

From: Jacob Vargas [Redacted]
Sent: Friday, July 9, 2021 10:56 PM
To: James Pillen
Subject: Critical Race Theory at UNL

Dear Dr. Pillen,

When I was eight-years-old, I asked my White second grade teacher why I was the only child in my class with dark skin. Her face warmed in sympathy, but she had no answer. So I kept looking.

When I was nine-years-old, a construction worker demanded I tell him “where I came from.” When I asked my father why he’d asked this, he frowned, but couldn’t say. So I kept looking.

When I was eleven-years-old, a White girl said she didn’t want to play with me because I’m a person of color. When I asked my White mother why this happened, she looked angry. And yet, she had no explanation. So I kept looking.

When I was thirteen-years-old, White strangers would come up to me and ask “where I got my tan” as if people who looked like me did not naturally exist. I asked my brown father why this happened. Though he gave it thought, he couldn’t say. So I kept looking.

When I was fourteen-years-old, I asked my White social studies teacher how Latinos were treated during the American civil rights movement. He paused for a moment, and then said he wasn’t sure. So I kept looking.

When I was 16-years-old, my dad said his aunt told his mother to bathe him in bleach as a child. When I asked why she’d done this, he looked tired, but he couldn’t say. So I kept looking.

I found the answers I sought in a college sociology class. The professor taught us about the racial history of the United States—how White supremacy led to and maintained everything from slavery to Japanese internment to the genocide of indigenous peoples, how avoiding talking about race maintained racism, and how, when you live in a world made by people like you for people like you, being asked to think about any of these things is taken as an insult.

It is not.

I came away from this class with a mix of negative emotions. I felt angry, betrayed, saddened. Not because I felt guilty or blamed, but because no one had ever before bothered to pull the pieces into a coherent whole. Sure, I’d learned a bit about race in school. My teachers had almost always made sure to reserve exactly one Power Point slide in each unit to address the parallel history of all non-White Americans before resuming our discussion of the more important history of the White majority. I had seen the trees, but not the forest. Now I knew what I was looking at, and suddenly my life made sense.

I was the only brown person in my class because of the legacy of segregation.

I was asked where I was from because many White people maintain an implicit belief that the words “White” and “American” are synonymous.

The White girl didn’t want to play with me because she’d been raised with negative beliefs about people who looked like me, and continued to hear them espoused on TV and in the news.

White people asked me where I got my tan because they’d been exposed to so little media about people who look like me that they sometimes forgot we even existed.

My social studies teacher didn’t know how Latinos had been treated in the 50s and 60s because our history has been deemed irrelevant and secondary to the larger White narrative.

My grandmother was told to bathe her son in bleach because White supremacy holds that White skin is the highest form of beauty, purity, and moral worth.

Critical race theory is an academic lens used to determine how our racial past led to our racial present. It originated in the legal sphere but has since widened to encompass fields as diverse as political science and economics. My own field of counseling psychology uses it to understand the many negative mental health effects of racism. In my work as a therapist, I have used it to help Black clients navigate racial stress. I have used it to help indigenous clients understand how intergenerational trauma has affected their family dynamics. I have used it to help Latino clients manage the anti-immigrant sentiment they face at school and at work.

CRT is a multi-faceted tool whose sole purpose is to lessen the suffering of people of color by encouraging understanding of how we got where we are and what we can do about it now we’re here. This is why I feel sick when I hear CRT called “divisive.” A dividing line separates two groups of people. When the issue at hand is race, the two groups of people are those who oppose racism and those who support it. If CRT is divisive, it is only because it threatens

racist worldviews. And yet many believe threatening racism to be a bad thing. This hurts. It's degrading to live in a country where people hold votes on whether or not you count as a person. Yet this is the reality of life for all Americans of color.

The Nebraska Board of Regents will soon be asked to vote on whether CRT should be taught—in all its many manifestations—at UNL. You're an elected official. You have dedicated your life to public service. You want to help.

My question for you is this: who are you helping?

"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."--Proverbs 31; 8-9

Sincerely,

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