

## Reclaiming the narrative: A key step in eradicating racism in America

Written by Dr. Gail C. Christopher America's Wire Writers Group  
Monday, 22 April 2013 14:53

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Just 100 miles from where Trayvon Martin was killed, the slaying of an unarmed Black teenager that unleashed intense racial anger and antagonism, there is a new example of the racism and racial insensitivities that continue to punctuate our society.

With Martin's death still a bitter memory, a Port Canaveral Police Department firearms instructor did the unthinkable - Sgt. Ron King offered paper targets resembling Martin to fellow officers for shooting practice in the Florida town. King claims the targets were teaching tools for what not to shoot at, but his supervisors deemed his action inappropriate and he was fired last weekend.

Throughout each day, newspapers, the airwaves and Internet routinely crackle with stories like this one, stories demonstrating that racism and the centuries-old racial hierarchy still exists. This destructive belief that skin color makes one group of people superior to another has dominated American culture, our institutions and our narratives consciously or unconsciously for centuries.

When Roland Martin says race played a role in his firing from CNN, when racial incidents erupt at a high school in Grand Haven, Mich. or when there are a series of hate messages at Oberlin College, all these events are widely reported in the media. Not much adverse news about racial bias is missed with the 24/7 news cycle, abundant talk radio, social media channels and the ever-expanding blogosphere.

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But do these stories represent the *real* story about our communities?

Not long ago, reporting on acts of racism was considered progress: after these media reports, it becomes less likely that incidents can be covered-up. Once hostilities are out in the open, frank and honest discussions can occur and perhaps lead to solutions that address the root causes of racism.

Yet those committed to positive change and healing the wounds of racism, both past and present, recognize there is also a changing America out there. This is also a nation of people with positive stories to tell about our communities, to tell about families of all different races and ethnicities -- the neighbors that we love and respect regardless of the narratives dividing us. Americans *are* working together, finding common ground in diverse neighborhoods and bridging their differences to sustain racial harmony in their communities, in their schools and in an array of public and private institutions, including the criminal justice system. But these are the stories that aren't reported in the media and aren't reflected enough in narratives regarding race.

In Michigan, the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services is healing divisions between Arab and non-Arab Americans. The center engages communities to document and share personal narratives and collective histories of the national Arab American community's experience after 9/11. It includes an exhibit, a series of public programs, educator's workshops and community dialogues.

In New Orleans, the Ashé Cultural Center is utilizing art and culture to create a safe and healing space for all who come through its doors, especially young people in the community. Its Truth Be Told project includes commissioning and producing original art works that are made available to other groups, gatherings, and events to stimulate thinking and dialogue in the community. The center is expanding interracial participation in their commemorations and producing a series of film screenings, panel discussions, roundtables, and lectures to upgrade knowledge, thinking on race and the impact and influence of racism.

And in Chicago, the Collateral Damage Project conducts interactive research on gun violence, racial discrimination and gang participation in urban communities. It has resulted in a traveling exhibition, multi-media documentary and the development of a social networking website for youth. Their work explores the lives of 46 youths who lost their lives to gun violence and examines the destructive role that violence, discrimination and residential segregation play in urban communities.

These stories belong in the narrative and must be shared and leveraged for meaningful change to take place.

In Asheville, NC from April 22 to 25, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation will hold its 2013 America Healing Convening. The theme for this year is *Reclaiming the Narrative*. We want to raise awareness of the diverse stories that are omitted from our nation's collective history and examine that impact. More than 500 national and community-level leaders, community-based

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organizations and civil rights groups will gather to share stories, and create a richer and more reflective narrative of our collective human experiences. We will share stories of successes, challenges and hopes for healing communities and creating better life outcomes, especially for vulnerable children. Our gathering will not only present a pathway to overcome racism and divisiveness, through healing, but showcases how it is happening today in communities across the country.

The first full day, Tuesday, April 23, will facilitate small group conversations about the stories that demonstrate the effectiveness of our work. The second day is committed to sharing stories of barriers and demonstrated outcomes in law, justice and racial equity, while using a narrative for structural change through interactive plenaries and concurrent sessions. On the final day, we will explore the catalytic power of a reframed narrative, while exploring the neuroscience and psychological power of narratives.

Reclaiming the narrative is vitally important to our nation's future. Most of the children born in our country today are children of color; we must eliminate the barriers to their opportunities if America is to flourish in the future.

Our stories will spur conversations about the legacy of racism in America. The past must be acknowledged and understood before we can heal the wounds caused by racial bias that limits opportunities for families and communities. Any progress towards achieving equitable outcomes for disadvantaged families, people of color and vulnerable children will require a collective commitment to taking actions that will bring urgently needed change.

It's the narratives that can create momentum for this societal change, building unwavering confidence that a new a day is indeed possible.

Working with the Southwest Georgia Project (SWGAP), high school students in Wilcox County, Ga. are organizing their high school's first ever integrated prom. In the past, Black and white students held separate proms. The integrated prom is not supported by the school system and has drawn opposition from some students. But students, some of whom have been friends for years, are embracing diversity, and an opportunity to bring change to a community stubbornly bound by segregation.

By telling this story to the public, these students are revealing that racial bias remains rooted in their community, and they are doing something about it. Their story, which has received international attention, is the type of narrative that will inspire others, the type of courageous action that exemplifies the racial healing that is occurring in other communities.

The Kellogg Foundation, through its America Healing initiative, supports SWGAP, as well as the programs cited in Michigan, New Orleans and Chicago that are promoting healing in communities today, so we can all have a brighter tomorrow.

*Dr. Gail C. Christopher is vice president - program strategy for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and leads the foundation's America Healing initiative that is committed to addressing structural racism in America on behalf of vulnerable children.*