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Rich Perlberg: 'I felt like I was in Howell'

A man was so disturbed when an Ann Arbor movie audience laughed at a racist line of dialogue that he and his wife not only left the movie, but he wrote an angry letter to the editor to the Ann Arbor News.

"I felt like I was in Howell or the deep South," he wrote, "not one of the most well-educated cities in the U.S."

So what do you do when you hear a line like that? Do you get angry? Do you ignore it? Do you sigh with tired resignation?

"My first reaction was hurt," said Joe Rohatynski, a public relations specialist who 20 years ago moved from the suburbs to Howell, where he both lives and works.

Like many, Rohatynski had heard the stories about the area - the Klan, the white sheets, the so-called safe harbor for racists. He didn't believe the perception was reality.

But the perception persists, enabled by casual comments such as the letter-writer. I tried to find out the root of his perception, but he's not listed in the phone book.

Why, you might wonder, would a paper print such a letter?

"There's nothing statistically valid in this person's views," said Ed Petykiewicz, longtime editor of the Ann Arbor News. Nonetheless, he said it is important to give voice to his perspective.

"We tend to give very wide latitude to people when expressing opinions," Petykiewicz said. "Unless there is this dialogue, there is no way to know what is on people's minds."

He rightly noted that the News has given news coverage to the efforts of people in local Howell groups who are not only fighting the image but working to prove that the community is open to all who want to live, work or visit here.

Not all news outlets can say that. While TV, radio and outside newspapers flocked here three years ago for a notorious auction of Klan robes and other hateful, racist memorabilia, most of those news folks weren't interested when the community hosted much more positive displays of tolerance, acceptance and a celebration of diversity.

Petykiewicz suggested the community continue to reach out to various groups - he suggested a couple of Ann Arbor religious organizations - to counter the negative image.

Rohatynski agrees.

He was particularly moved by the community members who stood for hours in a silent, candlelit protest of the Klan auction. He drove his three young children past the protest to show them the type of community where they lived.

"I think it is a matter of baby steps," he said. "It's not an issue that is going to go away overnight. We can keep plugging away. We can choose to take things in our own hands."

As ugly as the auction publicity was, there are longer-term positive results.

The auction house that found no problem in profiting off racism is no longer in Howell.

Because community leaders took a positive stand and reached out beyond the immediate area, a relationship was built with the Jim Crow Museum, a Ferris State University enterprise that chronicles our nation's racist past. Its "Hateful Things" exhibit was hosted in Howell.

Detroit Free Press columnist Desiree Cooper has looked more closely at Howell and has written positively about the community.

Based on one of her columns, a black man from Ypsilanti decided to give the town a chance after dropping off his daughter at Michigan State University.

He was so enchanted by his experience and the friendliness of the people he met - including, to his surprise, a black woman who lives here - that he wrote community leaders a glowing letter. He said he planned to return soon for a night out and dinner.

Provided he can persuade his wife. Because, you know, she's heard some stories.

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