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OPINION

Dallas, we need to talk about 'the knee' We must have conversations about race if we are to heal and move forward

By ANTOINE JOYCE, June 2, 2020

What's it going to take?

Black men — and those who care for us — are choking on these words: What's it going to take?

Colin Kaepernick, a black professional football player, took a knee during the national anthem to peacefully protest excessive police force. That knee lit fires in peoples' hearts and minds, unleashing hope. It also exposed a festering hatred that still inhabits our nation, a hatred that is deep and brutal. What's it going to take?

And, now, the knee of a white police officer comes down on the neck of George Floyd, as Floyd pleads for his life. This is the knee of hatred and total disregard for human life. It has unleashed a rage among all ages, races, ethnicities and backgrounds for the past several nights and, I fear, for nights to come.

Floyd couldn't breathe. And we are choking with grief and anger.

And so many of us who work with youth and allied adults feel our knees weak and weary, our spirits craving hope. And we feel the anger that is our birthright — we, black boys and black men in America. I see you every day in our youth development programs, in the streets and now on social media, and I hurt with you and for you.

I've heard it said that it's hard to hate someone up close. The more you get to know each other, the more common ground you can find. So, this is me. Know me.

I am a product of poverty. Growing up poor, you are always angry. People treat you like excrement because you are poor. And in poor communities, we tell poor children to be quiet. The system expects the worst of these young people, so we tell them to be quiet, mainly because we want to protect them, to avoid any trouble, to avoid being seen. Because if you are seen, you might get shot in the back or find yourself on the ground with a knee on your neck. We grow up angry and afraid.

As a creative teenager from Brooklyn, I redirected my anger (I'm still plenty pissed; it doesn't leave you), but I was lucky. I was given the opportunity to be heard. With the help of caring adults, I took my energy and put it into a movement. An effective movement.

Up close and finding common ground, I work with whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, lesbians and gays. I got to know caring Republicans, independents and Democrats. And we built



D'Anthony Gray performed a dance titled "We Are One" as he protested the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at Klyde Warren Park Sunday. D'Anthony is a student at Dallas' Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. (Ben Torres/Special Contributor)

a national movement for youth development and creativity. We are not the cream of the crop. We are the dirt poor. And I have invited thousands of youth and adults to join this movement. And we have only just begun, I promise you that.

As a young person encouraged by caring adults, I learned how to channel my angry voice so it was heard and respected. I learned how to organize power with like-minded and like-hearted allies. Soon, I began to have access to more opportunities, more knowledge, more inclusion in the mainstream. I now sit in boardrooms with world, national and local leaders providing opportunities for young people.

Yes, the violence and destruction of property need to stop. But so do the killings of citizens by police. So does the violence of hate against those who were as much a part of building this country as anyone else.

Elected leaders need to speak words that unite, not divide. Or they need to stand down and make room for new leadership.

To move forward, Dallas needs to engage in a series of youth-led, cross-community conversations about "the knee." These will be angry conversations, I guarantee you, but they are necessary conversations if we are to end this cycle, change the system and finally, finally, finally heal the injury threatening our nation.

The wounds are real and they are deep. Let's start the healing process in Dallas.