

Suzy Sonenberg's Acceptance Speech at ERASE Racism Fundraiser 6/2/09

Thank you!

I am deeply honored and equally humbled by this award. It means so much to me for all the reasons I will share in the next few minutes, but most especially because it is coming from a group I hold in highest esteem and because it is given in the name of a great mentor, advisor and friend.

It is really hard to feel deserving of an award for courage and commitment when I am surrounded in this room by people whose very lives exemplify those two words. Simply serving with the extraordinary members of the board of ERASE Racism is an honor and a continuous learning experience.

I am not a person of great courage. I am the child of Holocaust survivors who instilled in me two conflicting core characteristics: the first is to stand up against injustice whether on my own behalf or that of others; the second is to be deeply and profoundly fearful – of everything. As some of you may know from personal experience, this is a conflict that's hard to reconcile.

And the reason that I want to tell you this and talk a bit about where I came from and where I am now is because we have to have these conversations and we have to be able to have them in mixed company without fear of revealing ignorance or of being politically incorrect or of offending somebody.

Back in the 60s, in my college years, while my friends, and so many of you (who were old enough then) marched for civil rights, participated in sit-ins and freedom rides, worked to register black voters in the south (one giving up his life in the process), I sat safely behind my desk at the school newspaper here in New York and wrote passionate articles supporting those efforts.

I got a masters degree in social work, and went to work in Manhattan where people of all colors were my colleagues and friends. I found jobs that made it possible for me to provide opportunity and assistance to people in the most disadvantaged communities in NYC. I was your typical white liberal do-gooder without a biased thought in my head or a knowingly prejudiced word on my lips. And really, for such a long time I believed I was doing enough.

And then, in 1988 I came home to work on Long Island – a place I had called home for almost 20 years, but had never really known. I was still trying to get the lay of the land when I was invited by Newsday to participate in one of the many focus groups they were holding as part of an examination of segregation on Long Island. The group I was in consisted of 10 white people because the groups were divided according to skin color. One of the questions we were asked was, "How many black families would have to move in for you to consider your neighborhood integrated?" Do you know what the answer was? Almost unanimously, it was ONE.

When Newsday published that report in 1991 as a 10-part series called, *A World Apart: Segregation on Long Island*, edited by Joye Brown, it was devastating in its description of the gulf between black and white on Long Island, and the extent to which extreme residential segregation had led to stark inequalities in education, opportunity and overall quality of life for the several hundred thousand black people who lived in our two counties.

And that, for me, was the end of thinking that I was doing enough.

As the staff leader of the community foundation, then much smaller and with less perceived power, I brought the issue to the table and asked the board if we could take it on. There was immediate agreement, but none of us really knew what it was that we could do that would have significant impact. And looking around the country at other community foundations we found no model that we could adopt or adapt.

There's no time now to talk about the years of trial and error that brought us to the forum from which ERASE Racism ultimately evolved. But in one single Ah HA! moment, everything changed – and that was the moment in which I decided to invite Elaine Gross, a colleague with whom I had developed a friendship, momentarily between jobs, to participate in the discussion.

Of course we wound up hiring Elaine, first as a consultant to help us figure out what to do, and then as the director of the initiative she had designed – an initiative to address the policies and practices that result in advantage for white people and disadvantage for African Americans and other people of color.

The deal was that we would pay Elaine's salary, and house and support the initiative for three years -- by which time it had to be strong enough to spin off. The other part of the deal was that the Foundation had to make a commitment to become a visible model of an active anti-racist institution by first examining and then changing its own policies and practices.

There were things we had to overcome to move the initiative forward. Some of them were easier than others.

First, our parent organization, The NYCT, required that we raise 100% of the money to cover salary and benefits for the entire 3 years (not using any of the Foundation's grant dollars) before we could bring Elaine on board. That was my job. And would that it were as easy now as it was then!!

Next: community foundation directors in other parts of the country who had tried much less "in your face" diversity projects told us that we would almost definitely get bomb threats when we launched. You know what the staff said? We'll learn to be careful. We won't give out our address. But we can't let fear stop us.

Friends of the foundation warned us that we would lose donors if we took this on, and do you know what the board said? They said okay. Those are the donors we don't mind losing. We'll gain others who believe in what we're doing.

Then there were things that were harder to overcome:

First, LICF has a long history of immigrant advocacy, activism and support. There were people on the board and on the staff, initially including me, who said, "Why is this only about African Americans? What about all the other people of color who suffer from discrimination and lack of opportunity?"

Abe Krasnoff, always brilliant, was very clear on this issue and backed Elaine's position. "We are dealing," he would say, "with America's original sin. Immigrants with dark skin who come willingly to this country, suffer from the policies and practices designed to deny opportunity to the descendants of the slaves we brought here in chains. All people of color on Long Island will benefit from the changes ERASE Racism will bring about."

And then there was the anti-racism training. I am not talking about the Unraveling Racism Training that Cultural Bridges now provides on behalf of ERASE Racism. I am talking about the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond that we brought from New Orleans to Long Island (on the recommendation of someone who was then a staff member, Lynda Parmely, a lifelong anti-racist) to train staff and board and a few community leaders. This was tough, no-punches-pulled training. It was tough for the people of color who participated, it was tough for the white folks, and man – it was brutal for me.

In that very first session, a trainer - after earning our respect over a couple of hours - said to us straight out: if you are white in this society and you passively accept and live with all of the rights and privileges conferred on you based solely on the color of your skin, while others with darker skin are denied those same rights and privileges, then you are a racist. And the only way you can avoid being a racist is by being actively anti-racist and working to ensure that nobody is helped or hurt by the color of their skin. In other words, if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem – no matter what is in your heart!

And while we're talking about what was tough, let me say that the first year Elaine and I worked together was not a walk in the park. You've got two strong personalities here, and we both had a lot to learn about the other's way of approaching the world. I think if we hadn't respected and liked each other as much as we did, and if Marge Rogatz and Al Jordan had not been as good at mediation as they were, we might not have made it. But we did. We DID.

And ERASE Racism made it --far enough to open the eyes of so many formerly unaware Long Islanders to the shameful fact that this is the third most segregated suburban region in the nation; made it far enough to force our elected leaders and the media to acknowledge the devastating impact of Long Island's racial segregation on African Americans and other people of color – and let me interrupt myself here to point out that

Tom Suozzi was the first of these, not forced, not even asked, to stand up (in 2002) in front of hundreds of people and the press and make a public statement about Long Island's segregated housing -- now tell me that didn't take courage on the part of an elected official. With the Nassau County Executive fully on board, ERASE Racism made it far enough to change fair housing law in both counties; made it far enough to bring together hundreds and hundreds of people in a partnership for racial equity, and made it far enough to bring extraordinary anti-racism training to hundreds more.

This initiative is the outcome of so much courage and commitment on the part of so many people, certainly initially the board, staff and donors of the community foundation, and then the board, staff and donors of ERASE Racism. And all of YOU! It's because you are here, whether for the first time tonight or from the beginning. Thank you so much for attending this event, for providing sponsorship, for buying tickets, for participating in the auction, for supporting ERASE Racism in so many different ways.

But I cannot wrap this up without sharing with you my biggest fear, and that is: that it's not enough. That the more successful ERASE Racism is at dismantling policies that favor some people over others, the more difficult it becomes to raise the money to support this work. When Abe passed away, we not only lost a great friend, we lost a great benefactor. Then the economy collapsed. The funding shrank, we cut the staff, but not the workload. I am afraid that Elaine and Rosemarie will burn out. I am afraid that ERASE Racism is in a financially precarious position. I am afraid to think about the momentum and possibilities that will be lost if we lose ERASE Racism.

If the work of ERASE Racism is something you care deeply about, if it reflects your values and your interests, please help more in whatever way you can. Spread the word, find more donors, give until it hurts – because the alternative will hurt more.

Now, finally, I thank you all for listening to me. I feel in some ways like the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz who has finally found courage, but it was Elaine who led me down that yellow brick road, not Dorothy. Elaine, who every day has the courage and commitment to get up and face the world and do this hard, hard work.

When we take the Unraveling Racism Training we are asked on whose shoulders we stand in doing this work. We all have different answers. For me it has always been my college friend and classmate Andy Goodman who was murdered in Mississippi in 1964. But I am going to change my answer the next time I take the training, because I contend that here on Long Island every one of us stands on the shoulders of Elaine Gross.