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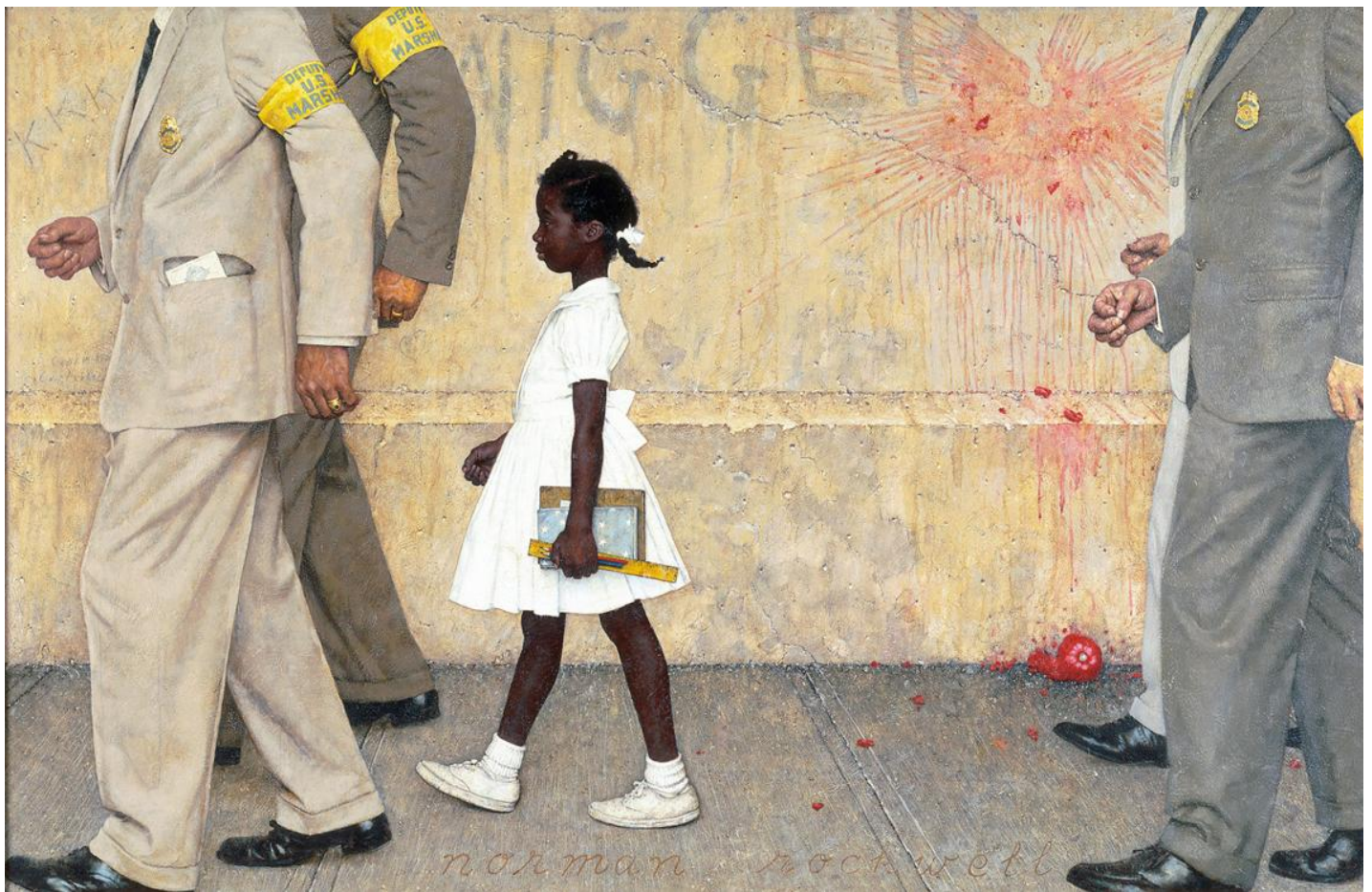
FEATURED

Talk and action

## Williams: We must engage our children on race

MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS

mwilliams@timesdispatch.com 7 hrs ago



Norman Rockwell's 1963 painting "The Problem We All Live With" depicts grade-schooler Ruby Bridges walking to the New Orleans school where she was the only African American student, escorted by four federal marshals.

Collection of Norman Rockwell Museum via The Washington Post

The little black girl in the crisp white dress walks by racist graffiti and splattered tomatoes, escorted by U.S. marshals. Unseen is a howling white mob. The 6-year-old child, based on Ruby Bridges, who desegregated an all-white New Orleans elementary school, is the focal point of this Norman Rockwell painting, "The Problem We All Live With."

Black children were on the front line fighting American racism. Six decades later, we're still at war, with too many white families on the sidelines.

Don't sit out this problem. Not because you're scared; not because you're uncomfortable; and not because you're unsure how best to explain centuries of systemic injustices to a toddler.

Start small — today — by choosing to acknowledge and celebrate our differences — a choice that in and of itself embodies privilege.

Because yesterday's howling mob is today's silence, in the face of a growing racial divide. The White House is pursuing a white supremacist agenda at odds with racial reconciliation.

We need backup. (Just stay away from "I don't see color." We're not invisible.)

Parents — especially white parents — must speak candidly about racism with their children. Opting out speaks more loudly than you might know, according to the American Psychological Association.

The APA says when parents have these conversations, children are more respectful of other groups; have a better understanding and appreciation of their own race, ethnicity and identity; have higher self-esteem; and recognize and respond more appropriately to racially charged situations.

When children start recognizing shapes and colors, they'll start noticing differences in people. That's your cue to begin educating them on race and celebrating our differences with picture books.

"Research shows that children notice differences (and potentially different treatment) from a very young age, even if they aren't socialized to speak about it or contextualize it. However, there are often different realities that emerge around race early on," said Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities.

Most people of color talk about race young, either with their parents or peers, Zur said. "It can be protective in nature, or it can result from an experience of exclusion or feeling different in some way.

"White children are having those conversations much less often — and rarely with the same specificity," he said. He added that psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum, president emerita at Spelman College, has noted that the messages white children receive "are often broad platitudes (such as 'We are all the same' and 'We should treat everyone nicely'). Or, white children receive the message that you shouldn't say the wrong thing around race. What that means is that even if they see something that raises questions or inspires interest, they often won't speak about it."

Erlanger A. Turner, a Houston-based licensed clinical psychologist and consultant, echoed that.

"One of the first things is for parents to be honest with their kids and not try to sugarcoat things," Turner said.

"It's just a matter of people being honest about the history of racism in the United States, and if we work together, we can have progress."

Sadly, we've been far from forthright about that history, or even in denial. Our education system has peddled misinformation. Parents repeat the lies to their children, or simply remain mum.

"This lack of practice or honest engagement unfortunately continues for many white people throughout their lives," Zur said.

"It means that they are less likely to speak up when they see injustice. And, over time, it means they are more likely to gloss over or not even notice an injustice."

Meanwhile, people of color may develop mistrust of white people or choose not to have certain conversations in mixed company, Zur said.

"It means that we end up having two very different perceptions and realities."

America must stop framing racism as a problem for people of color to solve. We've borne a disproportionate burden. We cannot overcome racism alone.

If you want to be an ally, raise your children to work toward a more inclusive nation, tolerant of difference and intolerant of bigotry and injustice.

We must start by breaking the silence and stopping the sugarcoating when it comes to race and our children.

But guiding children's behavior is more than what we say. It's how we educate our kids, where we choose to live and whether our neighborhoods mirror America. It's about modeling behaviors that will help the next generation break this cycle of hate, bigotry and injustice.

We must be intentional in teaching our children tolerance, or racism will remain the problem we all live with.

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mwilliams@timesdispatch.com (804) 649-6815

Twitter: @RTDMPW

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Michael Paul Williams