

TARGET OUR

Franklin residents of color respond and reflect to recent violence

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After shootings in Atlanta March 17 rocked the nation and brought attention to growing hate against Asian Americans, lifetime Franklin resident Michelle Waugh-Dahl is pushing for her majority-white hometown to answer questions about race and community that she feels have often been ignored.

A Korean adoptee, Waugh-Dahl said her feelings are complicated. She was raised by a white family. Six of the eight victims of the Atlanta shootings look like her—Asian women—but the killer looks like her family. That’s difficult to reconcile, she explained.

So, Waugh-Dahl is looking to her community for support alongside Jessica Daudy Hamm, another Asian woman with whom she leads the Franklin Equity and Justice Coalition. Waugh-Dahl reached out to city leaders, including Franklin Mayor Steve Barnett, to encourage them to issue a statement in response to the shootings. But the city has yet to do so.

“There has been zero sympathy,” Waugh-Dahl said. “We’re purposefully being ignored.”

Franklin Mayor Steve Barnett declined

ON BACK”

an interview, but City of Franklin Chief of Staff Tara Payne said the city hasn't issued a statement because no one asked them to do so. Payne said Waugh-Dahl reached out to say Asian folk in Franklin are "scared and hurting," but there was no mention of a statement.

Payne said that she and other city officials have done their best to provide support without a statement, including listening to Asian residents and sending cards to Asian-owned businesses.

The Franklin Police Department has also spent nearly \$600,000 on body and car cameras, an action Payne said will improve transparency and protection of all residents. The city also requires diversity and implicit bias training for all city employees.

Still, Daudy-Hamm and Waugh-Dahl said they do not feel like minority voices are heard in their city or the nation. People want to read the headlines, they said, but they don't want to address the underlying issues. Daudy-Hamm said she had to tune out the media coverage of the shootings because it was threatening her mental health.

"That was such an eye opener," Hamm said. "It felt like a stab in the heart... It was too raw, and it felt too lonely."

LEADING THE CHARGE FOR EQUITY

Hamm, who is half Filipino, grew up near Franklin. She said the Atlanta massacre is a painful reminder of the trauma that she lives with after being oversexualized on account of her race. After being sexually assaulted, her assailant told her that he had never "had" an Asian before.

Both Daudy-Hamm and Waugh-Dahl said Franklin residents avoid racial discussions, but Hamm said she's tired of "tiptoeing around white fragility." According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Franklin's population is 95.4% white, with small percentages of minority groups.

"We're some of the loudest Asian women you'll ever meet," Daudy-Hamm said.

The Atlanta shooting brought attention to the racism Asian communities face in America, which is on the rise. A recent poll conducted by Gallup, a DC-based analytics

company, shows that xenophobia towards certain Asian populations is growing. In March 2020, 22% said China is an enemy of the U.S, and the figure increased to 45% in March 2021.

Meanwhile protests across the country, including Franklin, have brought attention to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Waugh-Dahl and Daudy-Hamm both attended Black Lives Matter protests over the summer but had multiple issues with the city's reception of the movement. At one protest, Hamm and Waugh-Dahl challenged city officials to join their fight to mixed support.

"Yes, I hugged the police chief, and I feel like that was a great photo opportunity for all of us to share, but do I feel like he understood why we were really out there? No," Hamm said.

Franklin Police Chief Kirby Cochran did not respond to an interview request, but Johnson County Sheriff Duane Burgess said his goal as a public servant is to hear the thoughts of his community, something that goes beyond attending any one event.

“I’m not doing anything for publicity,” Burgess said. “I care about their feelings.”

Nonetheless, Daudy-Hamm and Waugh-Dahl both feel as though minority groups in Franklin are consistently targeted by city officials. Both women joined community members on the downtown square to etch Black Lives Matter messages on the sidewalks. They said that Burgess threatened to arrest the participants if they did not leave immediately. Hamm said she knew they weren’t doing anything wrong because downtown festivals have decorated the sidewalks with chalk before. She suspects they were confronted for ideological reasons.

“It wasn’t the action, it was the message,” Hamm said. “Next thing you know a fire truck shows up, and they’re out there having

the fire department scrub the sidewalks. It spoke volumes that day where we stood... It was a defining moment.”

Burgess said he was not hostile or threatening toward those gathered at the chalking event. He simply told them that they could be prosecuted for altering public property and asked them to leave.

“I don’t have a problem with peaceful protest,” Burgess said. “You just cannot take chalk and draw on the property of the people of Johnson County... Even with chalk, that is criminal mischief.”

Waugh-Dahl and Daudy-Hamm are not the only ones who feel ostracized by the city. Students of color at Franklin College raised similar points.

Junior Bennie Patterson said that Franklin is friendly to Black people “if they have a dog.”

He said numerous people in Franklin have acted superior. They show this with their body language, he explained, as many people look down at him and turn their nose away. One day while he was shopping, a woman switched her daughter to the far side of her body as if to protect her from a threat.

Sophomore JaSaun Johnson shared similar thoughts. He said he smiles more in non-Black spaces like Franklin. He enters stores by saying hello, so that he will appear non-threatening. Nonetheless, he sometimes gets followed by store employees, especially if he is wearing his backpack.

Black Student Union President Alexis Cheatham, like Patterson, said that Franklin is not an inclusive city. When her family came to visit on family weekend, she said people stared at them as if they were confused why there were Black people in their town.

Cheatham said she and her friends with

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MICHELLE WAUGH-DAHL

minority identities avoid going downtown alone. They know they will be viewed as outsiders, and they have heard there are people who refuse to wear masks.

“It’s just not the greatest place for us because there will be instances where we’re stared at,” Cheatham said. “It makes us feel like we have a target on our back.”

VACCINATING ACROSS RACIAL DIFFERENCES

Addressing racial disparities becomes more important during times of crisis. As COVID continues, it has become clear that vulnerable populations experience reduced access to health care. This is true for those who have received the COVID vaccine, where the number of people of color who have is much lower compared to white Johnson County residents.



Michelle Waugh-Dahl, community activist
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

In Indiana, 87.8% of vaccines already administered went to white people who comprise 86% of the state's population over the age of 16, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Black Hoosiers received 4.5% percent of the vaccines, followed by Latinx residents at 2.1% and Asian residents at 1.7%. These populations represent 9.4%, 6.2% and 2.6% of Indiana's population over 16 respectively.

In Johnson County, white people have received 90% of vaccines and account for 91.2% of the population over 16. Black residents, who comprise 2.6% of the population, have received 0.9% of the doses. Asian residents have received 1.7% of doses, while Latinx residents have received 1.2%.

Patterson said that this data puts preexisting discrimination on display. The pandemic has drawn attention to medical racism and that many Black people do not receive adequate care, he explained. Many black people, he suspects, distrust the government's administering of the vaccine because of this history of medical racism.

"Black people have understood what the system has done to people who look like them," Patterson said. "It kind of looks like population control for us, and I don't blame them for not wanting to jump the line to go get it."

Cheatham said the medical system needs to address internal discrimination; medical personnel need more bias training and poor neighborhoods need better access to health care. One underlying problem, she concluded, is that race influences the care that people receive.

"Don't treat me because of my race. That shouldn't factor into how I'm being treated," Cheatham said.

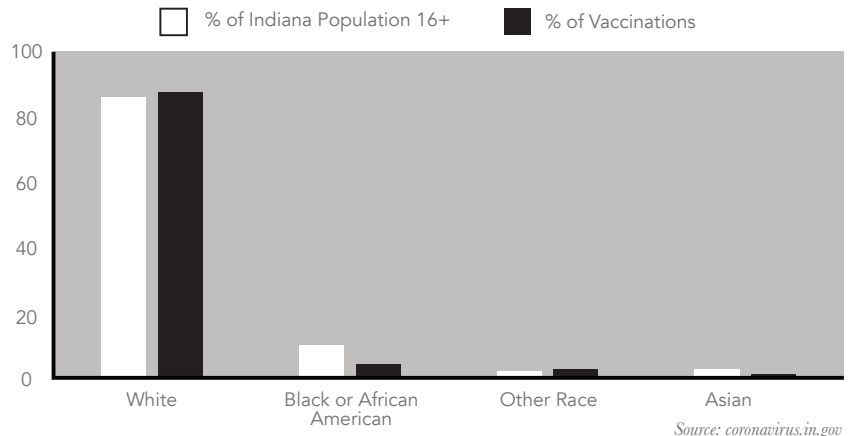
Activists like Daudy-Hamm and Waugh-Dahl are working to reverse the narrative of racism in healthcare and all sectors of society. They said that their efforts will be ongoing as long as they have a voice.

"When we can't really effectively talk about being anti-racist with our leaders and are not exactly understood, then we're kind of at a standstill," Waugh-Dahl said. "We're going to build—that is our job."

[Franklin is] just not the greatest place for us because there will be instances where we're stared at. It makes us feel like we have a target on our back sometimes when we go out there."

BLACK STUDENT UNION PRESIDENT ALEXIS CHEATHAM

FULLY VACCINATED INDIANA RESIDENTS BY RACE



CITY OF FRANKLIN, INDIANA RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS

