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Michael Johnson: Race in America: Will we overcome?

3 HOURS AGO • MICHAEL JOHNSON | CEO, BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF DANE COUNTY

There have always been obstacles for people in all walks of life: people of color, women, the disabled, and people of lower economic status. Regardless of race, many have faced the bigotry and hatred of small-minded individuals and groups. These situations are troubling, but when bracketed as a segment of our history somehow feel less threatening. Fast forward to present day. Images of Klan members marching in large groups — even in a photo taken in the 1920s — and a gentleman holding the Confederate flag at the White House during the recent government shutdown both seem grossly out of place. We've grown and developed as a nation, and to continue doing so, our nation must denounce and minimize any group with a history of causing harm to others.

There are already so many challenges facing our nation's children and families of color: homelessness, low graduation rates and high unemployment rates. Our young people of color will be faced with overt and covert racism that will attempt to distract them from their dreams. We have to lead by example, and our young people will need to learn how to respond appropriately during challenging times while staying focused on their dreams. To be successful, they must demonstrate the tenacity, desire and drive to reach their full potential.

Our young people need to be supported and encouraged because history has not always been perfect and fair to people of color and race relations, and equity is still an issue that many will continue to face today. The road to prosperity for our children will rarely be a straight line and racism will continue to hurt and divide us — black and white — for generations to come.

I remember my pastor, Alex Gee, once saying, "As an African-American pastor in this community, it is important for white kids to see me as a role model as well as black kids." His words resonated because many times, middle- and upper-class kids from white suburban and rural communities are segregated by zip codes and they miss the cultural connection to other ethnic groups. I believe that many white kids from these groups are informed by what they see in the media and they too are "at risk." This kind of isolation could be damaging to not only their futures but also our nation's continued development. It should not surprise us to see these divides form because (many times) there is no relationship with other cultures that foster a history of good will and friendship.

I have learned that our collective communities are immigrants made up of blacks, whites, Latinos and Filipinos, just to name a few. It is the fabric of those collective groups that makes us "one community united" and we must protect our nation from those who seek to harm one strand of that fabric. There are hurtful voices, institutionalized racism, and disparities that still exist. As a community we must overcome those voices, which act as barriers, and we must learn from one another to minimize these issues for years to come. The future of all our children and our collective communities depend on it!

Michael Johnson, MBA, is CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County.

Editor's note: Michael Johnson wrote this piece to help explain why he believes it would be inappropriate for The Capital Times to publish an advertisement that includes a 1924 photo of the Ku Klux Klan visiting Madison, accompanied by a Capital Times' 1924 editorial denouncing the Klan. See [editor Paul Fanlund's column](#) for the complete story.

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