

A personal lesson about insidious discrimination



BY MARK BEDELL
Special to The Star

There was a time when I was prepared to ruin a young Black man's life because of sagging pants.

The mere presence of Black faces in the halls of leadership does not vaccinate against institutional racism. That is one of the most important lessons I've learned as a Black man in a position of power.

Every major institution in the U.S. is engineered on a foundation of racism, implicit bias and fear. As the Black Lives Matter movement sparks critical conversations about these issues, it is imperative that every white person and every person of color in leadership guard against the undermining influence of that structure. In fact, we must all begin now to dismantle those systems and build a new structure founded on equity, hope and opportunity for all.

In 2006, I was an assistant principal in the Houston Independent School System. I'd put an incredible amount of time and effort into reaching that point. I had a reputation as an administrator who kept his buildings tight. I simply did not let nonsense happen under my watch.

I came down hard when

I saw one of our Black students with pants sagging as he walked down the hallway between classes. I had warned him multiple times that I would not tolerate sagging pants on my floor. So I pulled him aside and passed swift judgment: He would be suspended and likely expelled. That was that.

I felt a tap on my shoulder as I resumed my hallway vigil, and turned expecting an angry confrontation. Instead, I saw this young Black man with tears forming in his eyes and a question on his lips.

"I come to school every day and go to class," he said. "I don't get into trouble. I haven't even been disrespectful to you. And you're going to ride me because my pants are sagging? You're not even going to ask what's going on in my life right now?"

His words slapped me and I woke up. We talked. It turned out that he'd had recently become homeless. This young Black man was experiencing some deep trauma, and I was bringing the hammer down because of his pants.

This incident extracted a traumatic memory. I was in second grade, sitting on the carpet in class. I started playfully slapping hands with a friend. Suddenly, the teacher, a white woman, started screaming at me. She said — and this is a direct quote — "You're dumb, you're ugly and you'll never amount to anything."

I dropped out of school after that. It was only the intervention of some very

caring adults that got me back on track. My life could have gone in a very different direction.

Instead, I became the only one of eight siblings to graduate from high school. I earned my college degree and became a teacher. I earned my graduate degrees and became a school leader. And in that process, I became a practitioner of the very forms of structural racism and implicit bias that had prompted that second-grade teacher to try to ruin my life. I had become a Black cog in a system of oppression.

I vowed never again to lose the perspective of students as an educational leader following my conversation with that young Black student in Houston. I would always listen to and empathize with the individuals who are impacted by the policies and procedures that we enforce. Being a Black leader isn't enough. I must dismantle racism and build equity in the systems I lead.

All leaders, whether white or people of color, must remain keenly aware of the racism, hatred and bigotry that undergird our society. We've had a Black president, and yet a Black man can still have the life squeezed from him under the knee of a white police officer.

There is hard work that we must do in the school district and in Kansas City to address the demands raised by the Black Lives Matter protesters. It won't be easy and it won't happen quickly. More than 40 years ago, James Baldwin asked an interviewer, "How much time do you want for your progress?" Our effort must start now. If not now, when?

Mark Bedell is Kansas City Public Schools superintendent.