

AUHSD and racial equity: How to repair the broken trust



Image provided

By Sophie Braccini

During a mid-June Acalanes Union High School District board meeting staff acknowledged that trust had been broken with the district's families of color. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and with the release of a video showing teenagers from the district using racist profanity in front of a parent (two years ago), outrage mounted from the community, calling for deep change.

The meeting opened with heartbreaking testimonies from parents of students of color who had been discriminated against and/or bullied repeatedly in the district. Parents accused the high school administration

as well as that of the district to have been side-stepping complaints and hesitating to take any action. Testimony after testimony painted the portrait of a community, starting as early as elementary school, where racism is dismissed by staff. In a like manner, some students also testified that bullying was seldom addressed and issues were swept under the rug.

The Campolindo High School Diversity and Inclusion Committee had a gathering the night before the meeting that was attended (on Zoom) by approximately 100 community members, current Campo parents, future/incoming Campo parents, Campo student leaders, former Campo students, Campo administration and faculty, AUHSD superintendent and associate superintendent, Moraga School District parents, and community members. Ellide Smith, chair of the committee who called the meeting (see related article on Page A4) said that the general feeling from parents, students, as well as teachers is that policies about racism are vague and consequences are unknown. The district has seen the number of diverse students diminish because parents send their children to private schools. Students are not equipped to stand up in a culture where those who speak out are ostracized and criticized.

The group agreed that racism and unconscious bias are rampant. Campolindo High School counselor Patrick Turner has been the only black faculty/staff

member at Campolindo. He has witnessed the pain of not only black students but other students of color as they encounter vile forms of racism, complicit biases, and microaggressions across the campus.

Amy McNamara, the district's associate superintendent, has been in charge of the district's equity policy for several years. She affirmed that a lot of listening is being done this summer and that change will happen through long-term work.

McNamara listed the actions that are being worked on within the district: to change the AUHSD mission statement to include race equity as a core value; to engage all students in a discussion about race to create a safe campus; to modify the curriculum in social studies and history; to establish more equitable grading practices for all students; to train all staff members and have them attend the Beyond Diversity training; to organize more parent information nights on this topic with parent leadership; to include more diversity when hiring new staff members; and to establish clear policies to address racist insults.

There is not yet a timetable for the implementation of these changes. All board members expressed their desire to support transformations in the new school year. McNamara noted that there is a highly activated group of young people who will be coming back to school in the fall and they will want to see change.

Lafayette forms task force

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Following the meeting Candell commented that she was thankful for all who attended and gave such good feedback, noting that the task force members needed this in-

put to shape how they move forward. "I honestly believe we can bring real positive change and create an even better community for all," said Candell.

"It was only our first meeting," said Burks after the

meeting, "and we have a long way to go on this complex and challenging movement, but if Wednesday night was an indication, I truly believe that the community will come together, representing a 'collective task force' embarking on one of the

most important and meaningful human-centered advancements in the history of Lafayette. I encourage absolutely everyone to be a part of it."

City Manager Niroop Srivatsa emphasized the need for

the public's help and engagement and invited people to send accounts of their experiences to her ahead of the town hall meeting.

Details on how to reach Srivatsa are on the city website at www.lovelafayette.com

Letters to the editor

Fourth of July Flags

When members of the Moraga Garden Club were putting out flags at the Moraga Commons on July 3, a man on a walk asked about it. When told that it was a project of the Garden Club, he asked, "Do you take donations?" Then he handed my wife a twenty-dollar bill.

Other members put out flags at the library, the Hacienda, and at the intersection of Moraga Road and Rheem Boulevard. Moraga may not have fireworks this year, but the Garden Club is quietly honoring the act that developed into our greatest gift.

Dale Walwark
Moraga

On diversity and racism

When I saw the video circulating of current Campolindo students flippantly using racial slurs such as the n-word and referring to black people as slaves while one of their fathers' drives without saying a word, I was sickened but not surprised. While I no longer reside in Lamorinda, having moved to LA for college, I vividly recall my experience at Campolindo High School as one where non-white, poor, or LGBT individuals (such as myself) were treated with at best, disregard, and at worst, outright discrimination.

I existed in a state of otherness, isolation and alienation throughout my high school years, which I'm sure doesn't even compare to what my black peers experienced, as race is nearly impossible to conceal, unlike sexuality. Some members of this community may be shocked that their children would express such violently racist ideas, but what concerns me most is the silence of the father in the video. Young people do not develop bigoted and hateful ideology in a vacuum.

There is no excuse for the behavior of the girls in that video, but it is only a reflection of the de facto segregation and race and class-based hierarchy that exists in Lamorinda, enforced by the maintenance of suburban ideals that conceals more insidious motives. Just a few days ago, after almost nine years of pushback, the decision to move forward with the 315-apartment housing plan in Lafayette, which the East Bay Times deemed "divisive," finally went through. The project has set aside 63 apartments (20%) for affordable housing.

It is endearing that Lafayette organized a 'Black Lives Matter' protest to call attention to the epidemic of police violence that has gained traction after the brutal murder of George Floyd, but highly troubling that the percentage of black students at Campolindo is 1% (U.S. News 2020 High School Rankings). The percentage of economically disadvantaged students is 4%. Tak-

ing this information into account, it is rational to assume that the majority of students at Campolindo don't have a meaningful connection or interaction with a black person until after they graduate. As much as residents of this so-called idyllic enclave want to pay lip service to the cause of racial equality, the history of exclusion of black and hispanic people from our schools, housing, and community, unless their function is to service us, tells a different story. I hope that anyone who was truly shocked by this video does some real reflection on the message that unofficial racial and class-based segregation teaches our children about whose lives matter to us and whose don't.

Fiona Deane-Grundman
Lafayette

Letter presented at the June 22 MOFD-Orinda-Moraga sub-committee

Dear Chief Winnacker,

You are my hero for your fire prevention activism. I organized seven homeowners to prepare for the chipper. I communicated with Mr. Graham, read the chipper rules, informed my neighbors, made sure all the stacks were chipper friendly, and everything went perfectly. We eliminated two trucks full of vegetation. It was the existence of the free chipper service that allowed me to generate enthusiasm.

I attended the last MOFD Board meeting and was very disappointed with the outcome!

You said that the demand would continue indefinitely. I believe you are wrong. We cleared out many low branches that will not regrow. The brush we eliminated will not be allowed to regrow now that we know about Paradise. Any regrowth will be green binned. You also referred to outlier customers. Surely there are very few.

To the MOFD Board, These are not reasons to discontinue the program through the summer months. We are talking about 70 days of 1.5 chippers at \$1500/day or less than \$160,000 out of a \$26 million budget. That budget is only possible because of the taxes we citizens pay. The MOFD Board received very many requests for summer chipper service, before the next fire season, but declined to even invest \$50,000 towards the chipper service, despite a \$500,000 surplus for the year. If 10% of our city burns this fall, you will lose millions in revenue.

It has become clear that the Board has been captured by industry insiders that make decisions in favor of the firemen's union pension fund and not in the best interest of the citizens. Their decision not to fund a paltry amount of their \$26 million budget for the chipper program

has made this obvious to the citizens and is the worst political mistake the board could make.

And lastly to the city council members,

We have already lost a week of chipping. It is now clear that the MOFD Board has exhibited a dereliction of duty to serve and protect the citizens. Should they not commit to an emergency board meeting, despite very tight city budgets, I beg you to consider funding the chipper service for the summer.

Charles Porges
Orinda

A wonderful man's passing

The Kiwanis Club of Moraga Valley and the Moraga Community lost a fantastic person on June 22 - Larry Swindell.

A brief set of highlights from Larry's life include: (1) Published five film biographies on Hollywood celebrities -- Spencer Tracy, Carole Lombard, John Garfield, Charles Boyer, and Gary Cooper; (2) Was a writer for a number of publications and earned the nickname "Scoop"; (3) Taught composition and literature at 5 universities -- Maryland, UC Irvine, LaSalle, Delaware, and TCU; (4) Was inducted into the Texas Literary Hall of Fame and the Classic Film Hall of Fame in Moraga; (5) Was involved in the Moraga Park Commission, Moraga Historical Society, Classic Movies at the Rheem Theater (introduced each movie), SIR, Moraga Movers, and the Kiwanis Club of Moraga Valley.

Larry touched each Kiwanis member in so many ways. But little did each member initially know about the breadth, knowledge, and character of this person. Larry's memory amazed all of us, especially pertaining to baseball, the movies, and history. And he graced us with that knowledge, and without notes, in many talks. Some of those talks included: (1) "The Great Depression" (2) "1939, The Greatest Year in Movies" (3) "The Korean War" (4) "An Historical Perspective on the Political Parties and Party Conventions" (5) "The transition of Movies from Silent to Sound - Hollywood in Chaos" (6) "How Baseball Changed over the Years" (7) "The history of Popular Music, from Antiquity to the Era of Rock n'Roll" (8) "The Origins of World War II."

Some anecdotes we recall: (1) Seeing Satchel Paige in his youth in Texas, when his father caught him in a local exhibition game -- Larry indicated his dad may have contributed to the integration of baseball; (2) Swimming with Marilyn Monroe and sitting in a baseball box with Spencer Tracy and having a rough chat; (3) Telling Ronald Reagan he knew more about his movies than he did, and set out to prove it.

We were all lucky to have known Larry, to learn from, re-

spect, and admire Larry. He will be remembered by all of us forever. A wonderful man!

Stan Holcenberg
Moraga

More on MOFD chipping program

Last issue's article regarding the suspension of MOFD's chipping program to remove flammable vegetation waste only told half of the story.

First, to say there was a "passionate outcry from district residents" is an understatement. 46 people "attended" the Zoom meeting. MOFD has NEVER had that many people attending one of its meetings. Those 46 represented the 86% of Orinda who said in the recent Orinda survey that fire prevention was their #1 priority.

Second, it did not mention that the Board Members supporting the program were the two "independent" members (Jorgens and Jex) while those opposing were members of the firefighters-union-block (Danziger, Donner and Baitx).

Third, it did not put in perspective the \$100,000 chipper program which Baitx complained was "throwing money" away when they were cutting spending elsewhere. While the District is projecting a \$1.1 million deficit this year (for all of its "funds", not just its general fund), the financials show:

1) While revenue is projected to stay flat (at \$29 million), MOFD expenditures (excluding capital expenditures) are not being cut, they are increasing from \$27.5 million to \$30 million; over three times the rate of inflation.

2) Employees' salaries and benefits, accounting for 90 percent of the operating expenses, are increasing from \$24.8 million to \$27.3 million. This \$2.5 million increase (10 percent), accounts for the entire expense increase.

3) Reserves will also be increasing, from \$18.2 million to \$19.3 million, including a \$2 million increase in the employee retirement fund. So the entire \$1 million deficit is going into reserves, specifically into the firefighter's retirement fund.

4) Over the last four years MOFD has added over \$10 million to its reserves; half of it to the firefighter's retirement fund which now has \$165 million in it.

Bottom line: The union-controlled board is making sure that every extra dollar of revenue that MOFD receives goes toward salaries, benefits and retirement reserves even though that already accounts for 90 percent of the budget. It will not allow, even by a few thousand dollars, expense reprioritization for fire PREVENTION, not fire FIGHTING, which the community seeks.

Steve Cohn
Orinda

On school reopening plans

I appreciate receiving the Lamorinda Weekly and look through it every week. Today I saw an article by Sophie Braccini about Lamorinda school reopening plans this fall. She said that the blended model "will allow all students to be back in their schools at least several days a week", but at least at the high school level, the blended model allows students to attend school in person only twice a week. This is a significant difference and the public should be made aware of the actual plans, not the artificially optimistic ones. My understanding is that in the blended model high schoolers will receive live instruction from each teacher only 85 minutes a week (vs. the 135 minutes they got with each teacher prior to the pandemic). Three days a week they are home. On one of those days they might attend virtual office hours, but two days a week they will have no interactions with teachers or peers at all.

This is an important distinction that the public needs to be made aware of. "Several days a week" sounds somewhat similar to a normal school schedule. In fact what is planned at this point is attendance only two days a week, with once-weekly in-person contact with each teacher and this doesn't sound anything like a normal school schedule or a remotely adequate amount of learning.

I know the AUHSD administration has worked very hard to put forth the best possible plans and I don't fault them at all for the blended scenario. The county health department order that children be separated by 6 feet is the reason, the only reason, students are being forced to essentially forgo adequate schooling and being forced into continued semi-isolation. There are so many other ways to manage the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., testing, contact tracing, masks, daily health screenings for symptoms and exposure, hand-washing) that do not require decimating the educational and social-emotional development of our children. The county health department has tied the hands of our educators and will make it impossible for our schools to properly serve, support, and educate children in Lamorinda.

Elizabeth Owens
Orinda

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