



Postscript

We Need to Talk

The week before spring break, a now infamous video pulled the University of Oklahoma into the national spotlight and dialogue on race. Nowhere is that conversation more important than on its own campus.

Students, faculty and staff are often referred to as the “OU family.” And sometimes families argue. Sometimes they say things that they regret. But at the end of the day, families sit down and talk things out. For those who call OU home, meaningful conversations about race, stereotypes and free speech are just beginning.

After the release of a video showing fraternity members singing a racist chant, the national headquarters revoked its OU charter and the two students identified as leaders were expelled. Has racism now been eradicated on the OU campus? Of course not, but it’s finding fewer places to hide.

Throughout March, colleges across campus opened their doors to give the OU and Norman communities a safe place to talk and to listen. In a packed town hall meeting held at the Price College of Business, students who had never spoken up gave heartbreaking first-person accounts—American Indians heckled on the north oval, black students in residence halls finding themselves the brunt of their roommates’ racial jokes, gay men who are afraid to work out at the Huston Huffman Fitness Center. Everyday life for OU minorities goes mostly unseen by the white majority. A nine-second video floodlit that shadow.

Since January, OU President David Boren had been meeting with members of Unheard, the black student alliance, exploring ways to foster greater diversity on campus. In late March he announced that former state legislator Jabar Shumate had been hired as the first vice president for university community. Shumate’s one and only task will be to foster a more inclusive and diverse environment on all three OU campuses. As an undergraduate in the ’90s, he served as student body president, a resident adviser in housing and was a member of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity. With a master’s degree in human relations and four terms finding common ground among Oklahoma legislators as a leader of the Oklahoma legislative black caucus, Shumate seems fit for the task.

Throughout the past few weeks, amid all the press, pub-

lic meetings and administrative changes, the most remarkable reaction has been from those at ground zero—OU students themselves. While national networks set up camp on the south oval and OU made headlines from FOX News to The Daily Show, OU students found ways to be heard without raising their voices. Peaceful demonstrations and marches, led by Unheard, Sooner athletes and others, provided a visible man-

ifestation of not only the hurt, but also the hope to heal it. During one such gathering, a diverse group of Greeks and independents, dreadlocks and pony-tails, campus residents and commuters, walked side by side offering a new chant, “Not on our campus.”

The administration can and should provide diversity programs and fertile ground for dialogue, but in the end it will be students who implement the change, one conversation at a time: “Think before you tell a joke,” “Listen to what you are saying,” “Don’t be afraid to say, “That’s wrong.” “Teach someone about your culture.”

This is not the first time OU students have reached across a racial divide. After winning a U.S. Supreme Court battle in 1948, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher became the first black student admitted to the OU School of Law. “Separate but equal” meant Fisher was given a roped-off chair at the back of the classroom. The boundary, however, did not prevent white male classmates from offering her

their notes when Sipuel missed the first two weeks of class. Nor did it keep students from ducking under chains around the segregated table in the cafeteria to eat lunch with her.

Errors in judgment provide room for introspection and growth. Both expelled fraternity members have now made public apologies, one addressing black community leaders at Fairview Missionary Baptist Church in Oklahoma City. “We have hope for healing,” said Oklahoma Senator Anastasia Pittman. “This is just the beginning of a great conversation.”

“I have never been more proud to be a Sooner,” added Isaac Hill, president of the OU Black Student Association. “I hope we can take this experience and turn it into a time to learn and grow. These behaviors are taught. The only thing to do is to unteach them.”

And what better place for education than a university?

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