

For the good people of Thunder Bay

BY REG JONES
FOR THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

— Edmund Burke

I HAVE been following the racism debate locally, nationally and internationally. There is so much misunderstanding and ignorance of the facts. I sense many people who weigh in may never have talked to an Indigenous person or a refugee — let alone worked with them. They make assumptions and aspersions based on fear and generational myths. I find it curious that the current objects of fear are both the earliest inhabitants of this land, and the newest. Self-preservation of status quo privilege seems paramount.

In my work with school boards from 1973 to 1989 I was privileged to get to know First Nations leaders and educators across Northern Ontario. There were many "aha" moments as I blundered along, learning



ONE CITY
MANY VOICES

Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

and trying to be helpful. My 27 years with the college's Negahneewin Council has taught me much. Elders, council members, teachers, students and colleagues have revealed a different perspective on history and culture — the dramatic transition to first contact, the fur trade and settlers, the broken treaties, the apartheid of reserves, the generational damage of residential schools,

and more.

I now know many successful indigenous professionals working and raising their families in Thunder Bay. My learning has continued in retirement. I read, watch films and ask questions to understand. Living in the waterfront area gives me opportunity to engage with folks on the streets and along McVicar Creek.

I do think our personal and media focus on the polar extremes of left or right is wrong-headed. It takes our eye off the ball.

The biggest problem I see is "apathetic racism." Most people in Thunder Bay do not hurl trailer hitches, slushies or epithets at Indigenous people. Nor do they overtly despise Muslims. They are "good people." But they are largely silent and not well informed. A few work on justice issues in their work, church or service organizations. But most do not want to think about it,

learn more, or get involved. It's understandable. It's hard. But as Desmond Tutu said: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Our focus for education and understanding should not be on the overt racists but on the vast middle in our community — the well-meaning. It should be within all our institutions where old structural attitudes still exist. Good hearts and minds also need to change — we can't be uninformed and uninvolved — apathetic. We must be engaged.

We need to be educated to the truth of our history and impacts. We can no longer claim blindness. Seeing nothing, learning nothing, saying nothing and doing nothing, is why racism continues.

My hope is that this column and

newspaper become a place of learning for the good people of Thunder Bay. This is an amazing city. I love it. It works for me. But it does not work for others.

I am continually surprised at how little we collectively know of our shared history. But I am encouraged as I see how little new knowledge it takes for most people to turn their hearts and minds toward justice, rather than away from injustice. We need to, and we can do, better! Commit to be part of the solution. Start your own learning journey. Engage in local opportunities. Get to know your Indigenous and refugee neighbours. Learning makes us humble and helpful. Become an ally. Speak up!

Reg Jones is a retired Confederation College vice-president who worked there with Negahneewin Council. He has facilitated Walk a Mile sessions and is engaged with The Redwood Church Walking Together Circle, where he also chairs the sponsorship of two refugee families.

APATHY

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