



Don't be an enabler in the spread of prejudice

December 6, 2007

BY LINDA V. PARKER

The late Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan once wisely noted: "If society today allows wrongs to go unchallenged, the impression is created that those wrongs have the approval of the majority."

Those powerful words come to mind lately as those of us who work in the field of civil rights in Michigan have observed a disturbing escalation in hate crime activity.

Last week, a Rochester Hills home owner of Middle Eastern descent awoke to find his property vandalized, with his garage door and car spray-painted with racial and sexual remarks, swastikas, Ku Klux Klan symbols and other racist images.

Last month, students and administrators at Central Michigan University were confronted with the spectacle of four nooses hanging from a wall in a classroom in the schools' engineering building. That incident came on the heels of the dissemination of anti-Muslim hate literature around campus.

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Just a few months before, the leader of a newly organized chapter of Skinheads in Genesee County announced that its first order of business was to march on the Flint branch of the NAACP. Couple that with back-to-back hate rallies by white supremacist organizations in Kalamazoo and outside Jackson in August, and it's easy to discern a profoundly disturbing pattern emerging in our state.

All of these incidents appear to be part of an alarming trend in the occurrence of hate symbols in Michigan and across our nation. Just last week, the FBI reported that the number of hate crimes increased last year by nearly 8%.

Unfortunately, Michigan, for the third consecutive reporting cycle, has the third-highest number of hate crimes as reported by the FBI. The perpetrators of these crimes seek to divide the residents of our state into competing groups of us versus them. This is as un-American as it is unforgivable.

In a shrinking world and a global economy, they also deter businesses and individuals from coming here.

Hate symbols like hangman's nooses or swastikas and leaflets espousing anti-Islamic sentiment do not merely reflect underlying racial tensions in a particular community, they often can be precursors to violent acts. That's why it is imperative that local officials move swiftly to identify the perpetrators and hold them responsible for their crime, as well as state loudly and clearly that such activity will not be tolerated.

But neither CMU nor Michigan is unique or immune to this problem. Leaders and responsible residents throughout our state and nation must develop effective strategies to counter bigotry with constructive activities that focus on things that unite us around our common humanity.

Considering how intense segregation precludes quality intercultural relationships, community activism in response to hate is imperative so as to not allow the hate to speak for us.

The simple fact is, ignoring hate or attempting to trivialize its significance will not make it go away any more than pretending an undiagnosed illness means you are not sick.

Until more of us recognize this and learn to respond appropriately, extremists will continue to invade our communities, creating a climate of fear and mistrust, sully the reputations of entire communities and innocent people by mere association.

If we wish to be known as "One Michigan," if we are to be seen as a state where all are welcome, if we do not want a reputation as a state where such hateful activities are tolerated, then Barbara Jordan's message is one we need to hear. Complacency in the face of hate is complicity in the message.

Silence is not an acceptable option.

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