

Editorial

When I consider all that has occurred recently related to the racial unrest across the world, our country, and here in South Carolina, a picture from my childhood comes to mind; that being, a group of black and white protestors in the late 60's marching arm-in-arm against racial injustices across the south. When I look across the landscape today, I see that same picture, people from diverse backgrounds, young and old, together marching to highlight injustices related to police brutality and institutionalized racism all over the world.

For those who may not know, it was the racial unrest of the late 60's and early 70's that gave birth to the South Carolina Human Affairs Commission (SCHAC). Racial unrest is not new to South Carolina. The Orangeburg Massacre in 1968 on the campus of South Carolina State College (University), where black students seeking to integrate a bowling alley across the street from the campus, ended with the shooting deaths by law enforcement of three unarmed students and injuries to many others; the Charleston Hospital Workers Strike in 1969, when mostly black women marched to uncover unfair treatment and to seek better pay, from an all-white hospital administration; school integration across the state in 1969 to desegregate public schools; and the nationally publicized Lamar bus attack in 1970, when a mob of white parents overturned a school bus carrying African American children going to a newly integrated school in Darlington County.

It was these matters, soon to be fifty years ago, that led then Governor John C. West and members of the South Carolina General Assembly in 1972, to pass the South Carolina Human Affairs Law (SCHAL). That law created the South Carolina Human Affairs Commission (SCHAC), a state agency whose mission continues to be "to prevent and eliminate" unlawful discrimination. It would be this agency's responsibility to help level the playing field and seek to keep the peace through dialogue and good will. Over the years, the South Carolina General Assembly added to the agency's statutory authority - the South Carolina Fair Housing Law in 1989; the Equal Enjoyment and Privileges to Public Accommodations Act in 1990; and mostly recently, amended the SCHAL to add the Pregnancy Discrimination Act. In totality, the SCHAC has the authority to help both counties and cities establish representative community relation councils across the state to address some of the issues unveiled by protestors over the pass weeks. Additionally, state statutes give the SCHAC the authority to investigate allegations of unlawful discrimination in employment and housing, and to monitor fair employment practices in state government. You are now thinking, what happen? Easy. Counties, cities, and communities must seek the help of the SCHAC, and state funding must be provided to do the work across the state.

I have said and heard others say during the weeks of unrest, that it makes no sense that this nation and state continues to struggle with its legacy of slavery and the belief by some, that all men are not created equal. But I say it does make sense. The virus of lack of respect for all human life; greed; respect of person; and the fruits of hatred, have not been properly treated in the hearts and minds of mankind, and continues to metastasis like a cancer spreading itself unchecked, from generation to generation throughout the world. This cancer started with slavery, and when slavery ended, the people in power instituted Jim Crow Laws that continued to suppress and divide the people of this State. Those Jim Crow laws promoted an illness of division, oppression, and hatred for blacks. This sick virus continues to infect one generation after the other. Consider Dylann Roof and most recently, high school and college age students across this nation and state, who now hide behind technology and spew racial hatred without

fear. Why wonder about the marches across the entire world? The whole world has been infected with a disease greater than COVID -19, namely, RACISM.

But I am encouraged, like a doctor who makes a diagnosis, then begins the process of treatment and healing. I remind all South Carolinians, that understanding the problem simply provides us with another opportunity to do what we have already done, treat the recurring sickness with stronger medicine in the form of addressing systemic discrimination and coming out of our comfort zones, discussing the past, and moving forward to the future.

We must continue to work together to build a better South Carolina for all persons who call this beautiful state home; and a place worthy to visit and stay for those who come for business and relaxation. You see, we are all in this together because economic growth and expansion, employment opportunities, top tier colleges and universities, and award winning public schools, healthy communities and so many other quality of life issues, will not excel in places where people cannot or will not work or live together peacefully. In short, we all have a vested interest and a role to play in making South Carolina great for all people who live here. The racial unrest we are dealing with now is not a black issue only, it is also a white issue, a state issue, and it affects all of us. Regardless of your race or socio-economic status, isolating yourselves from those who still suffer racial injustices and disparate treatment, will not protect you or your businesses from the impact of the events of the past several months and weeks.

Many whites and persons of color expressed outrage toward the protestors because of the threat to life and the destruction of property. Such was unwarranted and inappropriate. I agree! Many are angry because they had to shut down their businesses again, many suffered destruction to their properties after making investments to reopen, and some may never be able to reopen again. But in all of this, we must find a reason and way to move forward. We have an example in this State often heralded so proudly by all – the Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church shooting almost five years ago this month. On June 17, 2015, during a Bible study meeting at the Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, nine people were shot to death by a person who espoused hatred. The nation and state, dignitaries, and people white, black, and from diverse backgrounds, all grieved for and with those families who lost so much. Like, Mr. George Floyd and so many others, and the victims of the shooting at Mother Emanuel, their lives were cut short by hatred and racism. There is no coming back nor getting over it for those families.

The state and nation to this day praise the families for their display of forgiveness and love for all mankind. Likewise, no matter the hurt or loss of recent weeks, we must acknowledge the impact of years of systemic racism and white privilege and move forward together to build a better South Carolina. That is why people of goodwill cannot be silent, white, or black. To remain silent and not speak out against hatred and injustice anywhere and at any time, is no different than the law enforcement officers who stood over Mr. George Floyd and did nothing, while a man died for all the world to see because of police brutality. Likewise, I wonder why so many on-lookers on that day did not rush the officers to save the life of Mr. Floyd. FEAR - the same paralyzing fear that black males and people of color have lived with since evil men for greed, decided to enslave and devalue another human being.

We have a window of opportunity to work together as a state to address many of the issues identified by the protestors. Time is of the essence because in a few months this country will face some of the most divisive national and statewide elections in modern times. The clouds are

already forming, and we must all work together now to unite our citizenry and not let racial strife and discord rob us all of a bright future.

Our role at the SCHAC is to help bring healing, and “to promote goodwill and the betterment of human affairs”, thereby improving the quality of life for all South Carolinians. We have read the requests of the protestors and will address those issues that fall within the scope of the mission of the SCHAC. However, to give everyone across the state the opportunity to provide the SCHAC feedback regarding recent protest; make comments regarding the protestors recommendations for change; and how to bring healing and move forward, I am asking that you send your response to information@schac.sc.gov . All information will be used to help develop appropriate responses in the form of training, community development councils, new legislation, etc. It is important that we hear from you.

In closing, when the SCHAC was created in 1972, it was a time of uncertainty and civil unrest across this county and state. Forty-eight years later, South Carolina has evolved from a largely segregated and farming economy, to a diverse economy with better jobs and opportunities for all. Over the years, we have experienced tremendous economic growth and goodwill, which has translated into better race relations and community harmony. However, we are not where we should be or where we need to be. Therefore, send us your thoughts, push up your sleeves, come out of your comfort zone, reach out across racial lines, reject hate, and embrace all humanity with equal respect and love. If we do these things, we will make remarkable progress in race relations.