

Natalie Draper

From: Julie Ryan <julieann.ryan@yahoo.com>
Sent: Sunday, September 19, 2021 3:45 AM
To: Natalie Draper
Subject: Arts and Culture Commission and Say Their Names

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the organization.

Dear Members of the Arts and Culture Commission,

I love Northfield. When I moved to the countryside in Northfield's school district twenty-seven years ago, I was eager to call Northfield "my town."

As someone who is a supporter of academic excellence, I was thrilled that my children had access to a superior education from pre-school through college. As someone who has a degree in art, I've appreciated being able to attend exhibits and performances at the Northfield Arts Guild and the colleges. As someone who is a writer, I enjoy taking advantage of great literary programming at the Northfield Public Library. As someone who is a fan of studying history, I applaud efforts to preserve the history and early buildings of the city. I have been thankful for the opportunity to work, volunteer, and be a member in many creative and educational capacities in Northfield.

I could continue to list all I love about Northfield, but it has also become clear to me over the past twenty-seven years that Northfield doesn't love everyone. I have gotten to know many non-white Northfield residents who have felt alienated by the city's welcoming messaging targeting a very specific demographic—privileged white people. Many of those alienated people I have known moved away from Northfield to places they feel more welcomed. I have given Northfield's city leaders the benefit of the doubt over the years and wishfully assumed this messaging wasn't intentional, and that it was just the result of what happens when you have a singular voice in power doing the messaging instead of voices from a diverse group participating in the conversation. It has been evident to me that change does not come easily to Northfield. In my various positions, I have found myself engaging in battles to help remove barriers that prevent everyone from having a voice in Northfield. Despite the relatively minor progress that I felt I contributed to in the past, it now appears to me that the City of Northfield is actually very intentional—and selective—about who it wants to give a voice and who it wants to attract.

It has come to my attention that at a recent Arts and Culture Commission meeting, in response to the request of Say Their Names to create chalk art, it was stated that *"we don't want thought-provoking art, or art that creates dialogue. Those are not the priorities of the city and we are here to serve the city. We want art that attracts*

people to Northfield." I'm appalled by this statement on multiple levels. This strikes me as a really thoughtless thing to say. The fact that no member of the ACC objected to the statement reflects a collective lack of awareness regarding what true art really is. It also demonstrates to me a poor understanding of how to go about attracting business to Northfield in the 21st century.

As someone who also has a degree in business, the questionable statement implies to me that the ACC is focused on the financial benefit of presenting the city's appearance in a certain way that appeals to people with money to spend. If I am correct in my understanding of the intent behind the statement, it is insulting from at least two perspectives. To assume that people with money to spend in Northfield do not desire to interact with thought-provoking art implies that wealthy people do not like to think. It also implies that people who are drawn to thought-provoking art don't have money to spend. As someone who is comfortably wealthy and extremely creative, who *only* desires to be exposed to thought-provoking art, I am offended by the ACC's statement—twice.

As someone who deeply cares about the experience of every person, I find it offensive that it is even questioned whether a group of compassionate people should be allowed in Northfield's public spaces to temporarily honor the names of Black people who have been killed by white people—white people who most likely never had a desire to experience thought-provoking art. In light of all that has occurred in society since George Floyd was murdered last year, it strikes me as either tone-deaf or racist to silence voices desiring to speak to the Northfield community about people being needlessly murdered. I hope the ACC's decision will be reversed and Say Their Names will be allowed to create art that thoughtfully provokes people to help prevent the murder of other people due to the color of their skin.

If it turns out that the City of Northfield continues making a conscious effort to be a place free of thought-provoking art, one benefit of living in the country is being able to choose any place to call "my town." I believe that antiquated behavior in Northfield is only appropriate at the re-enactment on Division Street during the Defeat of Jesse James Days. If this apparent mission to control the voice and face of Northfield in a way that is presumed to appeal to white people with money continues, I will gladly find a more colorful place to spend my white-privileged money where everyone's voice is represented.

Sincerely,

Julie Ryan

