

# We can't stand in silence

Ethnically, Pope county is about 90 percent or higher white. And without looking at the demographics, I'd wager that this is roughly the same for other counties in the River Valley region. I don't recall much blatant racism while growing up in Atkins, though, there was plenty of passive racism in the way of jokes and such behind the scenes. Those jokes at school were the only place I ever heard the "N" word.

I remember in my young ignorance -- probably early teens -- using that word. It was in the company of my one African-American friend who, with angry tears in his eyes, explained to me how incredibly hurtful it was.

I never said that word again.

The town I live in now, along with neighboring communities in the northern part of the county are and were nearly 100 percent white. On up into the 1980s, they were known as "sundown towns." The bold implication being, if you weren't white, you best not be around after sundown. Things got a little better in the next decade. I remember playing pick-up basketball in one of those high school gyms in the early 90s and being pleasantly shocked when an African-American young man walked in and no one said a thing. But we all had a common interest in basketball. Outside of the gym, things were different.

In the years since, I really thought we'd turned a corner. But I've heard the "N" used more during the last decade than at any other time of my life, and from sometimes surprising sources. I've also heard countless other thinly veiled racist remarks with the preamble "I'm not racist but..." Still, I've held on to hope that things were changing for the better.

And then, just a few weeks ago — in the year 2019 — a group of megaphone-equipped self-proclaimed Neo-Nazis felt emboldened to surface in downtown Russellville. And we were shocked.

We shouldn't have been

Active racism festers because passive racism -- the muttered slurs, racist jokes, belief in

white entitlement grounded in the "I'm not racist, but..." stereotypes -- enables it. Our apathy enables it.

You don't have to be a social justice warrior or an activist to bring true change to our communities. But you do have to speak up when racism rears its despicable head. We can't argue that those waving swastikas and chants of genocide are the fringe minority, that they don't represent us, while we stand in silence as they parade hate on our streets.




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