

Defeat the Label Conversation on Bullying speech

Dr. Agustin V. Arbulu

Director, Michigan Department of Civil Rights

As Prepared For Delivery Oct. 26, 2018

Good afternoon, and thank you for the honor of allowing me to speak to you today. I want to start by thanking Commissioner Jeff Sakwa, a member of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, who also serves on the board of Defeat the Label and helped start the organization. And to Kevin Goldman, the other co-founder of the organization and CEO. I am also appreciative of executive director Jamie Greene Kaniarz for extending this invitation.

What a great conference especially being held during October, Bullying Prevention Month.

Before I start let me tell you a little about myself, because I think this is important and reveals what each of us possess, that we are unique beings made up of different histories, backgrounds, environments, education, physical looks, etc. I came to the United States and Michigan at the age of 13 from Peru.

I am a product of a multiracial background, with a great grandfather who emigrated from China to Peru in search of a better life at the end of the 19th century and a great grandmother who was black. In Peru we call her Afro Peruana. And between those two book ends you add Spanish, Quechua (those indigenous to Peru when Spaniards arrived), Basque and up pops me. Even my last name creates confusion. It is not Spanish sounding so even those from the Latin/x community don't know if am Latino.

My last name, Arbulu is Basque, which is a region located in the northeast part of Spain with its own distinct language, custom and culture. And Bascos don't consider themselves as Spanish.

So here I was, a 13-year-old boy arriving in a new country, at a new school at a time when young people seek to be included and be part of some already created peer groups. Everyone wants to be part of something, have an identity. I was new, an outsider, not just because I was new to the school, but because I was different looking from what you might expect in a mostly white community, in color, hair, eye, complexion and yes, in the way I talked with an accent.

Did I experience outright and obvious bullying? No. What I did experience was that of being and feeling excluded, an outsider. Kids might snicker behind my back about my accent, or they might not invite me to the “cool” parties. Excluded, and not really being aware of it. So about 15 years ago, I was on Facebook -- I am not anymore and I never want to be again, thank you -- and I joined a group connected to my high school reunion.

I was really on Facebook because I began receiving notices or communication about my high school reunion. I thought Facebook would give me information on people that I went to school with and refresh my memory of the people I went to school with. Then, I noticed how classmates in that group were reminiscing about parties and things they

did; and I thought to myself -- “I never got do any of that. I didn’t even know that happened.” “Boy that is weird. What did I miss?”

I was unaware of just how excluded I had been. And maybe that is good that I did not know what I was missing.

So, when I was pressed about attending the reunion I said to myself -- “Agustin, do you really want to go?”

Why would I want to go? To show them how I was doing? Or feel like one of them? To reminisce about some thing I was not part of? Was that really a good reason to attend? Ultimately, I said “no.” I wished them the best. I just had no good reason to attend.

Why would I deliberately place myself in a position where I would hear stories I had not been part of and from which I had been excluded? All that would do is leave me feeling isolated, alone and an outsider. I don’t need that. And I think that none of us who have felt isolated would want to revisit that feeling.

Now, flash forward to today. Imagine a 13-year-old child like me arriving for the first time at a middle school in Michigan (maybe a mostly white school) and going through this process. Can you imagine having that child feel isolated, the pain that would have? Now, I am not saying that it is done purposefully. But kids can be cruel unintentionally. On top of this we are going through a time when our nation is deeply divided over

issues such as race, immigration and gender. A fight over who is included and who is excluded has taken front and center stage. It has to be impacting our youth.

The science says that our national dialog does impact our children -- dramatically. For example, a recent study by researchers Dewey Cornell, of the University of Virginia, and Francis Huang, of the University of Missouri, looked at bullying data from Virginia schools. The study looked at the answers of survey given to seventh and eighth grade students from more than 400 Virginia schools and across three years -- 2013, 2015 and 2017.

While Virginia voters were split among their 2016 presidential ballot choices, with 49.8 percent casting a vote for Hillary Clinton and 44.4 percent voting for Donald Trump; the bullying statistics turned up an astonishing finding.

They found that in 2017 teasing and bullying were significantly higher in schools located in districts that had voted for Donald Trump compared with districts that had cast ballots in favor of Hillary Clinton. In fact, bullying incidents were 18 percent higher in Republican leaning districts. Teasing about race or ethnicity was 9 percent higher in GOP districts.

This is not to say that Donald Trump *caused* the bullying. No. That is far too simple an answer and simplicity can be misleading. What I can tell you is that this recent study supports what we at the Michigan Department of Civil Rights discovered: that

immediately following the elections in 2016 our offices began monitoring and receiving calls especially from families and students complaining about instances of bullying, hate and violence aimed at students of color and those ethnic of backgrounds.

We noticed increases of bullying and targeting of Latin/x, Jewish and Arab American students, especially in areas like Oakland County and Kent County and guess where? Primarily the super white school districts, not Pontiac or Detroit. But why?

In Michigan, our own Governor Rick Snyder pushed back hard on the harsh abusive rhetoric of the 2016 political campaign, calling for civility. He rightly noted that we accomplish much more working together, respecting each other and listening than we gain by tearing each other down. And he is right we need civility in having difficult conversations, And I am going to come back to these points later, because there is more going on under the surface.

So, what is happening?

We all know the statistics. In 2017, [here in Michigan](#), 1 in 4 students has been **bullied**, 1 in 5 reported being **cyberbullied**. Nationally, only [20 to 30 percent of students](#), depending on which study you read, who were bullied reported the bullying to a school official.

Of those who are bullied, we know that certain populations of youth -- those in the LGBTQ community, the disabled communities and those who look different or not the norm -- experience significantly more bullying than their peers.

In addition to this, the federal government reports that 70.4% of school staff have seen bullying. 62% witnessed bullying two or more times in the last month and 41% witness bullying once a week or more.

You know, when those of us, who are adults were in school, the bullying at school likely ended when we left the school grounds. We could escape to the safety of our homes. But youth today do not have that luxury. In 2015, the Pew Research Center found that 73 percent of American youth have smartphones. And I suspect that 3 years later that percentage is much higher.

I suspect nearly every young person has a smart phone. We all know that smartphones go hand in hand with social media. We know that social media and cyberbullying has increased as access to this new technology has increased. With that technology, which is important to improving this country, the schoolyard bully is now in your living room or your child's bedroom 24/7.

All of us have encouraged and continue to encourage those who are witnessing bullying to become upstanders. To challenge and intervene in the episode. We know that

disrupting a bully's behavior by intervening brings the incident to an end much more quickly.

We also need to encourage those who are being bullied to tell their stories. That's why MDCR is happy to support the *Relentless Tour with Anthony Ianni* and Commissioner Sakwa's Defeat the Label, and many other similar initiatives throughout Michigan. Schools need to be safe and secure spaces for young people to grow and develop.

Anthony's story of overcoming bullying through basketball and community support is not only uplifting, it's powerful. Anthony was diagnosed on the autism spectrum when he was just 4 years old and his family was told he would never accomplish much and would eventually end up in a group home. Instead, he went on to graduate high school and college and he played college basketball and professional basketball. That's a story of hope we need to hear as we rise up against bullying and work to change the culture that allows it.

The real question we have to ask, I think, is not how much bullying is there. The real question is: Why does it continue even as we've built up programming that addresses bullying and have implemented policies to confront the crisis head on?

As the director of the Department of Civil Rights I would be remiss if I didn't talk about the issue of bullying from a deeper systemic perspective. We know there are lots of ideas about what is the root cause of bullying. Low self-esteem, peer recognition, fear of

the other, fear of what one see in ourselves when we look at the other, cycles of family and community violence.

Recently, some have called it the “Trump Effect.” But it is not Trump himself and alone. It goes much further and much deeper than that. What it reveals are the changes that are taking place in our country. Instead of embracing inclusion and striving for diversity, the unpublished study found a correlation between school districts that voted for Mr. Trump and higher incidents of bullying. Why could this be? Maybe it is the uncertainty that change brings.

Michigan today is more diversified than it was in 1980 and it continues to grow in diversity, racially, ethnically, religiously, gender, etc. For example, in 1980 85% of our community was white, today it is 75% white and by 2040 it is projected to be 64%. And the workforce is expected to be 40% diversified. And today our schools, student population in Michigan is 66% white and continues to decrease. Yes, change continues. Diversification continues. We are looking different and will continue to look and even act different. This should not be viewed as a threat. Instead we should embrace diversity as a cornerstone of America’s capacity to grow, to lead, to innovate and bring new ideas and viewpoints.

I am also reminded of a musical [Into the Woods](#). In it, the Witch, in explaining to Rapunzel why it is she should not escape her tower, sings a haunting song. The lyrics which read:

Careful the things you say

Children will listen

Careful the things you do

Children will see

And learn

Children may not obey,

But Children will listen

Children will look to you

For which way to turn

To learn what to be

Careful before you say

Listen to me

Children will listen

Thank the stars that we have the arts and artists who can help explain the very complicated world in which we live.

We have to resist falling into the trap of the "Us" vs. "The Other" or "Included" vs. "Excluded." It's easier to blame others for all of our ills or changes we see taking place. People that don't fit our sense of what we think Americans should be. This has been part of our history and from the beginning of the first white people that arrived in the Americas. There has always been this struggle and tension between including and excluding.

Today it's persons who are transgender, people of the Muslim faith wearing hijabs or beards and those who are immigrants or might be immigrants with accents. They are the people in our public discourse whom we are told to fear, despise and exclude. You only have to look at the rhetoric today. On refugees fleeing from Central American countries, and 1000 plus miles away from the American southwest border with Mexico. Take the recent mailings of bombs sent to our political leaders or activists who speak out against the rhetoric of hate, bullying or blaming others. Even though the Feds today arrested a Florida man in his 50s, we don't know more about him. It will be interesting what we learn.

The Detroit Free Press [reported](#), just days after the 2016 election, two or three boys in the mostly white community of DeWitt, lay down in a mostly empty hallway of school chanting "Build the wall." Later that day, a Latina student was blocked from her locker by a group of boys who chanted about building a wall and sending her back to Mexico. Many of us were shocked and disgusted by the reports of this incident when they went public. And rightfully so. And, yes, we received the calls and complaints.

But where did these junior high school students learn this behavior was acceptable in society? The Virginia study provides some insight. We need to consider what was talked about in the living rooms and around the dinner tables in this community leading up to the election. Was the othering and scapegoating normalized at home, as it was on the media, in a way that told children yelling "Build the wall" were acceptable behavior?

“Careful the things you say
Children will listen”

Does that mean that these families were deliberately indifferent or hateful towards latinx persons? In my heart of hearts I do not believe the vast majority of Americans, or even of those DeWitt residents, harbored hatred in their souls and their hearts. I believe what we witnessed was the result of our behavior, whether conscious or not, that leads us to act out in certain ways.

If we are going to address bullying, we’ve all got to get honest about this. None of us were born hating someone else. We are socialized into othering or excluding people, often in ways we are completely unaware of, and as a result we socialize our children in them as well.

For instance, how many know the old Girls are made of sugar and spice and that’s nice rhyme? How about Little boys are made of snakes and snails and puppydog tails? Yes. I thought so. Most of you. But those are specific expectations we expect in children based on their gender. But what if a boy is nice and sweet? What if a girl is rough and tumble filled with boundless exuberant energy? Do we cheer them today? Do we allow them to grow and prosper feeling secure and safe?

That is an implicit bias, where our conscious beliefs run counter to our unconscious mind at work. The outcome is cognitive dissonance, where our acts are contrary to our conscious stated beliefs.

These bias combined with norms are developed and constructed into our brains. We don't think about them when we act. There are studies that show that only 10 percent or so of our actions and decision making is a conscious act. The rest, 90% of our behaviors and acts are unconscious, driven by our biases. And the great challenge of this is that our brain divides the world between "Us" and "Them," the "other."

Here is another example. When you are walking down the street late at night and an African American man is walking towards you. Most of us, regardless of our race, cross the street to avoid contact. The act is automatic and yet what is really playing out is a deeply embedded history of African Americans being presented in our country as threatening or criminals. Think about it. How many television shows feature black men as heroes?

One more example of how our brain operates. A young man is speaking Spanish and a white man tells him to speak English because this is America. The white man tells him if he doesn't like that he can go back to his country, which most often referred to as Mexico. But the young man is a fourth generation American. His relatives immigrated to the U.S. more than a century ago as part of the great industrialization of America. Because the young man was speaking Spanish, The white man presumed that this

young man was from another country. And because this young man does not fit the profile of what his definition of an American, he becomes an “other”, not one of us.

We are taught these messages from a very young age. They are burnt into our brains by our parents, our relatives and our peer groups and yes the media. They are reinforced by the stories we are told in mass media -- movies, television, magazines, newspapers. Everywhere we turn we are bombarded by messages of what is acceptable and what is not. Who is in; and who is out.

That’s a cultural problem. But it’s a cultural problem that is toxic for our children and to us. But we can do something about it.

Remember those parents in DeWitt? I am certain that none of them were intent on teaching their children that Latinx persons were lesser than. And yet they learned that message and saw Latinx persons as a threat to them. An immediate threat. And that fear is what stokes the acting out.

Here's the thing we have to keep in mind, all bullying comes down to one key dynamic at play: Power. That is who has power -- either through social status or physical prowess -- and who doesn’t have power. We need to be more conscious of how power plays out.

Studies show that early on we learn about hierarchy and dominance, expressions of power. Sometimes the sought power is internal, such as may be the case for young people struggling with their own self esteem. In that instance, the young person may temporarily alleviate the pain of that by belittling and minimizing another person. That's about power, the power to control how one feels about oneself through acting out on others. Other times, the power being sought is prestige of being part of an "in" group. And to be accepted translates to belittling those who are different and outside the group.

That process of disempowering another in order to gain power for yourself is about privilege and prestige in our culture. We reward that behavior in adulthood. It is insidious, toxic. Dangerous. Potent.

19th Century British politician Lord Acton [said](#) it perhaps most memorably: "Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Right now, we are witnessing this absolute corruption. Just last week a report was released called "[Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape](#)." The report itself made many headlines after its release. It found that there are seven distinct political tribes in America today. But it is the two extremes -- progressive activists on the left, representing 8 percent of the population and devoted conservatives on the right, representing 6 percent of the population -- that control the debates and discussion on policy related issues in America today.

The vast majority of Americans, labeled the “exhausted majority,” sit in the middle of these extremes. But their voices are not at the table and not guiding our politics. If they were, we would see more people demanding that we listen to others who disagree with us and to find common ground. That’s what the study found. That’s not pie in the sky. That’s the reality of America today, and I suspect we see that playing out in our schools as well. Not necessarily on political issues, but on the things we adults might consider mundane. Like whether or not a young person looks “pretty” or is being invited to this party or not. Whether a young person is a nerd or a jock. At the end of the day, those labels really serve no purpose but to separate us. To create others.

It is time we empower the exhausted middle to speak up and speak out. It is time we empower them to take the reins in our communities and not allow the voices to be controlled at the margins. And, no, I am not talking about politics. I am talking about in our school PTAs and our neighborhood watch groups. I am talking about empowering the exhausted middle and our youth to be the upstanders. One of the things I appreciate about Defeat the Label is that it is encouraging young people to be upstanders. It also means teachers, administrators, and other school staff have to be empowered to give voice to the exhausted middle’s commonsense search for commonality, acceptance and civil discourse.

Let me tell you the story of what happens when we actively listen to each other, even those we disagree with. One of my employees is as liberal as you can imagine. He’s openly gay and living with HIV. He’s worked for decades for equality for the LGBTQ

community. One of his friends is Republican State Sen. Rick Jones from the Lansing area. A super conservative individual. The two are on the opposite ends of the political spectrum, and yet they talk daily, share Facebook memes, and regularly get together for coffee. For nearly a decade the two of them have been building this relationship, listening to each other and growing.

Jones opposed amending Michigan's Ethnic Intimidation Act, which is called our hate crimes law, to include sexual orientation and gender identity. But when my employee was the victim of a brutal anti-gay crime -- the perpetrators told detectives they were targeting gay men, though they used much nastier words -- Jones was suddenly confronted with the reality of anti-LGBTQ violence. His friend had been a victim. Jones stood up to his own party and caucus and signed on as a lead co-sponsor to amend Michigan Ethnic Intimidation Act to include sexual orientation and gender identity.

That move was the result of two people, opposites if you will, spending time listening to each other, growing and learning. When the issue of hate crimes became real, that the victim was not a stranger, but a friend, the political perspective had to change; and it did change.

That is what we can do as a society. Instead of allowing the divisive rhetoric of today to continue to divide us; we need to reach out to those who have a different perspective and listen. We need to model that for our youth.

After turning down the invitation to my high school reunion, I also decided I really did not want to be on that social media platform. I closed Facebook down, and I haven't been back. And I don't want to go back. That may not be an answer for everyone, but we have a responsibility as a community to empower the bystanders on Facebook, just as we do the bystanders in our school hallways; to challenge bullying when they see it. Report it. Call it out. Shame it.

And we need parents and other trusted adults who mentor our youth, teaching them to be smart consumers of media including social media. We need to mentor each other to challenge and speak out against the brutality and toxicity bubbling on social media platforms.

Empowering the exhausted majority is going to be a heavy lift. They are exhausted because we have been screaming to be heard, clawing at the political system trying to be seen and heard. And yet we feel exhausted, worn out. But we should not give up, instead we can and will change this narrative. It's a huge cultural shift but a necessary one.

The process of addressing the toxic culture of social media is also going to be difficult. But change is necessary.

In fact, the whole process of raising our voices against bullying is changing our culture. From the living room to the school classroom. From the city council chambers to the state legislature. From the Governor's office to the Oval office, change is necessary.

I am reminded of the first three words of our Declaration of Independence: "We the People." Our own Statute of Liberty reads "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Change is a constant in our lives. It's necessary, it's healthy and it's scary. And it also can be overwhelming.

But I will leave you with a quote from the great and leading science fiction writer Octavia Butler. She's black and her work is beautiful, haunting and powerful. She wrote:

"All that you touch; You Change. All that you Change; Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change."

Please, go out there and change the world. I am standing with you and looking forward to seeing how the future unfolds when the exhausted majority has been empowered and we all recognize that change is truth.