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Driven to act: How I got through racial hazing and how what I learned can help Madison



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Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, said conversations with white classmates helped him move beyond a terrifying, racially charged incident in college.

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Michael Johnson - Driven to Act - (Part One)

After reading Rev. Alex Gee's article "**Justified Anger**" about some of the issues facing our community, and talking with elected officials, faith-based leaders, educators and parents, I was inspired to add my voice to this discussion and share my thoughts regarding race, the importance of communication and a proposed framework for moving Madison beyond the status quo.

Race and equality is a complex and uncomfortable topic and

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some won't understand why we are continuing these conversations. Some might be critical before reading my entire essay and many will be thankful for the exchange. There is no one solution and I don't have all the answers, but I feel compelled to open my heart to help us move from conversation to action.

While these two very personal stories may shock you, the purpose is to bring people together, not to further divide. I encourage you, the reader, to move beyond anger or guilt that might arise and to see these as examples for improved communication and better understanding of one another's cultures. This is my first time sharing these stories publicly, and I hope that my experiences will help others to better communicate and support each other.

I was raised in public housing in a Chicago neighborhood that was infested with gangs, drugs and prostitution. I lived in a single family household where 99 percent of my neighbors were African-American and poor. But it wasn't until I was 18

years old that I first experienced cultural insensitivity.

After graduating from one of the lowest performing high schools in Illinois, I was accepted to a rural, liberal arts university in Morris, Minn., where 90 percent of the students were white. Being the first in my family to attend college, I quickly learned other students were better prepared as I struggled to get good grades. It was difficult for me to connect culturally and I felt isolated and discouraged. As a release from such frustrations, I turned to sports, joining both the football and wrestling teams. Sports became my sanctuary.

But that safe haven came crumbling down one night when a victory celebration turned into a terrifying Halloween prank. The incident made **national news** yet I remained silent about the

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experience for 20 years, until now.

I had just broken a school wrestling record, and the assistant coach asked that I join him and other players for a celebration later that night off campus. On that brisk Halloween night in 1993, the assistant coach drove me and two other wrestlers down a pitch-black road where we came upon a large cross on fire surrounded by several men with white sheets over their heads. I immediately felt my heart sink. Before I could say anything, the coach turned the car around, concerned for our safety. As we headed in the opposite direction, the men in white sheets blocked the road. The coach grabbed a bat and opened the door.

We pleaded with him to stay in the car, but he didn't listen. Mark, the other African-American wrestler in the car, looked at me in disbelief. At this moment I was prepared to fight for my life. As Mark and I slowly walked behind our coach in the dark of night, we heard a voice say, "Just give us the (n-word in plural) and we'll let you go!" The man repeated himself twice, and as the coach began to respond, we suddenly heard gunfire: Click, click, boom! The coach fell to his knees, wiped his white shirt, which appeared to be covered in blood, and chokingly said, "Run for your lives!"

As I turned to run, all I could see were Mark's white shoes kicking up dust as he fled from two people chasing him. I ran toward the car, 15 feet away. From the way it was positioned, I hoped to jump into the passenger door and slide to the driver's side. But the door was locked. The men in white sheets ran toward me at full speed. I could either run or break the window; I chose the latter. After two unsuccessful attempts, I shattered the window with my elbow, dove into the car and drove off.

I was bleeding, praying and asking God for his protection. I sped away at more than 100 mph to the nearest town. When I got to the main street, I pulled into a gas station and jumped out of the car, forgetting to put the car in park. I frantically called 911 — I was terrified!



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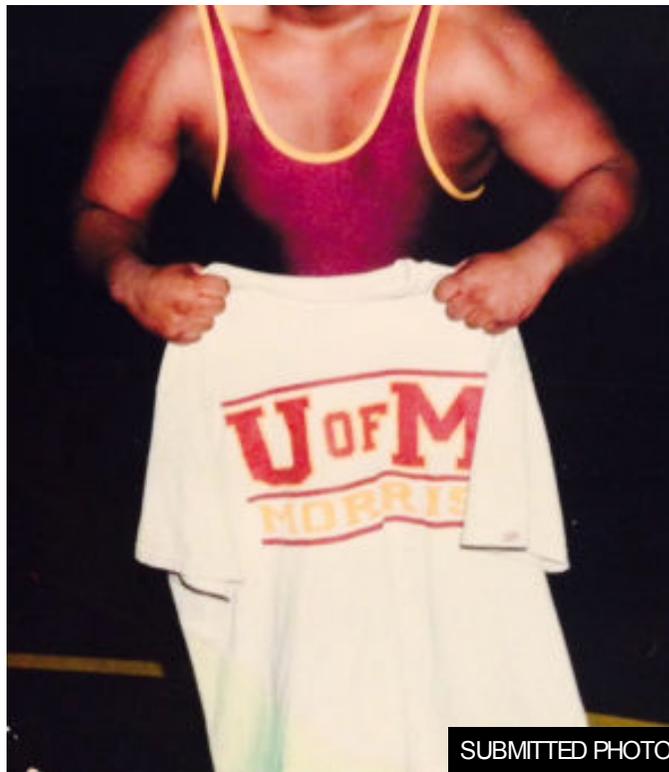
Minutes later, the assistant coach and several players arrived at the gas station laughing and saying, "Happy Halloween." I stared in disbelief and took a deep breath. I was confused and stood in silence for about a minute and then asked, "Where is Mark?" One player was laughing, while another responded, "We can't find him. Let's go before the police come."

By then the police were walking through the doors. I explained to an officer what had happened, and saw that the coach and players were being interviewed by other officers. At this moment Mark was still missing. I began to think maybe this was no prank. With my mind spinning, I didn't trust anyone. My confusion turned to anger, so I called a trusted upperclassman from Omega Psi Phi, where I was a fraternity pledge. Within minutes, he dispatched men to the gas station, dressed in the fraternity's signature purple coats and gold boots. It was not until then that I felt safe. Hours later, I learned Mark was also safe, having hid in a tree until help arrived.

In response to the incident, other law enforcement officials got involved and the coach and players were arrested, all claiming that it was nothing more than a prank. The incident caused racial tension on campus for weeks. To the school's credit, they reacted responsibly and I felt supported. University officials did what they could to address the situation and put me at ease.

[Listen to Michael Johnson tell his story here.](#)

Through it all, I went through a period of resentment, anger and confusion. Once I better understood the events of that night, and knew that it was just a bad joke that had gone terribly



Struggling with feelings of isolation in college, Michael Johnson turned to sports.

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wrong, I eventually forgave all those involved. I was ready to move on and did not want to be portrayed as a victim. I still felt pain for what had happened, but I hid it throughout the final weeks of school.

Healing through communication

Although I became exhausted by students approaching me and sharing their feelings about the incident, it was through these conversations that I discovered that many white students had just as limited experience with blacks as I did with whites.

One day, a fellow student in my English class named Amy whispered, "I'm sorry to hear about what happened to you. Do you need any help?" I appreciated the gesture and we started talking, but the conversation was dry and I was not mentally present. After about 20 minutes, a more outgoing classmate, Tina, joined us. As she cracked jokes, I noticed that Amy was staring at me. I looked at her and asked, "What's up?" She hesitantly asked if she could touch my black skin. Thinking to myself that she was weird, I agreed, laughing it off.

She then changed the tone of the conversation and began asking questions that felt racially charged, and then crossed the line into being offensive. After one particularly outrageous question, I asked her to repeat herself, before I unleashed language inappropriate for a scholar.

I was fed up. I raised my voice and released all the frustration that had been building inside of me. Amy was crying, and Tina walked me away to another room. She began praying and quoted Matthew from the Bible: "... if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men of their sins, your father will not forgive your sins."

Those words and her calmness caused me to cry uncontrollably, and it was then that I began to open up. Tina explained Amy's background: She had grown up in a rural area where her parents gave her misleading information about black people. In fact, Tina shared that Amy had never held a single private conversation with a black person before approaching me. She was simply trying to understand our history given the inconsistencies from her readings and the stories her parents shared.

After talking with Tina, I met with Amy days later and apologized for my response. We agreed to talk and used the opportunity to listen and learn. It was the first meaningful dialogue I had with a white person about race, culture and perceptions. We cried, we laughed and we educated each other on our respective cultures, including food, music and other relevant topics.

My exchanges with both women helped bring closure to the Halloween incident and brought peace to my soul. It also made me realize that we can't be so quick to judge. Conversations like this can help people move beyond problems and perceptions to mutual understanding.

Bridging the racial divide

Fast forward two decades to the present day. I am the leader of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, a nonprofit organization in Madison that advocates on behalf of thousands of children and their families. During my four years in this role, I have come to love our community and its people, but we are still quite segregated in many ways. Think about this: When was the last time you had dinner at your house with someone of a different race or socioeconomic status? When was the last time, outside of school, that your kids played with someone of a different race? This kind of isolation can create a racial divide because of the lack of exposure to different cultures.

My wife and I were recently invited to a friend's home for dinner with a group of people of various racial backgrounds. After discussing a wide range of topics such as marriage, sports and poverty, we began talking about race and equality. I was surprised by the honesty of my friend's wife who shared that this was the first time black people had ever been in their home. She later told me that



MIKE DeVRIES — The Capital Times

Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County

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when her teenage boys came home and saw all these black folks at the table, they were surprised and navigated to another room. Later that night when the guests had all left, her sons voiced their curiosity about her dinner guests. She expressed to them that as parents, they had realized they were unintentionally segregating their children and needed to be more proactive about exposing them to other races. I have also had these types of conversations with my black friends and they too shared similar experiences about having white folks in their homes.

We have to set the stage for the next generation, and it is important for white kids to see people of color as role models, and vice versa. In some cases, middle- and upper-class white kids from suburban communities and rural areas miss the cultural connection to other ethnic groups. It should not surprise us to see this type of racial division, because many times there is no history of relationships with other cultures to foster good will and friendship.

And the divide between races, including other communities of color like Latinos, Asians and Native Americans, plays out in Dane County's significant economic disparities. The statistics are bleak for black kids. According to October's **Race to Equity report**, more than 74 percent of black children in Dane County live in poverty, as opposed to just 5.5 percent of white children, perhaps the widest poverty gap in the nation. And other studies have found that the achievement gap between black students and white students in Wisconsin is the largest of any state.



As leader of the Boys and Girls Club, Michael Johnson advocates for children and families.

Where's the plan?

As someone who has spent 18 years working in three of the nation's largest urban school districts, I have witnessed many debates about the achievement gap and poverty. Elected officials and community leaders spend more time debating the issue than solving the problem.

One local leader in a private meeting with me said: "Ask poor people about the recent findings pertaining to the (Race to Equity) study and this will not be a shock to them. ... Let's cut the conversation short because we've been talking about this since my grandparents were toddlers."

Here are a few recommendations to help us move beyond the discussion:

1. Have dinner and foster fellowship with someone outside your race. We can't solve our biggest community challenges if we don't get to know each other and share meaningful dialogue.
2. Set a big hairy audacious goal to better our community. We need a unifying goal that will inspire community members to donate their time, talent and treasure to achieve it. Perhaps something like:

By 2025, Madison will be free of homelessness and will be a city known for innovation, superior public schools and low unemployment rates, and will have a reputation as the best city in the nation for all children and families.
3. Work with government and nonprofit officials to determine the real cost of the goal and develop a funding strategy/business plan to ramp up the infrastructure of nonprofits.
4. Create regional parenting centers to help local families navigate through services, and solicit third-party studies to validate the impact that nonprofits are having on families in our community.
5. With more than 4,000 nonprofits in Dane County, it's certain that we are duplicating our efforts while trying to alleviate the challenges facing our community. Identify gaps, reduce unnecessary duplication of programs and develop a plan to create cost efficiencies.
6. Create a jobs commission where corporate leaders commit to sponsoring internships for local kids and hiring more people of color. Imagine the possibilities if 30 CEOs got together and declared that over the next five years, they would hire 2,000 people of color into full-time jobs to help eliminate employment disparities.

These are just a few examples of what is possible. Any meaningful attempt to face issues about race and equality will require more than good intentions. It will take careful planning, systematic restructuring of resources, trusting partnerships and significant investment to make these goals a reality.

[Listen to Part 2 of Michael Johnson's story here.](#)

My challenge to people of color

The Race to Equity report shows a grim picture of our communities of color and their challenges. Let's dedicate our lives to improving the quality of life for our children and families. There are many people here who have overcome barriers and have thrived in leadership roles. However, there are way too many single mothers in this community struggling to keep their families afloat and many of our men of color are missing. Your involvement or lack thereof will have an everlasting impression on your kids' lives.

Let's ensure that our kids are thriving and engaged; don't let them become data points at the bottom of school performance charts. I also challenge you to not become dependent on a system, which will not be healthy for you and your family in the long run. Evaluate your situation and determine your road map to a better future. Don't allow institutional racism and other barriers to hinder your drive and motivation.

My challenge to black leaders

I have enjoyed some recent fellowship with leaders that look like me and it has been a refreshing change. It needs to happen on a regular basis so we can better collaborate, advocate and unite for a greater cause. Let's develop a plan to address issues in our community directly and minimize blaming institutions for our problems. Too often, we use "the system" as an excuse. While problems do exist, some of us have pointed fingers without offering solutions. For those who have offered ideas, we need to provide feedback, guidance and support. We must collaborate more to help shape policy and inform decisions that impact people of color. I also challenge us to create a common agenda instead of operating in isolation.

My challenge to white Madisonians

It is OK to talk about race, but it's more important to take action. A large percentage of people of color are missing in our workplaces, according to the Race to Equity report. Instead of excusing the challenges of hiring people of color, I encourage you to implement strategies to hire, recruit and retain people of color. Studies have shown that diversity drives economic growth.

I encourage you to embrace newcomers to our city whether they are from large urban communities or small rural towns. We have to stop blaming our problems on "people from Chicago." Many of us are transplants from somewhere, and we can't blame those who move here for the challenges we face. We have to own these challenges, manage them and create a quality of life for all who chose to reside here. Madison is a great city and in order for us to make this city a "greater city for all" we have to move past the status quo.

Finally, if we label those who step out of their comfort zone, tease those who reach out, we are doing a disservice to the next generation. No more off-the-cuff remarks, no more jokes, no more sarcasm, no more stereotyping, no more judgment. Our children are watching, everyone is watching. Change starts now, and it starts with us.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other." I hope my perspective will further the conversation and I pray the people of our community will get to know each other better and create a renewed commitment to supporting one another.

Editor's note: Names of some individuals were changed to protect their privacy.

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