

Racial Justice does not yet exist in our country, but Vermont can lead the way by establishing a Racial Justice Oversight committee.

Last week I attended part of the Judiciary Committee's hearing on H 492. I left work early to travel from Craftsbury to Montpelier to lend my support for the bill. I did not have opportunity to speak, thus I am sending this written testimony for the committee's consideration.

Due to concerns of race-based voter disenfranchisement nationally, in the past two years I have embarked on an effort to better understand racism in America. I have viewed the excellent PBS Series--*Race: the Power of an Illusion*, Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, *I Am Not Your Negro*, *Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise*, and recently Ava DuVernay's *Thirteenth*. I have listened to Bryan Stevenson's commencement address at my alma mater. Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative. I have attended meetings and workshops addressing racial oppression. I am a supporter of the group Stand UP at my high school Hazen Union, where students of color do not feel safe, and are frequently harassed. I have convened a reading group, whose first several meetings discussed Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*. As a preschool teacher, I am striving to implement an Anti-Bias education in my public school classroom. And yet, none of this is enough. I recognize that since the Civil Rights era, our culture has successfully suppressed the appearance of racism, but we have a long way to go to address the public policies and governing "norms" that have systematically kept people of color at the bottom of a white-dominated power structure, within a mass culture that perpetuates everything from ambivalence to fear to raw hatred particularly toward males of color. Whether it is Federal housing and loan policies established after WW II, or voting rights that are tactically removed by whites in power, the War on Drugs and the related mass incarceration of people of color under the prison industrial complex, or the assassination of black male leaders like Fred Hampton who sought to unite blacks and whites in a movement that sought to address economic injustice---both public policy and law enforcement activity have perpetuated a form of racism that is so systemic most of us do not see it. The recent installation of white supremacist-peddling "advisors" Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller in the White House and the appointment and confirmation of Jeff Sessions as the Head of the U.S. Justice Department are clear signs that America is quite capable of tolerating an historic level of intolerance just 3 years after a Supreme Court ruling dispatched key protections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. I am certain this ruling greatly impacted the outcome of our last election.

In our quiet community of Craftsbury, in the past year and a half--we have witnessed several incidents motivated by racial intolerance and hatred. Neighbor friends felt threatened shortly after posting a Black Lives Matter sign at their home; they found tire tracks on their lawn, later their door lock was jimmed, and one night a commotion caused by their dog prompted investigation outside--where they found a dead black cat had been deposited. Students of color, recently arrived at the almost exclusively white Sterling College Campus, experienced verbal and behavioral harassment on campus. Months later one of these students walking near the village road abutting campus was verbally assaulted as a full can of beer was thrown at him from a passing car. In the area Black Lives Matter signs are repeatedly defaced or stolen. A building at Craftsbury Academy, visible to students on a Sterling College walkway, was twice

grafitied with an SS sign. So here, too--in our idyllic Vermont village--we have a problem. But it is much more comfortable to look the other way, or to assign blame to a few bad apples and assume that overall we live in a society that has transcended racism. We have, after all, twice elected a black president. But the reading and research I have done in the past few years, and the national statistics on poverty, life expectancy, incarceration rates tell another story about the living legacy of racism in America.

I will end with a brief anecdote that illustrates both hope and the work still to be done. Last fall at a well-attended vigil on our famed Common, students and community members gathered to show solidarity for those in our community who have felt victimized by intolerance. Speakers from Sterling College, the church community, and residents came together, and Vermont State Police from the Derby Line barracks attended. The latter were included on the speaker's list, and I believe their comments are the best indicator of the sort of deflection that is so reflexive we overlook the energy that propels it. Speaking on behalf of the Derby Line barracks, a trooper expressed commitment to responding to situations where residents feel unsafe. He acknowledged the concerns expressed at the vigil. And then, in a feel-good anecdote that was probably meant to lighten the mood, he told of investigating the theft of one Black Lives Matter sign. "We investigated," he said, "and we found the sign was stolen by a person in another town who wanted it for his own lawn." The crowd dutifully tittered. Though I understand the desire to lighten a heavy topic, the takeaway message was: we don't really have a serious problem here, even after a near hour of stories shared that told of victimization, violence and fear.

Both facts and statistics--and the real-life experiences of black and brown people in our midst tell a disturbing story. I see the Racial Justice Oversight Board as a first but essential step toward reckoning with and rectifying the very real problem that exists here in Vermont's law enforcement ranks and in our criminal justice system. In both arenas a Racial Justice Oversight Board must be empowered to identify and work to ameliorate the implicit bias that precludes the ideals I voiced daily as a Vermont school child: the pledge of "liberty, and justice for all."

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