

May 31, 2020

The Junior League's Response to Racial Injustice

Dear Members,

This has been a tragic month. We as members of one of the largest and most effective international women's leadership networks — and one of the longest-standing organizations in Grand Rapids — cannot sit on the sidelines and watch the hurt and anger in our country and our city right now. We cannot stay silent after the horrifying death of [George Floyd](#), the murder of neighborhood jogger [Ahmaud Arbery](#), the fear-mongering ignorance of [Amy Cooper](#), and so many other instances not caught on video. We cannot stay silent as people of color are expected to bear the burden of educating others about centuries-old institutional racism and white privilege. We cannot stay silent as business owners who are trying to survive the COVID-19 shutdowns must now deal with rebuilding after the looting, shattered glass, fire, and graffiti of last night when tensions exploded. We cannot stay silent as our community feels the heaviness of all this grief.

This is not a political position or a partisan issue. The Junior League is an anti-racist organization, period. On this we must act. For 95 years, we have worked tirelessly in Grand Rapids as leaders on issues of inequality, inequity, and injustice: intimate partner violence, human trafficking, foster care, food insecurity, infant mortality, access to safe urban play spaces, and others. We are the premier women's leadership organization in Grand Rapids. On the issue of institutional racism, we now must act.

The Association of Junior Leagues International has taken a strong stance urging Leagues this week to take action:

"As an organization that believes in building better communities and strives for leadership excellence, many of us have asked what we can do. We as Junior League women strive to be civic leaders in our communities. As such we should hold ourselves accountable for our own racism. We must do the work. We must be willing to be humiliated and vulnerable. We must speak out and we must be visible. We have to know when to be quiet and listen. And equally important, when to speak up. . . . We must give support to our Black members — and all members of color — neighbors, friends, coworkers, partners . . . and as an organization be an authentic ally in this fight for justice."

Our League's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion is as important as ever. As you know, we launched a permanent Diversity and Inclusion Committee this past year to help us ask the hard questions and examine how we can model inclusion in everything we do, how we can attract and retain the most diverse group of women leaders, and how we can unpack and tear down our own unconscious biases.

The Junior League of Grand Rapids will continue to be grounded in an authentic and abiding commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and guided by our shared values of respect,

service, and leadership. We are catalysts for lasting community change, and our work and attention at this time are desperately needed.

What can we do?

- Please join me and our Diversity and Inclusion Committee this Wednesday, June 3, 7-8:15pm over Zoom for a TED Talk discussion on "[How to Overcome Our Biases and Walk Boldly Towards Black Men](#)." We will watch the video for the first 20 minutes, followed by a thought-provoking guided discussion. If you are not able to attend, I urge you to watch the video. I saw it several months ago, and I cannot stop thinking about it. Signup is available on Digital Cheetah, and/or you can join using this Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87280120606> (no password required).
- Reach out to your friends of color. [Read this article to find out why and how](#). Simply ask, "I'm thinking about you this week with everything going on. How are you coping?" Be prepared to listen. You do not need any further expertise to open this discussion.
- Reach out to your white friends and start a discussion they might never have had before. This might start with, "I'm heartbroken over George Floyd's death and all the racial injustice coming to light right now. How are you processing it all?" Express your feelings about the rioting, but remember to focus on the underlying racial injustice as well. Have you previously been so keenly attuned to issues of racial injustice? Why or why not? What is it about these most recent events that stir the feelings you have?
- Read a book to understand unconscious bias and understand institutional racism. [Here is a good list for where to start](#).
- Watch a documentary about racism in America. [Here is a list of 13 available on Netflix](#).
- Tell people that the [Junior League welcomes ALL women](#) who value our Mission of promoting voluntarism, developing the potential of women, and improving communities through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. We are a safe place for all women.
- Speak up. Intervene when you see injustice or racism in action, no matter how big or small.
- Know when to be quiet, empathize, learn, and listen.

We will be looking for ways to turn this commitment into community action, now and into the future. These conversations can feel uncomfortable. We have to do the work. Please stay tuned for those opportunities, and email me directly at jlgrpresident@gmail.com with ideas.

With all the warmth,



Tessa K. Muir
95th President
Junior League of Grand Rapids

