

Good Afternoon Rotarians. Thank you for inviting me here to speak during Black History month. I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered here on the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

Some years ago I watched a CBC television interviewer ask the American comedian, Chris Rock, "Haven't Black People made quite a lot of progress in recent years?" With a look of incredulity, Rock stared, blinked a few times, and then responded: "My Dad did not suddenly earn the right to eat in a restaurant; the white people got less crazy and so he was allowed to eat there." It is the white people who have recently been making progress. "They are becoming Less Crazy."

And one step in that slow progress toward equity – (or Less Crazy) for the people with darker pigment in their skin has been the creation of Black History Month. For Black people it has been firstly an opportunity to celebrate and honour each other. A month to highlight our past, present, and future generation of Black heroes and role models.

This long overdue acknowledgement of the people upon whose back the United States was built came into being in that country in 1970. And it was in 1995 that Black History month became a fixture on Canadian calendars. Since its inauguration here I have found it to be a major opportunity to reduce some of the "craziness", some of the ignorance, bias and racism by taking my story into the schools where we have for too long have been absent with no presence in the curriculum.

And so it was in that year I made my first black history month presentation. A friend whose daughter was a student in a grade 6/7 class invited me to speak at "that place of learning" where she knew my family had attended. It was to Ridgeway Elementary School in North Vancouver, the school about which I have had nightmares throughout my lifetime, that I first addressed a group of 10 to 12 year olds, in a classroom where probably my late brother Harry or my older sister Carolyn, or I had sat during some school days more than 40 years previously.

To begin that 1995 presentation I took the children to the window of the classroom and pointed out the house directly across the road where my family came to live in August of 1951. It was a challenge not to get choked up as I explained to this group of children how on the Tuesday morning after Labour day I and my sibling stepped out from the back gate, with only the width of 8th street separating us from the playground and the impenetrable looking stone structure. Harry was to have entered grade 5 that day, Carolyn, grade 4, I to grade 2, and for Barton, our frail younger brother who at times suffered massive seizures, was to have entered the first grade.

But we did not make it more than a few steps. We did not set foot on those grounds. "Niggers, Blackies, filth" ...assailed our ears while hundreds of stones rained down and stung and tore our faces, backs, heads, and limbs.

...Why was the hoard of more than a couple of hundred anger-fueled children, armed and prepped, each with their own little pile of stones, so determined to keep a group of children, whom they had never met, who were of their age, from coming to play before the bell would call them to the classrooms??

So I explained what a petition was how all of the families EXCEPT ONE on our street, signed the petition which they delivered early in August to city hall in North Vancouver demanding that their neighbourhood remain white. As white as it had been since the Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish Peoples were moved off their land and onto Indian Reservations hugging the shoreline of Burrard Inlet.

I explained that The Hoard of 1951 Ridgeway students were the de-facto Juvenile Militia attempting to do what their parents' petition had failed to do: Keep their school and their community White.

And so I continued the story of that long ago pain...

Harry, Carolyn, Barton, and I played in our back yard all that day... and the next. We did not leave our yard. Our father was a railway porter working for our government owned CNR and he was away for days at a time. Because the struggles our mother had faced in her youth, had left her deeply scarred and troubled, she did not have the courage to confront the hostility that barred our path to "learning".

And so the curious faces of young children stared up at me. Waiting for an explanation that made sense.

I went on to tell them how when our dad had returned from his railway run, that he proudly and defiantly took his children across the street and onto the playgrounds and we were immediately in the midst of a raging torrent of curses, racist epithets, and dust that was being kicked up. Leaving us encircled by the hate-filled faces, our dad entered the building to speak with the Principal, Mr. Bullman. Those minutes seemed like hours but during our heart pounding wait a brilliant ray of sunshine appeared in a moment that remains indelible in my memory: One little girl, a grade two student with red hair and freckles and thick glasses stepped toward us. She, Annabelle Mackenzie, separated herself from her cohorts and stood beside us. Silence interjected itself as the staring mob were hushed and stilled by the unimaginable "statement" made by this youngster. There, in that instant was one of the biggest lessons of my life. And decades later this incredible scene became the central theme of that very first Black History Month Talk – and in every one of the countless schools at which I have spoken. "Dare to be an Annabelle." Truly a STEP toward progress that white people need to take.

And my story continues... It was at least ten or fifteen minutes before our dad emerged from the stolidly looming stone building accompanied by Mr. Bullman. Lifting a megaphone to his lips the principal announced to his young, disinterested learners that the Jerome children did indeed have the right to enter the building and that the name calling, and rock throwing had to stop. No doubt this was a courageous pronouncement at the time because it would not be until 1960 that Canada adopted its Bill of Rights stating that we had personhood amongst a host of other rights.

And I finished that first Black History Month presentation with a summary of the next three years that we lived in that house across the road from Ridgeway School... Barton was repeatedly strapped (with a thick razor strap), for reasons he explained as "because I can't learn". This brutal punishment was administered to this grade one child by the principal. Midway through his first year a more suitable class was found for our younger brother at another school. Barton was indeed intellectually challenged, and so, bearing his little pink lunch box, he left our home earlier than the rest of us each morning and headed to the nearby bus stop on Keith road and travelled unsupervised to Queen Mary School. But the

cruel term “retarded” which was the nomenclature of the time was attached then not just to him, but to all of us along with the never-ending Nigger, blacky, dirty, etc.

The materials provided by the Ministry of Education we “learned” from were all about white people. A Black or indigenous person in a text was shown as naked or at best with a loincloth. The music curriculum’s acknowledgement of any people of colour were the Stephen Foster songs of happy darkies longing for the cotton plantations of the American South and accompanied by illustrations of black orbs whose wide eyes and full lips were of the comic book genre. These were the provincially mandated song books.

We lived amongst neighbours who clearly hated us. The large Patterson family attacked us verbally and physically whenever they saw us. The other residents never uttered a word except for Annabelle, her brother Ken and their single parent mom who worked as a night nurse at North Vancouver General Hospital.

It was again when our dad was away that our next crisis occurred. At some time around 2 a.m. I was awakened by the acrid smell of smoke, I gave my sister, sleeping next to me a shove and screamed “the house is on fire”. I tore downstairs to our mother’s bedroom, sobbing hysterically. As we the escaped the yard shivering in our pyjamas, I was sent to the home next door to us, to a home in which Mrs. Mason, who had like the rest of the neighbours, never acknowledge our presence, while living but twenty feet away. She called the fire department for me, and I raced back outside. It was then I realized with horror that my older brother was not out. I flew back into the house and up the stairs and shook and shook Harry until he finally stirred. When we reached the road’s edge, we could hear the wail of the approaching fire engines. But our eyes were fixed on the windows of the homes surrounding us. The lights were on; the blinds were raised; silhouettes stared out at our pregnant mother and her children shivering in the night... no one emerged from any of these homes to offer a bed, a sofa, or even a blanket on the floor. We went by cab to the Salvation Army Hall on Lonsdale Avenue and in vain tried to sleep on the rows of chairs.

We later learned that our old sawdust burning furnace had clogged and smoldered sending out thick smoke. The walls were blackened throughout the house, but fire had not broken out. We spent a week living in the upstairs of Salvation Army hall.

And although many warm and some life-long friendships were developed at Ridgeway School, and although there were a few great teachers who respected and nurtured us, those years we lived in that house at 416 Lyon Place from August of 1951 until we moved further up the hill in July of 1954. The horrors of that period were permanently etched in my memory. The challenges we faced on an almost daily basis shaped our early lives.

Since 1995 many of my Black History Month presentations have included a recounting of that time. Some have focussed on my thirty five years as an elementary school teacher in the city of Vancouver. And those stories are as fraught with the pain of racism as those which I have mentioned. In my first year of teaching in 1964, I was placed at an elementary school where the principal, Mr. Harper, often peppered

his comments with racial slurs. Early in the school year he came into my classroom after the students were dismissed and showed me how in his perfect Macleans method handwriting he could write on the chalkboard the word “nigger” starting at the end of the word with the “r” and write it from right to left to the “n”.

Before we left the school on a field trip, he would enter my classroom and demand, “Give me that little darkie over there. I need to show the children what will happen to them if they misbehave while they are away.” It was either Surrinder Bring, or Rog Grewal, or Barbara Risby who need to feel the sting of the razor strap. It was a nightmare. And you would think that some thirty odd years later this craziness would not be happening.

Yet it was the mid 1990’s when I reported at my staff meeting that a recently arrived student from Haiti was being called nigger. Mr. White, our principal at Sir Wilfrid Laurier School announced to the staff that “if this girl was being call nigger, she must have deserved it, she must have kicked someone in the nuts.” How crazy was that?? Sadly there were no Annabelles on my staff in 1996.

As recently as 2020 the parent of a little girl in grade one came to see me about the racism at his daughter’s school, just blocks from my present home. This worried father had gone to see the school principal, and this is the response he received, “You know, we did not have any racism here until you came.”

It was not just in my childhood that racism marked my life; it would take pages and pages to enumerate and describe the incidents that constantly keep me aware that I am not a real Canadian. From being turned away in 1964 from the Banff Springs Hotel on my honeymoon many weeks after a reservation had been made, to riding the bus in Vancouver in 1999 and listening to a barrage of racism from other passengers. From being turned away from Francesco Alonghi’s Vancouver restaurant with the words, “we don’t let women like you in here”, to the fruitless searches for apartment rentals where for-rent signs remained long after our inquiries. One instance being in August of 1962 when Harry had made headlines in our newspapers running the world for the 100 yards on two consecutive weekends but was unable to rent an apartment in this city. A dear friend, Dr Sheilah Thompson, had to take the rental and then turn it over to him and his wife. On one occasion I answered the door in my own home to a woman who had knocked on my door and insisted she wanted to speak to the owner of the home, “not you” she angrily screeched at me. And while running as a green party candidate in the Point Grey By-election and being week after week being harassed and called nigger by a woman who attended the entire series of all candidate meetings.

And of course to the hounded and almost everyday insult of “where are you from?” This question reflects the assumption in Vancouver that if you have any colour in your skin that you are from somewhere else. You are not Canadian. My grandfather was born in 1888 in Canada. My friend Fei Wong whose great, great grandparents came here to lay the railway tracks that linked this region to the confederation called Canada in 1873 is not referred to as Canadian – she is Chinese. Her skin is brown and Canadians are white.

And the use “eenie-meenie miney moe, catch a nigger by the toe” has been ubiquitous, falling easily from the mouths of children and adults for most of my lifetime. And it seems to have taken Canadians a long time to learn the words Brazil nuts.

Black History Month seems to still be necessary or the progress of the white population. The great American writer and lecturer James Baldwin articulated that “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Since the murder of George Floyd “live” on our television screen I have been booked as a Black History month speaker by community organizations, public and private schools, historical societies, probus groups, public libraries, seniors’ residences, and multicultural support groups. In 2021 Black History month lasted from February until early December. I have spoken via zoom to forums across this country. Coupled with the ongoing unearthing of murdered children on the grounds of residential schools across Canada, our nation seems to finally being forced to FACE the brutality inflicted upon peoples of colour.