

## Can We Become Antiracist?

It's likely you've been hearing more at Montview about undoing racism since the Memorial Day murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Certainly, that's when many of us white folks were awakened – or reawakened – to the systemic injustices Black people and people of color experience every day in America.

But, in fact, the work that's bubbling to the surface now at Montview is built on groundwork laid over the course of many years by the clergy and some lay leaders at Montview. Joining the pursuit of this work now are Rebecca Gale and Marilynn Ackermann, working in collaboration with the community organizing agency, Together Colorado. Many of you know Rebecca and Marilynn, but I'm going to introduce you to how they got involved in rooting out racism.

Rebecca grew up in the Deep South. She attended schools in Augusta, Ga., that were nominally integrated, but few Black children were enrolled in her classes. A Black girl in her class wanted to be friends and play together outside of school, but Rebecca remembers that an invisible barrier kept her from having that conversation with her parents.

Fast forward to 2016. Rebecca, now well established in Denver and working as a private piano teacher, got her introduction to antiracism work from Peg Logan. Peg is a friend in the Montview choir who has decades of experience in social and racial justice work and was professionally employed with Together Colorado at that time. After the 2016 election, Rebecca resolved to step out of her role as passive bystander and onto a path of community organizing.

Rebecca's first task was to recruit Montview members to attend an event known as "an action." The meeting, held in January 2017 at Shorter AME Church, concerned police officers' use of violent and deadly force against citizens.

"We turned out 144 people from Montview," says Rebecca, "and that felt very empowering to us." She and Peg hoped they could capitalize on the momentum coming from that meeting to work more deeply with Montview members on systemic issues of injustice.

First, Rebecca needed to engage in personal reflection. At the invitation of Peg and Together Colorado, she attended an intensive antiracism class put on by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond for 40 people.

"It was a powerful experience to learn about the roots of racism in this country," she said, adding: "We delved into it deeply in a personal way."

She began scheduling one-on-one coffees with Montview members who might be willing to engage in community organizing work with her. One of those coffees was with Marilynn Ackermann.

What emerged from that conversation, Rebecca recalls, was "the God moment." She needed another Montview member to step onto the community organizing path with her, and Marilynn was that member.

Marilynn had worked with Women's Homeless Initiative and Musana and was looking for a new challenge. "As good as these programs are, it's not changing systems," Marilynn said. "I was starting to see that something bigger has to happen."

When Marilyn tells her own story, tears often bubble to the surface. She'd grown up in Dearborn, Mich., an all-white enclave outside of Detroit. When she was 15 and candy-stripping at the Henry Ford Hospital, she was dumbfounded when her Black supervisor told her bluntly that he could not drive her home from work. "Sundowner" laws banned Black people from entering Dearborn after dark.

Marilynn confronted her father, and he told her that he had consciously reared her to be racist. "That was the beginning of my awakening," she says. She and Jeff, her high school sweetheart, left Detroit soon after college. Happily, she adds, "my father came around at the end of his life."

In 2017, Marilyn attended a Montview retreat on race and privilege. She experienced an "aha" moment when she identified the need to go beyond educating ourselves and converting that knowledge into action. She acknowledges now and understands that seeing and untangling her own racism is a journey she'll be on for the rest of her life.

"We have to take a deep dive to learn how racism affects us personally," she says. "The understanding of personal complicity [in racism] is essential to doing something meaningful without doing anything harmful."

In June 2018, Rebecca and Marilyn attended an intensive five-day training in Estes Park hosted by Together Colorado. TC engaged its leaders in the process of caucusing, in which white people and people of color meet separately to discuss their unique relationships to racism. Caucusing for white leaders involves conversations and activities led by a trained facilitator that help participants see and talk openly and regularly about their own personal blind spots around racism and implicit bias.

"We as white people swim in the waters of racism every day and don't see it," Marilyn says. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

Adds Rebecca: "Every system in our country is built on racist premises. Until you see that, you can't move forward with an anti-racism movement in a systemic way."

After that retreat, Marilyn, working with Together Colorado, took a deep dive into the police practice of "show-ups," in which officers detain a potential suspect and drive the witness or victim of a crime to the suspect for identification on the spot. This has mostly replaced previous methods of line-ups or photo line-ups.

Marilynn was instrumental in holding an "action" meeting with Together Colorado to pressure Denver Police Chief Paul Pazen to limit the practice of show-ups and to train officers on best practices to avoid erroneous identifications. Pazen has been receptive. Pazen has worked to develop new policies and trainings along with collecting data on race and identification practices. He's asked Together Colorado to endorse his request for a grant to train all officers in Active Bystander behavior. That training teaches officers to be empowered to step in or speak out when another officer is behaving inappropriately. Once these roll out, they'll look at replicating these trainings for the rest of Colorado.

After the coronavirus pandemic upended church activities this spring, the co-pastors invited Marilyn and Rebecca to offer a series of classes on antiracism as part of the Theological Tapas classes offered on Zoom. Through conversations with Together Colorado staff and curricula ideas borrowed with permission, they created the three-week series, "Becoming Antiracist: Our Calling as People of Faith."

The class filled up quickly, and it is being reprised this month. For more details on the class, or to register before the September 13<sup>th</sup> deadline, click [here](#).

“We wanted to create an arc from personal reflections to systemic understanding and action,” Rebecca says. That is, they engage people in the process of identifying their own complicity in racism and understanding structures that support systemic racism and the ways in which we can take action to dismantle those structures.

“It’s not enough to engage in lifelong learning for our own personal enlightenment,” she says. “We have to learn how to talk to other white people about racism, and we have to regularly work together in deep, trusting relationship with each other to begin to see and think and act differently so that we’re not causing so much harm to people of color. This is as big a spiritual shake-up and awakening as we could ever ask for, so members of our beloved Montview community are the very people with whom we want to be struggling in that awakening.”

Meanwhile, Marilyn is holding semi-monthly virtual coffees with members who want to engage in this work on a slightly deeper level as so-called Human Dignity Delegates. At the end of a coffee, she offers simple and concrete ways participants can engage in work such as contacting legislators, signing petitions and reading books or essays on racism and white privilege.

Montview members who gather together virtually for Supper Clubs this fall will see the year’s topic will be “Race and Racial Justice.” And the Wednesday night book club has just selected its next book: *Caste*, by Isabel Wilkerson.

Even more opportunities will arise as Marilyn and Rebecca plan an extended training program with trained facilitators. That likely will have to wait for the end of the pandemic.

“We want to take people through antiracism training followed by a year of deep reflective work that would culminate in how we are going to tackle systemic injustice together, as people of faith,” says Rebecca.

But that work must begin with and always include a look inward. Those of us who have taken the *Becoming Antiracist* class or have tuned in for the twice-monthly virtual coffee klatches recognize that racism isn’t an abstract concept. It’s deeply ingrained in all of us.

For my own part, I’m finding that I need to work on understanding how racism has shaped my life and imbued me with privileges denied to people of color, and how it undergirds the foundations of our country. For me, that work starts with reading about racism and white privilege and with supplementing the Euro-centric history fed to me in my formal education. It means having frank, even courageous conversations with white friends and family members. And it involves working to change systems in our country that effectively keep people of color down.

As Marilyn says, once you see it, you can’t unsee it.

Submitted by Jan Paul