



The League of Women Voters is no stranger to protests.

One hundred years ago, the League was born during the final months of the women's suffrage movement. The march to suffrage was not pretty; protesters earned "P" pins to wear on their clothing to signify time spent in prison for protesting their right to vote. Some women were sent to mental hospitals and classified as insane and others were tortured while in police custody. Some were force fed to end their hunger strikes and some were kept in solitary confinement. In 1919, suffrage protesters lit "Watchfires of Freedom" in small urns in Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C. Yes, the same Lafayette Square so prominently featured in the news recently.

The history of the League and the history of race and racial injustice in our country and in our community is tightly braided. The League has had its own internal struggles and reckonings with racial understanding. We owe our thanks to Frederick Douglass, who was there at the beginning, signing with Elizabeth Cady Stanton at Seneca Falls. Sojourner Truth spoke at early voting rights rallies and Ida B. Wells was an active protestor by 1895. Our very own Oxford League was organized in 1962 as a response to the riots at Ole Miss over the admission of James Meredith and their desire to bring the community together to heal and move forward.

It is in this same spirit of community that the League of Women Voters Oxford/North Mississippi now calls on our elected leaders and all the citizens of Oxford and Lafayette County to join our voices for racial equality and justice in our community.

Because there is a problem in our community.

Our black citizens don't feel welcome in many public places in our community. Our black citizens have been stopped and questioned while walking on the Square. Our black students know which bars on the Square don't welcome them. Our black citizens have been stopped in their cars without cause. Events catering to black citizens are policed differently than events for white citizens.

To think that events like Minneapolis or Ferguson can't happen here, unfortunately, is naïve.

For many of us, our white privilege has allowed us to see our community through one lens; what we think about race is just one part of that lens we carry with us every day.

All of us see things the way we were taught and often not the way they really are. We have overlooked, shook our heads, denied our attitudes, or "just hoped for the best."

We have an opportunity now to use the shared compassion over the brutal murder of George Floyd to create change. Let's not squander another chance. Let's use it to grow and make Oxford and Lafayette County a welcoming and safe home for all of us. Let's show reverence for all human life, safeguarding the guarantees of the Constitution and the laws of our community in our processes.

We strongly encourage our leaders to host community discussions of all citizens to hear the concerns of all our people and especially those in people of color communities. These gatherings could easily be done now in neighborhoods and Covid-19 compliant. There should be a simultaneous online viewing opportunity for at-risk populations and the ability to offer questions and comments online.

We strongly encourage the development of Citizen Advisory Groups to work with our Oxford Police Department and our Lafayette County Sheriff's Department to review current policies and procedures on their Use of Force, Training and Education, Hiring, and Community Policing. These groups should represent the demographics of our community and work closely, on a regular basis, to ensure fair and equal application of justice. There should be regular updates to the public on their ongoing work; what policies are outdated or flawed, what needs to change, what is the proposed change, was it adopted, why or why not? Transparency during this process is key.

We strongly encourage the adoption of new Evidence Based Guidelines and the development of new Policies and Procedures. Taking this approach will build trust between our police and sheriff departments and our communities of color. These Guidelines should be developed in coordination with the Citizen Advisory Groups and our policing professionals and should be measurable with scheduled accountability reports to the community.

We strongly encourage the adoption of Wellness and Safety programs for our police professionals to ensure appropriate shift lengths, easy access to mental health professionals and wellness education. The mental, as well as the physical, safety of our officers is a fundamental concern to all of us.

These are good first steps for justice equality with many good ones that can follow to address inequalities in housing, education, and access to quality healthcare for all our citizens.

The League of Women Voters Oxford/North Mississippi urges our community and its elected leaders to come together to create positive change for all our citizens.

The Board of Directors
League of Women Voters Oxford/North Mississippi
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