

## **A Conversation About Race in America**

WASHINGTON, DC — The Ripon Society and the Franklin Center hosted a virtual discussion this past Tuesday with Tamara Copeland and Amy Owen, two veterans of the nonprofit world who have launched a series of workshops intended to spur an honest conversation about race in America.

The workshops are called The Onion Dialogues and are aimed at providing nonprofit executives and board members the opportunity to explore and normalize conversations about race. Just as an onion has many layers, The Onion Dialogue workshops are designed to engage participants in a multi-faceted discussion about such topics as racially-charged language and systemic racism throughout U.S. history.

The workshops are led by Copeland and Owen, who draw on their own personal experiences to guide the discussions. Copeland recently retired from Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers after 12 years as president, thought leader, and visionary for the acclaimed initiative, ‘Putting Racism on the Table.’ Owen spent more than 10 years managing and directing fundraising programs for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and has served as President and CEO of the Community Foundation for Loudoun and Northern Fauquier Counties since 2012.

“I think many of us have thought of racism in terms of individual behavior,” Copeland stated, kicking off Tuesday’s discussion. “Someone saying words that are disrespectful or treating someone without respect. But it really wasn’t until maybe about a decade ago that I began to understand the concept of structural racism. Structural racism is the normalization or legitimizing of practices and policies and behaviors that disadvantage one race while advantaging another. It’s so ubiquitous that we often don’t even realize that it’s there. So when we talk about racism, we aren’t talking about individual behavior. We’re talking about what has been so embedded in society that we often don’t even see it.”

As an example, Copeland pointed to two photographs that were taken by the Associated Press after Hurricane Katrina. One image showed a White couple wading through thigh-high water with groceries on their shoulder, while the other image showed an African-American man also wading through this thigh-high water with groceries



Tamara Copeland



Amy Owen

on his shoulder.

According to Copeland, the difference in the images came not in the way the subjects were portrayed, but in the way they were described.

“Both of those photographs had captions,” she explained. “The caption for the White couple said, ‘Individuals trying to survive during Hurricane Katrina.’ The caption for the African-American man said, ‘Looting continues.’ It is profound, I think, because the person writing those captions did not talk to either of those individuals as he or she was captioning the photographs.

“But something in the mind of the person creating the caption, chose to use those particular words. The White couple is surviving and the African-American man is looting in what is essentially the same image. So when we talk about racial justice and racial equity, we

hope we can prompt different thinking and the use of a new and important lens.”

Owen agreed, and began her remarks by talking about her upbringing in Alabama and how it shaped her initial views about race.

“I lived a very segregated life,” she remarked. “Even though I lived in a community with many people of color, I did not have the opportunity to develop any authentic relationships with Black or Brown people in my community. And when I went to college and began to experience new opportunities, I regularly tripped up and would say things that, while my intent was not to create a negative impact, would in fact create a negative impact. What we are trying to do with The Onion Dialogues is help people develop muscle memory so that we can have conversations that are authentic, but more importantly, develop relationships — true, authentic relationships — with each other.

**“When we talk about racial justice and racial equity, there is a new and important lens we have to look through.”**

“I didn’t have that opportunity in truth and in reality until I joined the board of the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers under Tamara’s leadership. That groundbreaking program was called ‘Putting Racism on the Table.’ It was in that room where Tamara began asking questions. About half of us were Black or Brown, and half of us were White. And we were asking questions like ‘What goes through your mind when you walk into a meeting and there’s only one Black or Brown person in there?’ What goes through your mind? I began hearing my colleagues answer that question.

“And one of the things that I then began to realize was not only did I not know how to have this conversation, many African-American Black and Brown individuals don’t know how to have this conversation as well. And so having this opportunity today fits so beautifully with what I understand the roots and values of The Ripon Society to be about. It leads us to a more perfect union, and I appreciate that.”

Following their opening remarks, Copeland and Owen were asked a number of questions, including one about social media and whether it has had a positive or negative impact on race in America.

“I think it’s been very, very positive,” Copeland stated. “I believe that there are a lot of instances of racial injustice that we haven’t known about because they weren’t filmed. There’s a pretty telling quote from Will Smith. He says ‘Racism is not getting worse. It is getting filmed.’ So in a lot of those instances where we are being made aware of incidents of racially-motivated behaviors, I think if we didn’t have the film, if we didn’t have it on a recording, our inclination would be to say, ‘Oh, that couldn’t have happened because it goes counter to everything you believe to be true for some of these behaviors to occur.’

“When that woman called the police because that African-American man was birdwatching in Central Park, I think we wouldn’t believe that it had happened had it not been recorded. Why in the world would she call the police? Because it just doesn’t seem logical. So from my viewpoint, having cell phone videos has been critically important to elevating a conversation where, within the African-American community, we knew

certain things were happening, but I think the White community didn’t believe these things were true because they went so counter to their frame of reference and their life experiences.”

Copeland and Owen were also asked their thoughts on the role of business and the private sector in driving the conversation about race in America.

“I think that corporations certainly have weight in our country and an ability to move a message in a way that others can’t,” Copeland said. “Proctor and Gamble is a perfect example of a corporation that made the decision to use part of their advertising dollars in such a way that they do widen the lens. So I think that when corporations make statements and invest in ways that are tangible for equity, that’s critically important.”

Owen concurred.

“I think that corporations have some of the highest forms of influence in being equity influencers,” she stated, “and I think systemically the power they hold is within their own hiring practices. The shift that they can bring to a community of prospective employees is significant. And there are some wonderful consultants who are helping organizations study their existing metrics and moving forward in equitable hiring practices, advertising practices, opportunity movement, and performance evaluations. And again, I think if you look at systemic racism, for an organization to put itself under a microscope and study its numbers so that it can move forward has a very high impact.”

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