

Given the continuing national protests regarding police racism together with Shoreline police chief Shawn Ledford's reassuring but incomplete statement in his June 1 message to Shoreline residents in the Shoreline Area News ("-and treat all people regardless of race, with equity and fairness and dignity."), I have concluded I need to respond.

I witnessed the experiences of a Black friend (whom I will identify as Mr. X to ensure confidentiality) with Shoreline police. Further, we had a rather unique parallel experience with a vehicle: Mr. X bought a vehicle that I had owned for 8 years, and we lived 11 blocks from each other in Shoreline.

Within a few months he came to me to report what was happening. (1) At least four times he reported being tailed by police when he left his apartment in his vehicle on Richmond Beach Drive. He would be followed for a time without being stopped. (2) On a hot summer evening when he was sitting outside his apartment, he was lit up by a spot light from a passing police cruiser which then turned around and did the same, without stopping. (3) After giving a chap at a bus stop a ride from south Shoreline to another Shoreline business, he was pulled over at the Fred Meyer lot and asked why he had given this person a lift and "why had you talked so long" at the business. (4) Driving north on Aurora he met a police car which quickly did a u-turn and stopped him "because one tail light was out". (5) At least 3 other police interactions were experienced which I will not describe in detail here for the sake of brevity, but which he described to police, as noted below.

During my 8 years of owning this vehicle in Shoreline I had never been stopped. We later learned that in the first year of Mr. X's ownership of the vehicle, the license had been "run" 4 times by the police. As best I could determine, in my last year of ownership it had never been "run ." Mr. X described his terror with each police stop, knowing the history of police killings of Black men, and reported that he always kept his hands on the window sill.

I found this deeply disturbing. When I asked Mr. X if other residents of color in Shoreline that he knew had similar experiences, he said yes, and put me in touch with a couple people who recounted what they described as harassing experiences by Shoreline police.

After some reluctance, Mr. X agreed to request a meeting with the Shoreline police chief. At that meeting he maintained what I felt was remarkable composure and described this litany of police experiences. (Mr. X had no previous record of infractions with Shoreline police; he had recently moved to the northwest after six years in the U.S. Marines). Chief Ledford listened politely, but since none of the encounters resulted in police reports, he basically denied that officers were engaging in racial harassment or profiling, and essentially discounted Mr. X's experiences. I saw this as the typical experience of a discounted Black individual's voice when facing off with the institution of the police. No apology was forthcoming.

He and I then took the issue to the city. At a meeting with city leadership that included Chief Ledford, Mr. X again described his experiences. The result was similar. But by now we had received data from the police department. They apparently are required to record all types of ticketing by race (and other identifiers). The data showed that the percentage of tickets for all violations issued to Blacks were: 9.6% in 2012; 10.4% in 2013; and 10.9% in 2014. The city's demographic data showed that Blacks represented about 5% or less of the city population during those years. Therefore Blacks were being ticketed for all offenses at a rate twice their representation in Shoreline's population.

City leadership was polite, but the outcome of both these discussions was that neither the police chief nor the city leadership was willing to admit that racial profiling or harassment was even a possibility (in spite of city data consistent with Mr. X's experience) and no apology or other action was taken.

Chief Ledford forwarded Mr. X's formal complaint to the King County Sheriff's Internal Investigations Unit (Shoreline contracts with the county sheriff for police services). Mr. X was contacted, I was not. He quickly received a report from Captain Jesse Anderson that "there is insufficient evidence to sustain the allegations you have made. I sincerely hope that any future contacts you have with members of the department are of a positive nature." (I can report that they were not and Mr. X later was subjected to physical violence at the hands of a SPD officer). So an internal police review produced the results we have come to expect from most police departments conducting their own reviews.

What did I conclude from witnessing all this? First, it was abundantly clear that the institutional racism in Shoreline's police department was unrecognized, or unwilling to be acknowledged, by either police or city leadership. This denial is at the heart of the outrage currently enveloping our country. Police killings of Blacks usually come to the attention of the public, as we're seeing. Day to day racial harassment and lesser racist acts usually do not, and it is possible that they are invisible to police department leaders who can therefore engage in plausible denial.

Mr. X grew up in a Pittsburgh ghetto and along with his family and the Black community there were well schooled in police racism. I witnessed the additional emotional, economic and physical impacts from his experiences with racism from the SPD, other Shoreline businesses and the criminal justice system. They were life-altering, made more so by the persistent denial of institutional racism by our liberal but often too-often self-assured city and its leaders.

Along with many colleagues in the health professions, I believe that racism is a public health issue. The 7,000 health professionals who recently marched in Seattle in support of the Black Lives Matter movement have seen the debilitating impact of racism on the health of people of color, as was so eloquently stated by Dr. Estell Williams of the UW medical school who organized that march.

It is from directly observing a Black friend's experience in Shoreline that I found Chief Ledford's overly sanguine and self-serving June 1 public statement so unacceptable. It dishonestly failed to acknowledge any of this history or city data, or even the possibility that racism might have been exhibited by any of Shoreline's 52 officers, none of whom were Black in 2015. (The Shoreline force is currently 54 officers of which I believe only one is Black (web site photo)).

More current data (2018, 2019) on the ticketing percentages of Black residents might indicate positive changes considering the department's more recent emphasis on de-escalation and Implicit Bias training. However, I've been informed getting that data now requires submitting a Public Records Request, and I have had no response as of this writing. It's also important to note that this ticketing data by race is not included in the Annual Police Reports available on the department's web site, which I believe is a serious omission.

The city council at its June 8 meeting emphasized that Shoreline police follow King County Sheriff's policies which prohibit chokeholds, mandate de-escalation training, exhaust alternatives before resorting to deadly force, etc. We can all be grateful for such policies. But nothing in these policies addresses racial profiling and harassment actions by individual officers which typically escape detection and which our police chief has denied as even possible.

City leaders should actively solicit input from residents of color regarding their more recent experiences with Shoreline police. We are living in a dream world if we do not believe that structural racism exists in the Shoreline police department. I have observed it directly through my Black friend's experiences and the SPD's own data. Mr. X's "Black pain" that is currently getting unprecedented national attention I directly observed. It was truly sobering. I feel compelled to respond to the call from the Black community for those of us who experience white privilege to speak out in support of our Black neighbors and friends.

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