

Mixed messages

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I'm so confused. I admit it. There's such an absolute 'riot' of rumblings rumbling around in my head, that it's hard to focus on any one thing. COVID-19 hasn't gone away in Peel region and we're still under lockdown, although you can shop to your heart's content at your local 'Loonierama' without a mask on. It is also more than a keen desire of mine to ensure that the conversation around Black Lives Matter isn't snuffed out like the life of yet another young Black man who was shot in the back.

That said, June is also a month dedicated to recognizing Pride, LGBTQ+ rights, our Seniors and also Indigenous History. These are all groups that have something in common - marginalization in its various forms. Do we focus on just one at the expense of others? How do we even begin to address the systemic discrimination each group has faced under different conditions and to varying degrees? How do we even begin when one feels powerless to do anything? We begin by taking one small step in the right direction, despite the mixed messages we might be seeing, hearing or reading.

First up, COVID-19. I'll be the first to admit it, I'm still a tad paranoid. Protecting an immuno-compromised individual and the health and well-being of my entire family remains top of mind. I'd love a visit with my hairdresser though. Because I live in Peel Region however, that's off the table for now. What I don't understand is this: if case counts remain high and we are concerned about lifting restrictions to enable a visit to the hairdresser, why is it we can meander the aisles of almost any big box store, discount store and other arguably no more, or less, essential service providers? I understand the issue of close contact for prolonged periods of time in enclosed spaces but surely making masks mandatory, and provided that services like salons take the same precautions as stores, shouldn't this be enough to allow them to re-open? These are our local entrepreneurs, in most cases sole proprietors who have had no income for over three months now. There is no corporate head office to support them. We support them by using their services. If you can shop next to eight other people cramming the aisle to buy cheap Canada Day trinkets, candy or a gift bag - you should be able to get your haircut too.

On the topic of Black Lives Matter I continue to be encouraged by entire neighbourhoods supporting the cause by proudly displaying lawn signs. I'm excited about the number of folks who are willingly giving their time to come out and show support, standing along the side of the road in Bolton. I'm disappointed by some of the heckling, but happy to hear about the honks of support. Those who choose to muddy the waters by stating 'All Lives Matter' are missing the main message. All lives can't matter until Black lives matter, and we must not lose the momentum propelling us forward at this moment in time. Every single agency that supports community must look at how they are serving people of colour. Every system we have in place, from education to employment must ask themselves the hard questions about what actions we collectively undertake that perpetuate systemic discrimination and what actions we must undertake in order to help end it. Don't shy away from the conversations because they are difficult or you're afraid of saying the wrong thing. Say something. If we learn and grow as humans together, change can happen.

We've come a long way in recognizing the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and that's good news. We cannot forget, however, that it was just 1998 when a young Matthew Shepard was beaten to death for no other reason than the fact he was gay. His death was a catalyst in many ways for the recognition of gay rights and while obviously tragic, the positive gains over these past 20 years have benefitted many. Perhaps George Floyd's murder will have the same impact on ending systemic racism.

Think our Seniors aren't marginalized? The number of seniors aged 65+ is set to double by 2036 and at least one in three are considered financially ill-equipped to deal with their retirement years. According to a report in 2017, government support for single seniors topped out at around \$15,000 and for couples at \$25,000. Could you live on that? Women make up a disproportionately higher rate of those living at or below the poverty line. This makes seniors in general more vulnerable, more susceptible to illness, to the risk of homelessness and isolation and certainly to feelings of being powerless. All of this was before COVID-19 even hit our shores. Now, no greater example than COVID-19 exists to so clearly demonstrate how vulnerable our senior population is. By April, it was already quite clear that more than 90% of COVID-19 deaths were from the senior population, those listed as 60+. Is it because of poverty or inadequate access to health care? Is it because we are 'warehousing' our seniors in less than stellar living conditions

with inadequate resourcing for the staff who are often trying their best but without the tools to do their job? We must do better. Think this doesn't impact you? 2036 is only 16 years away ? how old will you be?

Finally, June is also Indigenous History month and certainly recent media coverage of tragic events impacting this community also abound. Historic and systemic discrimination here too is problematic. We might start Board meetings or school assemblies with an ?acknowledgment? that the land on which we gather is indigenous land and give respect to our first inhabitants but in this case what, other than words, are we really doing to support Indigenous rights? Is this ?acknowledgment? a positive first step in the right direction or empty words that simply serve to make us feel better? There is much work that still needs to be done. Especially during the month of June, and ongoing, don't shy away from conversations because they are difficult or because you're afraid of saying the wrong thing. Say something. If we learn and grow as humans together, change can happen.