



On the Ground in Sanford, Florida at the March 22nd Trayvon Martin Rally

My experience, thoughts, observation &
position

By Linda H. Stokes

In 1998, PRISM located its corporate office to downtown Sanford, Florida (a part of the greater Orlando metropolitan area). I was attracted to the growing diversity of the area. Sanford is a designated Florida Black Heritage City and is now 30% African-American with a growing Hispanic population currently set at 20%.

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When I originally chose Sanford as our corporate headquarters, I knew of the history of this town – the good, the bad and the ugly – and I wanted to make a difference. So, over the years, we’ve taught diversity and inclusion to elementary school children, we’ve donated funds and resources to local elementary schools, we’ve helped register voters, we’ve performed poll watching and we’ve reached out to the city on many occasions to offer assistance.

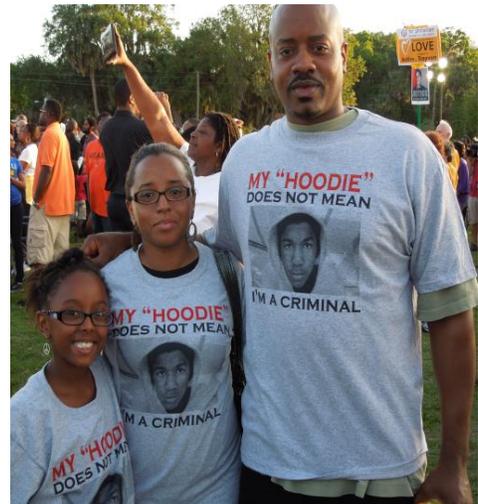
As our community grows, adapting successful to these changes requires increasing skills and awareness. Organizations serving communities that choose not to evolve cannot fulfill their mission. The Sanford Police Department is such an organization. Over the past several years, the Sanford Police Department has suffered – and so has the community - from a series of public disasters that have eroded community trust and widened the racial divide.

As we know, organizations are either reactive or proactive about many aspects of their business – including the work of inclusion. We all wish our police department had chosen the proactive route. Instead, the Sanford police department engaged in several recent incidents that were handled improperly:

- In 2006 two private security guards—the son of a Sanford police officer, and a volunteer for the department—killed a black teen with a single gunshot in his back. Even though they admitted to never identifying themselves, the guards were released without charges.
- In 2009, after an assailant allegedly attempted to rape a child in her home, the department was called to task for sitting on the suspect's fingerprints, delaying identification and pursuit of the attacker.
- In late 2010, the son of a Sanford police department lieutenant, sucker-punched a homeless black man outside a bar. Officers on the scene released the assailant without charges. He eventually surrendered after [video of the incident materialized online](#). The police chief at the time was ultimately forced into retirement. "Bottom line, we didn't do our job that night," a police department official reported.
- In February, 2012, unarmed 17 year old Trayvon Martin walking home from the store was pursued, shot and killed by armed neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman. He was not arrested because he claimed he was acting in self-defense and was protected by the Florida's "Stand Your Ground" gun law. As a result of this incident, the Sanford Police Department and the Florida gun law have come under national scrutiny.

EXPERIENCE

On Thursday evening, March 22nd, we weren't watching or writing about this rally from our homes. Many PRISM team members walked the 5 blocks from our office to the rally. Like the many thousands in the park, we were on the ground actively participating in support of Trayvon, his family and in support of justice. Over the three hours, we all reached out together in hugs, handshakes, knowing looks, raised hands and supportive hearts. We snapped a number of photos of the signs brought to



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the rally – which tells the story on the ground. You can view our video on YouTube by clicking ["Justice for Trayvon Martin - The World is Watching Sanford"](#).

Along with the photos, I wanted to share my thoughts and observations about the rally – from those who attended and those who didn't.

THOUGHTS & OBSERVATIONS

Many times throughout this ordeal we have heard from neighbors, rally goers and the news media... "this is not a black and white thing- this is a right or wrong thing!" This statement is so much like the way the traditional U.S. culture frames issues, decisions and viewpoints by boxing ourselves into an 'either/or' orientation. **In this case it is a black and white thing... and...it is a right and wrong thing.** It reminds me of the comments we all hear.... "I don't see black or white or race or age or gender or disability.....I just see the person". Well intentioned, but wrong, impossible, untrue and immensely discounting. The truth is we see both...and in the case for Trayvon...it is about both.

I advocate for unity, healing and prayer; however, it will take more than one part of our neighbors and our country wanting to attain this vision. It will take looking at the systems – and there are many – and the behaviors of people and the cultures of organizations to achieve sustainable change.

On Friday after the rally, I discussed the situation with an acquaintance who asked if we had attended. During the conversation she said to me... “This is terrible...and although a generalization...minority groups perpetuate these things on themselves.” Generalization? You think? After I restrained myself to prevent my head from flying off – I said in response... “you know I guess that could be said of a lot of individuals....but not in this case.” Since she had opened the door, I went for it – hoping this was a “teachable moment” and a way to help her reframe and expand her thinking. So I discussed the broader issues in that it is not just the individual – although we all have responsibility for ourselves...**but it is also societal issues, systems and others – acting out of stereotypes – that can perpetuate the cycle.** Sometimes it is simple....in this case – it was a person acting on his stereotypes – plain and simple...and it is about a law – part of the system – that Mr. Zimmerman can now hide behind. And Mr. Zimmerman’s comments about having racially diverse friends – doesn’t cut

it.

Being a Caucasian doing this work brings its own set of challenges...so, here is a sensitive issue that I have heard repeated many times. During the rally our Black leaders asked us to pray for healing and for unity. I advocate for unity, healing and prayer...but blacks and other groups must be awfully tired of doing all the praying! From my count out of an estimated 30,000, less than 5% were Caucasian. It will, as we all know, take more than one part of our neighbors and our country wanting to attain this vision. It will take looking at the systems – and there are many - and the behaviors of people and the cultures of organizations to achieve sustainable change.

POSTION

So, what is our position? A series of events must occur.

- The Sanford Police Chief Bill Lee must immediately and permanently resigned and be replaced by a capable Police Chief with a proven track record of following standard police and investigation procedures and building and maintaining community trust.
- The Department of Justice and the FBI must conduct a thorough investigation.
- The Florida legislature should repeal the “Stand Your Ground “gun law that was signed by then Governor Jeb Bush in 2005. The law is vague and can be interpreted – as by the Sanford Police Department in the Trayvon case – on an individual basis giving police the power to circumvent the judicial system denying justice and increasing the fear and reality that anyone can be shot dead and be declared the aggressor – without benefit of an investigation or a trial. The 24 states with similar gun laws should examine their laws and reconsider repealing them.
- Every police force and home owners associations in the country should examine their community watch program and undergo recertification and training.



- For this case we believe that a fair and competent investigation by the Justice Department will lead to an arrest of George Zimmerman. However, we are concerned that the shoddy and unprofessional manner in which the Sanford Police Department miscondacted the investigation has tainted or lead to the loss of important evidence and may make a conviction more difficult. Furthermore, we believe the vague interpretation of the “Stand Your Ground” gun law will add to the difficulty of obtaining a conviction.

CONCLUSION

If not us,
who?
If not now,
when?

As we all know from performing diversity and inclusion work within organizations around the U.S. and around the world – this work is a total change management process. **We hope the process of change continues to be peaceful and that the system, culture and behaviors change quickly and dramatically so that no family will ever again suffer the needless tragedy of losing a loved one.**

If there was ever a “burning platform” – a reason to recommit and refocus – this is it as we seek liberty and justice for ALL.

If not us, who? If not now, when? For our part, we will continue to rally, write, email and reach out to the City of Sanford, Seminole County, to our Florida state representatives and Federal legislators so that we may be seen as agents for change.

For your part, you can help us by doing the same here in Florida and in your own community with your local, state and federal representatives.

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