

We're All Infected

The second in EW's Q&A series on racism.

This week's interviewee is Mark Harris, an instructor and substance abuse prevention coordinator at Lane Community College.

How are minorities represented in Eugene's media?

They're not, except as problems. Their voice is invisible except when there's a peg for it, like the Cortez Jordan thing [in which Eugene police stopped and searched Jordan, a young black man, who then accused the EPD of racial profiling]. Cortez gets ink because he and his aunt work for the city. What about the black kid who was pulled off an LTD bus because there was a warrant for somebody else? They find out that it's not him, and they still arrest him. Nobody talks about that. Local media ignored Black History Month, and that's an easy peg.

Does it have to take a peg?

No. Black people are interested in more than just race relations. And what's playing out in Eugene has played out before. I find it ironic that with the Cortez Jordan thing, a county sheriff named Lane is the prompter. I don't know if he's actually related to General Joseph Lane, who Lane County and Lane Community College are named after. But Joseph Lane was a member of the Knights of the Golden Circle, which was a precursor to the Ku Klux Klan. The Knights of the Golden Circle wanted to create a separate slave-owning state in southern Oregon called the State of Jefferson, in which they were going to import and enslave Chinese, Indians, Blacks and Hawaiians. There's a whole history that isn't being talked about. A very common African proverb is, "The hero is the teller of the tale." So if I'm telling the tale, I'm going to tell it in the way that makes me look the best and leave out the rest. If you are educated with a form of history that doesn't mention certain people, then you don't know about them.

How do you know when it's racial profiling?

There are actual standards you can use to determine if it's racial profiling or not. There's a saying: Assumed criminality is not the same as mistaken identity. If you assume that I'm a criminal, simple psychology is going to show you that everything I do is going to fit a criminal mode.

Is there an assumption among police that black people are criminals?

The reality of gang behavior in this town and in Oregon — and I was on the gang task force — is that 80 percent of the new gang recruits in Oregon are middle-class white kids. I was walking down 13th, and I heard "What's up nigga?" I turn around and it was two white

kids talking to each other. So I ask them, "What's up with the 'What's up nigga'?" And they say they're 74 Hoover Crips. Gang identification is basically geographic streets, and 74th and Hoover is a neighborhood in south-central L.A. So I go, "Wait a minute. I'm from 48th and Denker; you've never been to 74th and Hoover. Where are you from for real?" They said Portland. And they said that they feel alienated from white culture — their words exactly — and what they find in rap culture is a level of truth-telling that they're not getting from mainstream white culture.

Do you think there has been an appropriation of black culture by, for the most part, suburban whites who think it's OK to use terms like the n-word?

The imitation and appropriation of African culture by Europeans is millennia old. So this is no new phenomenon, whether it's mimicking technology, terminology, or worldview. You see the same phenomenon in Omaha, Neb., and it becomes a *Time* magazine article. The cover features a white kid in a baseball cap holding a sawed-off shotgun. But the white kids who are drinking 40s, doing drive-by shootings and listening to rap music are described in the article as "gun-slingers," not "gang members."

Is there sometimes a sense of ambiguity about what constitutes racism?

I identify six forms of racism. Type 1 is overt individual. Type 2 is covert individual. Type 3 is institutional, where the institution is unconscious of the fact that individuals within it commit Type 1 and Type 2 acts of racism, so it makes no policy against it. Type 4 is institutional racism where it is legal and it is state policy to discriminate, like the state of Oregon at its founding, Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa. Type 5 is when it's covert institutional, and it's illegal, but it continues to happen because it's profitable. Redlining, for example.

What is redlining?

Redlining is Type 5 institutional racism committed by financial institutions — insurance companies, banks, real estate. It's been illegal since '65, but it still happens because it's profitable. And for those people [victims of redlin-

ing], it costs twice as much to buy a house, insure property, insure a life. Redlining is also when they only allow certain people to live in a neighborhood that they literally draw a red line around the area on a map. For example, it was legal to forbid black people to live within the city limits in Eugene before 1965. So they lived in the Ferry Street Community in Alton Baker Park, Glenwood, and West 11th, which were all outside the city limits.

Would you consider voter fraud against people of color Type 5 discrimination?

Sure it would be. This is nothing new. This is what was done during the Reconstruction from 1865-1877. The exact same stuff happens now, where you throw out the votes of black voters, or you have a line of police in front of the polling places, or the polling place suddenly doesn't exist. So voter fraud, gerrymandering, re-routing of districts — this is not new.

And the sixth type of racism?

Socio-structural violence. Literally what that means is that normal structures and practices of society produce the greatest amount of disease and deaths. The key here is disproportionality.

It's an intersection not only of race but of class as well. For example, the the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse said 80 percent of illegal drug users were white men who made in excess of \$50,000 in the Reagan-Bush years. Collectively, minorities are 13 percent of illegal drug use, and blacks are near the bottom of that in terms of rates of abuse. Wealthy white men are driving the illegal drug trade in America. So who is going to jail? The people who sell to them.

So it's that assumption of black criminality again.

Here's a reality of treatment. Not just in Eugene, but it plays out in Eugene. If you're black and you have a drug problem, you get jailed. This is why the Governor's Task Force on Disproportionate Minority Confinement exists. This is the reason that the Justice System, starting with police, are socialized to see blacks as criminals and not as addicts. If they have drug or alcohol problems, those problems aren't dealt with as medical problems; they're dealt with criminally, if at all. So even when you have a black kid with white kids and they're all smoking dope, the white kids get treatment; the black kid gets jailed.

What can be done to make people more aware?

As a veteran diversity trainer, I've come to

this conclusion: It's easier to strengthen the potential victims than to change the system.

So the system can't be changed?

I'm not saying it can't. I see racism as a co-occurring disorder. What that means is that it's both an addiction and a mental illness. Think of it as a toxic memetic infection. A toxic meme is spread by the English language, so if you speak English, you're infected. If you consume English media or English education, you're infected. And the degree to which you are addicted to various forms of discrimination or denial shows up in your behavior.

And that includes all English-speaking people of color.

Sure. One of the things that I've created for the students here is a 12-step program for recovery from racism. The idea is, if white people are the primary addicts of racism and people of color are co-dependents, then we don't have to wait for them to get it to recover. But we also have to understand that we've been infected too, and that we often play out the same things that they do against other groups. There has always been a "divide and conquer" strategy.

Do you think that Eugene is improving in regards to discrimination?

We're continuing to be good at talking about it and not so good at acting. Here in Eugene, there were barriers being placed on black police officers getting promotions. There's a certain reality where, within certain institutions, racist practices can be perpetrated against people of color. While it's nice that some of those people of color, the victims, have gotten cash settlements, the racists remain in place. Having a black county commissioner does not change anything. Having a black superintendent does not change anything.

It makes no difference that black people are in those powerful positions?

What socio-structural violence is about is that discrimination is built right into the system, and it has to be actively resisted or changed. And until it is, then it doesn't matter that you have a person of color at the head of an organization; that person doesn't necessarily change the structure of the organization.

Do you feel comfortable raising your daughters in this community?

They both have an activist streak. [Laughs.] Comfortable? Let's see. 4J is better than L.A. or San Francisco Unified [school districts]. But my advice for kids like them is to get out of here as soon as possible. I'm here just to raise them, and then I'm out of here. My advice to any youth of color raised in Eugene: Get out. See the world. And then if you want to come back here, do so. But you'll find out that the world isn't Eugene. **EW**



Mark Harris

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