

From the community



LIISA DEJONG | THE PLAIN DEALER  
Demonstrators make their way through downtown Cleveland to protest the killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice.

# For Tamir and all America, we must speak out against racism

RIVER SMITH

Recently, two honorable men who had dedicated their lives to serving their community as police officers, Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, were murdered by a career criminal who had already shot his girlfriend. He shot the two men because they were police.

As much as we mourn our brothers, however, we must not allow these or any other criminal acts to keep us from facing the fundamental crisis confronting white police and minority communities.

There is a scene in the groundbreaking 2004 film "Crash" in which a young white police officer, who has demonstrated much compassion earlier in the story, shoots an unarmed young black man. In that instant he mistakenly thought the young man was reaching for a gun, and it is clear in the film that he knows he has committed a crime for which he can be held accountable legally.

The key difference between this fictional account and the actions of the police officers who killed Tamir Rice, Malissa Williams, Timothy Russell, John Crawford and Akai Gurley is that the movie character was off duty.

He didn't have the legal protection accorded our working police officers.

In theory, it makes sense that we give these guardians of the peace that leeway, since they can face danger at any time. Unfortunately, we don't live in theory; we live in a racist culture that has systematically stereotyped men of color throughout our history.

We know from repeated studies that African-Americans are regularly discriminated against in housing, employment and the justice system. This isn't done because white people are mean or because we're all actively racist. It's done because we grow up with the misinformation passed on by the traditional attitudes we experience in our upbringing.

These traditions were imprinted on our cultural history as a way to rationalize the slavery of millions and, later, the white race riots and lynching of black men. Only if African-Americans somehow deserved, caused or contributed to what was done to them could our cultural ancestors preserve our perception of America as the beacon for freedom and justice.

Unfortunately, this contorted historical rationalization has

surreptitiously endured through the prejudiced perceptions of too many generations of white folks.

Whether we grow up to become a plumber, a loan executive, a television reporter or a police officer, we carry this misinformation with us unless we actively challenge our own attitudes. These same attitudes inform a white officer in the crucial split second that causes him to act aggressively when it isn't needed.

We could make generalizations about many groups. Stereotyping and categorizing things is actually a useful way to organize the world around us. However, we subtly make choices about which categories we pay attention to.

According to FBI statistics, most murders and violent assaults in our country are committed by white men. Yet our police don't treat that group in any particular way when they see them. We also don't see security guards following them around in stores, or patrol officers profiling them on the road.

Unfortunately, among white people there are those enduring stereotypes imbedded in our group psyche about black men. They endanger these men and their sons in various ways,

including unjustified incarceration, abuse and death at the hands of authorities who are supposed to be protecting them as members of our community.

We also know that there are many police behaviors that harm both white and black citizens. There are many actions involving arrest and interrogation that are at times provocative and abusive. It will certainly help to change police training, procedures and practices, and monitor their actions more closely, but until our nation is willing to face our racist heritage and challenge it, black men and boys will continue to be at risk.

Communities are finally speaking up, and Andrew Hawkins, LeBron James and other prominent black men are now utilizing their public profiles to speak out for themselves, and for all the men and boys who can't be heard. If we are ever to be a truly free country for all our citizens, white America must listen.

*Smith, of Cleveland, is a psychologist, social justice educator and co-author, with Victor Lee Lewis and Hugh Vasquez, of the 2008 book "Lessons from the Color of Fear: A Teacher's Manual."*