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OPINION

We Needed This Verdict

A new call for action in the fight for justice

BY DONOVAN M. SMITH

With all due respect to the loved ones of Trayvon Martin, most importantly his parents, America needed a "Not Guilty" verdict to shake up its senses.



Unfortunately in the wake of this young man's death, Trayvon has gone on to symbolize a number of things reflective of the darkest thoughts people usually discuss only amongst their closest peer groups but subconsciously and consciously act on every day.

Had George Zimmerman, the then 28-year-old neighborhood watch captain who took the unarmed 17-year-old's life, been convicted on any of the charges brought against him, there would have been an unnecessary calm amongst the people, and "Justice" would have been served for Trayvon.

Trayvon's parents would have justifiably reminded everyone that

they have lost their son; civil rights leaders would have said this is progress but we still have more work to do; and the racial divide that was truly the star of this nearly year and a half saga would have marched on.

The one person who knows exactly what took place on that rainy night of Feb. 26, 2012 in Sanford, Fla., lost his life regardless of the outcome.

Zimmerman, like the teenager he shot and killed at point blank range, has gone on to symbolize something much greater than himself too.

For some, he's a testament to being able to stand-up for one's self in the midst of a conflict. For many others, in America and around the world, his call to 911 before he even exchanged words with Trayvon was revealing to his mindset. In the call, he assumed Trayvon was a drug user and labeled him a "f----- punk" and "---hole."

The state may not have been able to prove guilt by the traditional modes of law, but Trayvon Martin was profiled to be a threat simply because of the skin he woke up in every day for 17-years. Trayvon

knew it, and so does George.

Was this the first time Trayvon had been assumed a criminal in his life without proper justification? He lived in a country where race affects matters of interaction every single day. It is ignorant to think otherwise.

Sanford Police concede that during the near two years George Zimmerman had been a neighborhood watch captain, all of his suspicious-persons calls regarded so-called African-American males. The jury was not allowed to consider that fact though.

Before the night of Feb. 26, 2012 the American judicial system was broken, and so it remains after a predominately Caucasian jury of six women decided Zimmerman's fate.

Our justice system was built with racial bias since its 1776 inception. It has only been within the last few years that state governments, including Oregon and Iowa, have considered how certain laws can affect certain races disproportionately.

People are frustrated now. Protests have already started. Social media continues to erupt as people

virtually shout their disappointment that a young man with college prospects has been gunned down on his way home and that his killer gets no tangible punishment.

The reason we needed this verdict was to galvanize action for change.

We can shake our heads in disgust and stomp our feet all we want, but if we do not force change we have done absolutely nothing but exhaust energy to make ourselves feel better. And we certainly have not brought justice for all of the Trayvon Martin's that exist in this world.

Give some blame to the mainstream media that granted, has a flare for sensationalism, but this was undoubtedly a racially motivated case.

Trayvon Martin's life was in jeopardy for most of his life because there are a boundless number of people whom like Zimmerman would have found his brown skin and the notion of criminality synonymous, thus providing a groundless but long cultivated basis for their fear.

Even Michelle Obama, in a 2008

interview alongside her husband, and then-candidate Barack Obama said in an interview, "The realities are as a black man, Barack can get shot going to the gas station."

Calling and interacting with lawmakers in the Legislature to demand change is obviously necessary in the wake of this case. You may have no faith in the system, but you are in it, and to accept it as it is only allows other people to dictate the rules for you.

It is a must that people organize if a change is to come about. If not, there will forever be a legion of people whispering I want things to change, while others yell over them.

It is your right to continue living in a world that outrages you, but if change is truly what you desire, take the action that justice calls for outside your front door.

Rest in peace, Trayvon Benjamin Martin (Feb. 5, 1995- Feb. 26, 2012).

Donovan M. Smith is a writer, photographer, and web-editor for The Portland Observer. A northeast Portland native and graduate of the prestigious Oregon Episcopal School, he is committed to bringing the most important and impactful stories to the community.

Paying Attention to our Basic Civil Rights

Democracy requires vigilance

BY M. LINDA JARAMILLO

Just a few days ago we celebrated Independence Day. Flags were flown. Parades marched through our communities. The day culminated with a wide array of fireworks. In the midst of all the picnics and parties, I wonder if we paid enough attention to the real meaning of independence. I wonder if we take our democracy as seriously as we should. If we did, we would demand that our democracy belongs to the people -- to all the people.

By definition, democracy means equality and fairness. Unfortunately, in so many cases this seems to apply only to the wealthiest, hence most powerful.

The power of wealth is demon-



strated over and over during the election season when the most viable candidate is measured by his or her ability to raise money rather than votes. There is further evidence in the legislative process when highly financed lobbyists converge on elected officials

to ensure that their wealth is protected during deliberations on laws meant for the common good -- also known as equality and fairness.

Our democracy is 237 years old. We must re-visit the premise of our basic civil rights from time to time, lest we forget what democracy is all about.

Throughout history, when we realized that equality and fairness was denied to some citizens, laws were revised to remedy the situation. Powerful examples come to mind such as the abolition of slavery, citizenship to Chinese persons brought to this land to build our railroads, provision for women of the right to vote, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Laws must stand the test of time spanning

from generation to generation to prove that all members of the democracy are included.

At the turn of the 21st Century -- when we consider race, ethnicity, and class -- we finally experienced some level of equality and fairness at the polls. More African Americans and Latinos registered and voted in 2012 than in years before.

In many states, there were fewer instances in which voters were denied access to the basic right that democracy affords. However, many more states still create structures intended to maintain control by the historically powerful.

Just when we thought legal protections were in place so that democracy could expand voting access to citizens in all states, it was interrupted when the Supreme Court nullified section 4 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The Court claimed that racial discrimination is no longer practiced in this country. The very states that have a history of racial discrimination can once again do just that. Because of a slim 5-4

Supreme Court majority, the momentous work of millions of voting rights activists must begin anew.

On July 2, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ renewed its commitment to join with the church's Council of Racial and Ethnic Ministries and other partners in this movement to reclaim voting rights for everyone.

Our denomination will add its

prophetic voice along with the voices of our faith partners, because equality and fairness are fundamental to our Christian teachings. We will be vigilant until a democracy that belongs to the people -- all the people -- is realized.

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