

Does racial profiling exist in Des Moines?

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Dionna Langford spends most of her time pulling at the roots of social inequality and injustice in Des Moines.

She helps build connections with local companies and expands employment access for Iowans as a business and employer relations coordinator for the Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families. She's part of the criminal justice team for community organizing agency AMOS Iowa. The team is working to document racial profiling by police officers.

Here's the kicker: Langford is only 23.

The East High School graduate studied political science at the University of Iowa before moving more toward a career in social justice.

"We were studying all of these social problems, but there was no solution." Langford said.

The Register sat down with Langford to pick her brain on race relations in Iowa.

Q. Is there a racial profiling problem in Des Moines?

A. If you ask brown and black people in this community whether we have a problem with racial profiling, they're going to tell you yes. ... Most of them have been touched by it in the workplace, in law enforcement, in hiring practices, in co-workers or friends who make comments.

Q. How do we fix it?

A. We all have biases we've internalized from our society about race, gender and class. ... They're always functioning. Sometimes those biases are going to impact our decision making. We need to be taught to recognize when some of those biases may be unfounded or not true. We need to have the tools to check ourselves and recognize when a thought isn't necessarily founded, and make the decision to not let it influence our decision making.

Q. How do you get that education to the masses?

A. Before you can get to a solution, you have to acknowledge you have a problem. ... For instance, let's look at the race riots that broke out at the West Des Moines school district. ... (Administrators) said something along the lines of: the issues affecting our wider society are going to be affecting the students in our school.

I was waiting for the rest of that quote to continue. There was no "and we are committed to creating a safe environment for all our students and we have these action steps in place to make sure these things don't continue to happen."

To me that's a classic example of folks who recognize there's an issue and either don't want to acknowledge it, or they acknowledge, but just don't know what to do about it.

Q. What is AMOS and the racial profiling project doing to help?

A. They started this project to collect stories from individuals in the community about their experiences with profiling to be able to show that there is a disconnect. ... They document mostly vehicular stops with police officers.

The goal is two-fold. The first part is to collect the stories as evidence, and the second is to identify where these stops are happening. Are there certain areas where it happens most?

We've recently gone into barber shops. ... It's been really good to have people informally share their stories because most people don't want to. They're afraid of some sort of retribution.

Q. Why do you do this work?

A. I do this work because I believe we are at a critical junction in our country in how we deal with race and class relations. A lot of people in this city believe we don't have "those sorts of problems" here in Des Moines. We can choose to honestly confront our challenges, or continue to ignore the harder realities many marginalized people face in our society, and in this state. I want to be a part of a movement of people within this city willing to do the work ...

Q. What is your dream job?

A. I know I'm committed to justice work. I know I'm committed to challenging inequity that's present within our systems. I'm committed right now to exploring the things that I care about and walking through the doors as they present themselves.

Dionna Langford

AGE: 23.

LIVES: Des Moines.

GREW UP: Des Moines.

FAMILY: She has a host of family members in the city, including a brother and a sister who attend Roosevelt High School.

UNIQUE FACT: I was raised by my great-grandmother. She just turned 94.

MORE: NAACP and AMOS representatives are conducting confidential interviews to document cases of racial profiling in the Des Moines area. The goal is to work with law enforcement to end profiling. Contact the group by calling 515-943-7944 or emailing [srпиowa@gmail.com](mailto:sрпиowa@gmail.com).

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