

Facing Our Truth Part 1 | By DeeAnn Veeder
Berkshire Mosaic
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Two days ago, I ran into a woman at the grocery store who, over three years ago, was my first decisive ‘unfriending’ on Facebook because of her belligerently racist comments about the murder of Trayvon Martin. Even her grown children were telling her on Facebook she was racist, but she didn’t get it and seemed to think she was being very clever and daring in her defense of George Zimmerman. Trayvon Martin looked like the son of a friend of mine, his sweet eyes reminded me of Tito’s, whom I’d known since he was six, and I felt an awful sadness at Trayvon’s death as well as a searing certainty that George Zimmerman cold-bloodedly murdered a 17-year-old boy who had nothing but Skittles in his hand. That woman’s careless, goading comments made me spitting mad. I slapped that ‘unfriend’ button very hard. And big deal.

Because of Trayvon and the ensuing protests and media coverage and George Zimmerman’s acquittal of everything, even manslaughter, and the cold, clueless responses of so many white people, I was waking up to a nightmare – the inexplicable, ubiquitous, somehow condoned violence toward people of color in my country. And, to my horror, the bodies kept falling, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, John Crawford III, Sandra Bland, Prince Jones and so many more. And as in a nightmare, I was powerless in the face of a staggering relentlessness, I was unmoored by the inconceivable number, I was suffocated by white denial, I couldn’t bring these bodies back to life, I couldn’t move fast enough to save my countrymen that would still die.

In 2013, Keith Josef Adkins transformed his bewildered rage at the Martin-Zimmerman travesty into Facing Our Truth: Ten-Minute Plays on Trayvon, Race and Privilege. Adkins is the co-founder and artistic director of New Black Fest, a New York City-based theatre festival. He is also a playwright. “Theatre is one of the few public forums in which people can engage and have conversation and feel comfortable and feel protected,” he said. He went about contacting six diverse playwrights to ask if they would each write a ten-minute play exploring the painful issues of race brought to light by this case. He received a resounding yes.



Facing Our Truth continues to be performed throughout the country, usually at this time of year, as February 5th was Trayvon Martin's birthday, and a staged reading will be performed at the Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield on Saturday, February 6th. Gwendolyn Hampton VanSant is glad BRIDGE was in a position to join Kristen van Ginhoven of WAM Theatre in producing this play, and BRIDGE is honored to be the beneficiary. Proceeds will support BRIDGE racial justice work from school-

based forums to community advocacy.

Gwendolyn is well known in Berkshire County for her tireless, elegant and gently unflinching work toward racial justice. We will now get to see her onstage as the mother in *Dressing* by Mona Mansour & Tala Manassah, directed by Yvette "Jamuna" Sirker, who is also a producer of the show. In a touching turn, Gwendolyn's son JV Hampton Vansant plays her son in this piece. *Dressing* is a play in three parts, and the first part is playful bantering between mother and son about what he's wearing to school that day. The following two parts are devastating.

"Facing Our Truth is important to me because these six 10-minute plays tell so many sides to this important story," said Gwendolyn. "It is getting yet another level of conversation about racism, privilege and bias. It is powerful and educational and an access point at many levels for all to join and increase their understanding. This production will be a milestone in my lifetime, most poignantly as we rehearse on what would be Trayvon Martin's 21st birthday on February 5th. The joining of hands, talents and experience and treasure for all of the work leading up to this event has been momentous for me. We see what we can do as a community and how brave we can all be to face the truth head on when we work together. I agreed to be in the piece to tell this story and it turned out to be my own story in *Dressing*. Working with Kristen, Jamuna and Lindsey has pushed us to our growing edges and we are proud! We all hope this catalyzes more collaboration, more action in our community. I am proud of the Berkshires in their steps to confront racism."

Gwendolyn will moderate a panel discussion after the performance.

I stopped 'unfriending' the white people on Facebook that were defending everyone but the fallen. Instead I continually read and post pieces on racial justice. I hope to someday do more, through my art or through my writing, but for now I can write about and learn from people who are doing more, like Gwendolyn, and Kristen and Jamuna, as well as their sponsors, Kate Maguire at the Colonial Theatre, and Karen Zink and Chris Farrell at Berkshire Gas, and Vicki May at Greylock Federal Credit Union. More about them next week...