

Thinking, writing about racial justice is learning experience

“Ferguson” became a worldwide byword for racial injustice when protesters took to the streets after the policeman who killed Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager, was not indicted. Three years later, people of all races were again marching in St. Louis to protest the acquittal of a white policeman in the shooting death of Anthony Lamar Smith.

These events were catalysts for Women’s Voices Raised for Social Justice to focus more than ever on racial justice and the systems and practices that exacerbate inequities. To raise awareness of racism and its consequences, we released a position paper on racial justice. Crafting the paper became a true learning experience.

Our Racial Justice Committee wanted a document that would address the pervasive racism that infects public policies. We believed that to be an authentic voice for equality, we needed a comprehensive statement that dealt with a wide array of complex issues: disparities between African-Americans and whites in employment, wages, accumulated wealth, access to transportation and health care, and, especially, criminal justice.

As we began, we felt confident that we understood most of the issues, but as we researched each topic, we were humbled by how little we actually knew. As we looked into criminal justice we discovered that black men are over five times more likely to be imprisoned than white men. We learned that for-profit prisons provide incentives for increased incarceration of black men. We found inequities in juvenile justice so great in St. Louis that a U.S. Department of Justice consent decree has intervened to correct discrimination against black youth.

We knew some schools were in trouble, but were shocked at how badly Missouri is failing. We learned the state has underfunded education by \$400 million, especially hurting low-income school districts. We knew many people lacked health care, but were outraged to learn infant mortality is worse in some primarily African-American neighborhoods than in Third World countries.

We learned that St. Louis ranks 19th in population, but 68th in transit coverage and resulting access to jobs. The lack of public transit disproportionately affects minority communities; more than 23 percent of African-American households in the city do not have access to a car, compared to 5.2 percent of white households.

As we peeled back the onion of racial injustice, we were also surprised that all committee members didn’t perceive every issue in the same way. We worked through disagreements, assumptions and unconscious biases. The section on Black Lives Matter raised questions about the negative images we often hear in the media. Research and discussion revealed Black Lives Matter’s mission is nonviolent protest against the injustices impacting black people. We then reached consensus to support the movement’s goals and methods.

Another section divided us on the issue of reparations for descendants of slaves. Questions of implementation seemed too complex. Ultimately, we agreed to state that a holistic approach is needed to repair the harm caused by our systemic racist policies and actions. We called for our politicians and other leaders to open a discussion in the public forum of how to assure that victims of racism have real opportunity in all facets of life and work.

We had specific goals to energize the members of Women’s Voices Raised for Social Justice. We hoped to provide a guiding light to a future where such a paper will not be needed. Now that our paper is complete, we propose another, unanticipated use for it. May it serve as an example of how people can successfully confront and overcome biases by educating themselves and talking through disagreements calmly and openly. Only by working together will we achieve justice for all. You can read the paper at womensvoicesraised.org.