

## White Women Face Racism: First One by One, Then by the Dozens

By Mary Sussman

In January 2024, LWVMC member Mary Delgado received RID Racism MKE's Spotlight Award for her commitment to fighting racism in the metropolitan area, along with three other recipients. Since 2019, Delgado has been facilitating a program designed to help white women understand, confront and set aside racism. "We need to set aside our white lens," Delgado says, "so that we really can hear and listen to what non-white people are telling us about what life is like for them."

Since 2019, Delgado has reached more than 50 women through her [White Women Facing Racism: One White Woman at a Time](#), a nine-month program that meets bi-weekly from June through March. About 10 LWVMC members have participated. In nine months, the participants read, reflect, write and share. The reading list includes: *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity In a World Made for Whiteness* by Austin Channing Brown; *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond; *Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly About Racism in America* by George Yancy; *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin; *Birth of a White Nation* by Jacqueline Battalora; *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram X. Kendi; *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* by Robert P. Jones; and *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* by Richard Rothstein.

Delgado hopes that the program will help women realize that "race is not a thing" and that there's no biological reason for race because our DNA is 99.9% the same. "So it's this tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny little bit of DNA that makes you look like you and me look like me. What I like to do in these nine months is talk to people about whiteness. And that is the thing that has been constructed and created. So it has nothing to do really with my white skin or somebody else's black or brown skin."

Delgado likens the program to a pregnancy and is not uncomfortable thinking of herself as a midwife. "The women are coming to me when they're pregnant, but they haven't got a clue as to what is going to be like when they have a baby, especially the first time."

Delgado considers the process transformational. "Anybody who would facilitate this has to know in her gut what a transformation is," she says. "In other words, you've been here and now you are over here in your life. To me, that's what a white person has to do. We have to sit down and shut up and take the time to go through this very difficult time. We were not taught correctly. We were not taught the right history. We live in a bubble of innocence. And it's just not working."

Delgado was born in Manitowoc in 1943. At 14, she joined the convent, took her vows and earned an undergraduate degree in English and Music at the former Silver Lake College in Manitowoc. Delgado eventually renounced her vows before beginning a 50-year teaching career that

landed her in Bridgeport, Conn., Puerto Rico, Chicago and, finally, Milwaukee. She also married, had a child and got divorced.

When she was in her 60's, Delgado began reading books about race and racism. She longed to find out what "this race thing" was all about so she actively studied and researched, and eventually read more than 25 books in the process.

In her mid-70s, while undergoing chemotherapy for cancer, Delgado participated in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, a lengthy spiritual retreat designed to bring participants to encounter Jesus more deeply and grow in their relationship with God. "I don't like to use the word exercise as it sounds like a gym," Delgado says. "So I call it a retreat." The retreat took place between 2017 to 2019. "I went into it asking what does God want me to do now?. I just didn't want to go into retirement." She also wanted something good to come out of the chemotherapy.

At the end of the retreat, she came up with the idea that white women and race would be her focus. "it's wasn't white women and recipes or white women and travel," she said. At that point, she took her idea to two Black friends and colleagues, Althea Washington and Dana Orr. They were enthusiastic about her idea even though she couldn't quite explain right then what is was that she wanted to do. However, within in two weeks she developed the curriculum "because writing curriculum for me is like eating ice cream," Delgado said. She already had done a lot of background reading. That's "where God really stepped in" when she woke up at 2:00 a.m. and identified four of the books that she currently uses in the program. Program associates, Orr and Washington periodically attend sessions to provide their perspectives on the readings and discussions.

The rest is history. The alumna are eager to continue meeting annually – 30 of the 50 alumna gathered in September 2023 -- and Delgado is now forming the 24/25 class, which begins in June. If you are interested in participating, visit the White Women Facing Racism website to get more information and [sign up](#).

Still going strong at 80, Mary has been a long-time supporter of the LWVMC. From 2018-2022 she worked with the high school voter registration team.