



In the PINES

By T. Lee Brown

Learning from our kids

Parents learn a lot from our children. They teach us about ourselves and the world around us. When a parent and a child are of different races, a whole new avenue of learning opens up.

Cheryl Soleim is a local mom, a white woman. Her daughter Natalie is Black. Until recently, Cheryl considered herself “color-blind.” As I’ve reported in *The Nugget*, Natalie experienced bullying at Sisters Middle School, bullying that involved race and gender.

“I had to go through this in order to understand what racism is,” Cheryl told me. “My eyes weren’t opened to the hardships of it. Going through this, I understand that life is difficult for people of different color in ways that it’s not difficult for white people.”

Cheryl was shocked not just by the things that were said to her daughter, but by how people in the school district and the community responded. Many of those details cannot be shared in print, as I’ve reported previously.

The bullying incidents went on two-and-a-half months. “Trying to get her help was like, every avenue that I went to was shut down,” Cheryl said. “Had I not been a more strong-willed person I would have given up.”

She eventually reported the situation to the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), which sent a representative over from Salem. According to an ODE report, the school environment was recognized as conducive to discrimination.

For around three years now, Cheryl has been taking time out of her busy life to attend meetings and hold conversations about the case. She also took the time to talk with me, in three separate interviews over a series of months.

My impression is one of dedication and courage. This everyday, local mom like me could choose an easier path. She could avoid the hassles that come with raising difficult subjects. After all, her daughter Natalie seems to be doing just fine. I found her to be a funny, kind, and super chill young woman, now homeschooling through Baker Web.

“Natalie is amazing,” said Cheryl. “Having gone through this, she is a stronger person... she’s doing very well. I’m so proud of her.”

Instead of glossing things over now that her own daughter is past a rough time, Cheryl bravely chooses to learn more. She engages in complex discussions during a time when many white or mostly white people would bury their heads in the sand.

“I want to say that I do not believe that because white people have allowed [racism] to happen, that all white people have a bad heart,” Cheryl clarified. “I think that we can be confused and we can be ignorant, and the best thing we can do is to be open to learning and to listening, and not have to wait until it happens personally to us like I did.”

Cheryl, her husband, Sisters School District (SSD) staff, including superintendent Curt Scholl, and ODE civil rights specialist Winston Cornwall met for six meetings of a conciliatory nature.

“We were able to put 12 pages of things that SSD was going to put into place, and that they had certain dates” to accomplish each goal, she said. “Winston told me that Mr. Scholl has been very good about making those deadlines.”

As for herself, Cheryl continues to learn.

“I’m more of a listener now when people of color talk,” she said. “I hear their stories better. [For example] I hear that Black parents have to tell their boys to look down, don’t draw any attention to yourself.”

She thinks it’s wrong that they’ve been put in this position.

Cheryl came to recognize problems with her old way of thinking.

“I was so proud of myself because I was color-blind,” she said. “I thought that meant I wasn’t racist, right? I should have said, Let’s celebrate the Black community, including the differences — we don’t need to be color-blind. We don’t need to pretend like their Blackness doesn’t exist.”

Being self-proclaimed color-blind, she explained, “implies that they should be ashamed, [like] I shouldn’t recognize their color because somehow they’re going to be ashamed of it.” Cheryl realized, “I don’t want Natalie to be ashamed of her color. I want her to celebrate.”

“I’m not proud of the fact that I had to have my Black daughter have racism against her in order for me to figure this out,” she said. “I would way rather have figured this out because I am empathetic and I have eyes that see — but it was not that way. I wasn’t ever trying to hurt anybody. I just wasn’t going out of my way to understand how they felt.”

I asked Cheryl, What challenge do our local leaders face?

“At the end of the day what’s most important is our children... Keeping things quiet because we’re trying to protect adults is not OK,” She responded. “We don’t have to attack people and make them sound like they’re horrible because they made a mistake, but we need to be OK talking about it.”

Cheryl is a Christian. She noted, “Jesus talked all the time about injustice and being merciful, and we’re supposed to be like him.” Jesus “stood up,” she said. “He hung out with the tax collectors and the prostitutes. He didn’t care how much money somebody had, didn’t care their position, their standing in the community — he just loved people.”

Cheryl hopes to learn from Jesus’s example. That includes not “somehow getting defensive” if a discussion of racism challenges white people, including herself.

“I just want to love people and to listen to them.”

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