



Systemic change starts with us

by Irene Kai Monday, August 24th 2020

The first World Peace Flame in North America was installed in the lobby of the Civil Rights Museum, at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, in 2002.

The World Peace Flame is as eternal as the ideals and inspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King are universal and timeless. In the current times, his words are like flames that glow in our hearts: "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice. Never, never be afraid to do what's right, especially if the well-being of a person is a stake. Society's punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our soul when we look the other way. Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission installed the second North American World Peace Flame in Ashland Sept. 21, 2018. This was possible because it was supported by our community. The residents of our city aspire to the ideals of Dr. Martin Luther King. We tend to rise and answer to our higher callings and adhere to our moral compass to do the right thing.

On July 3, 2020, Joanne Feinberg invited me to participate in her "Say Their Names Memorial" project to paint a name assigned by her on one of my own T-shirts. It was displayed with others on the fence in the Ashland Railroad District. Her project is an effort to help ensure that Black victims of senseless killings are not forgotten. The memorial is also a place to process the grief we feel about the violence and injustice faced by Black, Indigenous and People of Color in our country. My assigned name was Aaron Campbell. He was unarmed and killed by Portland police in 2012. I found the brightest red paint and started to paint his name as if his blood was spelling out his name. In the process, I was overcome with emotion. His name is on my shirt, I am a living person — I am Aaron Campbell. I will speak for him and all the victims killed at the hands of police brutality.

On July 28, 2020, I read a story and watched a video in horror of how Mr. Tony Sanchos of Ashland was treated by the Jackson County Sheriff's Office and their deputies in the Jackson County Jail. He was not charged with a crime, but he was handcuffed with his hands behind his back and was pinned on the floor of the county jail by a sheriff's deputy with his knee. Later, Mr. Sancho was handcuffed to the grate on the jail floor for two and a half hours. This is Jackson County, Oregon, and not some far-off place like Minneapolis. Jackson County jail is where Ashland community members go if they need to be put in jail. We know that this country needs systemic change. We are part of the system; change starts with us. We cannot look the other way and hear the urgent call to step up to do the right thing. There is so much at stake and so much needs changing. Nov. 3 is our big chance to make significant changes. Vote! For our local election, we will be able to vote for new Ashland City Council members and a new mayor.

Ashland Culture of Peace Commission posts a question for both mayoral candidates, Tonya Graham and Julie Akins: "If you are elected as the mayor of Ashland, what action would you take to influence reform in Jackson County's jail and sheriff's office to reduce excessive force?" Their responses will be published in our Ashland Tidings ACPC column Sept. 7, 2020.

Let us vote with our hearts to begin the change we would like to see. On Jan. 1, 2021, we will hold the Ashland mayor accountable to her promise to influence Jackson County Sheriff's Office to reduce excessive force.

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Irene Kai is co-founder of Ashland Culture of Peace Commission.