

Community Corner

Black LI Family On 'Subtle' Racism: It's Not Just The N-Word

"The racism is real and you often stand alone when you call it out."

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Jul 15, 2020 5:33 pm EST | Updated Jul 17, 2020 6:22 am EST

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Vanessa, Kurt, Danielle and Allura Leggard speak about the acts of "subtle racism" that have shaped their lives in Sag Harbor. (Courtesy Leggard family)

SAG HARBOR, NY — The death of George Floyd has sparked a dialogue about systemic racism across the nation — including in the small towns on the East End that so many call home. The words "I can't breathe" opened the floodgates for voices long silent as protesters have lined streets and laid down on the pavement, crying out for change.

Not all racism, however, is witnessed in acts of violence or outright slurs or derogatory remarks, some say. Sometimes, it's the subtle acts of discrimination that cut deep, shaping lives and paths with opportunities never afforded, scholarships never granted — roles in school plays not won.

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In Sag Harbor, Vanessa Leggard, who moved 18 years ago to the East End with her husband, Kurt, and their two daughters, Danielle and Allura, shared a post on social media in recent weeks that took a blistering look at the "subtle" discrimination and bias that she feels the time has come to expose.

Leggard and her family spoke with Patch about racism that they said exists even in the heart of the tony East End.

"Living in the Hamptons for the past 18 years has been wonderful and very hard," Leggard said on Facebook. "The racism is real and you often stand alone when you call it out."

Leggard has worked for three companies. At each, she was the only Black person in a leadership position, she said.

"To this day, they still do not have any Black people in leadership positions after my exit, and it is sad and disappointing," she said. "In each of the three companies, I felt the racism and the isolation. I was used to this treatment, but it was still hurtful and lonely. I stayed quiet for fear of retaliation, backlash, lost friendships and opportunities."

Her children, Leggard said, attended a school district where there was only one Black teacher in the elementary school. When she retired many years ago, the district didn't replace her with a person of color, she said.

Although she inquired multiple times a lack of diversity among the teaching staff, she was told it was because many teachers did not want to work on the East End; it was too far away and the cost of living was too high.

"I say that is BS, and if they are honest, they would call it for what it is: racism," she said.

Speaking about her children's education in the Sag Harbor Union Free School District, Leggard said her daughter Danielle was the only Black student through grades 3 to 12 and Allura, one of three in grades K through 12.

"Both girls were passed over for scholarships, awards, parts in plays," she said. "The list is endless."

When Danielle was in third grade, Leggard said she asked the teacher about planned lessons for Black History month. The teacher said they covered Martin Luther King's Birthday in January.

"I sent a letter describing the notable Black people to talk about," Leggard said. "Fast forward to fifth grade, when I asked to review Danielle's permanent school records before going to middle school. To my surprise, that letter I wrote the third grade teacher was in my daughter's permanent record. I knew immediately what that meant: A message was being sent to other teachers to watch out for this Black family. I was hurt, angry and disgusted at the same time. I removed it."

Detailing other instances that marked her daughters' educational experience, Leggard said that when Danielle was in the sixth grade on the swim team, she was "singled out" and put in a lane to swim with younger kids, even though the top swimmers — which included Danielle — were in another lane.

"When I approached the coach, he acted as if it was no big deal," she said, "I told him he had just ruined any chance of this being my daughter's foot in the door because in that moment Danielle felt the slight and lost her passion. At the next swim meet, she swam the race casually, and we knew that was the end of swimming competitively for her."

When her younger daughter, Allura, was in third grade acting with a community theater company, she, too, was singled out.

"The director had makeup for all the white girls but had none for my daughter; she had failed to get a shade for my daughter. My daughter felt the slight, and that was it for working with that company," she said.

Leggard's daughter later went on to do an off-Broadway show and act in an independent film.

When Allura was in the eighth grade, the district was staging a performance of "High School Musical: The Play." Allura was excited to audition.

"She was so excited when the director told her to audition for the lead, only to realize that she was never going to get that part because the director was typecasting the parts; the girl who was white with blond hair got the lead, the girl with dark brown hair got the other lead. And yet, three Black girls that auditioned were never allowed to audition for the part that was originally cast by a Black girl," Leggard said. "The director gave that part to a white girl; and when I called her out on it, she told me I was out of line. Was I? She cast the three Black girls in non-speaking roles as cheerleaders."

Leggard told her daughter it was OK not to take the part if she wouldn't be happy in the role.

"Once my daughter said she was not taking the part, the director proceeded to send a text message to everyone working on the play and in the play — a horrible text about my daughter and me. It was an awful time for Allura," she said. "A good friend sent me a copy of the text. I shared it with the administration and demanded a public apology from the director, and they never enforced it. They continued to keep this person on until she decided to retire. I have forgiven her, but I will never forget," she said.

Detailing other instances, Leggard said that when Danielle was in high school, she was denied an opportunity to take an AP English class.

"When I inquired why, the teacher said she was going to be the weakest in the class," she said, even though that the same teacher had given her daughter high-90s grades for the year.

When Allura was a junior and one of the top players on the field hockey team, they honored seven white girls.

"My daughter was the team captain and the second-best player on the team," she said.

Looking back, Leggard said: "Before any kind of change can be made, these organizations need to acknowledge their past racist acts and they need to strive to do better. As a mom who has fought for my girls to have equal opportunities, it was grueling, and I am well aware of the many names I was called. . . The struggle is real and saying 'I'm sorry' is not good enough! My girls had a good education, and that is one of the reasons why we stayed," she said. "We stayed focused on the end game."

However, she urged the district to make changes for the next group of Black children so they don't have to endure what she called "systemic racist behaviors."

"You have a choice to be better," she said.

When asked for comment, the Sag Harbor Union Free School District issued a statement from Superintendent of Schools Jeff Nichols: "The Sag Harbor School District is committed to creating a diverse and inclusive learning environment for all of its students. We condemn racism and racist behaviors. Over the last few years, we have strived to diversify our curriculum and make positive changes to our school district."

One of the district's board of education goals, Nichols said, is to "support a diverse and inclusive school community" by incorporating culturally responsive practices through which all major decisions that are made at the building and district level take diversity and inclusion into account; building diverse and inclusive classroom libraries at Sag Harbor Elementary School; continuing to support a culturally diverse film series in collaboration with the John Jermain Library; and promoting professional development on diversity and inclusion throughout the district."

Additionally, the superintendent said, the district has established a Diversity and Inclusion Committee and its subcommittees with the specific purpose of addressing the following issues: bolstering the diversity of classroom libraries; promoting diverse and inclusive films; increasing professional development on diversity and inclusion; and helping to create a student club on diversity and inclusion.

Recently, he said, district officials have also discussed ways to try to recruit a more-diverse candidate pool for teaching positions, and are actively trying new methods of

recruitment.

"This is just a start. We are listening to our community and taking their experiences and feedback seriously," Nichols said. "We will continue to research best practices to provide our student population with a well-rounded education and enhance our curriculum with a focus on diversity and inclusivity."

Looking back, moving forward

Patch spoke with Kurt, Danielle and Allura Leggard about how their experiences with subtle acts of discrimination shaped their lives.

Danielle, 27, live in Brooklyn and works in a screen printing studio.

Moving to Sag Harbor from Brooklyn when she was 8, she went from a diverse community to a predominantly white neighborhood, where she said she would "see kids of different races only part of the time," usually during the summer. Her parents made sure to bring her back to Brooklyn often to visit family and her old friends.

Speaking about her experiences with racism as a child and teen, Danielle said it was "very subtle." Her parents also shielded the girls from much of their experiences. Growing up among white friends, Danielle said the girls would make statements such as, "Look how tan I am — I'm just as dark as you are." Others would say, "You don't act Black," she said. "You're not really Black."

Growing up in Sag Harbor, Danielle said her experiences didn't center on "people saying the N-word. There is a lot more subtle racism, in the way people act and treat my family."

And while many of their friends treat their family well because they know them, Danielle said, "Just because you're not racist toward our family doesn't mean you're not racist."

As a student in the district, Danielle said there is an inherent lack of knowledge about Black history, as well as a "whitewashing" of Martin Luther King Jr. Students need to read and learn more about Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey and James Baldwin, she said.

School reading lists reflected a dearth of tomes written about the Black experience. While Mark Twain and Jane Austen and "Jane Eyre" are "wonderful authors and books, they do not give a complete scope of what literature and culture is," she said.

Her memories of Black teachers are few. Similarly, there were few black students in Danielle's grade. One day, a reporter wrote about her field hockey team and mistakenly named another Black student as Danielle.

"We didn't look anything alike," she said. "We were just two Black girls playing field hockey."

White girls, she said, could have "hissy fits" without fear of repercussion. If a Black girl tried to express frustration about something, she said, "it was taken completely out of context. It's seen as more aggressive" than if a white girl does the same thing. Young Black girls, Danielle said, experience a "maturing" that others girls don't. She and her sister, Danielle said, "carried a lot of those things with us."

As one of the only Black families in the district, Danielle and Allura felt all eyes were on them to succeed and set a good example.

"Our parents didn't push us," Danielle said, "but in the school district we would always be known for what we did or didn't do. We constantly felt we had to be putting forth an image of success and of being achievers."

In college, at SUNY Purchase where she studied graphic design, Danielle said a personal transformation took place.

"I do remember going to college, then coming back and being able to shed those layers. I was able to feel comfortable calling out people in town for their racist behavior. It stopped being, 'Oh, I can't say anything,' but became, 'I don't care. What you're doing is bad, and it should be labeled as 'bad,'" she said.

In college, Danielle decided to forgo her perm and let her hair grow naturally. As soon as it started growing in, she started to look at things.

"Why was I so scared of having natural hair? Why did I have to conform into a European sense of beauty?" she said.

When girls from Sag Harbor asked her why she didn't do it sooner in high school, Danielle said, "Because in high school, you probably would have made fun of me."

Danielle soon encountered one experience Black woman have spoken out about: "People tried to touch my hair. I told them, 'Don't touch me. Do you try to touch white women's hair? Why do you feel you have to try to touch mine? It's not yours to touch or to hold.'"

Now, Danielle chooses to embrace the culture she is proud of, "being Black. I braid my hair to accentuate my Blackness and just enjoy it."

A few years ago, she said, she was out in a bar in Sag Harbor and a guy pulled on her braids. "I slapped him," she said. The bartender and bouncer and others rallied behind her and said if he touched her again, he'd be asked to leave.

"There is some solidarity that's started to happen in town with me, and I hope with other Black people, as well," Danielle said.

Speaking of the incident on the swim team, Danielle said it speaks to "[micro-aggressions](#)," which are defined as "the everyday, subtle, intentional — and oftentimes unintentional — interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups," according to Kevin Nadal in an NPR interview.

"I don't think I noticed until I got older," Danielle said. "As a child, I could probably tell. Did what happen take place because I was really the only Black kid? You can tell if it was your gender, race, or sexuality, through a process of elimination. That one was absolutely race," she said.

Swimming, she added, is still something she is passionate about; the incident didn't deter her from pursuing the sport.

The other situation that stands out revolved around the art scholarship her mother mentioned. Another student won the award, something that shocked students so much that

they went to the art teacher and said they didn't understand; Danielle had pursued, and excelled at, art throughout her entire high school career, she said.

Also, when Danielle was accepted into all nine schools that she'd applied to, someone made a comment about affirmative action.

"How dare you make me feel my accomplishment was only because of my race and because people need Black people to attend their schools?" she said.

The memories were a perfect storm, sparking Danielle's desire to move forward and leave the small-town mentality behind. "It was a big combination of, 'I am done with this. I am out,'" she said.

Her sister, Allura, is turning 21 in October and she is 27, Danielle said. "I have a different outlook about where I'm going and what trauma has sat with me, or not. I'm very grateful those things did not hold me back."

She added: "I don't think that I'm not able to do things, because I'm Black. I can do things because I'm me."

In college, visiting a print-making studio, she told her teacher she would get a job there one day — and she has.

Speaking about the high school AP class, Danielle said she was embarrassed that she didn't get into the class despite her strong skills, hard work in previous classes and grades in the subject. "I thought to myself, 'Did I not do enough?'"

Despite the experience, Danielle has fond memories of many teachers.

"The primary thing about teaching in this environment is that teachers maybe think they need to have color blindness. I don't think that helps," she said. "They think being neutral is better than me being Black. But it's OK to talk about the unsavory parts of our history and acknowledge that being Black, being Indigenous, being Chinese or a person of color in this country — everyone should be aware of their experience. It's not right or better just to be ignorant of it."

Danielle added: "You have to be able to talk about the hard things. Uncomfortable conversations are the only way that we grow."

Speaking of the recent Black Lives Matter protests, Danielle reminded that they are not new; the phrase has echoed for years, with the Ferguson unrest following the shooting death of Michael Brown by a police officer and the chokehold death of Eric Garner.

Danielle said she had to stop watching the videos. "It's really traumatic, being Black and watching someone die. ... It's horrible that we have to have videos of people dying to believe that there is police brutality," she said.

Recently, Danielle spoke her truth on social media about a job she had where she said she experienced discrimination, where she was doing all the work of someone in a higher position, without the salary or title.

Instead, an executive would say, "OMG, babe, you're doing so well," she said. Danielle added: "Under the name of feminism, you are asking Black women to do more work without paying more, just giving them praise. You can't get paid in praise."

Speaking out feels right, Danielle said: "I don't want to be anonymous."

Hearing the story of a woman who has experienced discrimination, a woman you know and grew up with, puts a human face on the issue, rather than just watching CNN or Channel 13, she said.

Despite the past instances that shaped her journey, Danielle said she's looking forward. "I don't think we can afford not to be hopeful for the future," she said. "There's just too much that needs to be fixed."

When asked why she emerged strengthened by situations that could have broken her spirit, Danielle said: "I think that I'm stubborn; but more than anything, I'm really hopeful and optimistic."

A father's perspective

Seeing his daughters come forward on social media, Kurt Leggard said he and his wife have both worked to help them navigate the issues they've faced, including anxiety and instances of racism.

"We've shown them how to cope with it, and how to be able to identify when they see something happening," he said. "For them to be able to make an appropriate assessment of what is actually happening. We've always cautioned them to make sure that what they are seeing is, indeed, reality and not a secondary effect of past slights and issues. You want to be sure if you are calling something out, that you see it for what it is."

Some things, Kurt said, are obvious. "But there are hidden slights and biases that can occur, and people become very practiced," he said. "If they are going to have a bias against you, about how to hide that bias and make it seem as though you're the one at fault."

Kurt said he is older than his wife and remembers the 1960s. "My sensitivity toward racial biases are pretty acute," he said. "I can call it as I see it. But if you did that every time you see it, you'd be fighting every day of your life — and that diminishes the quality of your life."

Instead, Kurt said, it's important to find enjoyment in life. That said, "If we see something that goes against our ethics or principles, we are going to fight it. We are not going to turn away from it. We're not afraid to fight injustice."

Growing up in Brooklyn, it wasn't until he'd entered the professional arena that Kurt said he began recognizing racial disparity. A nurse by profession, he said he quickly moved up to become an administrative nurse. "I knew I was being paid less than my counterparts," he said. "You see those things and unfortunately, you grin and bear it — and you find other work."

Too many times, Kurt said he heard the words "we're going to downsize. I, unfortunately, found myself too many times on the brunt end of that particular stick. There were subtle things."

But Kurt is a man who does not makes excuses and believes in teaching his children to take responsibility for their actions, part of building a principled way of looking at the world, he said.

"When you see BS, you can call BS," he said.

Kurt said he has come to the point in his career that he's compensated commensurately for his experience. "I moved far enough up the ladder. But look, this has always been a crime to people of color: We have to try harder, and the fact that you have to try harder adds a specific and detrimental amount of stress to your life."

Those stressors cause physical maladies, in conditions including high blood pressure or diabetes — and they trigger anxiety, as they have in his daughters. "But they've also developed coping mechanisms, that allow them to function in a healthy fashion in life," he said.

And he said, he wanted his girls to be strong enough "to manage all the crap that could potentially come their way. If you see an injustice to your brothers, you have to speak out. You're not going to fight every battle but pick and choose your battles — and fight to win."

Kurt said he is proud his daughters have spoke out about their experiences publicly. "That means I did my job. These kids have the internal fortitude to speak their truths without fear or reprisal."

Despite specific challenges their life in Sag Harbor has not been defined by struggle, Kurt said.

Kurt added that he would be "remiss, and it would be a misrepresentation, to say that we've had a bad life out here. We've not." His close friends are white. "These are friends that I would go to battle for. We do not differentiate by color. My life would be so much the poorer" without them, he said, describing the "the esteem, the love, that I feel for this group."

Seeing white people protest at a Black Lives Matter rally, he said, fills his heart. "I know these are people of goodwill— even if they have not walked in my shoes, they are not going to let me fall. They are there to partner with me."

Kurt is not overly optimistic about the future; he said he's lived long enough to have been let down before. However, he said, "I am cautiously optimistic."

Allura's story

Allura, who lives at home when not at school at Ithaca College, looked back on the experiences her mother shared.

Looking back on the instance when she was in the theater company where the correct makeup wasn't given for her skin tone, she said she was too young, just in third grade, but looking back now, she sees the experience not just as "embarrassing" but a micro-aggression.

"At the end of the day, she knew she had people who weren't all white taking part in these performances. She could have bought makeup for black and brown people like me but she decided not to," she said.

Rather than hold onto anger, Allura chose to forgive. "I do it for the sake of myself, because I need to move on with my life. I see it as: 'You have taught me a way I never want to be treated again.' I can forgive, but I won't forget."

Majoring in journalism, Allura also has a minor in African diaspora and is studying "ingrained and systemic racism," she said. "I didn't even know the full extent of the racism I endured living here until my second year of college. We're just taught in Sag Harbor that we're in a bubble in the Hamptons."

Now, she quotes a teacher from college: "It's like you turn on a light and you can't turn that light back off."

The dawning of realization, Allura said, made her sad. But it also made sense, she said. "I really started to think back to a lot of things that were said and done to me that I didn't

even realize were so racist."

What she'd experienced, Allura said, was subtle.

"It wasn't people calling me the N-word or yelling racist profanities," she said. "Then I learned the term 'Northern racism,' and it was what I was experiencing in Sag Harbor. It was the micro-aggression when my mom had issues with the administration and they wouldn't listen, putting my mom in the position of being the 'angry Black woman.' Or people saying I'm athletically gifted — something that's always posed toward people in the Black community — and made to seem like a compliment, but it's actually not. Because they're saying, 'We have to use our brains but you don't because you're athletically gifted.'"

Another subtle but painful truth was when friends in middle and high school called Allura an "Oreo — black on the outside and white on the inside," she said. "Saying, 'Oh, Allura, you don't speak like you're Black. You speak so well.' What that means is people that are Black don't speak intelligently. Those are micro-aggressions."

Those incidents sparked years of anxiety and emotional stress Allura still experiences, she said, as did having to live up to the roles she and her sister shared of having to be the school's "model Black students."

Speaking about the role in the school play she didn't get in eighth grade and the subsequent text saying her family were "bad apples," Allura said it still rankles that there was never an apology.

"They were not going to have to listen to a Black woman," she said. "It is unacceptable."

Allura said she loved her education in Sag Harbor and some of her teachers but felt the district lacked diversity when she was a student.

In field hockey, despite being team captain and a star player, the white team members got awards; Allura did not. "Everything that happened to me, I wish never happened. But I have become so much wiser. That's what's sad and good at the same time. I've had to mature and become wiser beyond my years because of the color of my skin. I couldn't

afford to be all innocent, lollygagging around. I enjoy my life, but I always have to be on my toes because I never know what's going to happen."

Asked if she believed there had been significant change, Allura said consequences need to be outlined.

"It starts with education," Allura said. "We have to enforce consequences on those kind of behavior. Too many people feel defeated because of the lack of support."

Also critical, Allura said, is teaching more than just cursory lessons on Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Malcolm X.

"Schools have to start teaching uncensored versions of history, not censored textbooks written by white men," she said.

Personally, Allura said while she will carry the injustices she experienced with her forever — but keep moving forward. "There's this huge sense of relief that I'm never going to let someone treat me in this fashion again," she said. "I'm going to be better than what they are. Your attitude and way of treating me is not going to stop me from keep me from believing in myself, my dreams."

George Floyd has sparked a flood of discourse, she said, largely because the video drew attention to police brutality in a way that hadn't happened before.

"You can't change everyone's way of thinking," she said. "At the end of the day, you want them to change it themselves, but maybe you can help them to want to change themselves."

Change can happen, Allura believes, but it will take longer than a decade to dismantle a system deeply rooted over 200-plus years.

"People say it starts at home, yes — but it also starts with you. You have to acknowledge to yourself the racist tendencies that you have depicted," she said.

Some have to acknowledge years of privilege and minority groups have to educate themselves, she said.

The first step, Allura said, is to truly teach the honest history of racism. "We have been censoring people, way too much. People are not going to learn. We need to start enforcing consequences for that kind of behavior. We can't say, 'Mistakes happen,' or 'It was just a joke.' There are certain positions where you cannot make mistakes. One mistake can honestly lead to someone being killed."

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