

THEIR OWN FIGHT

As protests against bigotry spread across the country, seniors Trevor Gicheru and Marlon Henderson take a stand.

The Sonic Drive-in was not an unusual destination for seniors Trevor Gicheru, Marlon Henderson and five of their friends from Booker T. Washington High School, Greenhill School, Plano East Senior High School and Parish Episcopal School, as the group searched for a place to hang out one evening in late May. They had just left a nearby graduation party, and the group of Black teenagers were all in high spirits as they celebrated their new status as seniors in anticipation of their own graduation the next year.

The Sonic at Inwood Rd. and Willow Ln. was a teenage hotspot. Each of them had visited many times without issue, usually accompanied by white friends.

As they pulled into the parking lot, they noticed a few other groups of high schoolers talking and waiting for their food.

They got out of their cars. Some ordered food. Others hung out in the ordering bays.

Not five minutes had passed when Gicheru, Henderson and their friends — all gathered together calmly — were approached by a member of staff.

"I need you all to get back into your cars," the employee said. "And if you don't, I'm going to call the police."

An hour later, Shonn Brown — mother of a member of Gicheru and Henderson's friend group — drove to Sonic to address the situation. There, she saw another group of teenagers, all white, parked at the

adjacent Chick-Fil-A, standing in the street nearby.

"I saw this car in the ordering bay and I saw teens that were outside of the vehicle," Shonn Brown said. "I drove around to the drive through and knocked on the window and said, 'I understand you have a policy where kids can't be out of their cars and hanging out, but are you going to say something? Because I drove by two groups of kids.'"

Brown drove around the parking lot to

"That was a really special moment for me because it showed how much my community actually cared about that situation. They were willing to take time out of their day to come and support me."

— Senior Marlon Henderson

see if the employee would stay true to his word. She remembers the employee acting slowly.

"It took them a moment, but the carhop came out and he spoke to the two groups," Brown said. "By this time the group who had been over at Chick-Fil-A was standing in an ordering bay. They were not in a vehicle at all, their vehicle was parked by Chick-Fil-A. Those two groups of individuals were all white."

He made no mention of the police, and

STORY Toby Barrett, Austin Williams
PHOTO Lars Ochs, Courtesy Ray Quezada

Brown noticed. The carhop told Brown that employees mention the police when teenagers are being loud or causing a commotion.

"That's not what my son and his friends were accused of doing," Brown said. "I have actually now seen the videotape and know that all they were doing was exactly what I observed the other kids to do. Standing outside their cars."

Gicheru had been to that very Sonic in a group that was not solely Black only three days prior without being asked to leave.

"It was the same as every other time," Gicheru said. "One of our friends had ordered food, so it wasn't like we were just hanging around. Nothing was going on."

That very night, May 29, protests prompted by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis had begun in Downtown Dallas. Henderson believes the role of police in Floyd's death and modern incidents of over-policing made the situation more frightening.

"Especially with the times we are in now and what's going on, even hearing the mention of cops is kind of scary," Henderson said. "We weren't doing anything wrong. We were just hanging out outside our cars."

On June 7, protesters held a rally at the Sonic in objection to the racist treatment Gicheru, Henderson and their friends had experienced. Brown saw this as an opportunity to help her son and his friends



TREVOR GICHERU
Senior



MARLON HENDERSON
Senior

grow in the face of adversity.

"The rally was really amazing," Brown said. "There was a sense of healing for the kids... we wanted to come up with a possibility of healing."

Henderson remembers the rally in a positive light, but Gicheru and Henderson believe more change is needed, specifically with regards to education and understanding of the Black experience.

Gicheru is a member of the Student Advocacy Coalition of Dallas, a student-led organization founded with the intent to unite students across the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in the pursuit of racial and cultural justice. He attends meetings and sees it as a great way to be an active supporter of Black initiative and maintain an opposition to racist problems.

"I feel like most of the issues surrounding race happen because people don't know better," Gicheru said. "It's not because they hate a specific group of people. It's just because some of them haven't been educated."

Henderson maintains the importance of empathy in interacting with victims of racism.

"Support your friends who are minorities going through situations like this," Henderson said. "It helps you gain another perspective. That's the main thing. Understand the other person's perspective and what they're going through."

For Brown, Sonic needs to change on a chain-wide scale.

"There's a training piece they can implement," Brown said. "There's internal issues they likely should look at on the board level. They're owned by a private equity company, which doesn't appear to have any diversity. I think there's lots of ways to attack this, and that can be overwhelming because it's such a big issue."

Sonic management issued a statement of apology in the week following the May 29 incident, highlighting specific measures to be taken in response to both the protests and to the wider national conversation.

"To that end, we are revising our policy to ensure the appropriate level of manager is involved in handling matters with our guests. We are also bolstering our training program to include consistent unconscious bias training, with a focus on the African American experience, as we foster a more inclusive environment for our team members and guests."

Ultimately, as a community Brown wishes to see intentional social outreach among families of different backgrounds.

"I think there needs to be an effort among us as parents, particularly white parents, to engage in real relationships with families that don't look like theirs," Brown said. "Look at your friend groups as a parent. If you have a pretty homogeneous group of friends, yet you're so happy your school is diverse and has lots of students of color, then you're not really demonstrating what you would implore your child to engage in."



Working together, seniors Trevor Gicheru and Marlon Henderson, Greenhill students Zoe Purdy and MJ Ward, Booker T. Washington High School student Elle Grinnelle, Plano East Senior High School student Milan Patton and Parish Episcopal School student Evan Brown coordinated a protest outside of the Sonic at which they were discriminated against.



Because of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the protesting students elected to keep the gathered crowd to a small number to lower the risk of spreading the disease. Instead, the students reached out to their communities asking families, classmates and friends to drive by to show support.

Hanging out beside their cars, Trevor Gicheru, Marlon Henderson and their friends were told the police would be called if they didn't leave, despite making no mention of the police to white students behaving in a similar manner to the group. According to a 2012 survey by North Carolina State University, 52.8% of servers have seen fellow employees discriminate against Black customers, while 10.5% claimed they had never perceived racial discrimination.

