

# Peaceful protests compel change on Bainbridge Island

'Are you with us?'

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- **OPINION**



One of the protest leaders leveled his gaze and asked a direct question, “Are you with us”? Answering an affirmative I joined James Friday, chairperson of the Bainbridge Island Race Equity Task Force, and well over a thousand fellow protesters in peacefully marching down Winslow Way to City Hall.

The June 4 Black Lives Matter-led event in Winslow was probably the largest mass protest to have occurred on Bainbridge Island. And it was followed just two days later by a similarly well-attended student-led protest.

That these historic events brought me to my feet is a testament to the organizers. But as a privileged white man it is not nearly enough to counter racism and inequity. I believe a moral obligation exists to do much more.

Racism, as defined by writer Ijeoma Oluo “is any prejudice against someone because of their race, when those views are reinforced by systems of power” (So You Want to Talk About Race, pages 26-27). To go about reversing it we must address the social and economic system that produces it. If that sounds like a tall order, it is.

Government clearly has a role to play and as a member of the City Council our first steps make me hopeful, creating the Race Equity Task Force (soon to become the Race Equity Advisory Committee), becoming a member of the Government Alliance for Race and Equity, and participating in trainings that will follow for staff, councilmembers and committee members.

This is not going to be easy, as conversations are going to happen that will make most privileged people uncomfortable. Being like most people, I anticipate making mistakes, exposing my ignorance. But enduring some discomfort will be a bargain if it helps to move the needle, by any measure.

Looking further still, we have hard, important work ahead of us to bring true equity to Bainbridge Island. Decisions that will test our resolve because they affect our privilege, the advantages that we have that others do not. But there is no better time than now to do this.

On virtually every level, health, education and economics, the COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating – and reveal the system’s inequities. As we start to rebuild, let us make a point of doing better this time, by prioritizing those areas that lead to long- term equitable outcomes for all. We need to turn the rusty wheel of the system and finally meet the housing needs of our workers and most vulnerable, the needs of our small businesses and the children of essential workers. And not least, to acknowledge those oppressed by the justice system, by exploring means to bring a different kind of policing to the Island.

These efforts will undoubtedly be challenged as they will make some people unhappy. But those all too familiar obstacles serve the inequitable status quo, and what compels me are the voices I heard at those peaceful June protests, with one in particular, “Are you with us?” resonating.

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