

OPINION

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Bill White: A powerful Lehigh exhibit will wake you to realities of race



Customers eat at the counter at Ben's Chili Bowl in Washington. The Emmy-nominated virtual reality documentary "Traveling While Black" puts viewers at Ben's Chili Bowl, where Black men and women discuss the danger and indignities of traveling in white America,. (Abdullah Pope/AFP/Getty Images)

By **BILL WHITE** |

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Back when I started at The Morning Call, a young Black colleague and I walked up Hamilton Street in Allentown for some shopping.

We walked into a store on or around Hamilton — I don't remember anymore which one, but it's long gone — and were approached by one of the store's workers. "Can I help you?" he asked.

We were just looking, we said, expecting to be left alone to browse. Instead, we acquired a shadow. He followed us everywhere around the store until we finally left. It was awkward.



MONICA CABRERA / THE MORNING CALL

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I knew it wasn't about me. I didn't get followed around like that when I walked into stores alone. They just didn't trust the Black guy.

That memory stuck with me, among the experiences that helped influence the columns I wrote many years later about a 44-year-old Black man who complained that he had been hassled by police on Hamilton Street for no reason one Saturday morning as he waited for a store to open.

I concluded, "Since it's Black History Month, I'll note that black history is crammed with black men who were rousted by police for no good reason other than their skin color ... If you think, as a general rule, that this is unheard of, you're naive, and you're certainly not black."

I think I'm woke, in current parlance. But I strive to be woker.

That doesn't make me a radical or a nut. It makes me someone who tries to learn more about and empathize with the experiences of people whose race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities or other personal circumstances have made life more difficult for them.

So when a friend told me about the Emmy-nominated virtual reality documentary "Traveling While Black," available for viewing through April 2 in Lehigh University's Zoellner Arts Center, my wife and I decided to check it out. The 19-minute film by Academy Award winner Roger Ross Williams of Easton, released in 2019, carries us from segregationist restrictions of the 1950s to present-day fear of police violence. There's no admission charge, but you must [register online through the lehigh.edu website](#). You also can find out there about upcoming events in connection with the film.

What I've already seen and read didn't prepare me for the sadness, guilt, anger of being virtually immersed in the historic Black-owned Ben's Chili Bowl in Washington, and hearing Black men and women reflect on the danger and indignities of traveling in white America, decades ago and still today.

The diner was included in "The Negro Motorist Green Book," a guide for Black travelers during segregation, letting them know where they would be safe and welcome, literally a matter of life and death in some places. The book inspired the 2019 Academy Award-winning film "Green Book," about a Black musician being chauffeured through the Jim Crow South by a white man.

Our Oculus Go headsets had us sitting with Black patrons talking to one another in a Ben's Chili Bowl booth while other customers chatted and ate all around us in 360-degree virtual reality. It felt so real that I found myself pulling my arms in so I wouldn't bump the people sitting next to me.

Sandra Butter-Trusdale remembered as a young woman being forced to the last car in the train once it crossed the line from Washington into Virginia, and not being allowed to eat or use the bathroom on board. Longtime civil rights activist Courtland Cox told his companions at our table about long Southern bus rides in which they couldn't get off for bathrooms or food, even on a 10-hour trip. Samaria Rice described how her family experienced the horrible day when her 12-year-old son Tamir was shot to death in Cleveland by a white policeman.

The virtual reality interviews were interspersed with video images of segregation and violence.

Few would deny that Black people were mistreated in the past. Where we're still divided today is on admitting that the aftermath of past racism and the reality of present racism persist — in housing, in employment, in education.

And in travel. The “routine” traffic stop is anything but routine when you're Black, particularly a young Black man. As one of the speakers pointed out (as best I can recall it, since I couldn't take notes during virtual reality), “Young people don't have the ‘Green Book’ in front of them anymore, but it's in their heads.”

We — young and old — desperately need to understand and address all this if we expect to put our shameful past behind us. If that makes us “woke,” we should embrace that, not use it as a partisan excuse for promoting ignorance.

So I encourage you to visit “Traveling While Black,” even if you think you have nothing new to learn about race relations in America.

Understanding it intellectually isn't the same as living it. As a white person, I can never fully get it. But I can try.

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Bill White, a former full-time columnist for The Morning Call for more than 25 years, writes a semi-monthly column.