

Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio

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Reflecting on Dr. King

Taking the first step: Reflecting on Dr. King's legacy

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As the head of a nonprofit, I hear the word diversity about as often as I breathe -- that is, constantly.

Funders, board members, staff (including myself) are always talking about the importance of diversity, how we measure it, why it's important. And at its core, it seems pretty basic: in order to make an impact, affect change, and truly transform our clients' lives, we must genuinely understand where they're coming from and how they got to where they are. So we should, as an organization, mirror our client base.

But with the other part of my brain, the part that's an American citizen and consumer, I find myself wondering...amid the challenges we face as a society, is diversity emerging as the "great divider?"

There has been so much rhetoric in the past few years about the divisions that exist among us: racial divisions, ethnic divisions, socioeconomic divisions, political divisions, gender divisions... We regularly see diversity threatened and even disgraced in the news and events of our times. Many of us have even gone so far as to start identifying ourselves by what (or whom) we're "against." And it seems it's always someone who is different from us.

As humans, we find comfort in the familiar. We identify with others based on what we have in common with them. And when we look at diverse groups and cultures, there's an element of the unknown that comes into play.

The unknown isn't bad. But fear of the unknown -- that's what can be toxic.

Fear causes us to put up walls. It enables us to blame our shortcomings or bad luck on others. It magnifies our differences from each other and minimizes all we have in common.

It pits us against each other, and it breeds hate.

We seem so focused as a country on fearing and hating those who are different from us, those who think differently or feel differently or even look different, that we are overlooking a fundamental principle -- that as Americans, our greatest commonality is our diversity.

Diversity doesn't only bring a wealth of new ideas and perspectives. It also brings with it a rich history of challenging the status quo, improving our society by standing up for what is right, and further defining the ongoing experiment that is our democracy.

This month, as we celebrate African American history and heritage, we remember Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the ideals he held dear -- equality, cooperation, justice. But we would do Dr. King a disservice if we didn't acknowledge his most important premise: that we can only achieve these ideals together.

At Legal Aid, we respect diversity as a core value, and we recently called this out as part of our new strategic vision. It's fitting, because in the legal field, we see the law as the great equalizer, the path to Dr. King's goal of justice -- for all.

We have only just started to examine our organization's diversity, and I admit that we have a long way to go. But by recognizing its importance and defining it, we've at least taken the first step. And to quote Dr. King, "You don't have to see the whole staircase. Just take the first step."

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