

STEVE LY DISCUSSES CHALLENGES WITH RACISM IN ELK GROVE

In June, Elk Grove held an emergency meeting about racist incidents that were disturbing the community. The event came on the heels of the Elk Grove Unified School District reportedly ignoring concerns brought forward by African-American students—concerns later brought to a head when a high schooler posted a shocking, hate-filled tirade on Snapchat. Elk Grove also recently dealt with one of its beauty salons being targeted for a hate crime.

Mayor Steve Ly says he understands the need to confront these issues head-on. When he first ran for mayor in 2016, someone sent him a message saying, “Go home, refugee.” During an interview with SN&R, Ly talked about the ongoing concerns in his city.

What do Elk Grove’s leaders need to do to make residents feel they’re taking this issue seriously?

Ly: First, you have to acknowledge it and accept that it’s happening ... Elk Grove is struggling with things like the hate note that was left at the beauty salon. It was signed as KKK, aimed at the African-Americans working at the salon. Everyone did rally around them, but, of course, it’s convenient for politicians to do that. I’ve challenged the politicians and City Council to consistently call racism for what it is, in all its forms. It doesn’t matter who the victim is, politics need to be set aside.

That’s a reference to a campaign flier that was put out against you in this last election?

Ly: Some of the people who funded the independent expenditures, they sent mailers out with [me]—eyes all closed, slanted eyes—and I said, “That’s racist.” I called it for what it is. They told me that it’s not. I said, “That’s your perception. My perception, as someone who came to the United States, who had to fight through grade school because people kept calling me, “gook,” “chink,” “Chinaman,” these are things which caused trauma through my developing years.” And when I see that—for every Asian person who sees that—it’s

something that’s felt the same way ... I sat down with [those who funded the flier] and said, “For you guys to do this, it’s beneath you.”

Does the election prove that kind of stunt doesn’t work?

Ly: I think the election sent a clear message about the negative and racist campaigning that took place. It was an opportunity to stare it in its face and say, “In Elk Grove, we have no place for this.”

In 2016, the City of Sacramento created an official mandate for its leadership to do a better job recruiting police and firefighters who better reflect the overall community. Is that happening in Elk Grove?

Ly: It’s less formal here, but we’ve always made it a priority to recruit a diverse set of candidates. But it’s important to me that we don’t create a situation where we’re bringing in unqualified candidates, either ... If we’re not finding people [from different backgrounds], then we need to create a program in which we can sponsor candidates to go through the academy. It becomes a question of how do we build a recruiting strategy where we teach these young people, out of high school, and show that there’s a career in law enforcement that’s very beneficial to our community.

So, if there’s better outreach, you’ll get a better diversity of qualified people applying?

Ly: I think so; but you’ve got to present it to young people properly. If you have kids like the ones I deal with [for my day job] in juvenile hall, they have a negative view of law enforcement. The last thing they’d want to do is become a cop. But if you present it in the right way, and create community policing programs that engage the young people, now they can look at a cop and say, “He’s out here playing basketball with us, or helping us do our homework.” That changes their perspective completely. It’s not quick, but it needs to be a concerted effort across the board.

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STEVE LY

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