



Dear friends,

The summer of 2020 was, to say the least, a volatile and uncertain time in the United States. We were still in the early months of the global coronavirus pandemic and understood very little about how the disease functioned. We left groceries outside to decontaminate for 24 hours and then wiped them down after bringing them in. We were terrified that corona contagion could come in the form of germs thrust from the airplane lavatory when the toilet was flushed. Long before vaccines and treatments to mitigate the impacts of the virus, people were dying by the tens of thousands, isolated from loved ones. Images of bodies piled up around hospitals and totally abandoned city streets flooded the news. We locked down, postponed family events, and stopped public meetings, gatherings, and celebrations. Virtual meetings became the norm.

While many things changed, others stayed the same. America's particular brand of racism, present in our national DNA since before the ink of the constitution dried, reared its ugly head in ways that were new to some while familiar to others.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer. It was caught on video and went viral. For some of us it felt eerily similar to Rodney King's beating by the LAPD in 1992 or the murders of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Amadou Diallo to name a few. For others it sparked a new fire and even a racial "reckoning" that rattled many sectors of American society, arguably changing some conversations and practices from Wall Street to Main Street.

In some ways this killing was different. The officers were charged and convicted. The agonizing 9 minutes and 29 seconds, caught on video, where a white officer choked the life out of an African American citizen, a human being made in the divine image, was too much. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets, calls to defund the police rang out in every state and around the world. White people, white-led companies, and predominantly white institutions responded in a variety of ways. From compliance to inspiration, from window dressing to structural change, from soul searching to media buys, there were commitments made, philanthropic dollars allocated, programs launched, diversity positions created, and employment pipelines built.

The new inspiration that some white Americans felt to combat racism also reminded us of how divided our country is. The same video that provoked action by some generated skepticism by others and the ensuing "reckoning" exposed deeper fault lines and dueling worldviews.



It will take years to know if this tragic event and the “reckoning” that followed will take America on a crucial journey to confront our history honestly and make amends. But long before those outcomes were known, and even well before those responses had been launched, an intrepid group of us knew we couldn’t sit on the sidelines as the ripples of racism and the responses to it spread across the country. The politics of division were tearing the fabric of America further apart and gaining momentum. Even amidst the pandemic, we didn’t want to sit home to contemplate and condemn—we wanted to feel the pulse of America and meet our country where it was, in all its diversity, heart break, hope, rage and searching.

Inspired by TNP Co-Founder, Tom Scott, 12 of us set out on a 12-day journey down the Mississippi to host public conversations on race. We arrived in the Twin Cities, from different parts of the country in pods. We devised a game plan to drive the length of the river, through the heart, or down the spine, of America. We and our families feared the pandemic and the health risks we were taking. I (Simon) vividly recall my repeated daydream of ending up sick in a small hotel room, isolated and alone, no one able to come in, and unable to travel home. But we went ahead and packed the way we imagined one would for a military operation entering contaminated land. We created protocols and evacuation plans. We were afraid but we were courageous.

We were also humble and curious. We didn’t know what we would find or who we would encounter. We hoped to meet people from every walk of life who held every point of view about the pandemic, racism, the state of the nation, and the future of our country.

We covered nearly 10,000 miles. Each night, in a different city or town, we facilitated an outdoor, open conversation about race. During the days we explored the local area, met more people, asked questions, and let the moment and the journey work on each of us.

And we did it, night after night, we talked. Day after day we drove. We met angry, loving, defensive, hospitable Americans. They surprised us and opened our hearts.

All of that was captured on film and turned into the 5-part documentary series that you will find on this page.

Please know that we didn’t head out on this American Neighbor journey thinking we had all or even many answers. We did, and do, believe in the power of face-to-face conversation.

We didn’t think we were special or saviors. We thought of ourselves as “loving try-ers” as Tom liked to say. We just knew we had to do something. We were sure we would make



mistakes and we were right. As my friend Megan Black said to me, “Did you think you would get the red carpet rolled out for you? If you are gonna do this work, you will get scrapes and bruises. You are going to get cut, clearing away the brush.”

So, this film series, the discussion guides, and the other tools are not meant as a comprehensive strategic response to racism in America. These films do not claim to provide a deep analysis or history lesson. The voices are those of real Americans and their perspectives are raw and authentic. We hope that as you meet the people we met along the way, your appreciation for the diversity of life experiences in our shared country will grow. And we hope those encounters lead you to more questions and fewer simplistic answers. We know that’s what happened to us.

Importantly, the conversations we started along the Mississippi continue today. Out of some of the most contentious nights new collaborations have emerged. May these films spark more conversations, inspire you to take action in your own way and invite us all to consider that this is not the time to vanquish our “enemies” but rather to embrace curiosity. Whether your “enemy” is your coworker, opposing candidate, fellow congregant, or childhood best friend, this is an invitation to turn back toward them. They are, no doubt, better than what you think of as their worst vote, deed, comment, or belief. Maybe today is the day that you reach out, open up the very conversation you closed prior, and with the humbling journey that these films convey in your back pocket, step into the fire of courageous conversations and do your part to step toward healing our souls and repairing the world.

With gratitude,

Simon Greer and Neil Phillips

P.S. If you are interested, along with watching the films, you can “join” the journey by reading through Simon’s daily journal entries. They are one example of our own reflections, in real time, as the trip unfolded. The entries might help fill out the story as you peek into the day to day learning that was part of this odyssey.