

Acting on discomfort

Incident reporting for racism coming to community

BY SHAWN CARNEY
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A NUMBER of years ago while walking in a downtown neighbourhood, I witnessed a young woman standing at a street corner waiting to cross on a green light. As she began to cross, a vehicle, turning right against a red, cut her off, grazing her in the process. The occupants did not stop and even appeared to laugh as they continued on their way. The young woman was a First Nations woman. She appeared unhurt but, angry and upset, rightfully so.

What did I do? I would like to report that I kicked into action, checked to see that she was OK and offered my support, empathy and assurances. I would like to say that I told her that what had just happened to her was wrong and that I had explored with her how I could support or help her. Sadly, I did none of the above. As I witnessed the unfolding of this, to me a foreign event, I felt awkward and unsure.

I wanted to say something to her, ask her if she was OK, support her, help her, but in my uncertainty and awkwardness I felt fearful . . . of saying or doing the wrong thing, fearful that my concerns might be misunderstood. Regretfully, in the end, I did nothing.

In those moments while I wrestled with my unease and uncertainty, my fears and bias, she walked out of sight and I carried on. But it stuck with me. I felt uncomfortable, not quite right. My inaction contradicted my view of myself, the values and beliefs that I thought I held. By my lack of action, I had not only failed



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Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

her, but had failed myself.

But perhaps discomfort is OK and, sometimes, even necessary. Perhaps there is a purpose and a message in discomfort. A message that something is not quite right. Perhaps in my personal failure to act, my discomfort was there to teach and motivate me. Psychologists have a name for this discomfort. They call it "cognitive dissonance." It is the discomfort that occurs when there is disconnect between our beliefs and our actions. On a personal level, I have since looked for opportunities to participate in speaking out against racism.

I do believe that there are many people in our community, like myself, who do not condone racism. People who believe that racism is harmful and destructive and recognize that in order to live and thrive in a healthy and vibrant community, we must learn to support and respect each other, regardless of our cultural background. But racism is an uncomfortable topic and I suspect

that many people struggle, as I did, with how to stand against bigotry.

Racism is an act of prejudice, discrimination or antagonism that is directed against someone of a different race. It is based on the belief that one's own race is superior. It can be overt, such as a verbal or physical assault. More often it is subtle. It occurs when someone is treated differently, often with suspiciousness or less regard, based solely on their outward appearance and the group they belong to.

Tomorrow, the Anti-Racism and Respect Committee, in partnership with Diversity Thunder Bay, will launch Incident Reporting for Racism, a confidential support and data collection tool that will help the city better track and assess racial incidents. An anti-racism resource section has also been created on the city's website at thunderbay.ca/antiracism. This website is meant to inform individuals of their rights and provide links to support resources.

There is a need to collect discriminatory information in a helpful and proactive way. The data collected by Incident Reporting for Racism will be used to inform and identify patterns of racial discrimination and existing gaps that are present within our community. This information will allow us to learn from past injustices and develop positive strategies that support the right to a non-racist and discrimination-free life.

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Shawn Carney is the vice-chair of the Thunder Bay Anti-Racism Advisory Committee.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author