

Special Edition

Race and Racism in Wellesley

What happened and how: breaking down the racist Facebook messages of this summer

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Editor in Chief and Print Editor in Chief



Photo by Andrew Tucker

Chisum speaks to the entire student and faculty body at the back to school assembly about the racist Facebook messages from the summer and the high school's need to unify in the face of hate.

"It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up," said Wellesley Schools Superintendent Dr. David Lussier. "I had never seen anything like it," added high school Principal Dr. Jamie Chisum.

On the evening of July 14, a Wellesley student posted a series of screenshots from a private group chat to Facebook. Seven male students, three of whom attended Wellesley High School, sent the chat virulently racist messages about their peers as well as messages referencing homophobia and genocide.

Commenters were shocked by the extreme degree of the messages. Many had never seen such overt and unapologetic racism. As reported by NECN, messages included, "I'm fed up with this s***/ N***** taking our jobs". Another student sent "You f***** hate n***** right?! Cause I don't know about you but I'm trying to genocide their a**". A third message said "If one more f***** n***** shows up in this chat I'll lynch him".

While the poster received praise for his actions exposing the brutal racism, the post did stir up controversy. Comments on his post also condemned the students who sent the hateful messages and devolved into death threats towards them. Thus, the post was soon removed from Facebook.

School authorities soon took notice. The school's disciplinary actions must remain confidential due to the age of the perpetrators. However, Chisum explained that each student received a disciplinary hearing

from the school administration to explain his side and the administration penalized the students accordingly. "I just wanted to know why. I wanted to know how it happened," said Chisum regarding his conversations with the students.

Lussier said that, despite his initial reaction of outright anger, he believes throwing the book at students is often uncalled for. "You want [discipline] to be done in a way that feels restorative," said Lussier. "Regardless of how bad the mistake, you want kids to be able to recover and learn from it."

"No one contended that they did it. They all admitted that they did it.... [The offending students] really showed contrition," said Chisum. According to Chisum, two of the students' families contacted him before he even reached out to them.

The police also became involved, but, again because the offenders are minors, the extent of any charges remains confidential. As Lussier pointed out, the police will only charge offenders if they deem their actions to be criminal in nature.

The response to this hate spanned beyond the walls of the school and shook the community as a whole. "The community was hurt by it. It became about more than just these conversations, these postings. They woke people up," said Chisum. "What you hear after that is all the different pains that people have felt here, particularly people of color, about how difficult it is to be a person of color in the town of Wellesley, not just Wellesley

High School."

For World of Wellesley (WOW) president Michelle Chalmers, reading these messages warranted immediate action. "When you are feeling this trauma, you have to be heard. You want people around you," she said. Feeling this, she immediately organized a town gathering.

At the event, 80 people attended and stood in a circle, singing and speaking about race and diversity. After this small gathering, WOW organized a second solidarity potluck on the town hall law before the first day of public school. Over 400 attended this event. Tendai Musikavanhu, the father of one of the families targeted, and his son Bobo Musikavanhu spoke at the picnic about the importance of forgiveness in a situation where feeling anger would be far easier.

Chisum spoke to all students at the school's opening assembly. He wanted to convey the overwhelming feelings of the faculty -- that these actions and words were inexcusable and intolerable. "The message I wanted to send is that [racism] is not OK -- we're not OK with it; we're outraged by it. We are upset. We are not just sad; We are angry. We are frustrated by it. It's not just something we are going to condone -- in any way," he said.

Chisum also outlined his visions for the way the school will address race and racism as the school year progresses. One of the key components of his vision is the newly created One Wellesley. The group, for

which there is a teacher component and a student component, aims to build positive, constructive discourse around the topic of race in Wellesley.

The district also aims to prioritize hiring faculty of color. Lussier emphasized how important it is to have a diverse staff. Not only is it important for students of color to have a teachers who look like them, but it is also important for all students to learn from teachers of varying backgrounds, races, and perspectives. For the 2015-2016 school year, 10% of new district faculty identified as people of color. For the 2016-2017 school year, that figure rose to 20%. Lussier hopes this percentage will continue to increase.

Additionally, district-wide, staff will receive thorough training on addressing race in school and facilitating discussions around racial issues. "We are looking at our curriculum to think about enhancing the ways in which we embed conversations about race and diversity," Lussier said.

The entire district, K-12, will also undergo a comprehensive curriculum review to evaluate how each school and each grade level confronts topics of race and diversity -- whether it be the Ghana unit in first grade or reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in eighth. This will be the first time that the district has launched a full K-12 curriculum review.

Lussier explained that the review not only moves to catalyze inclusive discussions in the classroom but also to silence the idea that micro-

aggressions in Wellesley are isolated. "We are moving to do a formal assessment on the climate of race and diversity in the district," he said. "Not just to have a baseline but also to point to other people who might want to hide this under the rug and say 'no, this is bigger than just an incident on social media or a couple of folks coming forward; this is actually a part of the culture that we have to have the courage to acknowledge and to address.'"

Chisum hopes that from this, the district will craft a unified curriculum that fairly represents diverse perspectives. He does acknowledge, however, that this type of systemic change will not occur overnight.

"I want people to understand we are not going to stop talking about [racism]," said Chisum. "Hopefully, with kids' help, with teachers' help, we talk about it in relevant, meaningful ways. I'm acutely aware that I can't keep lecturing people and have it be effective. We have to find and continue to find relevant, authentic ways to have a conversation."

Lussier added that he hopes these changes will have profound impacts, and that Wellesley's reactions to racism will outlast the racism itself. "I don't think any of these things are unique to Wellesley," he said. "I think what sets us apart is how quickly the community comes together in one voice to say 'no, this is not who we are.'"

“What do you want your role in history to be, in a movement like this that will go down in history? Do you want to be able to say that you were on the side of not caring, do you want to say that you cared, or do you want to say that you were indifferent? How do you want to go down in history?”

—Eleanor Sutherland '19



“One of the things I’ve said is that moving forward, I want to have a way where we have a mechanism to regularly check in for our students of color— for any of our students who feel vulnerable— to know what it’s like, to see if we are making any progress or not. To listen to those voices, to hear the flavors of what their experiences are, that is really important. And to use those voices to create those solutions.”

—Dr. Jamie Chisum

“The first step to resolve these issues surrounding racism is to talk about these issues. By doing so, people gain an understanding of different cultures and backgrounds, which then leads to a welcoming atmosphere in our community.”

—Dean Simpson '17



“I know some of the people that were involved and affected by it, and I think it is important to create a dialogue in Wellesley to talk about it and address it rather than just labeling it as something that we shouldn't bring attention to.” —Liam Skelly '17

“Honestly it’s not surprising. It’s not like racism isn’t around. I feel like the school needs to do more than talk about it just once. When it gets just mentioned at an assembly, people forget about it, and it gets brushed under the rug. Then the same thing happens again, and it’s a continuous cycle.”

—Freddy Stoudemire '17

“Soul-crushing, sad, angry, frustrated, disappointed...I also feel that it doesn’t accurately represent our community. It represents a portion of our community. I sort of hope and like to think that as a community, we’re better than that.”

—Ms. Amy Fiske

“There’s this strain because [the town] doesn’t know how to change it. And I just think that that’s kind of what we see, what we saw through that process. Even now, I think there’s a lot of faculty members of color in the different schools who feel weighed down because they don’t know who to talk to about it. They’re listening to different opinions; they have their own opinions. Obviously, because of the election, people feel certain ways about being in the community as it is. I don’t think that it is an accurate representation in terms of it being 100% accurate, but I just think that it’s really a tough spot to be in because I think it’s partially true and partially false, and nobody really knows where to draw the line.”

— Mr. Grant Hightower



“I think that there are underlying issues that these kids brought to our attention. I think steps need to be taken to address and acknowledge the issue. It won't be an easy process, or a short one for that matter, but things must change.”

—Katie Walsh '17

What was your initial reaction to the racist messages over the summer?

How do you think it reflects the culture of Wellesley?

How should we address these issues moving forward?

“I didn’t show my younger son, who was coming into ninth grade. It was really, really painful to see what these students chose to do and say and post. It’s terrifying. And here my son, my baby son, is getting ready to come into this school, as a freshman, and it just was again a decision that I just felt like I needed to protect him.”

—Ms. Michelle Chalmers

“I was really surprised to hear about this because I thought were were better than that. I hope it doesn’t happen again. It is unusual that we are having all of these events in a row and maybe we have to work harder to stop them.”

—Javier Lopez '19



“I think it definitely accurately represents the town. I think it was brought to surface through this incident, but there is a lot of underlying racism and microaggressions that I personally have experienced, so I can’t imagine how many students of color feel that way. And I don’t think we can move forward from this until we address this issue head-on; make it part of our daily conversation; make it a consistent conversation instead of doing an event every so often. This needs to be the discourse of the school, and it needs to be a priority, and really it ties into our core values.”

—Ms. Shima Khan

Racism is not a new struggle

Bongani Musikavanhu '18

Contributing Writer

Contributing writer Bongani Musikavanhu '18 reflects on the racist messages of this summer, some of which were directed at him and his family.



Photo courtesy of Bongani Musikavanhu

When I first heard anything at all, I was on vacation detoxing in my home country of South Africa. We were just getting to that point in every good vacation where wifi becomes more and more scarce, due to lack of access and the fact that we really just didn't want to distract ourselves at all from enjoying our time. But one day in peaceful Kwazulu Natal, my eldest sister Gail-Agnes decided to enjoy some Facebook and saw all sorts of commotion that was hard to piece together. All we knew at that moment was that some people had said some deplorable things about our family and race. So initially, all I felt was helpless; I couldn't have done anything at all in that rural vacation setting. And all my information came from my sister Gail-Agnes.

So as soon as I could, I did some research and slowly began to piece together the fact that these messages were not just random people commenting online. They were my friends saying hateful things about me and my family.

At that moment, all I could feel was a great need to make sure that people understood that I cared, and to remind people that anger is not how to fight racism. So I did. I summed up as best I could all my thoughts and opinions and posted them to Facebook:

"Recently it has come to my attention that a new Ridiculous has come to light. A Ridiculous that carries the straw to the camel's back. Racism is not a new war and never will be; it has been fought by those older and wiser than I and has been conquered in many ways. In all our victories from this war against racism, anger and violence have never solved anything. So thusly, it is neither my responsibility to accuse nor to bring any judgement. However, it is my

responsibility to let everyone know that I am aware of the situation and am willing to say and do something about it. As for the men at the source of our conflict, forgiveness will always be on my heart. This is solely due to my faith in which my very honor dwells. Because of my faith, I know that if I forgive others for their trespasses, our heavenly Father will also forgive me, but if I do not forgive others for their trespasses, neither will our Father forgive my trespasses (Matthew 6:14-15). I mention this not to convict anyone, or to self promote, but rather to explain the reasoning behind my mentality. I forgive not because I feel like it; but because it is necessary and for the best of us. I accept every apology; however, we all know that thieves only feel true guilt for their actions when caught. And in this particular situation, it was my family that was put to mockery on top of blatant racism. And it is my family that I care most for. I think it is great that everyone has acknowledged that there is a problem; however, the true and best way to solve the issue does not lie in social media or in death threats. The true answer lies in full understanding of the actions taken and actions we can take toward ending this ordeal as a whole. I know that the suspension of random individuals will not end this form of racism, and I also know that if most of the texts and conversations held in all group chats were made public, nobody would feel like making any remarks on anything anymore. The men who make the most noise in times of judgement tend to be the most guilty.

Finally in the words of Martin Luther King 'We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.' We can sort this out together back in Wellesley, like we always have."

I felt like a weight had been

lifted off my shoulders, yet I quickly came to realize that half of my family and friends on Facebook did not have a clue about what I was talking about. Immediately my parents were up to speed, We felt angry, sad and betrayed, but sensed great opportunity: an opportunity to acknowledge the hidden racism that some of us experience or enforce daily without knowing or caring. An opportunity to expose it and define it.

Once we did, once we exposed and defined the racism; we were shown just how beautiful and natural it is for human beings to unify and heal. People from churches in South Africa and Boston prayed and acknowledged the situation; people at this school and town, for whom the situation was not even directly relevant, unified to amend the situation. A scenario as small as boys irresponsibly fooling around on Facebook had managed to alert and unify multitudes of people to heal an immigrant family from South Africa.

That is why it was so important to us as a family to forgive. It does not take Christianity, our faith, to see a chance for unification rather than a chance for condemnation and retaliation toward random boys. That is why the One Wellesley movement is crucial -- because it gives students an opportunity to embrace the fact that we are different as individuals, and to let our differences bring us together. Knowing that people who are less than willing to repent make comments like these every day should make anybody sick. Yet we let them and watch as bystanders.

The scarier possibility is if we had had no incident at the start of the school year. Racism would not be our priority as a school, and the One Wellesley Program would not exist. These comments on Facebook re-sensitized our school, and presented us with a brand new opportunity to step up. And recent acknowledgment of events regarding race around the school like the bathroom profanity and the computer lab Swastika are not futile or redundant attempts at sympathy, They are examples of active awareness to bring unity and prevent racist or locker room talk throughout our school.

With this in mind, we can see the student group One Wellesley not as an opportunity to judge our fellow classmates or express empty sympathy to distant issues, but as a seizing of the opportunity presented by our circumstance to make things right and to unify.

One love, One Wellesley

Shannon Chaffers '18

Opinions Editor

"Disappointed." "Worried." "Tiring." "Frustrating."

These were the feelings of students in the One Wellesley club whose messages were broadcast around the school after the issue of racism in Wellesley came to a head when the "n-word" was found written on a stall in the girls' bathroom.

In reaction to the racist incident over the summer, Principal Jamie Chisum started the One Wellesley Club with the help of the assistant principals, METCO coordinators Ms. Kalise Wornum and Mr. Grant Hightower, and various other community organizations to combat the racism that continues to plague the community.

Chisum, who attends every meeting, hopes the club can create a permanent forum for discussion in which students can share their experiences with racism. "We are trying to [create a mechanism] that will always be here to make sure the voices of students of color are heard," he said. Chisum believes this is a major component in making Wellesley a more inclusive community. "I don't want any kid to feel like they're not a full member of this community; that's wrong," he said.

The club, split up into a group of about 45 students and a separate faculty group, meets every Wednesday. "There was a passionate group of teachers and a passionate group of students that needed to do work in this area," said Chisum, explaining the logic behind having teachers involved in the club as well.

School Psychologist Jordana Matz and Adjustment Counselor Mary Howard, leaders of the student group, help communicate between the faculty and students. In addition to communication, Matz and Howard also help students facilitate conversation, provide them with support, and help make their ideas a reality. The two teachers also recognize the importance of giving the students room to create their own plans. "I really feel like if there's going to be a change in the student body, it really needs to come from the student body," said Howard.

For this reason, Matz and Howard spend the first half of each meeting talking to students about opportunities to get involved outside of One Wellesley, and give students time during the second half of each meeting to discuss amongst themselves. During this time, students brainstorm how to counter racism in the short term, intermediate, and long term. Students have discussed everything from "implementing activities in advisory to adding more culturally diverse courses in the curriculum," Howard said. The club also plans to bring in speakers to talk to students about race.

The club hopes to get involved outside of the high school community by sending its student members to a youth leadership summit run by the IDEAS (Initiatives for

Developing Equity and Achievement for Students) program of EDCO (The Education Collaborative) in the coming month.

In addition to confronting the issue of racism, the club brainstorms consequences for racist actions. "How do we respond and how do we react in a way that is restorative, but just and clear?" is a question some students are really focused on, Howard said.

The determination and dedication the students bring to the club have inspired both Matz and Howard. "It [is] really exciting... to see the passion and enthusiasm that many of the students have in trying to figure out how to make Wellesley a better more welcoming and safe place for everyone," Howard said.

Perhaps the most important message the club hopes to send is the importance of community. "We are one and we are coming to work together, and to do this long term consistent work, and to support one another," said Matz. "When people feel a part of a team, organization, or committee, it can feel safer to stand up for what they believe in."

Emaan Tariq '18 joined the club for just that reason: she believes it is important for individuals in the community to stand up and take action. "I joined One Wellesley to be able to make a difference in our school and community," she said.

Like Chisum, Tariq believes the club provides a safe environment for students to have hard conversations about their experiences with race. "The club is really meant to give a chance for students' voices to be heard," she said. "[This] gives comfort to other students because it's [their] peers who are bringing hope to such a difficult issue," she said.

The positive attitude exemplified by Tariq is a key in the mindset of the club going forward, as two more racist incidents have occurred since the beginning of the school year. Chisum believes all students must be active allies in this fight against racism. He uses the phrase "stay woke" to embody this idea: "Don't just wake up for [the incident over the summer], and then go back to sleep," he said. "Students need to be engaged, there's lots of educational opportunities [about racism] out there."

Chisum also wants the community to know that the work One Wellesley does will not happen overnight. "Give us time, be patient, this work is slow," he said. "We're headed in the right direction, but it's going to take some time, we just have to keep beating the drum."

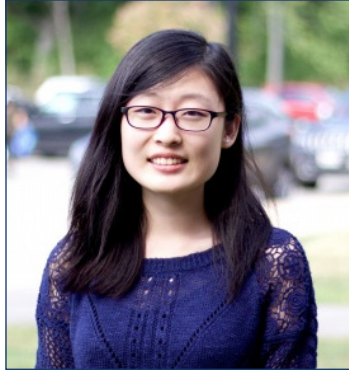
Most importantly, Chisum hopes students and faculty alike remember that the name One Wellesley comes from the idea of 'one love'; the idea of universal love for people of all races. Said Chisum: "There's not a limit for how much love should be in this town, in this school, for [all] people."

The Bradford Reflects

The differences between you and me

Christie Yu '18

Web Editor in Chief



Sometimes people forget I'm a person of color because I'm pale. From far away, you couldn't tell me apart from someone who is racially white. Asian is not a race that is black or white, so it's often left out of the conversation.

In fact, often people will suggest that being Asian is a good thing. To many, being Asian is like being white, but "you're smarter." And smart is good, right? Who doesn't want to be called smart?

Here's the thing: Thanks for calling me smart. I appreciate it, though it might not be true. What you're forgetting about is the fact that by calling me smart, you're picking me out of the crowd. Why? Because of my race.

And yes, sure, it's a compliment. I'll say thank you and go on with my day. But the principle behind it is that you are calling out a difference between you and me because of the color of my skin.

And whilst your comment that I'm inherently "smart" doesn't pierce me as much as, say, being called a "criminal" might, it highlights that you and I have some specific difference that is genetic and unalterable, simply by our physical features. And that breeds an atmosphere of alienation.

What happened this summer is a result of alienation. It's hard to think that the Wellesley High School is anything but inclusive and careful of human differences, but face the facts: it's difficult to feel anything but "we" and "they" when our school is 73.1% white, with a 4.6% African-American population. (If you're wondering,

the school is also 11.8% Asian, but nobody cares about that until college application season.)

And, this statistic is reflected in the population sample within the Facebook group chat that instigated this whole discussion. One person in that chat, the person that reported the racist behavior to the police, identified as Mexican-American.

No one in that chat was African American, the race targeted by the "jokes." It's easy to call it a joke when the people making the joke are all white.

And to zoom out of the charming town of Wellesley, what happens day by day, hour by hour in

this country is a result of alienation. What happened just in the past month, in Tulsa and Charlotte and El Cajon and Middle River and Columbus and all 71 other instances of police brutality just this month is a result of alienation.

All of these events are so "mundane," so "old-news" that I don't even cover them in my weekly Top 5 News Stories anymore. The ambience of the United States as a whole has become an atmosphere of alienation, of unfounded hatred, and of these tiny little comments about how I'm "smart" because something in my face tells you I'm Asian.

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Wellesley can no longer practice selective sensitivity

Zach Miller '17

Print Editor in Chief



Let me start out by saying that these Facebook posts contained some of the nastiest, most hurtful comments I have ever seen, and that in my opinion, no punishment would have been too severe for the perpetrators of the messages. The content of the screenshots was disgusting and vile and absolutely inexcusable, especially when half-assed apologies were all the bullies could muster after the fact. In no way do I wish to diminish the importance of what occurred; this was an incredibly momentous moment for Wellesley, both in the atrocity of the actions and in the response of the community.

That said, a part of me feels that the response in this case

only highlights Wellesley's indifference to previous incidents.

I understand that movements need catalysts; what I don't understand is why Wellesley waited so long before finally finding an issue that made people collectively agree that intolerance in Wellesley is a problem. The truth is, racial issues existed in Wellesley long before the screenshots appeared on Facebook; so, too, did anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

The fact that METCO students have been called the "n-word" in the streets of Wellesley should not have gone over lightly; instances where students bullied other students for practicing Islam should not have been swept under the rug. Last spring, an incident occurred on Instagram in which a student posted a series of anti-Semitic pictures with captions making fun of the Holocaust. I'm Jewish, so I'm not objective in saying this, but where was the outcry then?

This, again, is not to diminish the Facebook incident; rather, I believe the Wellesley community

diminished previous incidents by treating them as less severe and less important. Of course the community response to recent racism has been appropriate and welcome, but I find myself questioning why we couldn't bring ourselves to be as outraged before.

I do not want to promote an atmosphere of sensitivity, and I hate it when people get easily offended; it irritates me to no end when people think that just because something offends them, it's wrong. But consistency is important. If Wellesley is going to unify to confront an act of racism, we must unify to confront all acts of racism. The One Wellesley club is a step in the right direction, but we must also unify to confront sexism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and homophobia, among various other prejudices. After the unpublicized events of the past year and the well-known incidents this summer, we cannot pick and choose who or what we care about anymore.

A final warning

Will Parker '17

Opinions Editor



the n-word on social media. The white perpetrators used slurs and stereotypes with intent to harm. There is no defense for that, and calling it a "joke" provides no escape from consequence. Despite how archaic these behaviors may seem, they are unfortunately still around in places we would not expect them to be.

More common, however, is the more casual use of the "n-word". We hear it in music, on television, and even in the popular internet phrase, "really n-a?" Simon tried to explain why he thought his casual and comedic use of the word was appropriate, but those upset by his words rejected his defense. Simon angered a lot of people, and he paid for it with his reputation.

With the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and racism attached to the n-word, it will never sound proper rolling out of a white mouth, or typed into an online message by white fingers.

My message is simple. To all those young and blissfully innocent white fellas who enjoy saying "n-a": your excuses, reasoning, or defense will never be good enough. You know it is a bad word. If David Simon cannot get away with it, neither can you.

There are some words that white people are better off never using. You can explain your way out of a couple things, but never the "n-word" or its variations. No matter your intent, use of the n-word will be perceived as offensive, and you will be perceived as a piece of trash.

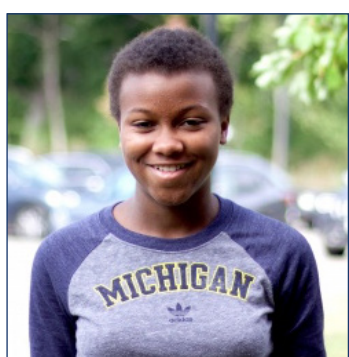
Even David Simon, creator of HBO's *The Wire*, cannot escape punishment. Simon, the white journalist who exposed America's failed war on drugs and its subsequent impact on inner city black folk by spending years investigating impoverished urban communities, is not immune to criticism. After using "n-a" in a satirical tweet that mocked Donald Trump's ignorance of race relations, he was relentlessly chastised by the tweeting public.

Here in Wellesley, we witnessed racially charged use of

Joining the discussion

Shannon Chaffers '18

Opinions Editor



To many people, it came as a shock. The bubble created by Wellesley's lack of racial diversity finally burst. For someone who

doesn't follow the national news, who doesn't see the racial tensions dividing numerous communities, whose only experience with racism comes from history class, the world seems to have advanced past the struggles of racism. But the event over the summer destroyed this perception.

As a black person living in this town, I never lived in this alternate reality. For me, the racial tensions in this country mean something. If innocent black citizens experience racism, so can I and so can my

family. So for me, the shooting in Tulsa, Oklahoma and the protests in Charlotte, North Carolina matter.

Because of the lack of diversity in our town, some people did not feel the way I do. They did not feel the need to worry about the effects of racism because it didn't affect them, and it didn't affect their friends. This passive attitude simply allowed racism to persist. Now, because the issue of racism has hit so close to home, we can no longer ignore racial tensions.

The Wellesley community must face reality as we begin our effort to heal and change the culture in our town. The events that have always mattered to me now matter to all.

To clarify, I am not saying what happened over the summer was a good thing. It was horrible and harmful because of the hateful, racist language aiming to dehumanize those in our community. I am saying, however, that the long term effects can be positive, that the response to this

event can bring our community together.

I say this because the event sheds light on the divide that race causes in this country. When a broad, ever present issue such as race finally affects your community, it builds a connection between people in the town and forces us to acknowledge the problem dividing our country. In essence, this event bursts the bubble, it ends the ignorance, and it allows us as a town to finally join the discussion gripping the nation.