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Thinking, writing about racial justice is learning experience

By Judy Arnold and Jeanne Bubb

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Marilyn Smith (left) of St. Louis participates in a vigil sponsored by Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice to call attention to gun violence in the area. Fifteen area groups came together for the vigil at St. John's Church in St. Louis on Sunday, Dec. 13, 2015. Photo by Cristina M. Fletes, cfletes@post-dispatch.com

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“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 are only two examples of a growing protest movement across our city and country.

These two events were catalysts for members of Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice, a St. Louis organization, to focus more than ever on racial justice and the systems and practices that have exacerbated inequities. As part of a new campaign to raise awareness of racism and its consequences, we recently 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 and use of resources. We believed that to be an authentic voice advocating for equality, we needed to present 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.

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As we began the project, 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, for example, we discovered that black men are more than 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 that inequities in juvenile justice are so great in St. Louis that a U.S. Department of Justice consent decree has intervened to correct discrimination against black youth.

We knew schools were in trouble in some areas, but we were shocked at how badly Missouri is failing. We learned that the state has underfunded education by \$400 million, especially hurting schools in low-income districts. We knew many people lacked health

care, but we 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 the United States in population, but 68th in transit coverage and access to jobs by means of public transit. 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 had to work through disagreements and examine assumptions and unconscious biases. One section, on Black Lives Matter, raised questions about the negative images we often see or hear in the media. After research and discussion we learned that Black Lives Matter's mission is one of nonviolent protest against the injustices impacting the lives of black people. We were then able to reach consensus and state that we support the goals and the methods of the movement.

Another section divided us on how to treat the issue of reparations for descendants of slaves. Questions about implementation seemed too complex to address in this paper. 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 when we started our project. We wanted to energize the members of Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice. For them and for others, we hoped to provide a guiding light toward a future where such a paper will not be needed. Now that our paper is complete (although we'll revise it as future events dictate) 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.

Read our paper at **[womensvoicesraised.org](https://www.womensvoicesraised.org)**.