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The Great American Paradox: Reality, Race, Relationships & Resources

On May 25th, our nation and the rest of the world witnessed yet another unarmed Black person being killed by law enforcement - the unlawful killing of George Floyd. This followed the senseless deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery just weeks earlier. The result has been unyielding protests around the globe that exemplify an irrepressible outrage and cry for justice.

At last count, over 100 cities and towns are still in active protests across America, with additional protests taking place in Europe and Canada. Even the global pandemic and unofficial start to summer have taken back seats to racial tensions caused by systemic injustice, leaving our nation wondering what will happen next.

This isn't the first time in our country's history that we have seen protests, and this isn't the first time they have been violent. This isn't the first time that there has been a delineation between peaceful protests and destruction of property. Those who want to peacefully assemble are demanding justice for the systemic racism and police brutality in this country. Those seeking only to inflict harm and incite terror do not speak for us or our communities. We cannot let the message of unity be lost because of the acts of a few people who are causing violence and looting. That is a loud minority and a distraction from the urgent need and causation of the divide in the United States.

This past weekend was a demarcation of the racial and socioeconomic divide in a country that was founded in pursuit of Liberty and Justice for "All". It is clear that Black people in this country have never been granted full Liberty nor the elusive justice that many of America's white citizens casually enjoy. We are the recipients of a system that did not recognize enslaved Black people as rightful citizens at the writing of the Declaration of Independence, and continues to deny their descendants full, unalienable rights. And now, these racial divides have captured the attention of the entire world.

There are 240 Big Brother Big Sisters agencies nationwide. In 2019, our collective agencies served more than 135,000 children and youth across the country. Many of our youth unfortunately experience extreme challenges such as poverty, housing instability, mass incarceration, single-parent households, educational inequality, familial substance abuse, and a host of other detractors that inhibit their potential for success.

We are proud to live and contribute to be a part of the solution. Big Brothers Big Sisters has a long history of bringing people from differing backgrounds and viewpoints together to serve our youth and their communities. Our programs are evidence-based, and our data demonstrates that mentoring builds critical social and emotional skills youth need to succeed in academics, career, and life. We believe in the power of mentorship and the transformational impact relationships can have on the trajectory of a child's life. But we cannot rest on the strength of interpersonal relationships and mentoring to resolve the systemic oppression and bigotry that plague many communities across America. We must be committed to bringing about racial equity and justice for Black people in this country.

Much like the rest of the country, we are unable to sleep in the wake of national protests. We understand the emotion and passion fueling those who protest. Many of our leaders and staff across the country locked arms in peaceful protest and are now helping clean



up our communities. We are meeting with elected officials and organizing communities to collectively decide how we should begin to move forward.

How can we understand, stay focused, and be present for our Littles, Bigs, and the communities we serve? We, as the largest, national youth mentoring organization in America, are in deep reflection right now. Over 50 BBBS CEOs endorsed this letter and committed to taking action. We know some policies and laws that continue to exist in this country don't fully represent or benefit marginalized people. But we also know there is hope. Hope is seeing young people relentlessly advocating for what they believe in. Hope is witnessing so many Black, Brown and White allies coming together to say, "this is not right." Yet if we focus only on the small group of looters and organized disrupters, we lose sight of the underlying issues, which require action from all of us.

Moving forward, these Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies are taking action:

- We will continue to develop culturally relevant training and resources that are shared with our Bigs, families, staff and stakeholders, informed by national experts.
- We are talking to leaders around the country to dismantle racism, address implicit bias and shine a light on the practice of helping others in a self-serving manner rather than with the dignity that all people deserve regardless of their race, socioeconomic status or station in life.
- We, along with our Board of Directors, are continuing to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion as we hire and partner with individuals and organizations that align with our core values.
- We are encouraging our supporters and community members to get out and vote and advocate for legislation and policies that protect all our communities.
- We will continue to support community leaders in their efforts to find solutions to our most challenging social justice issues.
- We will provide a variety of educational resources to our Bigs, Littles and their families, helping them to discuss what is happening and how to effectively deal with the aftermath.
- We will continue to ignite the promise and power of hope in the youth we serve.

Today, to our entire community, we declare proudly that we unapologetically serve our Black community. We are at a pivotal moment in history. What will you do differently to join the fight against racism?

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