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One man's struggle to explain George Zimmerman's verdict

David Muhammad New America Media | Jul. 15, 2013
Commentary

After the verdicts were read, my 8-year-old son saw my anger and asked, "Why did [Geroge] Zimmerman kill Trayvon [Martin]?" Thinking of all that I heard, read and saw through the three weeks of trial, I said to him, "I don't know for sure, but I think because he is racist."

The undisputed facts are that Zimmerman profiled, followed, shot and killed 17-year-old Martin. As the slew of texts, tweets and Facebook messages about the verdict streamed in from fellow angry friends and colleagues, I sat there, furious, disappointed and frustrated.

The feeling was also strange. I've spent most of my career trying to help people and change systems so there is less incarceration. But here I was, wanting nothing more than for Zimmerman to be convicted and locked up. Although I've spent several years of my career as a law enforcement official, the sole reason I got into government was to reform the system that is broken. And now the country, and indeed the world, is again seeing how broken America's criminal justice system really is. Even though the defense thoroughly out-lawyered the prosecution, there appeared to be more than enough evidence to convict. A teenage boy was killed, and the shooter was not held responsible.

This summer, I have had my children watch the groundbreaking PBS "Eyes on the Prize" series [1]. The night before the Zimmerman verdicts, we watched the last episode, which featured the story of Arthur McDuffie. McDuffie was a military veteran and successful black businessman the Miami police stopped and beat and kicked to death for no reason. Although clear and convincing evidence for murder was presented to an all-white male jury, including the testimony of other officers at the scene, the three white officers were found not guilty. Miami was engulfed in riots.

After my two teenage daughters said they didn't have much familiarity with the Rodney King case when I mentioned it in connection to McDuffie, we watched an hour of YouTube footage of the Rodney King beating, the acquittal of the officers and the unfortunate riots that ensued. My 16-year-old daughter said to me, "1980 in Miami was the same as 1992 in Los Angeles." Although Zimmerman was just a wannabe cop, we can now add 2013 in Sanford, Fla.

My eldest daughter and I have been planning to see the new movie "Fruitvale Station [2]." The story is of a young black man shot and murdered by a transit police officer. Even with clear video evidence of Oscar Grant being shot and killed while he lay face down, not moving, on a train platform, white officer Johannes Mehserle was only convicted of involuntary manslaughter and spent less than a year in prison.

The timing was ironic and painful. We had just seen the stories of McDuffie and King. We were headed to watch the story of Grant, and we were now experiencing the story of Martin.

Now, like many black parents across the country, I struggle with what to tell my son. A son who has spent his whole life knowing his father as a law enforcement official. A son who has said he is interested in being a police

officer. And like many parents, I have to have "that talk" with my son. The talk about Emmett Till, McDuffie, King, Grant, Martin and countless other black men beaten and killed by white authorities.

I will tell my son to be encouraged that a black man is the president of the United States, but also know and understand that the murder of a young black man still can't get justice.

[David Muhammad is the CEO of Solutions Inc. consulting firm. He is the former chief probation officer of Alameda County Probation and the former deputy commissioner of New York City Probation. This commentary originally appeared at New America Media's website [3].]

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