

- [PRESS](#)
- [Press Releases](#)

Racial Healing Activities Inspire Hope for ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ in America

By Edna Kane-Williams, AARP Vice President, Multicultural Markets and Engagement

Emmett Till. The four little girls in the Birmingham bombing. Rodney King. Trayvon Martin. Their names and situations invoke memories of extreme racial tension and often exacerbate feelings of racial distrust because of the painful circumstances surrounding their deaths. Across the nation, these and other historic stories of violence have for years saturated the airwaves and newspapers.

And yet, in many of America’s communities, programs and lessons in racial healing and tolerance are quietly spreading. Some are simply conversations that lead to understanding and changed behavior. Others are actual activities to establish outreach and relationships for racial diversity.

Like South Africa’s “Truth and Reconciliation” campaign that began the yet progressing road to racial healing post-apartheid, programs across the U. S. are inspiring hope that truth and reconciliation can also happen in America following slavery, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement and contemporary racial strife.

For example, the “Teaching Tolerance” program of the Montgomery, Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLCenter.org) describes its efforts to “foster school environments that are inclusive and nurturing – classrooms where equality and justice are not just taught, but lived. The program points to the future, helping teachers prepare a new generation to live in a diverse world.”

The program, which issues a *Teaching Tolerance* magazine; multimedia teaching kits, a Teaching Diverse Students initiative and special projects like Mix It Up at Lunch Day, reaches hundreds of thousands of educators and millions of students a year.

Likewise, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, which prioritizes equality and justice for the lives of children, four years ago launched a five-year initiative called, “America Healing”. The foundation is pouring \$75 million into programs and organizations that work toward ending racial inequities in trenches across America.

As a part of this initiative, Kellogg convenes an annual conversation among leaders of those groups, civil rights leaders and others who work for racial justice. The open and frank conversations aim to raise “awareness of unconscious biases and inequities and to help communities heal.”

Congressman John Lewis (D-Ga.) has praised this initiative, saying, “At a time when our nation shows disturbing signs of becoming more polarized, this courageous effort by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to promote healing within local communities is sorely needed.”

Of course these are works in progress and America has a ways to go for complete healing and reconciliation. Despite efforts like these to unite communities and touch individual lives around the nation, the SPLC reports that more than 190,000 incidents of hate and intolerance per year have been documented by the federal government over the past decade.

While widespread activities aim to teach youth and adults how to break racial barriers and authentically embrace diversity, some leaders see a void where more activities could be happening.

Elder Bernice King, an ordained minister who is the youngest child of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., believes many churches – Black and White - have lost their community focus.

“Honestly, we just keep living from day to day until another incident happens,” she said in a recent conversation with AARP. She said, as people gather weekly in houses of worship, “It would be so tremendous if we could use that as an opportunity to break some ground as it relates to some of these racial divides.”

Elder King serves as chief executive officer of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. There she oversees the Atlanta-based programs and exhibits that aim to inspire “new generations to carry forward his unfinished work”.

As thousands of youth visit the center every year, she sees hope that America’s painful racial legacy will gradually dissipate as future generations assert fresh perspectives.

"I see so many kids...And I watch the affinity that they have for each other across racial lines," she said. "They don't see color the way we do. They don't see race the way we do. They, I believe, are our hope for a changed world going forward. And if we would just pay close attention to them, we could learn something. Because they don't think about, 'I should have more than the other'. In fact, they teach us, 'I want this person included with me. It's only fair and right'...It's almost as if it's their assignment to do it for us; to redeem us."
