

06/09/2020

AJ Harris
Proponent of S.C.R. 14

Dear Chairman Burke:

My name is AJ Harris, a resident of Cuyahoga Falls, born and raised in Zanesville – and I’m here as a black man to voice my support of the resolution to declare racism a public health crisis. I want to thank the committee for granting the opportunity for me, and so many others who care about or have been impacted directly by racism, to testify before you today.

I’m the son of a white woman and a black man. I will be the first to admit that I’ve been protected by the privilege my lighter skin has afforded me, but being a black man, with family, friends, and neighbors whose skin is darker than my own, I’m here to speak up and speak out.

You see, this country, this state, the community I grew up in and the one I now live in, all have a racism problem. I saw it over the weekend peacefully protesting in Cuyahoga Falls, as a few white resident’s shouted “All Lives Matter”, or “Stop shouting, you’re not going to save anyone”, at my wife and I as we stood on the corner exercising our 1st amendment right. My step-father saw it when he was a kid in 1960s Zanesville and had to go to the back of the local ice cream parlor to get a sundae, instead of through the front door, because they didn’t want black people in their business – but they did want their money. My white mother experienced it, when her father, my grandfather, who I love with all of my heart, first objected to her marrying a black man, because he told her “that’s the way he was brought up.” Brought up to be racist -

brought up to feel superior to another person because of the color of their skin. Therein, gentlemen and women, lies the problem.

People have been raised to hate folks of color, which has fed an unfair system that was already designed to limit the rights of black communities. When racism leads to housing, education, and employment inequality, that's when it starts impacting our health. That's when it starts to become a health crisis. And it's been impacting folks for far too long.

Now is the time for Ohio to stand up as a leader in racial equality, to call racism what it really is – a public health crisis. That's just the beginning of overhauling and reforming the way black folks are treated by local and state institutions. It's not too much to ask, especially from a group of people who have been oppressed and persecuted for hundreds of years, calling home a nation that once considered them 3/5's of a person. It's time for us to put politics aside, for the white men and women in this room, especially those in this room in power, to say enough is enough.

As a black man – as a citizen of this state and this nation, I urge the passing of this resolution for my father, my stepfather, my brothers, my sister, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins – and all those black men and women throughout this state who are fed up.

Thank you.