

Creating a Race Equity Heart in our Systems

By Michelle Martin, Consultant

Co-Founder and former COO
of the Northside Achievement Zone

September 2019



www.illuminateresults.com

I believe there are powerful forces working for change where race and poverty intersect. But, despite some chipping away at the edges of the problem, there is still a bedrock of systemic racial inequity in America that too often leaves communities of color behind. Past racial constructs live on as disparities—of income, education, health, and more. Real change can feel impossible.

I also believe if we look beneath the surface and view these challenges with compassionate curiosity, we can see opportunities where we once saw deficits. If we intentionally engage and design our efforts *with* impacted people, we can create responsive, innovative systems that help transform instead of getting in the way. If we look inside and more intentionally illuminate how the structures historical and systemic racism shows up in ourselves, we can begin to work together to build a thriving, equitable culture. And new solutions will take root.

Here's my story.

America's deeply flawed racial construct made itself known to me while growing up in a homogenous middle class white suburb in the eighties. As a teenage clerk, I was trained to follow the black mothers around the store because the owner said they were more likely to steal. I learned businesses cement bias—racial profiling was literally written in the training manual. A family member boasted about rolling up car windows in 'black neighborhoods'—and I knew children were being taught who to fear. A friend's mother felt sorry for her maids because their white uniforms 'only made their black skin look darker by comparison'—and a 'lighter-is-better' mentality was revealed. These occurrences were so common they seemed to go largely unnoticed by my white community. This 'un-noticing' spoke as loudly as the incidents themselves.

Thus the racial injustice I witnessed in my youth sparked my own life path into social work and community organizing, which grew into leading systems change as my work advanced. I am a co-founder and former Chief Operating Officer of the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ)¹, a successful place-based, collaborative initiative that is yielding results in North Minneapolis, a neighborhood that's home to some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. While there are certainly points of progress in America's racial justice trajectory, including the election of a black president, in the thirty years that have come and gone since my 'noticings' as a teenager, very little has changed. For people of color in America, a bedrock of barriers to opportunity and success still exists. Minnesota, one of the most philanthropic, healthiest, and most well-educated states in the nation for its white population, has literally left its black and indigenous communities behind. This 'systemic racism' is starkly revealed in Minneapolis' Northside neighborhood—where a concentration of low-income people of color acts to magnify disparities. Rates of employment and academic outcomes for the black community members in the region are in the bottom quartile in comparison to white counterparts. And, every companion indicator—health, violence, home ownership—follows this pattern.

¹ <http://northsideachievement.org>

A possibility for change

I began deeply engaging in North Minneapolis in 2003, by helping lead a community effort to bridge divides of race, class, and geography to find solutions to these disparities. I spent more time in the neighborhood than in a board room because I believe the answers lie in the *community*. I learned that we need to: 1) look “upstream” to root causes, 2) approach solutions holistically, and 3) meaningfully involve the impacted people in designing solutions and leading change. And we need to do so in ways that are strategically agitating in pushing the boundaries of the current structures. In 2008, I used this knowledge to help design the model for NAZ as a new type of community-building effort that is focused on creating lasting systems change. An innovative, collaborative effort to rewire the way services come together in a specific geographic location to create measurable change, NAZ partners work to move past the competition and silos, which are established through fragmented resource streams. And more importantly, these partners share a focus on getting new levels of outcomes with families.

NAZ families are elevated as active leaders in change, at an individual and community level. This parent-empowerment model puts families at the center—both parents and child ‘scholars’ (which they are intentionally called, rather than ‘clients’ and ‘students’). In 2012, NAZ became a Promise Neighborhood² initiative, and was awarded an unprecedented \$28 million federal investment. Today it is nationally recognized as one of the first collaborative models to show proof of concept—beginning to deliver on the promise inspired by the Harlem Children’s Zone.

A counterforce to lasting change

As the Chief Operating Officer of NAZ, I focused on strategy, systems, programs, and developing concrete pathways for change. During the build-out of the model, with an African American man as president and a national movement supporting social change, I felt like the structures of racism might begin to fade into the past. I believed that if we implemented our strategies with fidelity and sustained thoughtful cross-race relationships, we were positioned to underwrite real change locally. However, there is a powerful counter force against lasting change.

The ethos in this country surrounding President Trump’s rise to office was like a light turned on in the darkness. There’s now a deeper level of awareness that the Obama-Trump dichotomy fully revealed. Despite best intentions, commitment, and collective action from the parts of America that claim a vision for racial equity, the system of racism remains. And there is a strong undercurrent working to sanction it as the ‘American way’.

Treating the root cause

Our best attempts to create better structures to solve the problem—new strategies, programs, curriculum—are not alone enough to create true, sustainable, racially equitable change. People of color

² <https://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov>

have known, despite any false promise of progress, that the echoes of our white supremacist past still reverberate loudly today. It is now being spoken out loud and its well past time that the broader white community hear it. There is no escaping the truth about America's system of beliefs, our internalized behaviors, and its ongoing impact on communities of color. In a country where race can predict poverty and its correlated impacts, systemic racism and the trajectory of white supremacy can no longer be unspoken. If a doctor had an opportunity to understand what causes an illness, would they not pivot all of their curative efforts from understanding the cause?

Without understanding the deeply entrenched historical realities which have become present-day root causes, we'll continue to treat the symptoms without truly solving the problem.

Low test scores, low income and employment rates, higher rates of violence are *symptoms*. Without understanding the deeply entrenched historical realities which have become present-day root causes, we'll continue to treat the symptoms without truly solving the problem. For every symptomatic reason the racial disparities are so stuck, there is a root cause that circles back to systemic racism. We need to meet what we see as the behaviors where race and poverty come together with compassionate curiosity. Find out what's underneath. And solve for that, together.

Methods for understanding concrete impacts of racism

What people of color have been lifting up as insight, experience, and lived narrative for decades is finally beginning to be accepted as 'the field' catches up through validated, researched practice. While we still have a long way to go, methods and tools are being created based on this insight to help guide us as we look underneath systemic racism to find ways to break the patterns. For example, we understand Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)³ and how childhood trauma changes nervous systems and often results in the negative behaviors we see in schools. We know that disparate levels of early trauma are pervasive in students from low-income communities of color. Understanding these realities is game-changing for developing new approaches to address issues like the elevated suspension rates of black boys in elementary school and the behavioral triggers for special education labels.

We are now beginning to recognize, through epigenetic research, that our past is literally housed in our bodies today— and it gets unintentionally re-activated within our nervous systems. This phenomenon is illuminated in the teachings of Resmaa Menakem⁴ with *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*. Menakem articulates how white bodies and bodies of color hold echoes of the past in our DNA. Epigenetics—how genetic impact through environment is carried forward in future generations—reveals that racialized historical trauma shows up in our bodies today, differentiated by whether we are birthed from the oppressor or from the oppressed. This means

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.resmaa.com>

that our decision-makers, who are still primarily white, carry the framework and context of being white into their planning and policy efforts. Therefore, our ‘helping systems’, including schools, social services, non-profits, and philanthropy, end up unintentionally re-patterning the very realities for communities of color that we are all working tirelessly to break through.

Our ‘helping systems’ including schools, social services, non-profits, and philanthropy end up unintentionally re-patterning the very realities for communities of color that we are all working tirelessly to break through.

A path forward

This context has the potential to add a new, deeply impactful dimension to racial equity work and the social sector. I believe we can create systems flowing through places like North Minneapolis that are informed by a framework and a thoughtful practice built from this knowledge. What if the people in power, predominantly white school, government, non-profit leaders—and police—could begin to recognize and understand how the bodies doing work with adults and children of color actually carry the echoes of our white supremacist past, unintentionally perpetuating it in regular interactions? What if we could impact our systems by creating deep awareness at a personal, energetic, and ‘heart’ level to begin to mitigate the impact of both historical and present racialized trauma?

At NAZ, I discovered a calling to focus more on the *internal landscape*, to influencing people working in our systems that function at the intersection of race and poverty (schools, nonprofits, and government) to more intentionally acknowledge and more directly heal the racial fracture our white ancestors created that we either passively or unabashedly reinforce today. We began to shift our work more toward understanding racialized trauma, how systems can support healing (even if that’s not their stated purpose) and build relational awareness. My time at NAZ illuminated how a synergy of ‘innerwork’ in people combined with innovation in process can begin to ignite change at a transformational level, helping to cultivate and unlock the true potential in a place like North Minneapolis.

Three levers of change

Working to create change within systems and communities, I’ve seen how human dynamics get in the way of progress (including my own): competition, ego, political fights, value conflicts, and fear of loss. And I witnessed people opening their hearts to new insight and awareness, digging deep and trying new ways of working, and allowing for old patterns to give way to new practices. I’ve learned that several realities must be present for real change to ignite:

- 1) Redesign how we function with intentionality to put people (families, children) at the center of the work in authentic, relational, and actionable ways, and
- 2) Create sacred space for innerwork, adaptive, courageous work—mind, heart, and body—with and across individuals around race, disparities, trauma, and equity, and
- 3) Build a positive, resilient, accountable team culture that will sustain the work ahead. Creating change within systems requires intentional and ongoing support, partnership and validation.

Using innerwork

To change our systems, we must change ourselves. Innerwork is a reflection, deep recognition and active awareness about how our attitudes, behaviors, and nervous systems inadvertently reinforce the structural power we hold in our society. To support innerwork, we need to create sacred space with each other to have honest conversations about what's underneath the surface of the work and how we can begin to solve for the real issues. This individual growth forms the building blocks for positive, resilient teams to form. Then we can intentionally move forward together to practice the culture that we want to work and live in. Individuals working and leading in the social sector can seek out the everyday ways the patterns of racism are replicated, and work together with intention and creativity to change them, even in small ways, to begin to reset the pattern one interaction, one behavior, one program, one policy, or one neighborhood at a time.

Individuals working and leading the social sector can seek out the everyday ways the patterns of racism are replicated, and work together with intention and creativity to change them, even in small ways, to begin to reset the pattern one interaction, one behavior, one program, one policy, or one neighborhood at a time.

Key questions

In nearly two decades working as a white woman in North Minneapolis, I've experienced success and failure—and learned from both. I've gained insight into the system (policies, programs) and person (culture, relationship) barriers related to racialized poverty. Perhaps most importantly, I gained insight into myself, the ways I hold and carry my whiteness in the world, and the ongoing journey to be the kind of leader that's needed to cultivate true race equity pathways. How I created openness for people of color to rise and at times inadvertently replicated the very power structure I'm trying to fight. I uncovered questions like:

- How can leaders in systems be engaged to have whole-hearted connection to the impact of both historical and present racism in ways that are tangible and supported?
- How can human resources in social services and schools be better equipped to hire, support and promote more low-income people of color, who might carry impacts of historical and present racialized trauma, so their unlimited potential can be cultivated?
- How can we create a measurement system that illuminates whether we are moving the needle on the root challenges that live deep beneath the surface, like mindset, racism, and trauma?

I know many in my white community, and America generally, think we need to talk less about race and more about poverty, less about the past and more about the future. Just as I did for a brief moment earlier on in my career—they feel race and racism is fading into the past. But white people are in the driver's seat of this country—of every major institution that controls what happens next. We are our systems. We can only change systems if we change ourselves and the ways we either contribute or detract from racial equity. As a white leader, I am no longer lulled by the post-race fallacy. In fact, I am re-

activated in the truth. I invite other white leaders to deepen their awareness of race, and at times, do so in ways that are painfully self-reflective and strategically agitating.

I invite other white leaders to deepen their awareness of race, and at times, do so in ways that are painfully self-reflective and strategically agitating.

A unique opportunity for the social sector

I believe there is a unique opportunity for social-sector leaders that working in organizations serve people of color in places like North Minneapolis. A principal, teacher, social worker, nonprofit leader, policy maker, or planner uniquely positioned to do this work from 'inside' the structures that pattern and contribute actively and authentically as a racial disparity equalizer.

- **Schools** that help determine if a community of young black or brown children have a quality education can set a new foundation for their pathway to success.
- **Social services** can provide resources and programs in a way that will either sustain a poverty-level existence or helps families to transform.
- **Philanthropists** can sanction and resource bold new strategies to leverage racial awareness—and fund programs that support a power shift.
- **Elected and administrative government officials**, who literally write the code for the programming of our society, can open their process and meaningfully bring in people who are impacted by their decisions, giving them a voice in policies that will underwrite authentic innovation—with new ground-rules that actively promote racial equality.

An opportunity and a choice

America is in a shattered state. The people who want to preserve the past, and the feeling of safety and security it brings them, is doing battle with those who want to create a great new society rebuilt with a more racially equitable foundation underneath it. It's a culmination of decades of below the surface beliefs and feelings that are now breaking free. Out of this brokenness, there is an *opportunity and a choice*. We can continue to close our eyes to racial inequity. Or we can lean into the fracture and truly recognize that our past system of white dominance still exists today and work to course correct what hundreds of years of human behavior carved into the landscape of our society. When we validate the racially unjust realities that we live, we can begin to change the system, structure, and culture barriers to racial equity, and rebuild a more equalized landscape.

I still have an unbounded optimism, similar to when we started work as a Promise Neighborhood nearly a decade ago. But I've learned to have a clearer perspective about where the work lies—inside with deeper recognition and cultivating potential in people as much as outside with fixing the processes and structure. Today, I remain engaged with systems that function where race and poverty intersect—working to support individuals and teams as they become levers for creating transformative change.