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Mitch Henck: Don't be so quick to judge NFL dissent

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Mitch Henck

JOHN HART — State Journal



Some Buffalo Bills players take a knee during the national anthem before the first half of an NFL football game Oct. 1 in Atlanta.

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Kaleem Caire, former leader of the Urban League of Greater Madison, says he was stopped by police five times during his first two months back in Madison after moving here from Washington, D.C. He didn't get a ticket on any of those occasions.

"They wanted to know why I had out-of-state plates," says Caire, now the director of the One City Early Learning Centers in Madison.

Caire says of those five stops, one was legitimate. Physically fit but not a small man, the soft spoken Caire estimates he's been pulled over or stopped on foot 40 times in his life. "I'd say about eight were legit," he says.

Caire and other African-American leaders in the Madison area have told me stories for years about similar encounters with white cops or white bank tellers or white ushers at ball games. They know how to handle themselves and stay positive, but they see the NFL protests differently than most of my white friends.

Conservative talk show hosts say the protesters are misguided because white police shoot unarmed black men less than in 1971, and in 2017 white cops shoot white people more. But racial anxiety over white police interactions with African-Americans runs deeper.

It's not a matter of left or right politics. U.S. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina is a black Republican who recently stood on the floor describing how he still gets carded at social functions in Washington, D.C., while he watches his white colleagues walk right past security. Scott told his colleagues he was stopped seven times in one year after he was elected. He said the majority of the time he was stopped for driving too nice of a car in the wrong neighborhood. He said his successful African-American friend was stopped so many times, he sold his expensive car for a cheaper one.

Caire describes the time he walked outside a friend's house in a Madison suburb to call his wife. He walked across the street into a neighborhood park wearing flip flops and sweats.

“One cop pulled up and walked toward me with his hand on his weapon and told me to put my hands in front of me,” Caire says. “Then another cop pulled up and walked toward me with his hand on his weapon. My wife was freaking out on the phone as she heard me ask the cops if I could give them my ID and business card. After the first cop ran my license, he was apologetic and said that he didn't know what it is like to be me.”

He also explained the park had closed at 10 p.m., and it was just after 10.

Caire says a six weeks later, the same cop pulled him over as Caire, wearing a suit, was on his way to a social function. The cop had forgotten who he was and asked about Caire's Maryland plates.

“I asked him why he pulled me over, and he said, ‘Wait in the car,’” Caire recalls. After running the license, Caire reminded him about the incident in the park. “He said, ‘I’m just doing my job.’”

Before the outspoken Boys and Girls Club of Dane County leader moved here, Michael Johnson had a strange experience in Ohio in 2008.

“I was driving a Chrysler 300, and the cop pulled me over and told me to get out of the car,” Johnson recalls. “I started praying outside the car and he asked me if I was a minister. I told him that I was a nonprofit leader. Sitting inside his squad car he told me that African-American men driving Chrysler 300s were synonymous with drug dealers, and that he had just been in a shootout a few weeks earlier. We started to pray together, and he talked about his wife and kids while tearing up.”

African-American talk show host and Madison businessman Derrell Connor was attending a Milwaukee Bucks game a few years back with eight of his white co-workers.

“We had come straight from the office, so we were dressed business casual,” Connor said. “We started at the concession stand and headed to our seats. I was at the end of the line as my co-workers moved down the aisle. When I started to file in, the usher asked me to show him my ticket stub. I said, ‘You didn’t ask anybody else to show their tickets.’ He said, ‘You can’t sit there unless I see your ticket.’”

“I had food and drink in my hands and had to ask a fan to hold my food. I reached in my pocket and showed the usher the ticket. After he saw it, he started to walk away. I said, ‘No apology?’ He didn’t say anything and just walked away. I was upset, and my co-workers were shocked.”

There is a deeply emotional and human effect on those who are stopped or questioned wrongly in America. The individuals who talked to me were able to stay calm in moments that could have escalated. Thankfully, they adhered to the eternal truth that love is more powerful than hate.

So today when some of the black players take a knee during the anthem, try to look in their eyes. Chances are you will see more pain than anger. It's OK to feel as I do that their dissent is misguided. But we can open our hearts and listen to their grievances. Only then can love triumph over hate.

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