

At LEAP, we often refer to ourselves as a family. And, for the last week, our family has been hurting. So, as a member of this family, I want to share my thoughts on the murder of George Floyd and the protests around the country.

As an African American man with an African American and Puerto Rican teenage son, the issues hit close to home. As a young man in New Haven I was harassed by police, an unfortunate rite of passage for men of color in the 1990s in our city. I have also had the pleasure to work with police to build understanding between officers and young people in New Haven.

When I watched the killing of Mr. Floyd, I thought back to my friends in high school held at the point of a gun by an officer while they waited before the start of basketball practice. It is something that sticks with my dear friend, now a college dean, despite it happening to him almost 35 years ago. I think of the LEAP counselor thrown to the ground by a state law enforcement officer some 20 years ago while walking a child back from the restroom at a state park. That counselor is now an elementary school principal. In these and other cases, the humanity of African Americans was ignored, and after the fact the trauma largely went undiscussed.

These experiences which are common for far too many of our Black and Latino brothers and sisters lie behind the protests. In watching the killing of George Floyd, we think that could be me, that could be my son, that could be my daughter, that could be someone I love. These are deep wounds.

I believe that only significant social change will begin to heal these wounds. There is no one cure. We need to reinvest in school integration so that children grow up with friends that do not look like them and build the skills to have conversations across the lines that divide us. We need policing that is based in legitimate relationships between all Americans and the officers we hire to protect us and where the standard for prosecution of police officers who engage in criminal violent behavior is no longer absurd.

We need housing policy that makes it possible for people to afford to live in all of Connecticut's 169 towns. We need national leadership that respects the dignity of all human beings, that knows that racism is, as American theologian Jim Wallis has called it, "America's original sin," and seeks to build bridges and not walls. COVID-19 has shown us deadly disparities in health care and that children of color often do not have computers or internet access in their homes. We need social policies that address the inequities in our health, economic, criminal justice, and education systems. In a democracy these conditions all result from choices we have made, and choices can be changed.

I lay out all these troubling realities, not to show that the mountain is steep. We all already know that. Instead, I want us to see that there are so many ways that we can do our part to climb the mountain. There are struggles where each of us has unique ability and knowledge -- places we all have power and skill -- where we can lead reforms. We can push for affordable housing in our town. We can join protests for police reform. We can do the hard work of rewriting school curriculum to celebrate the diversity of America as well as our history of oppression against Native Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans and African Americans. We can work for candidates for public office who speak honestly and courageously about what must be done.

Little will change unless we all do our part. As Dr. King said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

At LEAP, our unique expertise is working with young people, and especially young people of color. Our leadership, staff, counselors, the children and families we serve, and the neighborhoods we work in are predominantly African American and Latino. In our organizing model, we recognize race, America's history of racism, and the role both play in structural inequality in our country. Our young people are facing enormous challenges now and we will provide space and support to talk about what they are experiencing.

We will be bringing together some 100 young people who work for us this week to talk about the issues in both large and small groups. We will ask them what we can do to help them understand the struggles that America is facing. We will share the wisdom of an older generation of activists. We will chart our way forward.

You too are part of our LEAP family. In these times, we want you to know that we are also thinking of you. We hope that you and your loved ones are safe. And, we hope that you know that you have the power to make change.

Thank you.

Henry Fernandez