

Héctor Colón: Demand change through peaceful efforts

Posted on Tuesday, Jun 9, 2020

The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.

“Please.....I can’t breathe....Mama.....my stomach hurts, my neck hurts, everything hurts,.....Please.....Don’t kill me!” Like so many, I can’t get these words out of my mind. More than seven minutes passed as Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd’s neck. George moaned and groaned while three other police officers stood there doing nothing as George took his last breath on May 25, 2020. Today his family stands without a son and brother, his kids without a father and the community without a person that displayed a commitment to make lives better.

Why did this happen? My heart pains to see the videos or read the news relating to this injustice. Unfortunately, racial and ethnic disparities continue to exist in our society. The research literature well documents that people of color and specifically African Americans are treated differently in the criminal justice system. Who would have thought that the alleged use of a counterfeit \$20 dollar bill could result in a senseless homicide? When I looked into the eyes of Derek when watching the video, I personally felt the cold and reckless act that slowly and painfully took George’s precious life.

As a person of color, I can identify with the racial and ethnic injustices I have faced in my life. By no means would I compare my situation to the injustice of George, nor am I comparing my situation to the experiences of African Americans in this country. However, I will share a few points to demonstrate how I can relate. These moments never leave your memory.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

One time on a nice summer day I went to pick up my girlfriend, who is now my wife. Within blocks of her home we were stopped by four police officers in two cars. The officers shouted, "Get out of the car." I said, "Why?" They repeated, "Get out now!" They roughly ransacked my car, going through my glove compartment and trunk, leaving a mess as they calmly walked back into their vehicles with no explanation of why they did this.

Another time I was working for a mail carrier and was entering the back of a department store in Racine to pick up their mail. An individual next to me shouted, "Get away from my car you Mexican N..." I went on to tell him why I was there but he kept on shouting at me angrily. After being taunted several times, I picked up my mail and left.

Yet another time, I went out with some friends to go dancing, something I rarely did in college because I was focused on getting my degree to pursue a career. Two friends and I were prohibited from entering the establishment. I asked, "Why are you not letting us in?" White patrons were walking right in so it was not because of crowd control. I asked three times and then they said very aggressively, "You better leave or else we are calling the cops." Since I knew this conversation was going nowhere, I left.

The way I reacted in these situations, walking away, may have saved my life. Had I reacted differently, maybe I would have gone to jail, obtained a fine, lost my job and even died the way George did. The unfortunate thing here is that George did react the way I did. He was polite and did not resist arrest and yet he is gone.

Justice needs to be brought to Derek Chauvin, but he is not the only one responsible. The other police officers who were on the scene are also responsible. Why didn't they do anything? Did they agree with what they saw? On the other hand, maybe they were fearful. I say they were cowards. They chose not to use good judgment and common sense or to enact the aim and purpose of their police profession which is to protect and serve. Courage is acting even when you are afraid. Courageous people will do the right thing even when it is difficult. These police standing by were the only ones that could have saved George's life and they should have consequences measurable to their silence and inaction that led to this tragic situation.

Despite my personal experiences, I believe the overwhelming majority of law enforcement act with integrity in fulfilling their duties to protect and serve. The

actions of the police officers in the George Floyd tragedy did a grave disservice to all the men and women who put their lives on the line and whose countless daily positive actions go unreported. It is my hope that as a society we do not get clouded and turn against the individuals who choose to protect and serve. If we are to get to the root cause, we must look to the systems and policies that foster conditions where the actions of these officers can occur.

While George is gone his story lives. The pain and discomfort many feel is real and it will last a long time. Nevertheless, how can we use this unfortunate tragedy to move us closer together versus further apart. We need to peacefully end the racial and ethnic disparities that continue to exist in our criminal justice system, in our healthcare system, and in other systems and institutions in our society.

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that; hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." And the Floyd family agrees. Terrance Floyd said recently, "We've been down this road already. He [George Floyd] would want to seek justice the way we are, the way we're trying to do. But channel it another way. The anger, damaging your hometown, it's not the way he'd want."

Let us follow the advice of Martin Luther King and George's brother in moving forward demanding change through peaceful efforts. There is no place for violence against police officers, protestors, businesses and communities. We must lead with peace.

Everyone is created equal and has a right to live in a healthy community filled with people using their God-given gifts to serve. At LSS, we are called every day to enact our mission to act compassionately, serve humbly and lead courageously in solidarity with all people from white to black to brown and in-between. And we will stand in support of the infinite worth of black lives.

-Colón is president and CEO of Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan.