and through the media.

It's part of human nature to try to make sense of the senseless. Her death is an unfathomable loss to her family, friends and the entire state of a beautiful, vibrant young woman who was a bright light to all who knew her. But there are also a lot of ways we as Iowans can find meaning in this tragedy that would be productive to our state.

By all accounts, Mollie Tibbetts was a bottomless well of potential for her community and our state, and we are all the poorer because we'll never know what she might have become. It's a time to show compassion to the family, honor her life and reaffirm our connections to our own loved ones.

It's a sad outcome of a month-long search that engaged her entire hometown of Brooklyn, as well as people all over the state. The many volunteers who searched farm fields, printed T-shirts, posted leaflets, maintained a campaign on social media and more deserve thanks from all of us. It's what each of us would want if the unthinkable happens and one of our children goes missing.

Tibbetts' death is the subject of an ongoing criminal investigation that we still know little about, despite the media frenzy and initial disclosures by police. Law enforcement officials on Tuesday said the suspect, Cristhian Bahena Rivera, is an undocumented immigrant. A court document his attorney filed Wednesday states he was working legally in Iowa.

Regardless of his immigration status or whatever statements police say he made, he is entitled to due process and the right to a defense. This is a time to show restraint and wait for the facts before rushing to judgment. That goes for the media outlets reporting and commenting on the story as well.

It's an important reminder that there are still hundreds of other Iowa children who are listed as missing. They have not had the same media spotlight that Tibbetts' family was able to ignite. We should examine reasons for that while we resolve to ensure that every one of these children matters just as much as she did.

There are also many ways we, in the glare of the national media, can misinterpret this infuriating event in a way that harms our people and our state:

- This is not an opportunity to demonize undocumented immigrants and Latinos in general as dangerous, violent criminals. A relative clearly didn't want her death to become a cause for racism. A Facebook post from Billie Jo Calderwood reads:

“Please remember, Evil comes in EVERY color. Our family has been blessed to be surrounded by love, friendship and support throughout this entire ordeal by friends from all different nations and races. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you.”

People who enter the country illegally are no more prone to crime than people who were born here, research has shown. Such data have been hard to pin down, but the Libertarian Cato Institute, as one example, concluded last year that the incarceration rate for native-born Americans is 1.53 percent compared to 0.85 percent for undocumented immigrants and 0.47 percent for legal immigrants.

Whatever this one man did was not representative of a group of millions of people, most of whom are law-abiding taxpayers who are just trying to improve life for their families. We cannot give in to those who would twist this tragedy into a justification for bigotry and xenophobia.

- It's not an excuse to accelerate deportations or to turn away people seeking asylum in the United States. President Trump and Gov. Kim Reynolds immediately blamed the broken immigration system for the tragedy. Our country's immigration laws should not be based on knee-jerk reactions to disturbing but unrepresentative cases of criminal behavior by a few undocumented immigrants.
- It should not become another poster child for those who want to reinstate the death penalty. The drum beat has already begun, even before an autopsy had determined a cause of death. If Rivera is convicted of first-degree murder in an Iowa court, he'll spend the rest of his life behind bars. That's the law. Channeling our thirst for vengeance into a “Mollie's Law” that reinstates capital punishment may feel like justice in the short term, but our state will have to live with the cost — both monetary and moral — for a very long time.

And so we join Mollie Tibbetts' family and friends in mourning her loss. We should all keep working for the day when every young Iowan can be safe. But let's do it in ways that uplift our communities and our state rather than making ourselves feel better by dragging others down.