



THE LAWRENCEVILLE SCHOOL 2019-2020

May 31, 2020

Dear Members of the Lawrenceville Community,

Speaking to our graduating seniors and their families yesterday, I mentioned that during the week, the Lawrenceville Chapel Carillon rang to honor the memory of George Floyd, to offer condolences to his family, and to call for peace. Rev. Morrow played, among other songs, "We Shall Overcome" and "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

The Chapel bells served, however, not merely to console; they rang out as an urgent call that we pause together to focus on events that are tearing at the fabric of our nation and should shock us. This message does not, for a moment, take our attention away from our Fifth Formers, who just this morning walked across a virtual stage to receive their diplomas. The ongoing unrest across the nation, in fact, shines a stark light on the world they are entering, and therefore all the more reason that we take to heart, not only the tragic loss of a life, but what this event, and others like it, say about our society.

I have heard from many members of our community that the killing of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the shooting of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia, by a former police officer, and the incident in New York City's Central Park with Chris Cooper, make them feel profoundly unsafe. The truth is, when anyone feels unsafe in our society due to prejudice and hatred, when someone calls 911 and appears to claim that the mere color of a man's skin suggests menace and guilt, we all should feel unsafe and should feel a collective responsibility for our brothers and sisters.

And while the incident in Central Park may have ended without violence or tragedy, it is important to see it in a larger context. Eliza Orlins, public defender and Democratic candidate for Manhattan district attorney, wrote in a recent Washington Post piece,

*I have represented many people in similar situations. Most of their stories have followed a similar pattern: A white person calls the police on a black man. The police arrive and take the side of his white accuser, refusing to believe his version of events. He is arrested and arraigned. An outrageous bail amount is set. His family can't afford to buy his freedom. He gets sent to Rikers Island, where he sits for days, months or sometimes years.*

Likewise, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd need to be seen as only the latest examples in a narrative that has been going on for a long time, well before Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner in New York City, and Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio.

This is precisely why, on this day of all days, this deserves our attention. As we celebrate our seniors

and honor all that they have accomplished, it is important to see these culminating events as far more than the crossing of a ceremonial threshold and a goodbye.

As a school, we prepare each year for this moment. We have worked to instill in all of our graduates a depth of knowledge, a sense of responsibility, and a faith that the world, for all its imperfections, can be even better if we work at it. This moment, each year, is a profound statement of hope as we send them off, as our Mission says, to "lead lives of learning, integrity, and high purpose," and to use what they have gained from Lawrenceville to have an impact, "to seek the best for all." In order to have that impact, to have even a chance at improving things, we need to start by seeing the world as it is. We need to see clearly why there is such anger in so many neighborhoods, so many towns, and so many cities across this country today. As writer James Baldwin said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."

The theme of my Baccalaureate comments yesterday was love, and I expressed the hope that our graduates would not only find love in this world, but all the more important, that they would find a way to love the world, as hard as that may be at times. This means facing the reality that it will be imperfect, full of disappointment and loss, and even so we must keep the faith that the world is worth investing in, worth believing in, worth the effort to try to make it better. I quoted author E.B. White's famous response to an individual expressing profound disappointment with the state of affairs at that time:

*As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. ... [A]s a people we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time waiting to sprout when the conditions are right. Man's curiosity, his relentlessness, his inventiveness, [and] his ingenuity have led him into deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable him to claw his way out.*

Guided by our Mission, and with a dose of wisdom from James Baldwin and hope from E.B. White, we will face the issues that need changing. Tomorrow evening, I, along with other Deans and Faculty, will be meeting with members of the Alliance of Black Cultures and both the Diversity and Student Councils to coordinate the next steps we will take this week and into the summer months. While this will be a small group, we look forward to welcoming in July our new Dean of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement, Rick Holifield, who will help bring the entire Lawrenceville community into the conversation. In the meantime, advisors, Housemasters, teachers, and the counselors at the Al-Rashid Health and Wellness Center are available to any who are struggling. We will leverage all of our strengths to support each other as we move forward as a school.

So, as we celebrate our seniors today, let us acknowledge the recent tragedies and mourn the loss of innocent life. Let us take a clear-eyed, honest look at the state of our nation and how those who have been historically marginalized and demeaned continue to be treated. And I invite all of us to commit, through peaceful means, to finding a way forward together towards a more just society, one that we can love a bit more.

Sincerely,

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The Shelby Cullom Davis '26 Head Master