

Citizens should not ignore signs of racism in Hastings

To the editor:

If a tree falls in the forest and there are no white folks around to hear it, does it make any sound? When Jesus walked among us, the Pharisees challenged him to give proof of his message. Jesus told them that the signs were all around them if they only had eyes to see and ears to hear. Unfortunately, it is difficult to either see or hear when your head is buried in the sand.

The signs of racism in Hastings are all around us. Those who have been active in the schools know that several Hmong families have chosen to leave Hastings. Those who have been active in the secondary schools know that families with non-white children have removed their children from Hastings schools and placed them in schools in other communities. Visitors to the schools have seen the swastikas and racist slogans. People active in the housing coalition know that residents of the transitional houses and their children have been harassed. People who frequent the businesses in town have seen how certain shopkeepers react to blacks or Native

Americans in their stores.

Families of mixed race have shared their fear in bringing or even inviting family members to Hastings. People in the churches are aware that non-white visitors rarely stay to become part of the local faith community. (One could argue that the preaching at the Presbyterian Church drives more people away than does racism, but I am not aware of large numbers of minority families at any other church in Hastings.)

Although the signs are all around us, it is easy to ignore or deny those signs, as long as it's not your family or your friends. I applaud the spirit of young people willing to write in defense of their school, but they are wrong if they truly believe that innocent people don't get hurt. Innocent people do get hurt, and people who are not looking for trouble can often be provoked into violent and dangerous altercations. Neither is the argument relevant that it is only a small group of troublemakers. There can be no acceptable limits for harassment or intimidation. Whether troublemakers represent 5 percent or one-tenth of 1 percent, evil

behavior must not be tolerated.

I've been warned that calling attention to racism only makes it worse and hurts our positive reputation. I know I am at odds with those whose philosophy is, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil," but I believe that confronting evil is not only positive, it is also necessary, and we must constantly be on guard if we want to prevent its growth in the quiet shadows and dark corners of our schools, our shops or even our churches. I refuse to believe that our parents' generation went to war so that the restrooms in our schools could be decorated with swastikas.

I've been labeled an opportunist, and I'll claim that title. My religious tradition calls on me to seek justice, to welcome strangers in our midst, to care for widows and orphans, to defend the cause of the oppressed. I will continue to take every opportunity to speak out for that justice. Perhaps another opportunity will come soon.

5-16-1996 Pat Handlison
H.S.G. Hastings