



An Open Letter & Call to Action

Friday June 19, 2020

On May 25th America witnessed the murder of George Floyd at the hands of four police officers. The last few weeks of protests across our country have put a spotlight on the racial inequalities that exist within our communities, and the systemic oppression that perpetuates racism.

There have been many reactions to the Black Lives Matter movement, and perceptions vary because some believe that the social justice movement is dismissing “all” lives, and creating chaos.

I want to be frank and establish an understanding of why the Black Lives Matters movement is important. The dehumanization of African-Americans in this country began long ago with enslavement, entrenching the racist belief that your skin defines your value. Policies, institutions, systems, communities, and homes were built upon the perception that Black made you different and we still live within this system. To discount the enormity and the necessity of this movement is to disregard history. Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation to abolish slavery did not end racism. Martin Luther King’s Civil Rights movement did not end racism. And an acknowledgment of the lives lost because of racist violence will not end 400+ years of racism.

This movement stands for policy change. It is not dismissing anyone; it is giving our fellow Americans a platform to speak up for equality. As human beings, it is our responsibility to know where oppression and racism exist in our community. We must be courageous in our compassion for one another, so much so that the attitudes, systems, and laws that work against the Black and Brown people of our country change.

In Wisconsin, we have one of the lowest graduation rates for Black students. Why is that? As a mother, my connection to this movement is instinctual. I worry about my children and their safety, health, and success, but to be a mother of a child of color has the added worry of survival. Our women of color have to sit down with their young children to explain how not to get killed in this world. In our predominantly Black and Brown communities, wealth does not stop racial profiling. Keep your head down and do not resist, or you may not see your mother again.

Should we really be sending money to our prisons for more beds or to our schools for more supportive resources? Wisconsin has the second-highest disparity in prison incarceration rates in the nation, meaning

Black people in Wisconsin are incarcerated at a higher rate than white people, not because of an increase in crime, but because of policy.

Why have our Black and Brown communities been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus? The Speaker of the Wisconsin State Assembly, Robin Vos, blames the increase of disease in our Brown communities on “immigrant culture.” We cannot blame one group for problems; this is bias and systemically racist. We have become desensitized to these racist tropes, and identifying and reprimanding this kind of language is where we can begin to change.

Since George Floyd’s death, we have heard many campaigns to “defund the police.” The phrase can sound scary to many people, but we must understand the meaning behind the slogan. Our police are in our communities to ensure law and order. However, this begs the question of law and order for whom? We are over-allocating funds and exhausting our police to deal with the most fragile and vulnerable parts of our society. It is time to look at a variety of services that provide support and build up a community. It requires our legislators and government officials to think outside the box and work together to create a transparent and accountable system to help those who are vulnerable. This takes work, takes commitment, and is a cultural shift that our younger generation is demanding. We must listen, and we must be part of the change. This is not about pushing against the police. I support the work of our police force, and I mourn the officers that have lost their lives on the line of duty. This conversation is about 400 years of oppression and racism. This is about respecting the basic dignity of all human beings.

Is there anything that can be done right now? Yes, vote. We have the power to vote in people who make decisions about how our streets are policed and how our systems operate. Right now is a time for Wisconsin to reassess our values, to invest in our communities, our people, our schools, and our infrastructure. As leaders, our role should be to start important conversations and ensure everyone in our community has space at the table so their voices can be heard, and real change can be enacted. United, we are stronger. A community that is inclusive and reflects all of us is more resilient, more vibrant and a better place for everyone to live.

To me, this issue is not about politics; it is not red or blue. It is about basic human dignity and standing up for what is right. As the former CEO for the YWCA, I worked not only to empower women of our community but also initiated conversations about what systemic oppression and racism look like in our community. I am committed to learning, working with our most vulnerable communities, and fighting for the change we need in the Wisconsin State Legislature.

Every mother lives to see her children happy, healthy and safe. Every mother also wants to help our children to believe they have great value and purpose. A mother channels that value into a reason for living. For all mothers who want safe and vibrant futures for their children, I am committed to learning, listening and fighting for change in Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

Kathy A. Hinkfuss
4th District State Assembly Candidate