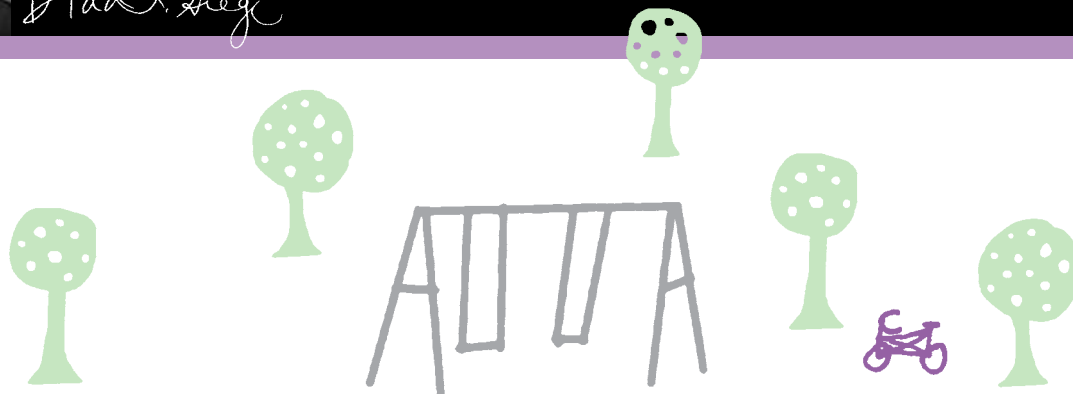




Diana Heggen

MY COMMUNITY MATTERS



Standing Tall Against Racism!

On April 29 our staff stood tall against racism, joining forces with the local and national YWCA and many others. At Grand Rapids Community Foundation, we are deliberate about taking a stand against all “isms” and, in particular, the injustice that spews from racist attitudes and actions. And we take this stand not for just one day but each and every day. This is part of our culture, and our staff engages in many activities that challenge racism and promote cultural inclusion. I’m proud to say that every Community Foundation staff member has been through an Institute for Healing Racism training. We made this mandatory for our staff.

My first encounter with racism occurred when I was four years old, and it is a vivid memory. My grandparents took me to Ann Arbor on a sunny summer day. At a playground they walked me over to the swing set, and I happily climbed on a swing and soared toward the clouds. As I was swinging, a little girl joined me on the next swing. We giggled together and tried to see who could swing higher than the other. I remember feeling happy and free.

Before long, my grandmother came over and grabbed me off the swing. She said loudly, to me, but in front of my new friend, “You are not to play with those people!” I looked at her and asked “What people?” She pointed to my friend, whose mother was now standing behind her. I

didn’t understand what was happening, but my friend’s mom sure did and whisked her daughter away down the path out of the playground. Of course, my new friend was African American. My grandmother dragged me into the car saying things like “Those are people we do not associate with” and “You just don’t understand.” I had started to cry as she continued to call my friend names with words I’d never heard before. I got the point loud and clear that my friend’s skin color was the issue. I told my grandma that what she was saying was “not nice.” We all sat in frozen silence until they dropped me off back home.

A few years ago, on Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday, I blogged about growing up in suburban Grosse Pointe during the 1960s. I did not have a privileged life. I was raised by two down-to-earth parents who were more concerned that I was too shy versus a kid that was a revolutionary. Though I did not grow up in privilege, it was definitely a community of white privilege.

As I grew up, I quietly took time to learn about the world beyond Grosse Pointe. I volunteered to tutor at an inner city elementary school. I worked summers and evenings at The Detroit News alongside kids from across the metro Detroit area. And I read

everything I could find about racism, social change, human services, community organization and righting the wrongs of oppression and segregation. The riots of 1967 taught me that the seemingly impenetrable border between Detroit and Grosse Pointe was artificial.

Writing this more than 40 years later, I am mindful that I write both as Grand Rapids Community Foundation president and as a private citizen. There are reasons I am in this position today. At age 21 I wanted to reach out to help make lives better. I determined to do something in my life that had tremendous meaning. Though it is no surprise to be at this place in my life, I know how fortunate I truly am. Leading this Foundation is an honor and not something I take for granted.

And so it is that as president of the Community Foundation and as a human being, I took a stand against racism in April—and I take one every single day. ■

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To read more of Diana’s writing about philanthropy and social change issues her blog features regular postings. It can be accessed at grfoundation.org/blog. Your comments on her postings are welcome and encouraged.