

Eugene saw a slightly more than 50 percent rise in race-related hate crimes from 2014 to 2015, according to the city's 2015 "Hate and Bias Report." It's important to highlight that the report also states these crimes often go underreported. The report also says that race has consistently been the leading factor in bias crimes in Eugene for the past three years.

PAINT IT BLACK

Another more tangible example of covert racism in Eugene is the actions of well-meaning people who nonetheless remain a big part of the problem. One recent story in the spotlight is the blackface incident with UO law professor Nancy Shurtz this past October.

Shurtz, a former chair of the law school's diversity committee, wore a costume to a Halloween party that included black face paint and an afro wig.

After cries of outrage from the community as well as from her colleagues in the law department, Shurtz released an apology stating that the costume was inspired by a book she'd read, Dr. Damon Tweedy's memoir *Black Man in a White Coat*, about Tweedy's experience as an African-American man working in the medical field.

"I intended to provoke a thoughtful discussion on racism in our society, in our educational institutions and in our professions. As part of my costume, I applied black makeup to my face and wore a white coat and stethoscope," Shurtz says in her written apology.

She adds: "In retrospect, my decision to wear black makeup was wrong. It provoked a discussion of racism, but not as I intended ... I intended to create a conversation about inequity, racism and our white blindness to them. Regrettably, I became an example of it. This has been a remarkable learning experience for me."

It should be noted that Tweedy, whom Shurtz was portraying with her costume, has neither an afro nor pitch-black skin.

Richardson of the NAACP says culturally appropriate portrayals like these show just how deeply ingrained racist stereotypes are. "[There seems to be] no alternative image of black people," Richardson says.

Although clearly not meaning harm in assuming a stance about race, Shurtz inevitably ignored the lengthy, painful history of blackface that is still extremely damaging to black people; as Richardson said, it shows there is only one version of African-Americans that people tend to acknowledge: an over-exaggerated, laughable, buffoonish dress-up caricature.

Although Shurtz says she admires Tweedy, she portrayed him as a clownish and offensive racial stereotype.

The act of blackface goes back to minstrel shows of the 19th century in which white actors painted their faces black, over-lined their lips red and pranced around a stage in a way to depict black people as animalistic and unintelligent.

Minstrelsy was the "first public commercial venue in which blacks — though of course, they're not blacks — are represented on the theatrical or musical stage," according to a PBS piece from 2001. It therefore held a lot of sway over how people viewed African-Americans.

This stylistic portrayal continued through advertisements, television, cartoons and other forms of media regularly in the U.S. and the world until it started to taper off in the 1960s, though some traditions of dressing up in blackface are still prevalent in some parts of the world today.

Shurtz's Tweedy costume showcased the "post-racial" idea that, as open-minded, well-educated and cultured individuals we are far enough past racism to casually do things like blackface, presumably without expectation of consequences.

Shurtz's actions highlight the faux-progressive or "fauxgressive" way Eugene tends to deal with race. Self-congratulatory fauxgressivism paves the way for liberal, intelligent people to either address race in unintentionally harmful ways or ignore it all together.

In a predominantly white city that praises diversity, race is just straightup uncomfortable to talk about. UO grad student King remembers a perfect example of a time race was made into an awkward subject in Eugene.

"I took my son to the hospital [...] and the lady who checked us in asked me if it was OK to write that we're African-American," King says. "I was like, 'Well, I'd hate to be called that,'" she laughs at having to massage yet another person's hesitant attempts to not come off as racist. If she were Asian-American, say, she doubts the woman would've asked for permission to write down her race, King says.

But race isn't something to be ignored or forcibly blind to. Nor can it be rationalized and condensed into a one-sided idea or character. Race is a core part of a person's identity. Interactions like the one King describes happen frequently in Eugene.

"Until there's a push to be inclusive in our history and culture, we'll always have these problems," Richardson says.

ATTEMPTS AT IMPROVEMENT

There are active attempts to come to grips with these problems in our community. Bonnie Souza is a commissioner with Eugene's Human Rights Commission (HRC). Souza co-chairs an anti-discrimination work group with the commission. "Our aim is to make Eugene feel like a safe and welcoming place for everyone who lives here," Souza says, and currently "some people don't feel as welcome as others."

This year, Souza and the HRC are working to bring together focus groups of people of color and other marginalized communities to discuss experiences of discrimination and biases in Eugene. With feedback from the groups, the HRC will then pass on recommendations to the Eugene City Council suggesting ways to take action to make Eugene a better place for underrepresented people.

"The purpose of the focus groups is to sort of take the temperature of different communities and what their experience is of living in Eugene right now," says Souza.

There are nine focus groups total: African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Muslims, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, two in the Latino community (a general group and one for families with children in schools) and two in the LGBTQ community — with a separated transgender group.

The commission is still in the process of meeting with all the focus groups, and Souza says she isn't yet sure what the specific recommendations to the City Council will be.

"It's an opportunity to work together — a strength in numbers," Souza says. "I see progress."

Though she feels positively about the headway the Human Rights Commission is making, Souza says she still feels the weight of racism and discrimination in Eugene, especially as a white woman with a black daughter.

"When I think about my daughter I think more about the micro-aggressions or the blatant racism that she lives with everyday," Souza says.

She also says covert racism and the fauxgressiveness of liberal Eugeneans is something she has discussed with friends who are in other fields of social-justice work. "People I know who have worked on these kind of issues have said things to me like, 'Really, the toughest people to reach are the people who are very much on the right and the folks who consider themselves to be enlightened on the left — particularly white folks,'" Souza says.

Souza says our society is built on a foundation of racism and "it's in the air that we breathe and none of us can escape it." To pretend otherwise is a privilege.

You might think Eugene, being a mostly white city that claims to value diversity, would be the perfect place for speeding the end of white supremacy. But, in fact, that might be its downfall.

Eugene's whole "accepting" university-town climate makes the problem even more intractable because we can't even agree that we have a problem, Souza says: "[There are] a lot more people that are open-minded and consider themselves to be more progressive and so there's just that much more opportunity to butt up against that 'not seeing color' and 'not seeing race' when in my life experience I find that to be a ridiculous statement," Souza says. "Maybe that can be true if you're blind."

Stanford educator Imarisha says that although racism, covert and overt, directly affects people of color, it's up to white people to recognize their place of power and take a stand. "I think that ending white supremacy is something that folks of color have to be engaged in, but ultimately it's white people's responsibility because they're benefiting," Imarisha says.

Ultimately, covert racism won't be demolished by dismantling the KKK or confronting Neo-Nazis in the street. Traditional forms of activism may fail because the missing piece is self-criticism. The good news is, change can have a much simpler start: treating people of color like people. Not in the "we're all from Africa," "All Lives Matter," colorblind way, but like real people, with individual thoughts, emotions and depth, outside of the stereotypes associated with their race.

UO Black Student Task Force founding member Jamison says, "You can't educate a person. A person has to desire information."

If you do want to take the plunge into being more involved in and aware of race issues, don't make the mistake of thinking you, now *enlightened*, have the power to educate people of color about their own experience, and dismantle their opinions with common arguments like "racism is over" or "blackface isn't racist." You can never know the harmful effects of racism solely from education. Without real-life experience, you will never fully understand it. And part of being a reliable ally to people of color is being humble about that fact.

Lastly, let's not ignore the bounds forward we have made against outward racism. We have made a lot of progress addressing intentional and overt racism in our society, frowning upon ideologies that endorse it openly. But sharing a post on Facebook about social justice, or reposting news stories about race-based hate crime, are hollow gestures if you still, even unknowingly, perpetrate acts of covert racism and bigotry. ■

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