

# Hard questions for the Mayor and Chief of Police — need for actions not just words

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing June 2, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the George Floyd killing* 

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Gadfly,

With all due respect to Mayor Donchez, I do not share your enthusiasm for his **“powerful statement.”** Powerful words are easy to come by this week, as many leaders are speaking out about racial justice and police violence. The mayor did not use these particular words, which reflect that the relevant problem is bigger than just some cops behaving badly. But even so, the words the mayor did use are not that meaningful unless they get turned into action that goes beyond condemning a single instance of police violence. So my question for the mayor is: What does it mean for a mayor and the people he oversees to not “turn our backs on racism,” to not “accept innocent lives being taken from us,” to not “think that you can’t be part of the solution and the change needed for this to stop”? Surely it must mean more than merely saying we should not do these things.

I believe the mayor can do a bit more. For example, the mayor can start by admitting that the problem is not out there, in some universe other than Bethlehem. Just earlier this year we had an incidence of racial bias in policing, which was raised by two local judges who went public with the information after receiving no response from the chief of police. In his response, the mayor demonstrated he neither understood nor had an interest in doing something about the problem. I recall his statement at city council, which asserted he had investigated the issue and found no problematic behavior, so he would not be commenting on it further—case closed.

Does the mayor really think there are no problems with how our police department is dealing with people of color? What is he doing to stop the

double standard that allows Lehigh University students to benefit from the local marijuana ordinance while his police department pretends the ordinance does not exist for others who are found with marijuana? What is he doing to make sure that the police department is not operating and acting on the assumption that black and brown people are likely to be criminals? Is he aware of obvious racial bias in the ways that city police officers respond to and interact with people of color whom they suspect are breaking the law?

The Bethlehem police may not be killing people, but that does not mean that they treat black and brown people the same way they treat white people. Racism that is not overt and does not result in a person's death is still racism. The mayor and police chief can pretend it does not exist locally and condemn what happened to George Floyd for the brutal inhumanity it displayed, but if that is all they do, then they are part of the problem.

Leadership requires hearing what people are saying about double standards and unequal treatment that operate through our own political institutions at the local level to undermine the experience, well-being, and security of people of color. Once this is understood, leadership then involves doing something about it. If the mayor and police chief can't even see the structural nature of the problem and its pervasiveness right here at home, then they are the wrong leaders for this time.

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