You Don’t Know Until You’ve Been There

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A presentation by Christine Marie Nielsen, Founder of Geodialog Media LLC for Track 2: Don’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow

"One of the most important insights of economics is that people live in poverty not because of who they are, but because of where they are. A person's knowledge, their skills, and how hard they work all matter for whether they are poor or not – but all these personal factors together matter less than the one factor that is entirely outside of a person's control: whether they happen to be born into a large, productive economy or not."

-- Max Roser, founder and director of Our World in Data (March 15, 2021)

Marquette and many other universities are located in areas with unique challenges. Life experiences of the local population may differ dramatically from those in the campus community.

--Milwaukee is deeply divided by economic status and race.

The state's economy ranked last in racial equality among all 50 U.S. states, in a WalletHub study in 2020. (https://wallethub.com/edu/state-economies-with-most-racial-equality/75810)

--Milwaukee is a hypersegregated area.

What this means is that a single race - in this case African-Americans - are isolated and concentrated in certain areas. The isolated group also tends to live in urban areas. The group tends to be cut off from opportunities and resources that lend social and economic support.

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Marquette University is located in one of the most challenged zip code areas in the city of Milwaukee, showing signs of economic distress and segregation.

The zip code area - 53233 - compared to the state average has a median house value below state average. It has a black race population percentage significantly above state average. It has a renting percentage significantly above state average. The percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher is significantly below the state average.

Read more: https://www.city-data.com/zips/53233.html

But what can be done? Targeting certain areas such as the 53233 zip code with increased resources? A start, but not enough.

This year, local officials collaborated to target some zip codes, including 53233, with Covid vaccines to make sure these vulnerable areas were not missed.

"I want to thank the city, county and state officials who collaborated to help make this expanded eligibility a reality. Providing vaccine access to areas that are traditionally underserved is an important step toward reducing health disparities," said Alderman Cavalier Johnson, whose district includes the 53216, 53218 and 53224 zip codes, is encouraging residents to take advantage of this expanded eligibility. (City press release March 2021 https://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/ccCouncil/News/2021/District-02/3_17Vaccineeligibilityrelease.pdf)

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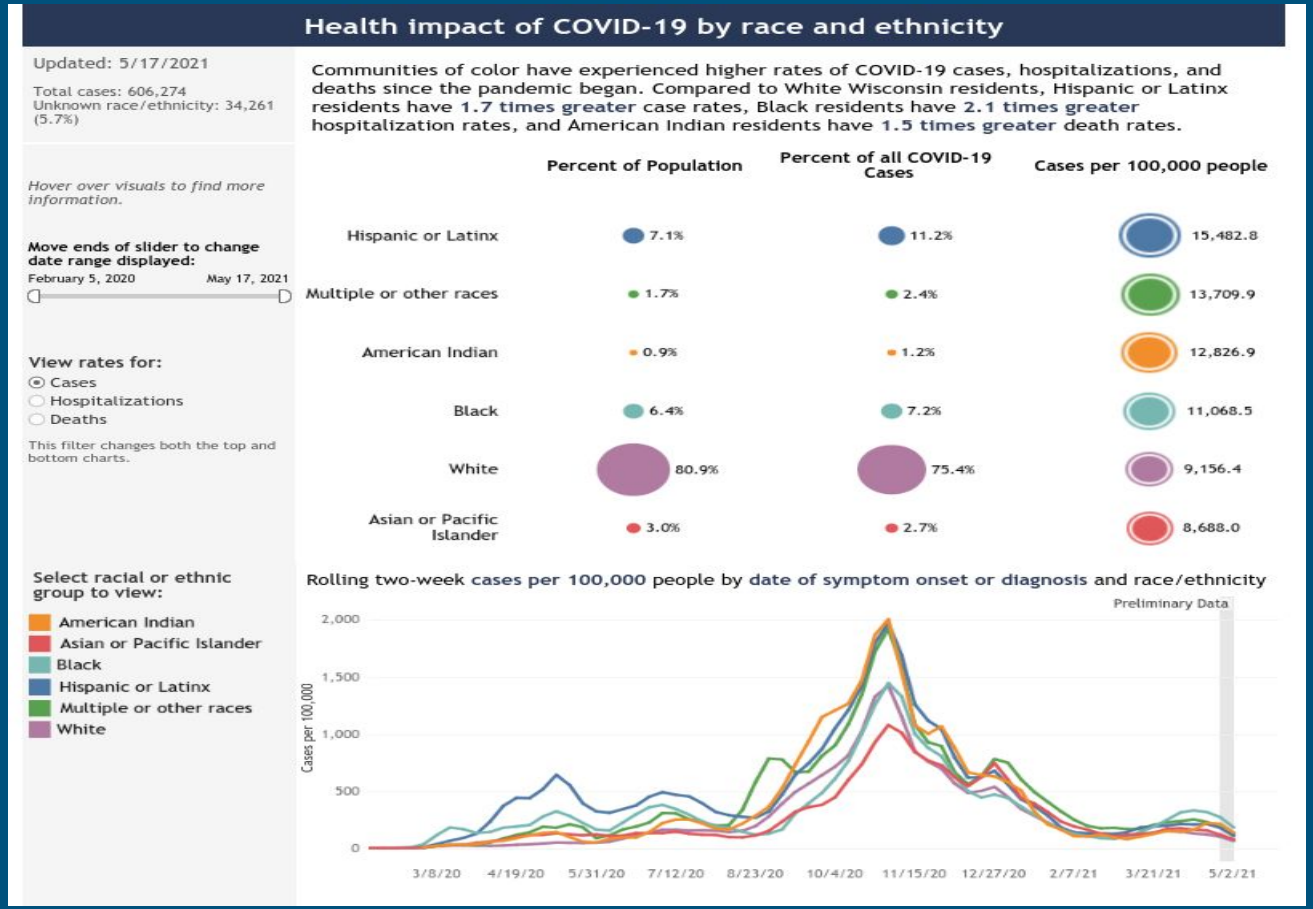
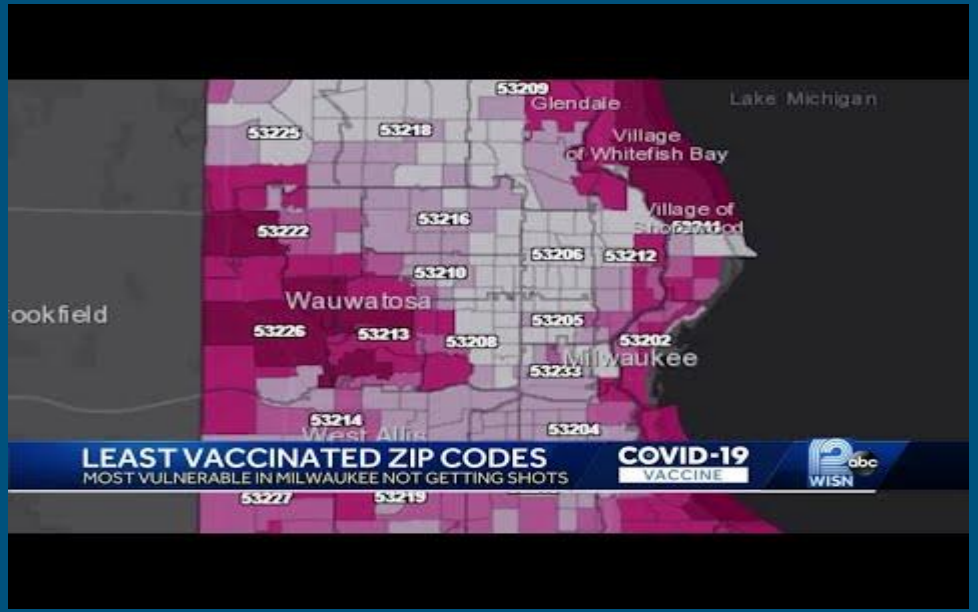
But it didn't immediately work



COVID-19: Racial and Ethnic Disparities (2020). Available at: https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/disparities.htm (Accessed: 17 May 2021).



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Some reasons:

--Lack of trust

--Lack of information

One solution:

Need more face to face efforts and understanding of viewpoints of individuals in impacted areas

Focus on eliminating “othering”

In othering a single person or group is thought of as an outsider because of their economic status, ethnicity, race, sex, disability, religion or sexual orientation.

The concept of “othering” is said to be rooted in the work of cultural theorist Edward W. Said.

Image by Anna Shvets from Pexels

Eliminating othering involves genuine empathy

Sympathy = Feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune.

Empathy = The ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

An exercise in empathy from the medical humanities meant to help medical students understand perspectives of the populations whom they are training to serve.

Week 1:
Write a narrative about your classmate. It can be in any form that you choose (prose, poetry, etc.) and it can be in the first person or in a limited third-person perspective.

Week 2:
Write about your experience with your first patient (or any other memorable patient) or write about your own personal experience (or that of a friend or family member) with illness.

Week 3:
Rewrite one of the suggested stories from the perspective of the patient or write from the perspective of someone that you have encountered.

Dhurandhar, A. (2009). Writing the Other: An Exercise in Empathy. *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, 5(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.21977/D95110039 Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8k29v4tf

Let’s give this a try:

Think of an individual you encountered in the last two days, but saw or talked with only briefly and didn’t know before the interaction. Take five minutes to write a narrative about the encounter based on what you saw or heard. The writing can be in any form that you choose (prose, poetry, etc.)

Now take five more minutes and write an account **from the perspective of the individual** you met and revisit the same encounter.

Would anyone like to share in the chat box how their account changed the second time around?

Did your feelings about the situation change? Did your feelings about the encounter change? Most importantly, how did your feelings about the person change?

This type of exercise can be useful in academic and civic settings when trying to cross the bridge from sympathy to empathy.

Photo by nappy from Pexels

The key:

Writing from the perspective of another person requires imagination, thus coercing writers to cross boundaries, both to be the “other” and to acknowledge themselves and see that these descriptions are truly their own.
(Calman & Downie, 1996; Charon, 1986; Hunter, Charon, & Coulehan, 1995; Shapiro, 2008).

“It’s easy to THINK you can understand someone’s perspective, but actually writing it is a more difficult thing. It forces one to realize all the barriers that exist to true Empathy.” -- A. Dhurandhar

Another step:
Involvement

Coalescing partnerships to mutually strengthen what are perceived to be disparate communities

Photo by Dani Hart from Pexels

Some examples:
City on a Hill

Closing

The aim of this presentation was to underscore the need to “meet someone where they are” when attempting to form connections within the community and find solutions.

Hopefully these ideas will give birth to others that will act as catalysts for change.

Credits/Permissions:

Thank you to WISN 12 Director of Programming and Public Affairs,
Ben Lorber, for permitting the use of WISN 12 videos for presentation.

Thank you for listening!