

My Perspective: Thoughts of a Mother Living in Today's Reality

By: Ora Houston, Austin City Council, District One

As the parent of an adult son and daughter, when a mother's child is killed, regardless of their age, I am sad. I check in with mine, to hear their voices, tell them that I love them, make sure that they are okay and remind them to be 'careful out there'.

There is no way for me to feel the powerful emotions that parents, family and friends experience when told that their loved one has been killed. I can only imagine that a mixture of disbelief, pain, anger, numbness and heartbreak might be some of those emotions.

The last weeks have been extremely difficult for me because of the number of individuals killed and the fact that their murders are replayed over and over on the 24 hour news cycle. The week began with the execution of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, followed by Philando Castile's in Minnesota. Then five peace officers were executed in Dallas, 84 individuals killed in France and three in Baton Rouge. I am numb at the total disregard for human life.

I attend conversations and prayer services seeking answers and hope that this time, this time might be the time that people are willing to put aside the hate speech and seek the humanity in individuals that are 'different' than they are. Change starts with conversations and/or prayer, and moves to a commitment to get to know other individuals who have life experiences and perspectives that are different. Change happens when all voices are heard, respected and valued.

As I write this, I realize that in addition to my perspective as a mother, I have other perspectives that inform my feelings and thoughts today. I have lived in Austin for over 60 years, went to segregated schools, knew the Black peace officers on the force because they lived in our community; they were role models who demonstrated respect for self, others and the neighborhood. I have the perspective of a person of faith, living out my faith in a denomination that is majority white and yet the Episcopal Church has acknowledged very publicly, the 'sin of racism' that infects the body of the faithful. I now have the perspective of the person elected to represent the people of the district to craft health and safety policies that 'we the people' must live by. Policies that must be administered fairly without bias.

I want to share a non-violent example of a situation at my home that appeared to have been handled with bias: In the wee hours of the morning, a young white student was seen trying to climb over my neighbor's fence. He then tried to climb over my gate and ended up asleep on my front porch. Police responded to my location, woke him up, called a cab, and sent him on his way. He was publicly intoxicated and trespassing. I want you to think about what would have happened to my son, Black, bald, physically fit, with several degrees, if he had attempted to climb over two fences and was found sleeping on someone's porch in another part of Austin. I submit that if he was fortunate enough not to have been shot by a property owner, he would have been placed in a patrol car, NOT a cab, and taken to jail. I followed up with the police and the department justified the handling of the incident. Was there bias? Can you see it?

In recent years, I have witnessed unarmed children, women and men killed by people who are sworn to protect and serve. I continue to recognize the extreme actions of some in authority

that reinforces the history I know and lived through. Generational history of trauma at the hands of individuals with legal authority to kill, has left lingering fear and pain that scar the psyche and souls of those of us who are seen as 'the other'.

When my son comes home to visit, he gets the same 'talk' about how to relate to the police that he got when he was a child. White parents don't give 'the talk' to their children or their adult offspring. He gets 'the talk' even though he is in law enforcement.

What can we do to make Austin a safe place for all people to live, especially those who have been marginalized by society? A suggestion is to acknowledge that Austin is geographically and economically segregated *and* resist stereotyping and making assumptions about 'others'. A suggestion for my community is to re-engage in East Austin. Individuals with limited education, limited income, and my young people, need role models and mentors who reflect their faces (entrepreneurs, professionals, congregations, civic and fraternal organizations), to show up, shore up and be examples of what is possible.

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world” - Mahatma Gandhi