

A shooting and a teaching moment..

Like many metro-Detroiters, I awoke Friday morning to learn that a 14-year-old African American youth was shot at by a 53-year-old Rochester Hills home owner after the boy knocked on the door to ask for directions. The boy, on his way to Rochester High School, had missed his morning bus and was trying to walk to school. This is the tragic and, in some cases, deadly reality of many African Americans who daily must face the legacy of our region's hyper-segregation.

The home owner has been arraigned and released on bond. He was charged with assault with intent to murder and possession of a firearm in the commission of a felony. The firearm offense itself carries a mandatory two-year sentence. He could face up to life imprisonment on the assault with intent charge. Needless to say, he faces plenty of time to reflect upon his actions. Meanwhile, it's hard to imagine how the student is dealing with this act of hate which nearly cost him his life. As a parent I can't imagine the depth of hurt being experienced by his mother.

Events like this don't need to happen. But it takes a willingness on everyone's part to ensure it doesn't.

For many who look like me (i.e., Caucasian), everything seems fine. They live blissfully unaware that not all are treated fairly. The good news is there are many open-minded people throughout metropolitan Detroit who do not relate to others by their race, religion, ethnicity, diverse ability, age, gender sexual orientation, gender identity or other ways we may be different from each other. In Rochester, for example, there is a group of citizens who have formed the Greater Rochester Area Inclusion Network (GRAIN) created to ensure all people in Rochester and Rochester Hills are welcome and treated fairly.

Made aware of the reality of others, people have an opportunity to rethink their previous conclusions. The City of Plymouth chose to meet this challenge head on last March when their Clerk of 35 years, Linda Langmesser, put a hateful message on Facebook, leading them to begin a project called "Know Your Neighbor" which has brought them to the area mosque, Hindu temple and Sikh gurdwara. Together with open-minded residents of this small town, members of the City Council have hosted three public programs including "Know your Muslim and Sikh Neighbor" and a showing of the film "A Continuing Series of Small Indignities" about a lifetime of negative experiences due to the subject's race.

This fall, the team is planning to bring the Michigan Roundtable's "We Don't Want Them" exhibit on Detroit's housing segregation, which has been seen by more than 450,000 people throughout our region. The exhibit is in many ways a tutorial on structural racism, meant to help folks begin to understand how governmental policy, business practices, and citizen obstruction determined where minorities could live, disadvantaging African Americans and leading to the tremendous wealth gap between black and white folks which exists today. The exhibit also helps us understand the residual ignorance and harmful thinking which was on display in Rochester Hills this week.

We should take their example.

Steve Spreitzer,
President & CEO
Michigan Roundtable for Diversity & Inclusion