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The Feed

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Trayvon Martin case highlights need to talk about race issues before someone gets killed

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This is a column I wrote for the front of Sunday's Perspective section in the Tampa Bay Times.

Watching the explosion of anger, protests, allegations of racism and reverse racism, \$10,000 bounties issued and Twitter pages of a dead teen publicized after the shooting death of **Trayvon Martin**, I have one, sadly overarching feeling:

This did not have to happen.

Not because volunteer watchman **George Zimmerman** learned the hard way why police tell actual neighborhood watch participants not to carry guns and to travel in pairs.

Not because Sanford police learned the hard way to investigate a little more thoroughly and transparently when a young, unarmed black youth is killed in their town.



And certainly not because Martin, a 17-year-old African-American who didn't have the best record at school, decided to wear a hooded sweatshirt while walking through an unfamiliar Sanford subdivision on a rainy night.

I'm convinced that Martin, shot by Zimmerman after the man reported following a suspicious person to a 911 operator, might be alive today if we all could have managed one thing.

To talk about race before there is a huge crisis.

At times, this nationwide explosion of Million Hoodie Marches, heartfelt stories about racial profiling and criticisms of the ongoing stereotypes about young black men feels disconnected from the reality in Sanford of a black teen shot dead by a man who said he was attacked.



It feels much more like the rush of conversation that bursts forth when you finally have somebody's undivided attention.

Now that our ADD nation has been forced to ponder racism by the vision of a dead teen armed with a bag of Skittles and a bottle of iced tea, concerned columnists and dedicated activists have been putting a lot of important ideas on the table.

Jesse Washington, who covers race and ethnicity for the Associated Press, wrote a moving column about teaching his son the lessons every black father eventually has to pass along: the Black Male Code.

"He's only 12, still sleeping with stuffed animals, still afraid of the dark," Washington wrote. "But after the Trayvon Martin tragedy, I needed to explain to my child that soon people might be afraid of him."

Commentators are filling cable news shows with their stories of "walking while black," sometimes wearing hooded sweatshirts on camera.



Even Fox News anchor **Geraldo Rivera** was forced to apologize for suggesting the sportswear somehow got Martin killed, though he said it was "for the language," according to the Associated Press. "I don't apologize at all for the substance of my advice. I was trying to save lives."

What I heard was an argument over a simpler question: Do people of color change for a society that is sometimes unfair to them? Or do they stand as one to demand society correct its unfairness for them?

These are conversations we should be having every day, outside the blistering heat of an internationally famous murder investigation.

I wonder: Would Martin be alive if the 30 people who showed up for a September neighborhood watch meeting at the Retreat at Twin Lakes — Zimmerman among them — had talked about the dangers of racial profiling?



Could they have come up with better strategies to handle watching for suspicious outsiders without sparking confrontations?

Would the explosive outcry over Martin's death have been more muted if Sanford police had established a stronger bond with the local NAACP and black leaders, regularly addressing their concerns about race and racial profiling?

I know from experience that journalists are often hesitant to mention race in stories if racial issues are not the primary focus. But that, too, contributes to a situation where such issues are only part of the discussion when disaster looms.

Imagine if we only talked about crime prevention after a string of burglaries, and you see how wrongheaded this can be.

Some people call these conversations "playing the race card." Stirring up trouble where none exists.

Race baiting.

Sad to say, many people who say this are white people, who have the luxury of pretending that race and prejudice issues don't impact their lives as much as anyone.

"The new racism is denying racism," said comic **Bill Maher**, who is white, on HLN's *Dr. Drew* show Wednesday. "We've progressed so much ... now (white people) think those problems are gone. ... It's like, if a race started and three-quarters of the way around the track, the black people got to start running. You don't look up and say, 'Hey, we're all running now.' "

What people who speak of race cards and race baiting don't understand is that talking about difference and getting to know people who aren't like you — in friendlier, more respectful settings — can reduce anxiety on all sides.

For white people, that means more than having those few black friends who know how to deal with you on your cultural terms. Among people of color, including black folks, that means getting to know white people beyond those you work with or the few Caucasians comfortable in black neighborhoods.

That's what I learned almost four years ago when I called up an old friend who just happens to be a psychology researcher at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Linda Tropp told me her studies looking into how people talk across groups taught a few things: White people often don't like to talk about race, both because they fear saying something wrong and because they don't perceive problems in the same way many people of color do.

"For whites, they're much more likely to look at how much progress we've made (on race issues)," said Tropp, who is white. "Blacks are much more likely to look at where we are and where we need to be. So there is going to be different levels of satisfaction with racial progress."

Which also helps explain why, after a stunned pause, some quarters of media began pushing back against the idea that Martin's death was an example of racial profiling, arguing that the public was fed a false tale of profiling by corrupt activists and biased journalists.

Right wing-friendly websites such as the Daily Caller and Drudge Report have published photos of Martin showing off his gold teeth in an image taken from his now-closed Twitter account.

A columnist at the website Human Events complained that early press accounts used only old photos of a younger Martin, contrasted with a 2005 police booking photo of Zimmerman, warning that "deliberate attempts to influence the readers' emotions are being made."

But Zimmerman, who has been in hiding, didn't provide other photos to journalists, while Martin's family released the images reporters are using.

Fox News host **Sean Hannity**, who hadn't spoken much about Martin when the world thought the case was more settled, on Wednesday warned about "highly inflammatory rhetoric" and a "rush to judgment."

"You know, nationally nearly half of all murder victims are black," Hannity said. "And the overwhelming majority of those black people are killed by other black people. Where is the march for them?"

In a sense, Hannity is right. Look over websites for the National Urban League and the NAACP and you see efforts to fight narrowing of voting laws, initiatives to feed hungry kids, jobs fairs and efforts to expand HIV and AIDS screenings.

But there's not much on black-on-black crime.

Wouldn't it be amazing if Hannity hosted a show featuring people trying to curb crime and poverty in black neighborhoods, telling his viewers how to offer help?

Still, the protests and anger now seem focused on ensuring the justice system works for people of color in Sanford. And crazy as the media deluge has been, it has also been heartening to see the world respond with concern.

Now it's time to show that concern when the spotlight is switched off, and the cameras aren't rolling. (Note to all you **Al Sharpton** and **Jesse Jackson** haters; this may also be the best way to handle controversies before they get so big, these guys get involved.)

Indeed, we must find ways to keep those cameras rolling outside a crisis, as we discover ways to defuse racial issues and understand each other better.

Science indicates such cross-racial contact is the key to reducing stereotypes and prejudice.

"Contact with other groups reduces our anxiety; it enhances our ability to empathize," Tropp said. "Even those who were highly prejudiced and highly sensitive to being rejected on the basis of race ... they showed lowered levels of anxiety with more contact."

Once the dust has settled on the legalities of Martin's killing, starting a new dialogue on race outside anger and crisis would be the best tribute to Trayvon Martin yet.

You can sign me up for that march right now.