

How one African-American mom tackles racism head-on

By Christa Case Bryant, Christian Science Monitor, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.12.19

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Captain Perri Johnson, in uniform at center, shares personal experiences with Touchy Topic Tuesdays (TTT) community meeting on Dec. 5, 2017 in St. Louis. TTT, founded by African American mother Tiffany Robertson (pictured third from left) to foster frank discussions about race has grown to three groups, a podcast, and a special forum for police officers. Photo by: Ann Hermes/Christian Science Monitor

It felt like the crackling before a thunderstorm, and Tiffany Robertson was bracing herself.

St. Louis had shut down early on November 24, 2014, tensely awaiting the verdict on the white police officer who had shot 18-year-old African-American Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, three months earlier.

Her teenage daughter was convinced that justice would be served – that the grand jury would indict the officer. She headed up to her room with popcorn and got ready to celebrate, while Ms. Robertson and her husband sat in the living room and turned on the TV.

When the news broke that the jury had declined to charge Officer Darren Wilson, they heard a guttural scream emanate from their daughter's bedroom. Their older daughter, who seldom cries about anything.

She came downstairs and sat between them, the house silent except for her sobs.

"There was no comfort we could give her," says Ms. Robertson. "We were not going to say, 'It's going to be OK.'"

Another African-American teen, Vonderrit Myers Jr., had been killed by a white off-duty police officer right in their neighborhood the month before. Amid these tensions, she reached out in prayer for guidance. Lord, I am so sorry that this is happening and I feel too small to do anything, she recalls praying. But however you tell me to respond, I am willing. However you tell me, however you govern me to respond, I am willing.

Out of that moment of humility was born Touchy Topics Tuesday (TTT), a weekly forum for frank conversations about race in America. What began as Robertson fielding questions alone from white attendees has expanded into three groups meeting across the metro area, with participants who reflect the city's diversity. They are committed to deepening each other's understanding and advancing racial reconciliation.

"Through critical analysis of our biases within the TTT space, we intentionally equip ourselves to recognize them in other spaces and re-adjust accordingly," she says.

"This fundamental strategy empowers us to be accountable to one another and build community relationally through truth and transparency."

Easier said than done.

The Power Of Relationships

At the first meeting, back in November 2014, she was the only African-American.

"I was petrified. I felt like I was in quicksand," she recalls.

Those early days were hard, the conversations raw. There were people she found hard to deal with, but she strove to "extend them grace," as she puts it. Over the years, the group has evolved and the discussions, though still frank and at times hard, are less acrimonious.

Participant Don Morgan had had a lot of anti-racism training as a clinical psychologist and professor at Rutgers University for three decades, but he says TTT has been transformational.

"All of those trainings, all of that study, does not compare – it's like apples and oranges – to sitting with people who are going to be honest with you about their experience with white people, and their experience of what it's like to live as people of color," says Morgan. He moved to St. Louis just before Mr. Brown's killing embittered relations between the area's already highly segregated white and black residents. "I'm thankful for all the apples I got, but this is an orange that's definitely a different level."

The missing piece that has made TTT more powerful, he says, is participants' commitment to building relationships with one another. It's one thing to read about educational disparities; it's another to be sitting next to fellow participants sharing their stories of being bused as kids or being raised by illiterate sharecroppers who couldn't provide much guidance or support when it came to education.

There's an understanding, says Morgan, that "we're going to be allowed to say horrible things to each other ... and come back next week and hear them again and not run away from this. In so doing, there's a lot of affection and bonding and friendship."

An Expansive Vision

In addition to three TTT groups, there's now a podcast and a special group just for city police officers, which Robertson co-runs with an African-American police captain.

"What I've gleaned the most from TTT is, if this attitude of reconciliation doesn't become intentional, then we just keep moving in the same circles," she says. "I think there needs to be a national and very transparent, open, honest dialogue and reconciliation of our past around racism."

So is she hoping to take this model national?

"Global," she says emphatically. "Global."

Quiz

1 What is the relationship between the following selections from the article?

Out of that moment of humility was born Touchy Topics Tuesday (TTT), a weekly forum for frank conversations about race in America.

"Through critical analysis of our biases within the TTT space, we intentionally equip ourselves to recognize them in other spaces and re-adjust accordingly," she says.

- (A) The first states a claim about racial difficulties in America; the second provides evidence that shows how the meetings are addressing the city's racial problems.
- (B) The first states a main idea, describing the court's decision; the second states a second main idea, explaining how the meetings build relationships.
- (C) The first states the main idea, showing the overall purpose of the meetings; the second provides a key detail, explaining how the meetings raise awareness.
- (D) The first states a claim about the TTT group; the second highlights a statement of contradiction, explaining the impact of the meetings on the community.

2 Which of these statements would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?

- (A) The TTT meetings have become a model for other cities that are struggling to address the deep-seated racial injustices that plague the nation.
- (B) The participants of the TTT meetings share Robertson's vision for racial equality, and support her efforts to strengthen community ties.
- (C) The idea for the TTT meetings came because Robertson was looking for a way to address the racial tensions in her community.
- (D) The success of the TTT meetings are due to Robertson's tenacity and her incredible willingness to truly listen to other people's opinions.

3 Read the following paragraphs from the article.

"This fundamental strategy empowers us to be accountable to one another and build community relationally through truth and transparency."

Easier said than done.

How do these paragraphs support Robertson's position?

- (A) The first provides a theory for how the meetings work; the second states the difficulty of the practice.
- (B) The first highlights the community's response; the second describes Robertson's point of view.
- (C) The first explains how the meetings were designed; the second highlights the actual conversations.
- (D) The first outlines Robertson's goals for the meetings; the second stresses the positive outcome.

4 Which answer choice BEST explains why the author wrote this article?

- (A) to showcase how one woman's idea to engage her community in a discussion about race has grown
- (B) to prove that it is possible to bring African-Americans and white people together to resolve racial issues
- (C) to highlight how difficult it is for cities across the country to address racial injustice in the court system
- (D) to illustrate how one mother tried to help her daughter better cope with her anger over a jury's verdict

Answer Key

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