

# STAND UP, WAKE UP, RISE UP

Reflections on an Illinois rally in protest of the death of George Floyd.

By Jim Reed

IN JUNE, I ATTENDED A RALLY IN DOWNTOWN SPRINGFIELD sponsored by the Young Activist division of the Springfield, Illinois, chapter of Black Lives Matter. It was an opportunity for people to express their frustration and anger peacefully yet forcefully over the senseless murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. As an African American man, I knew my 17-year-old daughter had every intention of participating, and while I fully supported her doing that, I must admit I had concerns about safety. However, once I arrived at the foot of the Lincoln statue, I felt relieved and at peace. In sharp contrast to what we had seen in other parts of the country, it was calming to be in an environment where our young people could practice their civil rights. I have great respect for the 17-year-old and 15-year-old women who organized the event. They and the hundreds in attendance are the future leaders of this movement, and we will all be well served.

Standing there listening to the stories and commentary, I thought about my own encounter with the Minneapolis police back in the late 1980s while I was a law student at Hamline University. Some friends were visiting, and we went to downtown Minneapolis for lunch. I am from the Chicago area and was not familiar with the streets in the City of Minneapolis. I made a wrong turn onto a one-way street. A short time after that, I heard police sirens and was approached by two officers. They informed me that I was going the wrong way down a one-way street. I explained I was new to the area and had not seen signs indicating it was a one-way. After looking at my driver's license and registration, they asked me and my two friends, young white women, to step out of the car. The officers asked my friends if they were okay, indicating to me they thought my friends might be in some kind of "danger." It was a strange question I have never forgotten. The officers proceeded to check the glove compartment and asked me to open the trunk of my car. At this point, I was annoyed but my parents had taught me to be polite to police officers. I expressed that I did not know what they were looking for and that I was a law student at Hamline. They soon ended the useless exercise and let us go without a ticket. During the rally, I realized that but for the grace of God, I could have been George Floyd.

Several other thoughts came to mind as I stood in the crowd. First, that I and people like me who have had unjust encounters with law enforcement have an obligation to STAND UP and tell our stories. The only way change happens is when people talk about the ways in which they have been mistreated because of their race. Secondly, those in power and in positions of leadership

need to WAKE UP to the realities of the laws that are in place. Lawmakers must know that unless they change the policies that protect racist officers from prosecution, there will be more killings and the public outcry will rise to a feverish pitch. Lastly, and hopefully most inspiringly, our younger generations must RISE UP and take charge of this country. That will happen when well-educated black and brown men and women who have attended our community colleges and public universities work and rise up with their equal white counterparts to take over the seats of justice and become the decisionmakers in law enforcement agencies. When the next generation is given the opportunity to reevaluate how police officers are recruited and when the focus is on de-escalating a situation rather than retaliating, we will see the kind of transformation necessary to prevent the senseless and racially motivated killings of black men and boys.

Soon after I shared my story within the Illinois Community College Trustees Association (ICCTA), which I lead as executive director. We decided to engage our community colleges to share their stories on #CCLiftUp. We made the following simple request: The best way to give hope to those who have been victimized is to share what you are doing at your college and in your community to uplift people of color and those who are underrepresented.

Not surprisingly, the response was overwhelming and inspiring: the formation of anti-racist teams, racial sensitivity training in law enforcement, Illinois Equity in Attainment Initiatives, TRIUMPH (Transforming and Inspiring Undergraduate Men Pursuing Higher Education), and a host of other initiatives from across the state. In addition to the stories we requested, several trustees and even presidents shared their personal stories. One of the most memorable testimonials was from a trustee who said: "All members of the college community must take time to listen and reflect, evaluating the ways we passively or actively, intentionally or unintentionally support systems of inequity and structural racism, then self-educate about how to change."

The change we all seek for the betterment of our country and our community colleges will occur when we start within ourselves!



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