

People of color still sit together in the cafeteria — here's why

BY DARCEL ROCKETT
Chicago Tribune

Where were you in 1997, when the book "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race" was released?

Beverly Daniel Tatum, a psychologist who recently concluded her 13-year presidency at Spelman College in Atlanta, was just releasing the first edition of her now-best-selling book on race and identity. Having taught a class on the psychology of racism for years, she knew that parents and teachers were looking for ways to talk to their children about race and how to interrupt the cycle of racism in their own lives, so she penned a book that answered that need. It resonated with a wide audience — from teens and undergrads to psychologists and education students.

Fast-forward 20 years, and Tatum revisits the same question after the deaths of Trayon Martin and Eric Garner, the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement and the exit of President Barack Obama from the White House. Times have changed.

"In 1997, when my book came out, it coincided with then-President (Bill) Clinton's decision to launch his initiative on race," Tatum said in a phone interview. "President Clinton had talked about why it was a good time to engage the nation in this difficult conversation. He said: 'We are a nation at peace. We are a nation with an expanding economy, growing opportunity for everyone, and because this is a peaceful and prosperous time, we have the energy and hopefully the will to take on this difficult past and look at how it's impacting our present.'

"Fast forward 20 years, and this time we've got President (Donald) Trump, and we are a nation at war, and we are a nation where there's a great deal of economic anxiety and not a sense of an expanding economy, but concerns about a contracting one.

"And we are not being led by someone who is saying, 'Let's have a conversation about this.' But instead, we are hearing rhetoric that is labeled divisive in its tone." The Tribune spoke with Tatum about this urgency and keeping hope alive in a climate where it may be hard to find. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Hope wasn't so much of a reach when the first edition came out, but in

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BASIC BOOKS

Beverly Daniel Tatum recently concluded her presidency at Spelman College.

2017, how do you keep hope alive?

A: How hopeful people feel, or not, really has to do with their generational status. If you were born in the '50s — I think about my parents' experience, leaving the South in 1958, moving to Massachusetts, where I grew up, the ways in which their lives changed. There was a time when they couldn't vote, then they could. You can see over time, an arc of progress.

But if you were born in 1997, the milestones that you might see as milestones in your life to date are not very encouraging. If you're 20 years old, and someone asks you, "Are things getting better?" Your perspective on that question is going to be very different. I think everybody is feeling like we need to have some progress, and where will we find it? What we know from history is that progress is rarely linear. We're in a backwards moment now, but I do believe it is possible to move forward again. But that forward motion is not going to happen by us sitting at home feeling bad. We all have to roll up our sleeves and really make a commitment to trying to create a more equitable society.

Q: Explicitly or implicitly, whites are getting the benefit of racism. What's the reason for whites to change?

A: Nothing comes for free. There is a price that you're paying for that system of advantage in the form of fear, or anxiety, or worry about your personal safety (because what would happen if nothing erupts in my neighborhood?).

Q: Where does one find the courage to break the silence about racism?

A: We all have to risk some discomfort. This message is as important, if not more important, for white people: Risk some discomfort, and enter those spaces that are unfamiliar to you.

I do believe if there's one thing that will really help us move forward, it is more conversation about race — people don't like to talk about it. It makes them uncomfortable. But we can't solve a problem without talking about it. If we can't have a conversation about it, we can't mobilize in ways to change it.