

When I was much younger an elderly relative of mine and I had a conversation that I cannot forget, one that I don't speak of often. I grew up in Oklahoma about 20 miles outside Tulsa, where this relative also lived. In the course of a normal conversation about his growing up on a farm, he told me that he was present at the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. He wasn't just present, he was a participant.

This horrific part of US and Oklahoma history has recently come to the attention of the country due, in part, to a popular TV show aired last year on HBO called *The Watchmen*, and now, of course, from the news of a political rally planned in Tulsa. The history of the event was marred in the politics of the time and the full truth of what happened may now be partially lost to us.

What is clear is that a riot broke out when a black man was accused of assaulting a white woman. One report says that he tripped in an elevator and grabbed the woman's arm on the way down, causing her to scream. Another telling states that he merely stepped on her foot.

However the event occurred, the end result was that he was arrested. A group of white people came to the jail where he was held with possible evil intent. A group of African American people then came to the jail to protect him. Shots were fired and the riot began which lasted two days. Hundreds participated. A private plane was used to drop firebombs on homes and businesses. The Oklahoma National Guard was brought in to stop it.

When the riot finally ended two days later 35 square blocks of the Greenwood District of Tulsa was burned to the ground. Greenwood was by most accounts the most affluent black neighborhood in the country, nicknamed "Black Wall Street." The accounts of how many died is still under dispute, with estimates between 35 and 300.

My relative said he was there. He told me that his small town had heard what was going on. A friend arrived at his family farm and in the back of his truck were several other teenagers from town. He asked my relative to help, and, according to my relative, he got his gun and jumped in the back of the truck too. He said he did fire off a few rounds at the riot but that he "didn't hit anyone." Looking back now, I think there was pride in his voice, not regret, and certainly not shame.

Was his story true? It's hard to say. Human memory is a funny thing. There are documented cases of people recalling vivid details of the horrific events of 9-11 that simply never happened to them personally. But, based on some of the terribly racist things I had heard come from his mouth numerous times until his death many years ago, I believe it is certainly possible if not probable. The timeline is consistent as was his view of people of other races.

I would love to tell you that after he told me that story I took the opportunity to have a teachable moment with him, or at least stormed out in disgust. But I was quite young at the time. Mostly I was just shocked. I had heard other racist things coming from him, this was just an extreme one. I just let him talk, then ignored the comment.

The time for ignoring these comments is over. The time for revisionist history has likewise ended.

At NCCC we are very proud of the diversity we bring to our service area. About 24% of our students are non-white. While the majority of our students are from Kansas, we bring in students from all over the region and the world to study with us. It is one of our greatest strengths.

And our service area has embraced these students. Many families have opened their homes and hearts to our students, inviting them to meals, holidays, events, and, in the case of our international students to join the family. It has been wonderful to see the connections our students have made with those in our community and it makes me proud to be an adopted Kansan and Chanute resident.

We ask our student groups, especially the sports teams and activity groups to get off campus and volunteer in every way we can. This is partially to help repay the communities that have been so generous to the college for many years, but is also to have our diverse student population helping to make the service area a little better place. Besides helping public events occur, it teaches the students the value of volunteering. It is also my hope that by seeing students from all walks of life helping in the community it might reinforce positive feelings and maybe even change a few entrenched minds.

However, despite the best efforts of the vast majority of the community and the college some students have not been universally accepted by all in the service area. Every two years we ask a random sample of our students if they experience discrimination from employees, fellow students, and/or community members they meet on and off campus. While the results of the survey indicate there is work to be done on campus, the lowest scores are from interactions off campus with community members, especially with our Hispanic and Black students.

The anecdotal data is equally troubling. Over my seventeen years at NCCC I have heard terrible stories about how a few individuals have treated those who do not look like themselves. For instance, in separate occurrences years apart, an African American employee and a student both reported a similar event. While out for an evening run passing motorists screamed racial epithets at them, in one case taking the time to circle back around so they could deliver the horrid comment. The employee involved subsequently quit because they did not want to raise their children in such an area. My students have been followed in stores, accused of crimes they didn't commit, and a host of other negative occurrences. If you think that blatant racism happens only in other communities and in other areas, you would be mistaken.

All that work by all of those families to appreciate and support our students, and by the college to introduce additional diversity to the area in a positive way through volunteerism, can be wiped out by a few vocal hate-filled persons.

We have work to do on campus to have our demographic makeup of employees more mirror that of our student body. The data from our survey indicated that we have work to do to help students experience activities that strengthen awareness of cultural diversity. I will be asking our Diversity and Inclusion Committee to help lead augmented efforts to make all students feel welcomed, included, and valued.

NCCC also wishes to partner with community efforts throughout the service area to improve cultural diversity while battling systemic racism.

I am ashamed of my relative and what he did, but I will endeavor every day to make up for his actions. I write this not to shame those of us who live here or to point fingers but rather to bring these issues into the light, so that we can do what I should have done with my relative years ago – confront them. Such things can no longer be tolerated and certainly not ignored.

If you have any questions about this article or any other item about the college, feel free to contact me at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).

