

8.15.15

Friends,

Scouring my computer for early Beyond Racism info led me to these comments by Bruce Poinsette (which I think he wrote not long after following the publication of his seminal essay in The Oregonian). I'm sorry I have no idea where I found this! I particularly appreciate Bruce's comments about what he thinks might be done to help in schools at toward the end of his article. See what you think.

Thanks, Jane

Bruce Poinsette comments about responses to his Oregonian article about LO racist tweets

When I wrote a personal essay about racist tweets among students at Lake Oswego High School ("**Lake Oswego's worst-kept secret, published March 17 [2012] in The Oregonian**"), I never expected such an outpouring of responses.

The nickname "Lake No Negro" is known in many circles, and yet many people were shocked and frustrated to learn institutional racism and cultural ignorance are still pervasive problems in this town. Even students I went to school with weren't aware of some of the problems I was dealing with in Lake Oswego.

Judging from the number of discussions I've had regarding my essay, I've realized that many people don't know what to look for when it comes to racial ignorance and insensitivity. This is why it's important for people of color and other marginalized populations to tell our stories.

Like other students in my position, I was too proud to share my struggles outside of my family and close friends. As a black student in a predominantly white environment, I was already hyper-visible. I didn't want people to feel sorry for me or give off the perception that I was just another hostile black person, even though I didn't owe anyone confirmation or contradiction of their stereotyping.

This resulted in me often suffering in silence.

Telling my story has shown me that there are a number of people out there who do care about these issues and want to engage in fixing the problem.

Some people contributed to the conversation by sharing their own

experiences in LO and towns like it. Others offered their time and the resources at their disposal to help. Some just wanted to express how sorry they were for my experiences.

Truth be told, I've always considered myself lucky. For all the teachers I had that treated me with callous disregard, I also had some that took a special interest and allowed me to thrive. I also had dedicated parents who spent countless hours helping me learn to read when my kindergarten teacher couldn't be bothered to. Their constant fighting on my behalf was an integral part of my educational success.

I grew up with many privileges that most black students in Oregon weren't (and still aren't) able to enjoy. According to the Census Bureau, nearly 50 percent of black children in Oregon live in poverty.

In fact, I wrote a news article not long after my essay that discussed how blacks are overrepresented in Portland's homeless population by 22.8 percent (blacks are 5.4 percent of the general population and 28.3 percent of the city's homeless), according to a study by the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness. In addition to all the struggles that come with poverty, the children in these families have to deal with all the same issues I dealt with in the Lake Oswego school system.

Compared with my essay, the news article received little, if any response. While I was heartened by all the people who expressed interest in helping improve conditions in Lake Oswego, I hoped that people would recognize similar symptoms all across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Low expectations, overzealous punishment and general disregard for black students are not just Lake Oswego problems. They are statewide and, quite frankly, national issues.

That is why I've told everyone who has asked how they can help that they should get involved in their local schools.

While I think there needs to be more ethnic studies in elementary and secondary schools, there are already requirements for culturally specific education that some teachers simply don't follow. Having more adults present and/or advocating would help to hold teachers accountable.

Culturally specific education is beneficial to students of all colors because it exposes them to different perspectives, which will prepare

them for an increasingly diverse labor force. The current system treats ethnic studies with tokenism. Along with troubling media images, this translates into a lack of respect for underrepresented people outside of the classroom.

In terms of children of color, exposure to present and historical figures they can relate to establishes a sense of pride that learning about the dominant culture doesn't provide.

Having more adults willing to have courageous conversations on race in the schools will also give students a safe space to share their stories. Many teachers don't have the time to prepare lesson plans and build individual relationships with all their students. If underrepresented students can get one person who they feel comfortable being painfully honest with, it will help relieve stress and anxiety. These obstacles can make all the difference in a student's performance.

Giving all students the opportunity to perform at their best is the main reason I wrote my essay. It has inspired an important conversation on race and made many people aware of a systemic problem. Now we must translate these ideas into real change. The definition of insanity is repeating the same actions and expecting different results.

Bruce Poinsette graduated from Lake Oswego High School in 2007 and in June from the University of Oregon, where he wrote opinion pieces for the student newspaper, the Oregon Daily Emerald. He now writes for The Skanner, a website and newspaper published in Portland and Seattle, and blogs at www.brucepoinsette.com. He continues to live in Lake Oswego.