

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Don't be so quick to judge NFL dissent

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"I was stopped by cops five times in my first two months in the Madison area after I moved from Washington D.C in 2010," says Kaleem Caire. The former leader of The Madison Area Urban League says he didn't get a ticket on those occasions. "They wanted to know why I had out of state plates," says the Director of the One City Pre-School Centers in Madison. Caire says of those five stops, one was legitimate. Physically fit but not a small man, the soft spoken Caire estimates that he's been pulled over or stopped on foot 40 times in his life. "I'd say about eight were legit," he says.

Caire and other African American leaders in the area have told me stories for years about similar encounters with white cops or white bank tellers or white ushers at ballgames. They know how to handle themselves and remain positive people, but they see The NFL protests differently than most of my white friends.

Conservative talk show hosts say the protesters are misguided because white police shoot unarmed black men less than in 1971 and in 2017 white cops shoot white people more. But racial anxiety over white police interactions with African Americans runs a little deeper.

It's not a matter of left or right either. U.S. Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina is a black Republican who recently stood on the house floor describing how he still gets carded at social functions in Washington D.C. while he watches his white colleagues walk right past security. Senator Scott told his colleagues that he was stopped seven times in one year after he was an elected official. He said the majority of the time he was stopped for driving too nice a car in the wrong neighborhood. He said his successful African American friend was stopped so many times that he sold his expensive car for a cheaper car, so he wouldn't be stopped so often.

Kaleem Caire describes the time he walked outside a friend's house in a Madison suburb to call his wife. He walked across the street into a neighborhood park wearing flip flops and sweats. "One cop pulled up and walked toward me with his hand on his weapon and told me to put my hands in front of me. Then another cop pulled up and walked toward me with his hand on his weapon. My wife was freaking out on the phone as she heard me ask the cops if I could give them my ID and business card," says Caire. "After the first cop ran my license, he was apologetic and said that he didn't know

what it is like to be me." He also explained that the park had closed at 10 o'clock and it was just after 10.

Caire says a month and a half later, the same cop pulled him over, as Kaleem was wearing a suit on his way to a social function. The cop had forgotten who he was and asked about Caire's Maryland plates. "I asked him why he pulled me over and he said, 'Wait in the car.'" After running the license, Caire reminded him about the incident in the park. "He said, I'm just doing my job."

Before the outspoken Boys and Girls Club leader moved to Dane County, Michael Johnson had a strange experience in Ohio in 2008. "I was driving a Chrysler 300 and the cop pulled me over and told me to get out of the car. I started praying outside the car and he asked me if I was a minister. I told him that I was a non-profit leader. Sitting inside his squad car he told me that African American men driving Chrysler 300's were synonymous with drug dealers and that he had just been in a shootout a few weeks earlier. We started to pray together, and he talked about his wife and kids while tearing up."

African American talk show host and Madison businessman Derrell Connor was attending a Milwaukee Bucks game a few years back with eight of his white co-workers. "We had come straight from the office, so we were dressed business casual," he said. "We started at the concession stand and headed to our seats. I was at the end of the line as my co-workers moved down the aisle. When I started to file in, the usher asked me to show him my ticket stub. I said, 'You didn't ask anybody else to show their tickets.' He said, 'You can't sit there unless I see your ticket.' "I had food and drink in my hands and had to ask a fan to hold my food. I reached in my pocket and showed the usher the ticket. After he saw it, he started to walk away. I said, 'No apology?' He didn't say anything and just walked away. I was upset, and my co-workers were shocked." Amazingly Connor says he was only upset for about five minutes.

There is a deeply emotional and human effect on those who are stopped or questioned wrongly in America. The individuals who talked to me were able to stay calm in moments that could have escalated. Thankfully they adhered to the eternal truth that love is more powerful than hate. So today when some of the black players take a knee during the anthem, try to look in their eyes. Chances are you will see more pain than anger. It's okay to feel as I do that their dissent is misguided. But we can open our hearts and listen to their grievances. Only then can love triumph over hate.

Mitch Henck is a Madison, Wisconsin based commentator, broadcaster and standup comic. The Mitch Henck Show streams at www.madisontalks.com and you can find Mitch's podcasts there. Watch Mitch's Daily Video Blog, "Two Minutes with Mitch," weekdays at madison.com.

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