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After recent acts of racism in suburban Milwaukee, grassroots groups are leading efforts to spark change so it's not 'swept under the rug'

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In late 2018, a community group formed when a 16-year-old girl was suspended from Greendale High School for confronting a girl who called her a racial slur.

Around that same time, the Shorewood community was divided by the use of a racial slur in the high school production of "To Kill a Mockingbird." Again, a group formed.

In the wake of these incidents, some black students shared their perceptions and experiences as minority students in majority-white communities. The issues exposed during these discussions led to movements that started conversations about racial justice and shaped policy in the Greendale and Shorewood school districts.

These are just two of the many examples of race-related controversies that have occurred recently in the Milwaukee suburbs.

Whether it's in the police department, a school district or online, most Milwaukee suburbs can point to an example of racial injustice that warrant a dialogue about race.

What happens when the outrage dies down and the headlines fade away, though, is more difficult.

In several suburbs, community groups have formed to not only address specific incidents, but also to address the underlying need for education and discussion about racial inequity in the suburbs.

These groups continue to hold community discussions, push school leaders for change and try to make their communities a more welcoming place for people of color.

Some of these community groups formed in response to specific incidents. Others say they just wanted to increase the cultural awareness of their mostly white communities — although it doesn't usually take long to find a local cause in need of attention.

Seeds of social justice

Tosa Together, for example, started with seven people who were interested in social justice and wanted to make Wauwatosa a more welcoming place for minorities. Created in 2016, about three months after 25-year-old Jay Anderson was killed by a Wauwatosa police officer, one of the group's first actions was to hold a community conversation with Anderson's family and friends.

The group just organized its first Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration, its fourth Black History Month celebration, and lobbied the city to establish an equity and inclusion commission.

In Cedarburg, two women started a conversation about race three years ago under the name Bridge the Divide. They have discussed numerous local issues on their podcasts and at their events, but a recent racist letter sent to a family in the town inspired them to hold a rally in support of the family.

In Whitefish Bay, a report of white students asking black students for permission to use a racial slur last spring generated discussion within parent-teacher groups. Those parents joined with other racial justice thinkers in the area to form a new group that hopes to educate the mostly white community about racial inequities in the Milwaukee metropolitan area.

These suburban groups are having tough conversations in communities that may not otherwise have to confront race-related issues. Through book discussions, movie screenings and potluck dinners, they hope to educate suburban residents about racial inequity in what has been deemed the most segregated metropolitan area in the country, according to an American research group.

Shorewood Moving Forward

Shorewood school officials anticipated a theatrical production of "To Kill a Mockingbird" would start a conversation about race.

But they probably didn't expect it to start a movement.

The school play — and the district's handling of the ensuing controversy — was a divisive topic in October 2018.

Some people, including black students, thought the play should be canceled because of the use of the racial slur. Others thought the play's use of the word was necessary to tell a larger story about racism in America.

After hearing plans of a large protest, the district leadership decided to cancel the production. The district reversed its decision and then canceled a second time.

The episode took a dark turn when a 17-year-old student threatened on social media to hang black students attending the play.

The debate triggered a larger discussion about race in Shorewood. At a community forum, some black students and residents said they did not feel welcome in the village.

"What became apparent to me is that so many things had been swept under the rug for so many years," said Shorewood resident Tia Reglas. "This was a spark that ignited so much."

With emotions running high in Shorewood Facebook groups, Reglas decided a group of concerned parents should meet to discuss the school district's response, the social media threat and the broader topic of race in Shorewood.

"There were these little silos developing, and people were becoming more segmented," Reglas said. "That's not the kind of community I want to live in, and it's not the kind of community we want our children to grow up in."

Shorewood residents Norma Duckworth and Tina Hetzel took Reglas up on her offer and met her at Boswell Books.

After talking, they realized the Shorewood community could benefit from more education and conversation about race.

Together, they decided to form Shorewood Moving Forward, a group that would promote education about racial inequity, build a sense of community and support equity in the school district and village government.

Joslyn Hegelmeyer, a board member for the group, said she sees the "Mockingbird" episode as a learning opportunity.

"I can only hope that, in the aftermath, we learned a lot about ourselves as a community," she said. "I hope that what we do with those lessons makes it worth what was a really painful

period for the community."

Keeping the dialogue going

The group's first meeting drew 40 people. At that meeting, the group decided to write a letter to the school board, asking for a safety plan in response to the social media threat.

More than a year later, Shorewood Moving Forward continues to keep the dialogue about race alive with weekly meetings, as well as potluck dinners, movie nights, book discussions and other community events.

More than 300 people belong to Shorewood Moving Forward's Facebook group, but Hegelmeyer said the group's goal is to get people off Facebook and into face-to-face discussions.

"Social media is great for spreading information and sharing events, but for us, it has always been — in the beginning and the end — about getting together and getting people talking together," Hegelmeyer said.

They try to find guest speakers who are local, which helps further their goal of connecting people within the Shorewood community.

They also invite representatives from local governmental agencies, such as Lt. Thomas Liebenthal from the Shorewood Police Department, Shorewood School District Superintendent Bryan Davis and Sam Coleman, the school district's new equity director.

In the schools, Shorewood Moving Forward is focused on addressing concerns raised by black students in a 2018 study. For example, some group members have become certified drivers to drive nonresident students home after extracurricular activities.

When vandals destroyed a piece of social justice-themed artwork created by black students, Shorewood Moving Forward raised funds for "Can You Hear Us Now," a new student group, to hold a rally in May 2019. The rally was meant to bring attention to biased acts and asked for specific measures to address the achievement gap between black and white students.

Youth Rising Up, the social justice student group that initially raised concerns about the "Mockingbird" play, now has two representatives on the Shorewood School Board, due to complaints about the lack of student representation on the board.

Shorewood Moving Forward also has liaisons on local governmental boards, such as the village board's human relations commission.

Although there is still much work to do, Hegelmeyer said she is heartened by the willingness of school district officials and other community members to have difficult conversations — conversations she said wouldn't have occurred when she attended Shorewood High School 30 years ago.

"If you're willing to have the conversation, open your eyes and see what's happening in your community, that's step one," she said. "You can't go anywhere without that."

Push for inclusion in Greendale

In September 2018, a Greendale High School student called 16-year-old Chanese Knox a racial slur in the school hallway.

Knox and her mother, Diannia Merriett, met with school administrators, who said the school was working on a solution to prevent the use of racial slurs.

When the girl repeated the slur two days later, Knox got angry and verbally confronted the girl in the hallway. She was suspended from school and warned by police officers she could be cited for disorderly conduct.

The following month, Knox, her mother and about 50 of other students and supporters, held a news conference in front of the school.

As more people learned about the incident, Knox and Merriett started hearing stories from other minority students and alumni about issues they have encountered in the district. They formed a group, Parents Advocating for Greendale Equity, to push for change in the school district.

In the months after the incident, racist graffiti was found in a Greendale school bathroom, and two online videos surfaced of students using racial slurs.

PAGE partnered with the American Civil Liberties Union to file a discrimination complaint against the Greendale School District, alleging it violated federal law by failing to address a racially hostile environment in its schools.

Although she was tempted to move after her daughter's incident, Merriett said her daughter encouraged her to stay in Greendale to improve things for the next generation of black residents.

"It's important that as more students of color enter suburban schools, they are treated with respect," she said.

PAGE, which has about 20 members, has successfully lobbied the school district to offer inclusion training for teachers as part of a larger equity plan.

In addition to its ongoing work with the Greendale School Board, PAGE also has a booth at Village Days, the village's Fourth of July celebration and the annual Dickens of a Christmas Festival.

"The more people see you, they become familiar," Merriett said. "Maybe that will open a dialogue, and it will dismiss some of the myths they may have been holding onto.

Talking about race in Whitefish Bay

In Whitefish Bay, a group called One Circle Forward formed in 2017 with the goal of making the village a more welcoming community for people of all backgrounds.

The group's activity has slowed in recent months, but in August, some of its participants formed a new group called Bay Bridge.

The group's three leaders include Jennifer Koop Olsta, who was leading racial equity conversations with Whitefish Bay PTO groups; Anne O'Connor, a local volunteer with an interest in social justice issues; and Kathryn Wurzer, who has advocated for minority students in the Whitefish Bay School District for 15 years through an organization called Parents Advocating for Cultural Equality and Educational Excellence.

O'Connor met Wurzer and Koop Olsta at social justice events around the Milwaukee area, and they decided to join forces to bring the racial justice dialogue home to Whitefish Bay.

O'Connor, Koop Olsta and Wurzer know that, as three white women from Whitefish Bay, they might not be the best people to lead a conversation about racial inequity.

At the same time, though, they feel a responsibility to start a social justice dialogue in the affluent, majority-white suburb they call home.

They know they are privileged, and the last thing they want is to be perceived as know-it-alls.

Instead, they choose to see themselves as facilitators of a conversation.

By seeking out information and talking with groups across the Milwaukee area, they hope not only to educate newcomers, but to further their own understanding of racial inequity.

They say the conversation about racial inequity needs to be happening in every community — even Whitefish Bay — and the burden shouldn't be on minorities to educate white communities.

"There are so many inequities throughout our city, and I think white people have a huge role to play in educating ourselves about those inequities, why they exist and what we can be doing to partner with others to start to disrupt those inequities," Wurzer said.

Whitefish Bay is 88% white, 6% Asian, 3% black and 3% Latino, according to U.S. Census data.

Koop Olsta said it is important to have conversations about racial inequity in white communities, where people might not be forced to think about race on a daily basis.

"The only people we are responsible for is ourselves," Koop Olsta said. "It's time for us to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions. If we want to make change, we have to start with ourselves and the communities in which we live."

Building relationships

They have invited diverse voices into the conversation, such as Chapter 220 parents, and a group called Five Points Neighborhood Association, which represents the Williamsburg Heights and Grover Heights neighborhoods in Milwaukee.

"We don't have any illusions that we have all the answers or that we fully understand or can even fully appreciate the experience of anyone else other than ourselves," Koop Olsta said. "We need to continue to learn from others. We can only speak from our experience and hope to educate other people about what we can do to make connections and build partnerships."

In November, the group brought in public health ambassador Rayna Andrews to talk about food insecurity. Three months later, they brought Andrews back to Whitefish Bay to lead a "racial wealth gap learning simulation," an interactive explanation of how federal policies created structural inequalities in the U.S.

In January, 150 people attended a screening of 88Nine Radio Milwaukee's film "Invisible Lines" at Christ Church Episcopal Church in Whitefish Bay.

They are reaching out to other North Shore communities with the hope of organizing a Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration in 2021.

On April 28, they plan to host Eric Dozier, a "cultural activist, anti-racism educator, and itinerant blues preacher leveraging the power of music to promote healing, justice and racial reconciliation," at United Methodist Church in Whitefish Bay.

Going forward, Bay Bridge hopes to continue working with like-minded social justice groups across the area. The more connections they make, the more they learn about the work being done across the area.

"The more we all work together and connect across different groups and communities, the more these conversations become more visible, more developed and more fruitful," Koop Olsta said. "The goal is to continue those conversations."

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