

# A Personal Story – Library Town Hall, June 4, 2020

Words by Executive Director Rose T. Dawson to Library Staff

Last night, after arriving home before my 7pm curfew in DC, the six o'clock news was showing a vigil that had taken place earlier that day on the steps of a Montgomery County Public Library (MD). At the student-led vigil, a young African American girl said her grandmother had marched for civil rights in the sixties, and here she was, more than 50 years later doing the same DAMN thing. She said nothing had changed. That statement brought tears to my eyes and unfortunately, for the most part, but not totally, I found myself agreeing with her.

When Black people can blatantly be murdered in the streets, killed while sleeping in their own beds, or simply jogging in their own neighborhoods, we have a problem. And it's called RACISM.

It's ugly. It's a difficult subject to talk about, but one that is long overdue.

Alexandria Library has taken baby steps where this is concerned. I need you to realize that this just doesn't affect a few certain people. It can hit very close to home.

In 2005, when I was hired to be the deputy director of the library, the library director and library board chair said in my presence, that the former library board chair was probably

rolling over in his grave. Shocked, I said, “Really?” and they assured me that was the case. This was 2005, you all. So, did that mean if he had been living, the simple color of my skin would have precluded my getting a job for which they all agreed I was more than qualified? RACISM.

Baby steps. The Library had a diversity committee before I became director. We changed its name to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) because we recognized it was about more than diversity. Most recently, our Staff Day with Whitney Parnell’s Allyship training focused on Racism. Based on the current pandemic, the library is closed. COVID-19 stopped everything...except RACISM! Even with COVID-19, who was most adversely affected? Black people! How? Based on systemic racism. Years of poor health care, housing, and numerous other things. The murder in the streets of George Floyd; the shooting of Breonna Taylor in her own bed; and the vigilante assassination of Ahmaud Aubery jogging in his neighborhood, are all based on RACISM, be it institutional, systemic, or individual.

As a society we need to do more. As a library we have to do more. With more than 22 languages spoken by the staff who work for the system, the Library serves a high concentration of customers who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC); it is time to ensure that our hiring practices, services, and programs are conducted through an equity lens. And in order to do this, it means acknowledging that RACISM exists and we

are going to work hard to remove it. That being said, we will be rolling out more training for the staff because that is the first step. Working in conjunction with the city we will be incorporating antiracist policies and practices. Yes. It's difficult. Yes, it's uncomfortable. And yes, it can be awkward. But, when it's all said and done...NO MORE BABY STEPS FOR THE ALEXANDRIA LIBRARY!