

## It's Time to Listen *continued from front page*

COVID-19 shutdown, are we really surprised our country has erupted in a violent call for change?

It has been a difficult three weeks, a time of wide-ranging emotions – anger, fear, disgust, despair, disbelief, and even hope – and complex questions. How do we solve this issue? What can we do as individuals about racism and police violence? What does Black Lives Matter really mean? As one local business owner here in Vernonia asked me, “Is this even our problem?”

While I won't pretend to have the answers to these questions, I do believe we all have a responsibility to engage in some self reflection, consider the impact of discrimination, listen to voices who have experienced racism, and do our part to create a better society. As a wise friend said recently, “When we choose to live in a community or a country, we are equally responsible for its excellence and in the history of its failures.”

### The fight for justice where we live

According to the 2010 Census, Columbia County has around 50,000 people, of which 93% are white, 4% are Latino, 1.3% Native American, and just 0.4% Black Americans, but our demographics are changing; from 2000 to 2010 Columbia County's population increased by about 5,800 and the white population dipped slightly from 94.4%. The individual cities that make up the county have similar demographics. It will be interesting to see what the 2020 Census shows.

On two recent Monday evenings

a small group of people stood in Spencer Park on Bridge Street in Vernonia in a peaceful demonstration against racial injustice. On Wednesday, June 3, about 1,000 people marched in a Black Lives Matter peaceful protest in St. Helens started by local high school students.

In Vernonia the demonstrations received a mostly positive response, with waves, honking horns, thumbs up, and a few negative. A Black American woman, who said she had just moved to Vernonia, took a photo and expressed appreciation with tears in her eyes.

The march in St. Helens had been announced over the weekend, and was initially cancelled after a strong backlash on social media from locals, that included threats of violence toward any protesters, who said they feared that angry mobs would descend on the community, loot businesses, and trash the town. By Monday the march was back on after organizers met with and received the support of local government leaders and local law enforcement. While there was some tension, and a few uncomfortable moments between marchers and counter protesters with weapons who said they were there to protect the community, the march was peaceful and respectful, and law enforcement was visible and friendly. The march ended in front of the county courthouse with several speeches, and then marchers moved to the riverfront park, where they relaxed in the shade.

One of the speakers was Savannah Manning, an 18 year old graduate of St. Helens High School, who had

been one of the original organizers of the demonstration. Manning spoke eloquently and passionately about her experience growing up as a Black American who is also Native American in a mostly white community where she has never felt completely welcome. “I want a positive and peaceful change that can bring an end to systemic racism, discrimination, police brutality, and violence,” she told the crowd. “I want a positive and peaceful change that can bring forth an equal, healthier, and happier society. I want a positive and peaceful change that can let our black brothers and sisters live in comfort, instead of fear. I want a positive and peaceful change that won't last for one day or two. I want a positive and peaceful change that will last forever.”

Manning spoke of her disappointment at the community's response to this planned march and the threats the group had received. She said in 5<sup>th</sup> grade she was told she couldn't sit at a certain table at lunch because of the color of her skin. “I am greatly disappointed in the families who continue to pass down hatred, racism, and discrimination... It is extremely heartbreaking to try and live a happy and fulfilling life when one is subject to threats, racism, and violence. It is extremely heartbreaking when some people try to voice their experiences, pain, and frustrations, but they are sadly silenced by death threats, and the words ‘go back to where you came from.’ I am an American citizen. I was born and raised in this country and in the state of Oregon. This is my home. This is our home.”

These are the words and the experiences of an 18 year old woman who lives right here in our community. This is why the current national conversation about racism and police violence needs to be our conversation too.

“We need to come together,” Manning told the crowd in St. Helens, but really she was speaking to all of us. “We need to build each other up. We need to celebrate our differences and our similarities. We need to be a loving community, a loving state, and a loving country. We need to be willing to stay silent and listen. We need to be willing to listen.”

### The time to listen is now

During the last three weeks, I have tried to listen. And read. And re-

flect.

Racism and police violence in America are not subjects I have much experience with. My grandfather was a police officer in suburban Philadelphia, but he was retired by the time I came along. In the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I chose to spend a career exploration day doing a ride-along with a local police officer in the suburban, privileged, mostly white community where I grew up; the only call we had the entire day was a false alarm at the jewelry store – the officer put on the lights and sirens and raced to the scene, entirely for my benefit. Most of my interactions with law enforcement have been positive, with the officers acting professionally, showing concern for my wellbeing, and providing needed assistance. I generally appreciate police officers and their service to our communities, and respect their choice to enter a career that can be both stressful and dangerous.

During my lifetime, I've lived in the suburbs, in cities (Philadelphia and Portland), and now in a rural community. I've had very little real exposure to minority cultures or witnessed actual racism, even though I know it exists. Like many of us, my lack of exposure to systemic racism has often allowed me the luxury of ignoring the issue.

I've mostly been unaware that being a white male has afforded me the security of never having to be afraid of the police, and that the color of my skin has protected me. How police see and treat me is not necessarily how they treat everyone. That my experience with police is not everyone's experience.

I am a product of white privilege in a system where whites control the institutions of power – I experience an invisible collection of unearned benefits and advantages that many white people don't even recognize or acknowledge. From a young age we are taught that we shouldn't talk about race, so I lack cross-racial experiences and have a limited view and understanding of race in America and the pervasive and subtle assumed superiority I am granted. We learn to assign value to white culture and understand it to be “normal” in order to rationalize the unequal status assigned to people of color.

In American culture the term

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### NOTICE OF PENDING COUNCIL DECISION

#### Consideration of an Ordinance of the City of Vernonia Reducing the Speed Limit on Selected Non-Arterial Streets

**When:** You are invited to attend and comment at the City Council meeting on Monday, July 6, 2020 at 7:00 pm.

**Where:** Council Chambers, City Hall, 1001 Bridge Street Vernonia, OR 97064

**Why:** The Vernonia City Council is interested in hearing from citizens who are interested in expressing their opinion on the Ordinance.

**NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN** that the Vernonia City Council will deliberate the adoption of Ordinance 923: An Ordinance of the City of Vernonia reducing the speed limit on selected non-arterial streets. A copy of the Ordinance is available for inspection at Vernonia City Hall located at 1001 Bridge Street, and on the city website: [www.vernonia-or.gov](http://www.vernonia-or.gov).

This Public Notice will also be onsite at City Hall and on [www.vernonia-or.gov](http://www.vernonia-or.gov)

The meeting location is accessible to persons with disabilities. A request for an interpreter for the hearing impaired or for other accommodations for persons with disabilities should be made at least 48 hours prior to public hearing to Nicolas Welch at 503-429-5291, TTY 1-800-735-2900 or at City Hall, 1001 Bridge Street Vernonia, OR 97064.

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