

Grassroots collective takes a stand against racism



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By Nate Smelle

Since the release of footage of George Floyd gasping for air and calling out for his "Mama" as Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his throat for nearly nine minutes, ignoring what turned out to be his final words "I can't breathe," the outrage sparked by his death has given fuel to a growing movement around the world calling for an end to racism and a transformation of the institutions that support it. Chauvin has been charged with second-degree murder, while his assisting officers J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao have been charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder.

Now, thanks to a collective of morally outraged and socially concerned citizens these calls for racial equality and systemic change can be heard echoing throughout North Hastings. Since the formation of the group Anti-Racism North Hastings a few weeks ago, Marlena Zuber has been one of the many local residents adding her voice to this clarion call. Pointing out that "Canada has its own deeply historical and systemic problem," she said it is important for people to realize that racially motivated violence "is not just an American problem."

Witnessing the uprisings, marches and rallies taking place in the United States, Canada and around the world supporting the Black Lives Matter movement in demanding an end to the long legacy of colonial violence and racially-motivated killing of Black people, Zuber felt compelled to take action.

'While a lot of white people are going out to protests and that is encouraging, there is still a lot of white silence and I really felt that silence here where I live in North Hastings,' said Zuber. 'I was frustrated by my own white settler silence and inspired on social media by seeing signs and art in the streets in rallies and marches but also in front of people's homes in neighbourhoods and communities. I thought a sign somewhere in downtown Maynooth where traffic is being diverted due to construction would be great to see.'

In an effort to show the community's solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, Zuber reached out to others in the area who have been involved in anti-colonial and anti-racism work, as well as local grassroots organizing. Once the group came together, she said the idea grew 'bigger and better,' evolving from the creation of one sign to a community-based sign making initiative and awareness raising campaign.

Marilyn Zehr and Ian Russell are two of the community members to join Zuber and help take her idea to the next level. When Zehr first saw Zuber's request for help with the campaign, she decided immediately to get involved. Noting that it was clear to her that this was a movement which needed the support of everyone who was 'brave enough to speak up,' Zehr and her partner Svinda Heinrichs started painting signs with the group.

Explaining what motivated her to take a stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement locally, she said 'Silence is violence. That is something I had known for a long time, but it was clearer now than ever, that silence supports the status quo.'

As a minister with the United Church, Zehr said she quickly realized that her actions were also representative of the church, so she decided to approach the congregation's leadership team for support. Now, with their backing, she said they have since put up two signs at the church. One which reads 'Black Lives Matter' and another declaring 'United Against Racism.' In addition, Zehr said the general council of the United Church issued a formal statement regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, which reads: 'We therefore encourage the church, particularly the white church, to publicly commit, in worship and elsewhere, to the stance that Black Lives Matter.'

Noting that people have been killed as a result of systemic anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism long before Canada and the U.S. were founded, Russell believes there are several reasons why the horrific images of George Floyd's death have inspired so many people to become engaged in the Black Lives Matter movement. Highlighting how 'people have been fighting against white supremacy since its beginning,' he said he believes that one of the reasons 'George Floyd's murder really turned things up a notch,' is that before he was killed, COVID-19 had brought everything to a halt. With the climate crisis and all the pressure of the growing inequalities in the world, at first, Russell said the pandemic felt like it was a break 'a massive chance to stop, reflect, and take a big breath.'

Explaining how this pause played a part in mobilizing the masses, Russell said 'There was hope that when we get going again we can do things differently. But then it comes out that Black and Indigenous people are dying from COVID-19 at twice the rate of white people. So your quality of life is still hugely affected by the colour of your skin. Police killing Black and Indigenous people didn't stop. And so there's no pause after all. So when people saw George Floyd being murdered, seeing him slowly losing his life with his murderer on top of him, with eight or nine minutes to change his mind, but he just keeps going, because he knows the risks, he knows he'll get away with it. I think it was just too much. So the video goes out and it's another Black life, it's just too much ' everyone's out in the streets demanding real change and we're seeing that change is actually possible. 'Looking for ways to be a part of the change she wants to see in the world, Zehr said she started researching ways to actively show her solidarity with the movement. Bombarded with ideas on www.BlackLivesMatter.com, she said one of the most powerful ways for people to take a stand against racism is by filming it.

'I think the Black Lives Matter movement has helped us see that there are very concrete ways in which we can reveal what is happening,' said Zehr. 'It can't be avoided, and you can't not see it any more. I hate violence of all kinds ' yet I couldn't turn away from this. And I think that has happened for so many people now. The video evidence we have today that we didn't have five years ago of what is really happening is undeniable.'

Attesting to Zehr's statement Zuber said she is haunted by another video showing the death of Ahmaud Arbery ? an unarmed Black man allegedly hunted down and shot to death by Gregory McMichael and his son Travis while he was jogging.

"There are so many murders by police that haven't been filmed," said Zuber. "If you think of Breonna Taylor, or you think of Regis Korchinski-Paquet these were not filmed, but they are there. Enough is enough, and enough was enough a long time ago."

Growing up, Russell said he was never afraid of police because he believed they were "good guys" that would "catch the bad guys." Acknowledging that she too had held this perspective as a result of her upbringing, Zuber added "We don't have to teach our children how to walk into a store, because they are white. If our kids were Black we would be telling them and teaching them to make eye contact, to show their hands, how to act around police, and not to reach for your glove compartment. They have a whole different set of rules ? We are 100 per cent in favour of defunding police and especially replacing [them] with specialized mental health responses and community services."

While so far Anti-Racism North Hastings' campaign has been met with overwhelming support throughout the community, there has been some resistance. Recognizing that it is through such conversations that people have the opportunity to consciously evolve, Zuber encourages everyone to stand up to racism and white supremacy every time it rears its ugly head. Although engaging with people in such a way can be difficult and unsettling, she said "a big part of this work is being ready to have those uncomfortable conversations. I wish I had been more ready before, but now I am starting to be ? and there are a lot of people who are really supportive."

As the Black Lives Matter movement continues to gather momentum locally and globally, Anti-Racism North Hastings is calling on others to join their campaign. Zuber encourages anyone interested in putting up signs to contact the group. She also encourages people to make their own signs if they have the opportunity to do so. To support Anti-Racism North Hastings in their efforts Zuber said people are also welcome to donate sign-making supplies such as two-by-two lumber, plywood, and paint. She said they are also looking at hosting an anti-racism workshop which people can participate in. Anyone interested in getting involved is advised to contact the collective at: antiracismnorthhastings@gmail.com.