

A Black Father's Letter to His Black Son: 'My Mission Is to Keep You Safe'



Greenberg Traurig litigation partner A. Michael Pratt pens a letter to his son upon his college graduation. Typically a time to celebrate, current events weigh heavy on their minds.

By A. Michael Pratt | **June 18, 2020** | **The American Lawyer**

Dear Son,

Congratulations on your recent college graduation. Originally, this letter was intended as a lighthearted celebratory missive poking fun at the generational divide between our ultra-liberal views. However, another senseless, preventable murder of a black man at the hands of police, and the tone-deaf reactions from some of our leaders, caused me to change course. I have felt helpless at times over the past two weeks trying to soften the increasing intensity of your pain, despair, fear, hurt and anger. Your innocence has been shaken and I have tried to find just the right words to comfort you, and, too often, I failed.

This should be a time to celebrate your remarkable growth as a student and person. While you have lived a life of comfort and privilege, you are also intelligent, industrious and hard working. You are responsible, respectful and kind. You are a proud young black man. Yet, you are colorblind in your judgment of goodness in all people, and the racial diversity of your circle of friends has always reflected as much. Now, you are a newly minted college graduate, poised to start your professional career.

I struggle with the juxtaposition of instilling hope amidst my constant fear for the safety of my black son, daughters, and stepsons. I'm not talking about that common separation anxiety experienced by all loving parents. This is an uncommon fear reserved almost exclusively for the parents of black and brown children, who themselves have been subject to blatant and unconscious acts of racism in their own lives.

Parents living in this perpetual state of fear and worry that at any given moment our child will face a chance encounter with a real or faux police officer. And that a misconstrued word, sudden movement, slow movement, or involuntary twitch will lead to tragic, or fatal consequences.

The names of black victims are now seared in our minds—George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and now, Rayshard Brooks. How about John Crawford III, a young black man shot and killed by a police officer while shopping for a bb gun? Or Levar Jones, a young black man shot by a highway trooper for the mere “mistake” of following an order to retrieve his driver’s license. The list of known and unknown, male and female, victims throughout the generations is endless. Son, I cannot—I will not—see your name added to that list.

This remains one of the unresolved vestiges from America’s original sin of slavery that can no longer be ignored. Americans of good heart must act together—NOW—to confront this ever lingering and deeply entrenched overt and unconscious racism that inflicts and burdens the soul of our nation. Act first by genuinely acknowledging its existence and black people’s resulting trauma, and then demanding and implementing immediate, effective and lasting instruments of change.

This time, hollow platitudes and broad words of condemnation—quickly forgotten—will not do. Real reform and change demand smart, determined and sustained effort if we are to dramatically and unalterably transform the practices and policies of police departments across this country. Included among these reforms should be the repeal of all state “stand your ground laws.” Perhaps most important, and difficult of all, the unwritten “blue code” and police culture that enables this inhumane conduct to fester without accountability must be challenged smartly and aggressively at every turn until eliminated.

While I am heartened by the multi-racial and peaceful protests, I am not naïve enough to believe we can excise all racism and hatred from the hearts and minds of a hardened sliver of America or sensitize the unempathetic, who while not openly hostile to racial justice, simply shrug off the undeniable truths of black people’s experiences living in this country. I recall telling you about my hurt from the empty stares and shrugs of indifference from white colleagues and acquaintances when sharing my personal experiences of being racially profiled and cavity searched at a European airport, and of being stopped and quizzed by a police officer for the offense of sitting in front of my home in a predominately white neighborhood. Sadly, you witnessed the latter incident from the window of our home.

Please understand that my words are not intended as an indictment of all white Americans, or for you to lose hope in your future. My personal and professional life has been enhanced by folks across the racial spectrum. I believe—and your generation must believe—that at its core America is full of many fair and good people who share our outrage at its racist elements and want to see a more just America.

Also, please understand that I am not indicting the collective of law enforcement. I have often said that police officers—along with school teachers and social workers—are among the most essential, yet least prized, groups of professionals in our society. No reasonable person can dispute that policing is a challenging, and sometimes, dangerous job. We rely on law enforcement to keep us safe and to maintain order. And many of them carry out that duty faithfully and fairly, and exercise proper restraint.

Son, let me leave you with this. I am so very proud of you for engaging in this most crucial issue of our time. Understand that transcendent course correction will not come easy. Be mindful that even the best-intentioned people hold conflicting views on a multitude of topics. While we should always endeavor to respect those differences and seek common ground, we can never compromise on hate, racial injustice, economic inequality or healthcare inequality.

I remain prayerful that these emerging multi-racial collaborations are sustainable and that our America will finally find a solution to contain those racist elements that hold such life or death power over its black and brown citizenry.

Rest assured that as your father MY MISSION IS TO KEEP YOU SAFE. I vow to forever stand with you and push back strongly against any forces that imperil your safety.

Love, Dad

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