

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

TO FIGHT INJUSTICE, LISTEN TO YOUTH

At a dinner party in 1935, the writer George Bernard Shaw was conversing with a young woman who said, “What a wonderful thing is youth!” Shaw sagely replied, “Yes — and what a crime to waste it on children.”

The exchange was memorialized in the well-known but acerbic adage: “Youth is wasted on the young.”

With all due respect to Shaw, I beg to differ — especially after meeting sisters Nene and Ekene Okolo, ages 20 and 17, who are using their talents to combat racial injustice. The pair are being honored at the National Conflict Resolution Center’s Peacemaker Awards on May 15.

In the aftermath of the guilty verdict for Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer who murdered George Floyd — and in the face of the recent death at police hands of another Black man, Daunte Wright, in nearby Brooklyn Center, Minn. — the impact of the Okolos’ accomplishments is magnified.

Last June, the sisters started an Instagram ac-

count, @BlackinPUSD, inviting students and alumni of color to share their experiences in the Poway Unified School District. The district serves 36,433 youth who reside in Poway and other communities in northeast San Diego; more than half (54 percent) are students of color.

The page drew more than 1,200 anonymous submissions from Black, Latinx and Asian students, who described racial slurs and racist incidents fueled by stereotypes. One particularly disturbing story: A middle school teacher staged a Civil War era reenactment in class, assigning roles based on race. Black students played the slaves, while White students played their owners.

Even when students reported their experiences to school authorities, they were often downplayed, with few consequences. In some cases, it was teachers or staff who displayed racism.

But to the sisters’ surprise, it wasn’t just students and alumni who spoke up. Parents also took to the platform to share their own

stories about witnessing racism in PUSD and the impact it had on their students and families.

While they didn’t set out with an agenda in mind — beyond creating a safe space where students of color could be heard — the Okolos’ work has contributed to immediate and long-term changes in Poway Unified. The district unanimously adopted a racial equity and inclusion plan that affirms its commitment to fighting racism and systemic inequity.

The plan also acknowledges the need to provide a more racially and culturally diverse curriculum, leading to the creation of courses in ethnic studies and ethnic literature. Now the sisters are collaborating with Rep. Scott Peters, D-San Diego, to introduce these courses in other school districts throughout the county.

Hiring practices have changed, too, since the launch of @BlackinPUSD. The district has brought on an additional 12 Black teachers and one Black administrator. The sisters assisted with recruitment

efforts.

It’s not easy to effect lasting change. But these remarkable young women took all the right steps:

- It wasn’t about them. Even though the Okolos had their own experiences with racism in PUSD, they remained anonymous for a time. This encouraged others to speak more freely. (Their parents even asked the sisters if they had heard of the @BlackinPUSD Instagram account.)
- They built relationships with the right people. Collaborators include the principal of Westview High (which Ekene attends), the associate superintendent of Poway Unified and the superintendent herself.
- They worked outside and inside the system. On its own, @BlackinPUSD might not have been noticed — or dismissed as noise. Instead, because of the work of the Okolos along with Black Student Union leaders at Poway schools, it was viewed as a call to action.
- They’ve stuck with it. And their reach has grown: The sisters have launched a website, ethnucation.com,

that contains resources for teaching history from a multicultural perspective.

When asked about their personal story — how they got the strength and courage to commit to this work — the Okolos described a home environment in which they could express themselves and feel supported. Their father, who grew up in Nigeria, has been a change-maker himself. He inspired and encouraged the sisters to make a difference in the world, helping them to become the people they are today.

The Okolo sisters are obviously wise beyond their years. They have a lot to teach the rest of us. And we have much to learn. All we have to do is listen.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit ncrconline.com. The National Conflict Resolution Center will host its 33rd annual Peacemaker Awards on Saturday, May 15, at 7 p.m. For information or to register, visit ncrconline.com.

FOSSILS

FROM **B1** gathered over the past several decades in the same way: salvage paleontology. Under state law, large construction projects in fossil-rich areas are required to have scientists on-site to protect and recover any fossils unearthed. Deméré said the relationship between contractor and scientist can be strained or it can be fruitful.

“Different developers have different views on what they want to do with discoveries on their projects. Some want us gone and want it to be a secret, but sometimes you have projects where the people on-site are excited about not just digging a hole in the dirt but about digging a hole in time.”

Fortunately for this salvage project, the construction team loved collaborating with the scientists. San Diego native Frank Najera is senior project superintendent with JPI Development and Construction, the Texas company that’s building the Jefferson Makers Quarter project at Broadway and 15th Street. The massive mixed-use project, slated for completion in fall 2023, will have 384 housing units, ground floor retail and 3 ½ floors of underground parking. Its exterior design will incorporate the original facade of a historic Ford car dealership building that has stood on the site since 1919.

Najera, 62, is passionate about history. In the mid-1990s, his company won a national award for historic preservation for re-creating the House of Hospitality in Balboa Park with 6,000 elements of the original building. Before he started on the Jefferson project, Najera said he and his construction crew toured the museum’s fossil collection so they’d know what to look for while digging. In this case,



COURTESY PHOTOS

An artist’s rendering of Jefferson Makers Quarter, a mixed-use project under construction in East Village where ancient fossils were discovered last month.



These chunks of sandstone embedded with shells up to 2 million years old were uncovered in mid-March at a construction site in San Diego’s East Village.

Deméré told them to keep an eye out for shells.

Two million years ago, San Diego looked very different. The sea level was higher, and San Diego Bay was larger and deeper. Over millennia, the shallower areas of the bay near downtown and East Village filled with silt, forming an estuary with streams and mud flats where tidal species thrived.

Najera said the JPI crew didn’t come across any fossils until a contractor dug a rectangular pit about 45 to 48 feet down for the footings of the building in the parking garage area. The workers ran into a layer of rock that had the look and structure of concrete. Deméré told them they’d likely hit highly pressurized sandstone and that if they chipped away at it

with a hammer, it was likely packed with shells.

“So they hit it with hammers and picked and prodded, and then they got a water hose and sprayed it. It was like you went to Las Vegas. The shells were spilling out like it was a slot machine and you’d hit the jackpot,” Najera said.

After studying the site, Deméré said the shells found in the pit appeared to be an accumulation of dead marine organisms that had been flushed out of their habitat to the east by rainfall or flooding. The shells were found scattered and on their sides, rather than attached vertically to substrate as they would be when they’re alive.

To help the paleontology team, the construction crew excavated the rock and brought a huge load up to street level. Deméré and his team gathered all the samples they needed. Then he asked Najera if the excess fossil-filled sandstone could

be donated to three nearby elementary schools for their hands-on science programs.

Najera was happy to oblige. He broke up the huge rocks into basketball-size chunks, loaded them in the back of his truck and delivered them to the principals at nearby Perkins Elementary, Burbank Elementary and King-Chavez Arts and Athletics Academy. He has asked the schools if they might invite him back so he can watch the children chip away at the rocks to make their own fossil discoveries.

“I really think it’s important for us to preserve the past,” Najera said. “I feel really blessed to help give this to the museum and to the kids of San Diego Unified.”

Shelley Baca, principal at King-Chavez, was thrilled to receive these heavy hunks of history for her students, who she said will do their own paleontology discovery work later this year when they’re allowed to gather again in groups for science projects.

“They’re absolutely going to love it,” Baca said. “Hands-on learning is always the best route to go. What’s really special is that these fossils came from our own community, just down the road. That makes the connection so much greater for our students. They’ll have a blast with it.”

Deméré, 72, has worked at the museum since 1979 and has no plans to retire because he finds his work so enjoyable. One of his greatest pleasures is interacting with the young dinosaur-obsessed children at the museum, so he enjoys finding ways to get fossils into kids’ hands.

“I love the opportunity to bring on board these young people who are interested in fossils,” he said. “These 5- to 7-year-olds may be the paleontologists of the next generation.”

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ROADS

FROM **B1** and the bike lanes, enhanced crosswalks and other amenities that come with them — create opportunities for exercise and attract more businesses, boosting incomes and the number of places selling healthy food.

The new policy is part of a wider city effort to make low-income areas, which often lack basic infrastructure like sidewalks, more resilient to climate change by adding amenities like new streets, parks and more trees.

“The new council policy is really going to help us address those equity, sustainability and mobility issues,” said Kris McFadden, director of the city’s Transportation and Stormwater Department.

The new policy dovetails with Mayor Todd Gloria’s proposal last week to spend \$40 million on what he calls “sexy streets,” upgraded roadways with bicycle infrastructure, wide sidewalks and improvements to slow and reduce traffic.

The \$40 million — \$10 million in cash and \$30 million in borrowed money — would be reserved for historically underserved neighborhoods.

City Council members are praising the plan to make neighborhood equity

and climate resiliency the main factors determining which streets get repaired first.

“It would be great if we could be more equitable,” Councilwoman Monica Montgomery Steppe said.

Montgomery Steppe noted that her council district, Southeastern San Diego’s Council District 4, has had the smallest number of miles of street repairs since 2015.

There have been 148 miles of repairs in District 4, compared to 242 in north coastal District 1 and 257 in north-central District 6. The city’s two other lower-income council districts were also on the low end, with 161 miles repaired in the South Bay’s District 8 and 164 miles repaired in mid-city District 9.

Districts 4, 8 and 9 have the fewest miles of streets among the city’s nine council districts, so the disparities are less severe when that is taken into account. But Districts 4 and 8 are still below average.

Councilwoman Vivian Moreno, who represents District 8, successfully persuaded her council colleagues in February to add 60 miles of unpaved roads and alleys — mostly in neighborhoods south of 94 — to the city’s street network.

That will allow those roads to be considered for upgrades along with the



NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T FILE

Workers install fresh asphalt along Harbor Drive near downtown in May 2020.

city’s other 3,650 miles of streets, McFadden said. Officials have said paving all of the dirt roads and alleys would cost between \$300 million and \$900 million.

Councilman Sean Elovera, who represents District 9, said that expense and reversing years of underfunding in poor areas means San Diego needs to devote more money to road repair.

“There’s no formula in the world that’s going to stretch \$5 into the \$20 or \$30 or \$40 that it needs to turn into to get all this work done,” he said. “As all these really important changes are made in terms of prioritization and equity, in pursuit of a city that is more fair and sustainable and in line with our climate action goals,

there needs to be the resources to actually do that.”

Councilwoman Marni von Wilpert, who represents north inland District 5, said San Diego needs to hire a consultant to do another comprehensive evaluation of the quality of every street in its vast network.

An evaluation completed in 2016 found that the overall condition of the network was 72, sharply up from the 59 score the city got during a 2011 evaluation. Roads are rated on a scale from 1 to 100, with 70 and above being “good” and 40 and above being “fair.”

Former Mayor Kevin Faulconer canceled a subsequent evaluation scheduled for 2019, citing budget constraints. Von Wilpert says

the city needs to spend the \$500,000 it would cost.

“The last one was supposed to be done two years ago,” she said. “We really can’t measure our equity goals and our climate goals if we don’t have the data to do that.”

Such a survey, called an overall condition index, also helps the city determine which streets need slurry, an overlay or a complete rebuild.

Slurry is a half-inch layer of sand emulsion and water that gets spread across the entire surface of a street. It typically costs about \$130,000 per mile.

Asphalt overlay is 1 ½ inches to 3 inches thick. Before an overlay, crews must remove 2 to 3 inches of existing asphalt by milling it down. Overlays typically cost \$780,000 per mile.

Sometimes streets get into such bad shape that they must be rebuilt entirely. The costs for that are several million dollars per mile, city officials said.

About 10 percent of the city’s street network is concrete, which is upgraded primarily by replacing panels at a cost of \$1.5 million per mile.

Information about recent ratings and repair plans for every street segment in San Diego can be found at streets.sandiego.gov.

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WATCHDOG

FROM **B1** Will Rodriguez-Kennedy said conditions inside San Diego County jails must improve.

“We have a scenario where people are going into the jail system and they are dying,” he said. “That is not the role of the jail system. ... We’re asking what’s going on here and what can be done to address what are clearly unacceptable conditions.”

Several local legislators told the Union-Tribune they support the resolution and plan to request the independent review.

“Assembly member (Brian) Maienschein and I are working together to draft a letter to request the Joint Legislative Audit Committee initiate an audit,” Assembly member Lorena Gonzalez said in a statement.

The Sheriff’s Department said it is committed to protecting inmates and would welcome any information or recommendations that help improve operations.

“We understand the momentous responsibility we bear in caring for the vulnerable and high-risk inmate population and the preservation of life is always our greatest mission,” spokeswoman Lt. Amber Baggs wrote in a statement.

“Our department has implemented comprehensive security, mental health and medical-screening procedures to provide the highest quality care to our population and to reduce deaths in custody,” she added.

Among other measures, Baggs said, the department nearly doubled its health care budget over the past decade, from \$52 million in 2011 to \$90 million this year. An additional \$16 million in medical and mental health spending is planned next year, she said.

Department officials also visited 10 like-size jail systems across California and other states in an effort to improve practices. And officials have brought in outside experts to review operations and adopted many of their recommendations, Baggs said.

Even so people continue to die in San Diego County jails. Two inmates have died this year, and 12 people died in 2020, according to department records.

The deaths do more than claim lives and disrupt families. The county has paid out more than \$10 million in legal settlements and jury awards since Gore was appointed sheriff in 2009 — money that comes out of the public treasury because the county is self-insured.

The San Diego County Democratic Party resolution was pushed by Lori Saldana, a local activist who previously served three terms in the California Assembly and now sits on the Central Committee. Saldana said state officials have the authority to impose changes on the Sheriff’s Department that the grand jury or the Citizens’ Law Enforcement Review Board can only suggest.

Earlier this month, facing criticism from families of deceased inmates and advocates, the Sheriff’s Department announced that it would begin announcing jail deaths within 24 hours — a major shift in policy that aligns San Diego with other large California counties.

For years, the department withheld in-custody death announcements until an autopsy was completed. The policy regularly kept loved ones in the dark for months. Under the new policy, the department says it will announce jail deaths within 24 hours of the completion of a preliminary autopsy.

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee is made up of seven members each from the state Assembly and Senate. The audits generally examine issues involving state government but may also review operations of city and county agencies.

In 2018, for example, then-Assemblyman Todd Gloria requested the state audit committee review the San Diego city and county response to the hepatitis A outbreak that killed 20 people and sickened almost 600 others.

Later that year, the committee issued a blistering report criticizing city and county officials for a delayed and muddled response to the outbreak.

Local legislators serving on the committee include Tasha Boerner-Horvath, D-Encinitas, and Randy Voepel, R-Santee. If the Joint Legislative Audit Committee conducts a review of San Diego County jail deaths, the examination would likely take six to 12 months.

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