



TUESDAY

December 29, 2020

75 cents

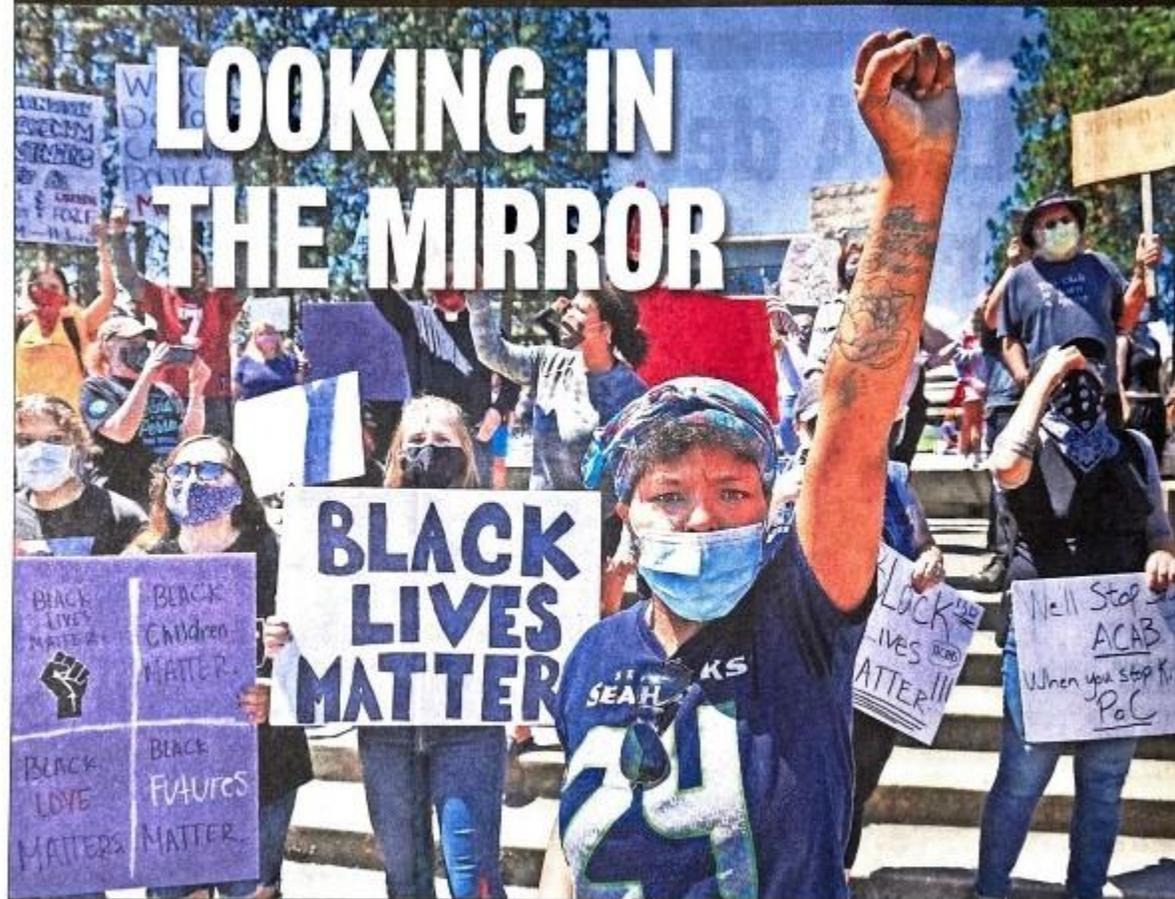
FIRST ALERT
WEATHER**Stay up to date online**

The Ashland Tidings is partnering with KTVL News 10 to keep you up-to-date on breaking weather news. Check AshlandTidings.com and KTVL.com for breaking news.

LOCAL

HINDSIGHT 2020 / RACE

ASHLAND AND SOUTHERN OREGON



London Wilson-Wells, 22, of Portland, protests at Medford City Hall the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis.

ASHLAND T

Approaching narratives about race

Confronting racism

by Allayana Darrow of the Ashland Tidings, Tuesday, December 29, 2020

ASHLAND — Throughout the past year, Southern Oregon racial justice activists and community groups have responded to repeated tragedy with a demand for widespread participation in reconstructing a social and political framework founded in equity and justice.

On March 13, Breonna Taylor was killed by Louisville, Kentucky, officers who fired into her home. On May 25, George Floyd was killed at the hands of Minneapolis police. Both were Black. Dozens more names line the fence at Railroad Park in Ashland, accompanying the reminder, “say their names.”

In the weeks that followed in Oregon, protesters and counter-protesters clashed. Two people were indicted by a Jackson County grand jury for allegedly aiming firearms at Black Lives Matter demonstrators during a march.

In June, a White City resident was charged with a bias crime for allegedly driving a vehicle into a crowd of Black Lives Matter demonstrators. In August, members of a peaceful demonstration in Rogue River held their ground against instigators who sought to drown out Black voices, according to the Southern Oregon Coalition for Racial Equity.

The murder of Black 19-year-old Aidan Ellison in Ashland Nov. 23 underscored the consequences of inequity close to home for many Rogue Valley residents in 2020, though police have yet to determine if sufficient evidence exists to charge the prime suspect with a bias crime in addition to charges of second-degree murder, manslaughter, reckless endangering and possessing a concealed firearm.

Yet those who seek to bring honest discussions about race to the forefront of the public experience say that pervasive and systemic roots of white supremacy alive today are as old as the nation itself, and must be acknowledged before progress is attainable.

The Southern Oregon Black Leaders, Activists and Community Coalition recently fulfilled an effort to compile Southern Oregon's Black agenda, which will inform conversations about race and bolster Black political power, said SOBLACC spokesperson Precious Edmonds. SOBLACC surfaced in Southern Oregon following Ellison's death.

Edmonds said SOBLACC plans to release an agenda at the beginning of the year and continue expanding on what it means to be Black in this region. Edmonds said in the coming year the organization is committed to ensuring policies designed to protect all people include protections for Black people, their perspectives and livelihoods.

"This year only exposed the many different ways in which racism shows up," Edmonds said.

The agenda will be both a process to align ideals, needs and solutions within the Black community and offer a pathway for non-Black people to support those solutions in pursuit of racial equity, she said. Attendance at a virtual agenda-setting meeting Dec. 14 included Black residents from Ashland, Talent, Phoenix, Medford and Grants Pass.

Responding to what she observes as racism laid bare through economics, police brutality and white vigilantism this year, Edmonds said each person has work to do, including Black individuals in communities where "colorism" persists, she said.

Edmonds said in her own life, she has endeavored to unlearn the internalized notions and practices that accompany a prevailing narrative that the presence and existence of Black people is threatening.

"We embody and hold anti-Blackness as well — everyone does," she said. "Yes, we need to work on the ways in which we individually show up and operate in anti-Blackness, specifically, but we also need to evaluate the structures ... that make it difficult for Black people to thrive in places that they call home."

SOBLACC's choice to be a Black-led organization focused on Black community needs and perspectives covers new territory for this area, she said. Recognizing a need for unity among Black, Indigenous and other people of color, Edmonds said focusing solely on the Black experience helps preserve a dimension of nuance that can otherwise be lost in discussions about nonwhite people. Issues facing those groups aren't identical, she said.

Speaking about the path forward, Edmonds said awakening is born of listening, and learning often comes from being wrong first. Even in a burgeoning movement to acknowledge the harsh reality of the Black American experience, some still seek an alternative narrative, which is harmful to progress, she said.

"In white supremacy, there's this idea around perfection and a need to be right that actually inhibits the growth of people," Edmonds said.

This year, Edmonds said, she was shocked by the extent of a disconnect between the issue at hand and individuals and institutions that claim "racism could be everywhere but where they are."

As many community members have come forward as self-proclaimed "allies," Edmonds said her feelings about the term are mixed.

While allyship may strengthen a resolution to the problem, the concept often comes across in practice as a "self-placating" effort, rather than a genuine initiative to undo harm by listening to Black voices and showing up in ways the Black community has requested, she said.

Amid end-of-year reflection on a challenging 2020, Edmonds called for introspection on what collectively and individually can be done to "show up for each other better" in the year to come.

David Wick and Irene Kai, co-founders of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, have contemplated their roles in furthering racial equity from the perspective of decades as an interracial couple.

Wick described his own learning curve as a white male a "huge, longterm awakening" of consciously recognizing his white privilege, views and expectations of others.

Initially, he moved through a phase of feeling blamed, confused and in the wrong. Then came an understanding of how white culture is positioned for dominance within U.S. institutions. Looking inward, Wick said, he faced how "deep and unseen" his biases and privileges are rooted.

"It's like becoming conscious of the water being a fish," Wick said.

Kai watched as her partner faced the sadness and guilt that often accompanies fuller understanding. She hopes for others, the vital, oft-painful learning morphs into a joining together and reclaiming of one's humanity, strengthened by compassion for other beings.

Because of her professional interests, Kai said she is passionate about filling the role of an educator — sharing her experiences and serving as an assistant to change. Since she immigrated to the U.S. as a teenager, her relationship with white rules and culture has informed an approach to race awareness education through ACPC.

“I have assimilated into the American culture so well that people feel very comfortable around me and do not realize that I’m not white,” said Kai, a Chinese immigrant who has lived in the U.S. for half a century.

After spending her adult life integrating into a “prescribed” culture and serving to make white people feel comfortable, Kai said she has only recently become aware that now is the time to speak up.

“Recently, enough of us are saying, ‘enough.’ We are not going to be on our knees any longer,” Kai said.

Having lived in New York City, London and Los Angeles, Kai said the demand for acquiescence to white values is more severe in Oregon than elsewhere.

According to the Oregon Historical Society, white supremacy in the state stems back to the fur trade era and treatment of Indigenous people, the 1850 Oregon Donation Land Claim Act that limited land grants by race, anti-slavery politics that excluded free Black people, and incidents of violence against people of color that continued through the 20th century.

“Go out and read the books to understand the history of oppression, how the culture became what it is, that’s the first step,” Kai said. “The state of Oregon is the epitome of the aggressive white rules for all different races,” Kai said.

Understanding the history of Chinese and Native people in Oregon influenced Kai’s decision to bring the World Peace Flame to Ashland as a token of healing, she said.

From the ACPC perspective, education, listening and compassion are three prongs to the cure.

One challenge, she said, is the burden typically falls upon nonwhite people to perpetuate a conversation about race because those who live in privilege will not voluntarily give it up.

Recently, initiatives such as forums with law enforcement hosted by BASE Southern Oregon — a nonprofit focused on connection and prosperity for Black people — give Kai a reason to be optimistic, she said.

“In healing the racial wound, everyone has a responsibility,” Wick said.

Contact Ashland Tidings reporter Allayana Darrow at adarrow@rosebudmedia.com and follow her on Twitter @AllayanaD.