

LOVE LIVES IN MARIN

Moving from Apathy to Empathy

By Ashley Reid

Love Lives in Marin Intern, MDiv Student

EMPATHY is much larger than having the capacity to emotionally connect and care for the suffering of others; it's a call to action. *Love Lives in Marin* is an initiative of the Marin Interfaith Council that is calling the citizens of Marin County to get serious about being a space of radical welcome and inclusion.

Love Lives Here is a Montana non-profit organization based in Whitefish, and is committed to co-creating a caring, open, accepting and diverse community, free from discrimination and dedicated to equal treatment for all citizens. Inspired by their work on a recent visit, Rabbi Susan Leider of Congregation Kol Shofar brought the concept back to Marin, creating *Love Lives in Marin* (LLIM). LLIM nurtures a positive, welcoming environment in Marin, and cultivates a culture of love throughout the county that reshapes our public discourse. It aspires to rise above the fray, and speak with—and for—those whose voices are overshadowed and marginalized.

MARGINALIZATION is a term we hear a lot currently, but what exactly does it mean in our daily efforts to be inclusive? Marginalization indicates mistreatment, a lowering of status, a dismissal of human value. It also means to be misrepresented. This can include being labeled, stereotyped, profiled, discriminated against, and more. On the surface, you hear Marin County being described as liberal and progressive but within smaller communities another narrative of marginalization exists.

A total of 2.8 percent of the Marin County demographic is Black/African-American as of July 2016, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. When I moved to San Anselmo in the Fall of 2016 to start seminary, I didn't expect to be hit with so much culture shock. As a New Jersey native, black woman, and previous resident of North Carolina, I thought I was well versed in immersing myself into new places. When I arrived in San Anselmo, I didn't expect to feel the magnitude of my blackness the way I did. Leaving my old car behind in New Jersey, I was forced to walk and use public transportation again. Every day I experienced some kind of staring, sneering, and blatant body language that told me I didn't belong. I found myself asking, "is this really California?" Things got harder. I struggled to find employment that suited a full-time student schedule. The constant suggestions of babysitting drove me nuts because I couldn't visualize



myself babysitting for the same families that grabbed their children when walking past me on the street. My anxiety skyrocketed, and I found my depression setting in again. That fall semester I was diagnosed with Celiac disease after

losing 10lbs. from not being able to digest anything solid.

ISOLATION is what I felt. Outside of the few friends I made through school, I felt no sense of community, no grounding, no connection. I felt like I was in the twilight zone, because my physical cries for help and community were met with blind apathy; the kind of apathy that was complacent with having signs and statements of inclusion at the door, but still left me feeling empty and unwelcomed when I actually entered into these spaces. This feeling of unwelcome and mistreatment almost convinced me I didn't belong here, and it was time for me to leave. It was right in this phase of giving up that I came across the Marin Interfaith Council (MIC).

AUTHENTICITY is what I immediately felt when I walked through the doors to interview with the staff at MIC. What I saw as an opportunity to be financially stable in an unstable time for me became the door that I needed open to feel like I mattered. I found a community that made me feel like I was visible and included. What became a way for me to provide for myself financially, also gave way to a community that helps me care for myself mentally and spiritually. My experiences, joy, sadness, and suffering became the concern of those around me. I was no longer obligated to face these issues alone; I knew I had other people that genuinely cared about my well-being.

WHY DOES LLIM MATTER? Just like me, there are plenty of other people, families, and communities that experience the daily fight of declaring their value. Stories like mine are not rare, and that should bother people. It should disturb the comfort and complacency of Marin residents so much that it shifts them from a place of apathy to active empathy. While *Love Lives in Marin* seeks to celebrate the spaces of love and inclusion already in existence, we also aim to uphold the realities of those who do not have the luxury of feeling welcomed and included. This initiative is more than just a seminary internship for me, it's the opportunity for me do the active work of helping to challenge and change these exclusive behaviors and spaces. It's not just a social media campaign, it is the opportunity for residents to hear the personal stories of mistreatment and isolation, and change their individual and communal behaviors that contribute to this toxic narrative. The only people that can change our communities are the ones living in it. Love and inclusion in Marin won't matter until we make it a priority enough to matter. ✚

JOIN this movement, **PARTICIPATE** in ways to better Marin for everyone, and **CHALLENGE** yourself to make the changes necessary to create the space for everyone to be included.

For more information, please visit lovelivesinmarin.org