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# Study or not, city has work to do on race

Last Updated: Jan. 18, 2003



**Eugene Kane**  
E-MAIL | ARCHIVE

Milwaukee County Supervisor Tim Johnson has read all about the new study suggesting Milwaukee isn't anywhere near as racially segregated as once thought.

Regardless, he still thinks a county Task Force on Segregation and Race Relations is still a good idea.

"The thing is, nobody's doing anything when it comes to race, nobody's taking a leadership position," said Johnson, who is proposing that a commission of County Board members examine the daunting issue of race in Milwaukee and come up with specific recommendations.

Johnson, a boyish-looking 36, is one of a group of reformers who won election to the board after the Tom Ament pension scandal.

His district is 84% white, 10% black and 3% Latino, the rest Asian and other races.

Despite new statistical information that suggests segregation in Milwaukee isn't as bad as previously thought, Johnson said prevailing racial attitudes in this community that create all kinds of tension and misunderstanding required immediate attention.

"What we need most of all is a dialogue, people sitting around a table talking," said Johnson.

He has no illusions his commission on race will solve all of the problems overnight, but he wants to get the conversation started.

"I'm not looking for a home run," he said. "I'd be satisfied with a

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single."

Despite the abundance of information presented in the Journal Sentinel series on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee study on segregation casting doubt on previous studies, there's still ample evidence to suggest this community isn't exactly a hotbed of diversity.

Like, the evidence of one's own eyes.

All over Milwaukee - just like in most major cities in America - there are "black" neighborhoods and "white" neighborhoods, where never the twain shall meet.

There are even "black" shopping malls and "white" shopping malls.

In fact, the "white" malls often become "black" malls once white shoppers begin to notice a creeping increase in the number of black shoppers, particularly black youth.

Some Milwaukee area neighborhoods are so definable by race, anybody who has lived here for more than five years can confidently guess whether the suspect or victim in any crime report was black, white or Hispanic.

More times than not, all you need is an address.

Despite the presence of a handful of truly integrated residential areas, basically, the place still seems awfully segregated to me.

The UWM study by John Pawasarat and Lois Quinn introduced a new way to determine the degree of segregation in major cities, which redefined Milwaukee in terms of our national rankings.

The study suggested our long-standing reputation as one of the most segregated cities in the country - placing us above places with small African-American populations like Salt Lake City - was unjustified.

Johnson, who has lived in lily-white communities across the Midwest, recognizes that, despite any national ranking, Milwaukee was typical of many other cities in one regard.

True integration, meaning black and white living and interacting together, is still a rarity.

His awakening on racial matters came about after being exposed to minorities while attending West Point. Later, while serving in the Army during the Persian Gulf War, he grew close with comrades from all backgrounds and races.

Made him wonder, why can't it always be like this?

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As an instructor at Lakeland College, he encouraged his students to examine their differences in an attempt to understand how similar they actually were.

Those classroom discussions proved to be the spark that prompted his idea for the county task force.

After talking it over with black supervisors, Johnson presented a plan for a one-year initiative concentrating on specific goals of transportation, economic development and housing.

The task force resolution was sponsored by a racially diverse group of 10 county supervisors: five white and five African-American.

The proposal to create the task force will go to the full County Board later this month. Johnson has high hopes, but he remains grounded by reason.

"You're not going to solve this problem by picking at the edges," said Johnson.

He also realizes meaningful interaction between different races can't be mandated by official decree.

"You can't ram it down people's throats. In order to get at the fundamental problems, you have to change one heart at a time."

With his background in both religion and philosophy, Johnson feels prepared to tackle an issue with great political and social significance.

The fact that Milwaukee may not be as segregated as other cities with no minorities at all doesn't faze him. This community is his home; like the rest of us, it's the only community he cares about when it comes to segregation.

Same thing goes for me.

Whether we're number one, number 43 or number 143, the real challenge isn't changing our ranking but changing attitudes about race that continue to keep people apart.

It's about seeing our community with honest and open eyes, and caring enough to do something about it.

A version of this story appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Jan. 19, 2003.

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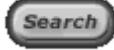
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