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Friday, 19 June 2020 01:21



There is a video circulating on social media of a beautiful little girl in a tee-shirt trimmed in white eyelet lace, her smiling face aglow in pride, proclaiming “Daddy changed the world.” It is both sweetly uplifting and painfully heart breaking. The little girl, seated on the shoulders of a family friend, is at one of the protests that have become commonplace since her father’s murder at the hands of police officers.

George Floyd’s 6-year-old daughter Gianna has a child’s limited understanding not only of the pent-up anger unleashed by her father’s murder, but also of the finality of death. She has not experienced all the repercussions of having lost a parent so early in life – a parent who will not be there when she celebrates accomplishments, grieves failures, and shares the joy and wonder that comes from discovering the world around her. But she hears her father’s name on TV and sees that crowds have taken to the streets to call for a sea change in the way that people who look like her are treated. She deserves this moment of pride. She deserves equity, justice, and much more.

The protests, of course, are about far more than the murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, or even the problem of police brutality. And it is no coincidence that this explosion of marches and riots has come during the throes of a pandemic that has disproportionately taken the lives of people of color. COVID-19 has laid bare an ugly American reality – that the socio-economic differences falling largely along racial and ethnic lines is not simply a quality-of-life matter. They are a matter of life and death.

Centuries of laws, policies, and practices that have privileged whites and oppressed people of color have created and maintained a system of structural racism. The disparities people of color experience begin before they are born and follow them unto death. They are evident in the enormous income and wealth gaps, in sentencing for non-violent offenses, in access to high-quality education, and even in life spans between whites and people of color. They are evident in the disparate outcomes of police encounters with unarmed Black and brown people

and those with armed whites.

But how does a nation begin to dismantle a 400-year-old system of oppression? We can start by demilitarizing our police and schools and reinvesting a meaningful portion of our police budgets into our communities by way of programs proven to prevent crime and build partnerships. We must overhaul our criminal justice system, implement the “8 Can’t Wait” policing reform agenda, release those serving sentences for non-violent drug offenses, and offer, instead, treatment, education, employment, and reparations. We must admit that the war on drugs has always been a proxy for a war on Black and brown people. And we must ensure that health care is available to all – rather than just to those with white-collar and union jobs.

Here in New Mexico, we can start by ensuring that every bill the Legislature considers – from budgets to criminal codes – has been analyzed for disparate impacts by race, ethnicity, and gender. So, for example, the next time legislators debate cutting taxes for those at the top, they’ll know not only how much money it will cost the state, but also how much it will increase economic inequality between whites and people of color. And New Mexico must robustly invest in the early childhood care, education, and community health programs that we know create opportunity for all children and especially for the three-quarters of our child population who are children of color.

Like all great social upheaval, change will not occur until it is demanded. Those in power must see that fundamental reform is the only way they can keep their power and that, if they resist, they will be replaced. That means getting angry and channeling the anger constructively. It means taking to the streets and protesting peacefully. And most of all, it means voting — voting for candidates who are committed to dismantling structural racism in all our institutions.

George Floyd’s death may well change the world. It may make the world a safer, kinder place for children of color like Gianna. But only if we all — people of every race, ethnicity, and color — demand it. We cannot allow George Floyd’s life, and the lives of others who have met the same fate, to have been lost in vain.

For information on 8 Can’t Wait policing reform, visit: ***https://twitter.com/Larken/status/1269002063121448960/photo/2***

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