

Vernonia Equality and Racial Justice – Fighting For Everyone in Vernonia *continued from front page*

protests first started, several people of color attended and discussed their direct experiences involving racism right here in town. “As the demonstrations continued and as we talked with each other and heard first hand stories from people, it became more and more clear that Vernonia does have a problem with racism,” says Aiuto. “Even though we haven’t had acts of terrible violence that we know of, there is still a lot of discomfort for people of color who come to our town. We have stories of people coming to Vernonia and being called the N word or being told to go back where they came from. And that’s upsetting because Vernonia is suppose to be a place that is friendly, where we help out our neighbor.”

In an interview on MSNBC on December 30, civil rights activist Alicia Garza, co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, addressed how racism plays out in today’s society, capturing it in a succinct and straightforward statement that resonated with local activists. “The problem is that too often, the way we talk about racism is that it’s about mean people being mean to people. And that actually is not racism. That’s just people being mean,” said Garza. “Racism is about rigged rules. It’s about keeping people from power, decision making, and dignity. And we see that in systems across the board, whether it be law enforcement, whether it be education, whether it be health care, whether it be in employment or in our economy. Racism is fundamentally about rigged rules that keeps people who have been designed or designated as ‘other’ from the things they need to live well. Racism is not about people being mean to each other. It is about rules that are rigged against communities that have been left out and left behind for too long. Once we start to address it from that perspective, then we can take on the mandate of changing those rules. Getting rid of those rules and replacing them with rules that allow people to access dignity equally.”

“There are lots of lovely and really good people in Vernonia – people who don’t knowingly try to hurt or dis-



The killing of George Floyd in May has sparked a nationwide uprising, calling for an end to police brutality and systemic racial inequities in the U.S. Photo by Roberto (Bear) Guerra

criminate against anyone,” says Aiuto. “But every town has its issues, and this is still an issue here. It’s important for me to make the place that I live a better place.”

Fighting Racism in Oregon

Don Warfield lives in Mist, but he grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Now almost 80 years old, Warfield was enmeshed in the civil rights fight from a young age and offers a unique perspective on today’s racial justice issues. “My first experience with racial injustice was back in the ‘50s when I was about 10 years old,” remembers Don. “A grocery store was not straight in their operations so we decided to picket them. It lasted about 10 days and it was a successful boycott. My grandfather was a minister at a large Baptist church. The Baptist church has traditionally been at the center of the black community, both socially and politically. My grandfather was a real outspoken leader in the community and my father was really active, so I was always in touch with social issues.”

In college in Michigan Warfield helped organize a program to tutor young black students, and then traveled to Alabama to help a college establish a similar program. “That’s where I got my first exposure to the southern way of life,” he says. “My family was very prominent in Chicago where they had

large churches. Consequently, I got to know and associate with leaders like Jesse Jackson, and others who were on the forefront of civil rights issues at the time. Those experiences helped provide me with a pretty broad perspective, both nationally, and internationally regarding these issues, and how they play out in our society here in the States.”

He later moved to Oregon where he attended graduate school at the University of Oregon during the 1960s. In Eugene he helped organize Project 75, a program that recruited black high school students from Portland to attend college in Eugene; Warfield would go on to run that program for two years. Being a black student in Eugene and Oregon was a struggle, says Don. “There were two different Oregons. In the cities – Portland and Eugene – they operated like most other contemporary urban areas. But if you moved outside the city, even just a quarter mile, it was different. I used to go hunting and fishing out in the back woods areas all over Oregon. I never had any trouble, but when I went to a tavern to eat, you could literally feel the atmosphere change when I walked in the door. But that’s because I was by myself. They wouldn’t bother me because I was just a person getting a bite to eat. But if two black people went out together, you became a representative of black people and that brought out all the

attitudes towards us. So, I’ve had a lot of perspectives on racism in this country.”

Like most other places in the U.S., Oregon has a history of racism, far-right extremism, and active hate groups, some of it very recent. Jeremy Christian, a known white supremacist was convicted of stabbing and killing two men on a Portland MAX train in 2017, after they stood up to protect two young women Christian was harassing with racial slurs.

Recently, two Oregon men were charged this past December with a hate crime in the 2018 beating of a black man in Seattle.

And you only need to look back to 2019 to find a well documented incident at St. Helens High School when the mostly black girls basketball team from Parkrose High School in Portland was subjected to shouted racial slurs from the local fans.

These are just a few of the recent incidents that add to Oregon’s legacy of racial injustice.

In 2019 the Oregon legislature passed Senate Bill 577, which updated Oregon’s hate and bias laws and included a statewide hate crimes hotline, established by the Oregon Department of Justice in January 2020, that allows citizens to report biased based incidents. The new hotline documented 11 incidents in its first month. In April that number jumped to 61, in June it increased to 144, and it reached a high in August of 200 reports from across the state. Locally, through October of 2020 Columbia County had six reported bias incidents.

Hate crimes have steadily been increasing across the U.S. and in Oregon, and Oregon’s updated law was a direct response to that. According to the FBI who reports the statistics for the previous year each November, reports of hate crimes have steadily been rising since 2014. Numerous law enforcement agencies have been reporting an additional rise in reports this year, with sharp increases following the COVID shut downs in March, and in June after Black Lives Matter protests started.

The Department of Justice

continued on page 7



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