

***Special Issue on Violence against Individuals and Communities: Reflecting on the Trayvon Martin Case*** [This article appears in the Narratives and Reflections section of the Special Issue]

## **Moving from Words to Action: Reflections of a First Year Counselor Educator for Social Justice**

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### **Abstract**

*This article provides a personal narrative of my experience as a first year counselor educator organizing and facilitating a public panel discussion held at George Mason University in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. The panel discussion provided an opportunity for open, honest, and constructive dialogue among students, faculty, staff, and community members on such topics as individual and institutional racism, stereotypes of Black masculinity, gun control laws, hate crimes against young Black men, the myth of a post-racial United States, and what we can do as citizens to prevent such tragedies in the future. I will also discuss the lessons learned, not only about organizing a public forum, but about taking the initiative.*

*Keywords:* Social action, counselor educator, racism, Trayvon Martin

The American psychologist and philosopher William James once said, "Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does." (Baerg, 1999, p. 12) As a counselor educator committed to social justice, I often challenge my counseling students to look for opportunities to engage in social action initiatives that challenge individual and systemic barriers to health and well-being. This in turn raises the question of whether I hold myself to the same standards to which I hold my students. To a large extent, the answer has been "no". Prior to becoming a professor, I had published articles, led workshops, and presented at state, regional, and national conferences about the counselor's role in promoting social justice and how practitioners can be agents of social change. While these experiences definitely increased my understanding of and commitment to social justice counseling and advocacy, they did little to prepare me for taking the initiative to create social change. However, the circumstances' surrounding the murder of Trayvon Martin and subsequent lack of activity in the Northern Virginia area propelled me to take action and serve as a role model for the next generation of counselors at George Mason University (GMU). It could have been any one of my brothers, nephews, cousins, or friends

who had been killed because they fit the stereotypical images of criminals based on their age, race, gender, and perceived social class.

This article provides a personal narrative of my experience as a first year counselor educator organizing and facilitating a public panel discussion held at George Mason University in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. The panel discussion provided an opportunity for open, honest, and constructive dialogue among students, faculty, staff, and community members on such topics as individual and institutional racism, stereotypes of Black masculinity, gun control laws, hate crimes against young Black men, the myth of a post-racial United States, and what we can do as citizens to prevent such tragedies in the future. My experience as a first year counselor educator organizing a community-wide panel discussion taught me about the challenges, rewards, and frustrations of taking the initiative to promote social change.

The purpose of this article is to share lessons that I learned which may be useful to new social change agents, early career professionals, counselors, students', or those who want to take initiative and make a difference in their families, schools, workplaces, and/or communities. For the purpose of this article, *social action* is defined as the practice of taking action, usually on the part of individuals (or "agents"), groups, and communities to create positive social change (Lee and Walz, 1998). Social change refers to any significant alteration over time in behavior patterns, cultural values and norms that lead to improvements in human well-being, social relations, and social institutions, which are equitable and compatible with principles of social justice. This article is organized into three sections: my reactions to the Trayvon Martin tragedy, my response, and what I have identified as the primary lessons I have learned in taking the first steps in practicing what I preach.

### **Reactions to the Trayvon Martin Tragedy**

My initial reaction, knowing nothing more than the simple sound bites of the Trayvon Martin tragedy, varied in intensity from mild frustration and disappointment to sadness and to intense rage. The incident reminded me of "the talk" about race that I would one day have with my infant son. It is a talk the African American community has passed down for generations, an evolving oral tradition which serves as a buffer and filter to protect children from racist encounters and teaches children in an age-appropriate manner how to anticipate, identify, and respond to those experiences of racism, prejudice, and discrimination that are unavoidable. I rehearsed certain aspects of the conversation in my head, which went something like this:

Always pay close attention to your surroundings. Understand that some people might perceive you as a threat or dangerous simply because you are a young Black man. Unfortunately, people will make unwarranted (negative) assumptions about you based on physical appearance: skin color, clothes, hair, age, and other aspects. Remember, physical appearance does not define your character and value. Please don't assume that all White people view you as a threat or dangerous, or hold negative racial stereotypes against you. Suspicion and bitterness can imprison you, and rob you of the opportunity to build authentic relationships across racial lines. Respect authority, but also protect your dignity and take pride in being humble. As a young Black male, it is important that you know what to do when confronted by police officers or anyone with a

badge or gun. Sometimes you have to go above and beyond to show others that you are not a threat or dangerous.

Some readers may find it difficult to believe that a dialogue about race (such as the one stated above) is still needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, I find it hard to ignore the role race played in the Trayvon Martin case. In fact, I believe perhaps the reason why the Trayvon Martin case, although it is not an isolated case, has garnered so much attention from the public is because it represents the most important current struggle to defend or destroy one of the most powerful illusions in American life: the idea that we are a post-racial society.

### **Response to the Trayvon Martin Tragedy**

For many professors, most advocacy and social action initiatives receive little to no credit in tenure and promotions reviews. As a junior tenure-track faculty member, I was cautious about getting too involved with the Trayvon Martin case because I saw it as detracting from the time I could spend on more rewarded activities. Initially, I decided to host a candlelight vigil at GMU in honor of Trayvon Martin because I thought a candlelight vigil would be quite simple to set up and organize and would not take away from my professional responsibilities (i.e., research or teaching productivity). The purpose of the candlelight vigil would be to remember those who have been victims of targeted violence and hostility, and to raise awareness about the devastating effects of ever-evolving forms of racism and prejudice on young people of color, particularly black men. Conducting a candlelight vigil, in my opinion, would be a peaceful yet powerful way to send a message to those in attendance that justice for Trayvon Martin means more than arresting and trying George Zimmerman for his death. It means acknowledging the treacherous plight of young Black males in America and working toward creating real change.

A few days after the incident, I facilitated a class discussion regarding the Trayvon Martin tragedy. In particular, we discussed the role and responsibility of counselors to speak out against racial stereotypes, profiling, and the devaluing of African-Americans. I shared my idea for the candlelight vigil to solicit student input and feedback and invite them to be a part of the initial planning process. During the last hour of class, students were randomly assigned to small groups in order to generate ideas for the candlelight vigil (e.g., location and time, master of ceremony for the event, event logistics, getting the word out, agenda for candlelight vigil, and potential [talking points]). The exercise provided students with the opportunity to be a part of social action initiative that would tackle real world problems like targeted violence and hostility against young Black men. Further, the exercise provided a means of reinforcing and enhancing students' understanding of their role and responsibilities as social justice advocates. I left class that night feeling like I was practicing what I preached and the students seemed to admire me taking the initiative. Nonetheless, I decided not to share my plans with my colleagues out of fear and insecurity. I feared that an unsuccessful event would be a direct reflection of my inability as an advocate, leader, and social change agent. In hindsight, fear, self-doubt, and insecurities have been a constant stumbling block in my life, preventing me from taking action where I know it is urgently needed. I decided that I would share my plans with my colleagues after I knew about, for certain, the status of the candlelight vigil.

Much to my surprise I received a phone call the next day from one of the senior faculty members in my program. Several of the students in my class informed her of my efforts to

organize a candlelight vigil in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. She offered words of encouragement and assistance to help see the project out to the end, but the excitement and momentum generated from the phone conversation quickly dissipated as my fear and self-doubt crept back into the picture. I realized that my students and colleagues were now holding me accountable to follow through with some sort of action. I wondered to myself: "What if my plans fall through?" "How would my students and colleagues perceive my abilities as a counselor educator for social justice?" and, "Can I afford to take a blow to my credibility this early in my career?" Yet, being held accountable for my actions forced me to stay with the initiative, despite my self-doubt.

I shared the idea for the candlelight vigil with a tenured African American male faculty member from another department at GMU with the hope of gaining insight about how to get the project moving. He referred me to multiple contact persons within GMU and the surrounding community. Many of these individuals later formed the base of my peer consultation team. In hindsight, I realize that collaborating with others: (a) helped me build professional contacts around GMU and the surrounding community; (b) allowed me to consult with a diverse range of experts who each brought a different perspective to the project; (c) exposed me indirectly to more resources around campus and the surrounding community to address the targeted concern(s); (d) helped me avoid making damaging mistakes by informing me of past failures and successes in relation to public forums on the GMU campus and surrounding community; and (e) provided me with a sense of credibility -- because I associated myself with members of the peer consultation team.

One of the members of my peer consultation team who agreed to help out with the candlelight vigil had a reputation for organizing rallies for social justice issues. He informed me of a campus rally organized by students in honor of Trayvon Martin. With the rally just days away, I tried reaching out to the lead organizer to offer any assistance and inquire about collaborating, but I got no response. I attended the rally which was poorly advertised and attended—and most students I spoke with afterwards were unaware of its intended purpose. After the rally, I was unsure as to whether I should continue with the candlelight vigil on April 10<sup>th</sup>, the original date of the grand jury, or drop the idea since GMU students already held an event in honor of Trayvon Martin.

### **A Change of Plans**

After consulting with my wife I decided to consider organizing a public forum to allow members of GMU and the surrounding community to process the Trayvon Martin tragedy instead of continuing with the candlelight vigil. I notified my class the following week regarding the potential changes to our social justice initiative. The students offered little resistance to the idea and agreed that a public forum might be a better option to awareness-raising. In class we discussed the importance of thinking out of the box and being creative and flexible in your approach to social justice work. Although it was clear that the candlelight vigil idea would be scraped, their efforts did not go unrewarded. I was able to transform some of the talking points the class formulated for the candlelight vigil into talking points for the panel discussion.

I met with an additional member of the peer consultation team, who is a prominent university professor at GMU with experience in human rights movements, to discuss the idea of a public

forum. During our meeting, the professor helped me process my ideas and align what I planned to do (*social action*), what I wanted to accomplish (*intentions*), and why I felt it was important or justified (*beliefs*). We agreed that a public forum held at GMU would be more appropriate than a candlelight vigil to raise awareness about individual and institutional racism, stereotypes of Black masculinity, gun control laws, hate crimes against young Black men, the myth of a post-racial United States, and what we can do as citizens to prevent such tragedies in the future. First, a panel discussion focused on the Trayvon Martin case would not only allow members of the general public to participate in a critical dialogue about race and race related issues, but it would also generate recommendations to be considered by those in attendance. Further, panel discussions catch the attention of the public and the media regarding selected topics. In addition, panel discussions help to develop critical thinking for both panelists and the audience and highlight the multi-dimensionality of the issue under discussion. Lastly, panel discussions can be used to analyze problems from different perspectives and model how those in attendance might carry the race dialogue further for their families, schools, or communities, while respecting the ideas, opinions, and personal experiences from people of diverse backgrounds.

I left the meeting with the prominent university professor at GMU with mixed emotions. On the one hand, I had more clarity about the type of action I wanted to initiate; but on the other hand, the social action was bigger than I had initially anticipated. Yet, I decided that bringing GMU and the surrounding community together for a constructive dialogue was worth putting my professional responsibilities on hold temporarily because the rewards (i.e., raising awareness) were greater than the cost. I committed to organizing a town hall meeting, which would begin with a panel discussion followed by a question-answer session. I wanted the panelists to represent a diverse group (in terms of sex, race, and profession) of individuals with different perspectives, ideas, and experiences. So, I began to recruit police officers, lawyers, politicians, local business owners, clergy, and undergraduate and graduate students. It was frustrating to receive no responses, email replies, or call backs; with the exception of those who were courteous enough to decline my invitation. I was discouraged and began to once again question my ability to engage in social action work. In retrospect, I believe part of the poor response was due to the fact that for many, conversations about race and race relations are still sensitive subjects in America. Not to mention, I was relatively new and unknown in the Northern Virginia community, so my credibility was almost non-existent.

Added to the growing list of setbacks and frustrations, I received an email from the only panelist who agreed to participate in the forum (the prominent university professor at GMU with experience in the human rights movement) explaining that he felt as if the moment had passed and that we missed our chance to act. At this point, for the third time in one week, I was close to calling the event off. It was only after consulting with my wife and colleagues that I made the conscious effort to not let the media's attention, or lack thereof, dictate my course of action. I was encouraged to keep the faith and not cancel the public forum -- a decision that won the confidence of my only panelist and helped me recruit five more. I spent the next two weeks organizing and promoting the event, making executive decisions, delegating responsibilities to the panelist, and other behind-the-scenes responsibilities. I also spent a lot of time (relatively speaking) formulating discussion questions and learning about the roles and responsibilities of the moderator. Overall, my involvement with organizing and facilitating a public panel discussion in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin has helped build my confidence in taking the initiative to create social change. The panel discussion was held on

April 25<sup>th</sup>, sponsored by the counseling program and the Diversity Research and Action Center at GMU, and attended by close to 80 students and professionals from GMU and surrounding communities of Northern Virginia, Washington D.C., and Maryland.

### **Nine Lessons Learned from a First Year Counselor Educator for Social Justice**

The purpose of lessons learned is to bring together any insights gained from experience in a specific field that can be usefully applied to future experiences. The following is a summary of nine lessons I learned from organizing and facilitating the public panel discussion in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. These lessons are simple ones, but they are not always taught in textbooks, and some are only learned through supportive guidance, experience, and trial and error. I believe these lessons may be useful to new social change agents; early career professionals, students' or those who want to take initiative and make a difference in their families, schools, workplaces, and/or communities.

#### *Sometimes You Have to Jump In*

Jumping is about doing. It is about taking the initiative to take action. It is not about rash or unexamined reactions or getting in over your head. It is about taking calculated risk and going forward despite the uncertainties. Jumping in creates a "no turning back" moment. It commits you to taking the action you have commended. This can be a powerful tactic when starting a social action initiative. Sometimes you have to take that leap—otherwise you run the risk of doing nothing at all. I believe my "jumping in" moment came when I announced to my class that I planned on holding a candle light vigil at GMU in honor of those who have been victims of targeted violence and hostility. From that point on, I felt that I was being held accountable for my actions or lack thereof.

#### *Be Realistic About What You Can and Can't Do*

If you decide to jump, there are a few questions you should ask yourself: *What do I want to accomplish? Who are the people, groups, or organizations to help me reach my short-term or long-term goal(s)? What kind of action will be most effective for the purpose at hand? How much time and energy do I have to commit? What resources do I need to be successful? What are the risks, if any, of my involvement? What might be the consequences of doing nothing? How might my involvement take away from my professional responsibilities and commitments? What other "costs" may be involved (i.e., emotional, physical, and financial)?* Consider these important "costs" before you commit. Remember, you are in the best position to decide how much you can get involved and what constitutes manageable.

#### *Create Consistency between Your Actions, Intentions and Beliefs*

It is helpful to establish consistency between what you plan to do (social action), what you want to accomplish (intentions), and why you feel that is important or justified (beliefs). Consistency or congruence between these three factors keep the planning process smooth and oftentimes calls for the input of other stakeholders. The

importance of establishing congruence between your actions, intentions, and beliefs cannot be overemphasized in order to ensure yourself the best possible chance of a successful outcome. For example, my initial decision to host a candlelight vigil (social action) was not the best way to accomplish my goal of creating a safe space for open, honest, and constructive dialogue about race and race-related issues (intentions). This incongruence made the planning process harder than necessary. Consulting with someone who has experience in social action initiatives can aid you in the process of clarifying your goals and help guide you to recognize and identify what decisions and actions are best to meet your desire outcomes.

### *Break Through Fear and Self-Doubt*

In order to take initiative, we have to push past our fears, self-doubt and insecurities. Fear and self-doubt can be major pitfalls that prevent us from taking action where we know it is urgently needed. It makes taking the initiative harder than it needs to be and it keeps us prisoners in our own comfort zone. The best way to manage fear and self-doubt is to acknowledge and recognize that there is a problem or the need to change. You cannot overcome something until you first recognize and acknowledge its existence. Confide in a friend, family member, or trusted colleague about what might be the underlying causes of your fear and self-doubt and what you can do about it. It might be helpful to remember that fear and self-doubt plague all of us. Since we can't completely avoid fear and self-doubt, we need to plan out strategies that allow us to contend with and conquer them.

### *Don't Do It Alone*

It's true, collaboration takes time and work, but the positive effects of successful collaborative efforts are well worth it. For instance, being a part of a peer consulting team extends the amount of human, social, and cultural capital available to you and even might increase your level of credibility. Identify and contact key individuals and group who have the knowledge, influence, and other resources to help you. It's also an excellent opportunity to practice your leadership skills and to learn how to work with others, skills that aren't always easy to perfect. When working with others consider the needs of the group and be flexible in the planning process. This doesn't mean that you need to change your approach, especially if you are the primary organizer unless you find it wanting, but it does mean that keeping an open mind will ultimately make your action stronger and more watertight. Besides, you can't expect to do all the work by yourself -- that leads to burn out.

### *Expect Setbacks and Learn to Embrace Them*

If you want to succeed at something new, you will most likely experience setbacks, disappointments, and challenges along the way. So the question is not when will setbacks, disappointments, and challenges occur, but how will you respond when they occur. To be successful, redefine failure in a manner that allows you to see failure as "information". Failure is really just feedback telling you to evaluate your experience, utilize the information gained to adjust your plan, and then try a new approach. When

you experience a failure or setback, get up, dust yourself off, assess the information gained, revise your course, and start over.

### *Stay the Course*

Stay the course, even when things aren't looking so good. Engaging in social justice work forces you to be patient and trust that what you are doing will be effective and will lead to change. Remember that sometimes things can come together just as quickly as they fell apart. There was period during the public forum planning process in which I only had one confirmed panelist (one and a half weeks prior to the actual event). However, within a twenty-four hour period, I receive so many requests to be a part of the panel that I had to turn away qualified applicants.

### *Celebrate Your Efforts*

Celebrate your accomplishments; you and those you work with deserve it. Celebration helps keep everyone excited and interested in the work they are doing. Celebration also helps people stay engaged with one another, rarely does a social justice action resolve the issue completely, rather it is one step and celebration can help keep the group motivated to continue. Take some time away from your busy schedule to celebrate your efforts, if even for a short while. No matter the outcome, it is important to step back from the work and pat yourself on the back. Regardless of the results, you can still feel a sense of satisfaction and camaraderie in the work itself. Reflect upon the ways in which you have grown as a person and a professional as a result of your actions and the lessons learned.

### *Evaluate and Follow-Up*

When it's all said and done – the next day or the next week – the organizers should meet to evaluate how things went. *Did everything go according to plan? Did the people with responsibilities do a good job? What was most effective? What was least effective? What was the attendance like? What was media coverage like? How could we stage such an action in the future? Overall, did this type of action seem to work toward the purpose we set for it? If not, what might have worked better?* Use your evaluation to adjust your next action – or your overall strategy, if necessary – to make it more effective. It might also be a good idea to help people to develop a practical plan for transforming any good intention(s) into action. My biggest regret was not facilitating those in attendance in developing individual or collective actions plans designed to promote continuous dialogue or social action around the topics discussed.

## Summary

These recommendations are based on my own experiences. I hope my narrative has provided ideas and encouragement for new social change agents, early career professionals, counselors, and students about how to move from writing and talking about social justice to action. Now, more than ever, when I stand before my students, there will be congruence between my words and actions. It is critical that counselor educators model what it means to be a social change agent. Only then will the roles and responsibilities of our students be made real.

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