

SLATE

March 13, 2021

How Did You Sleep Last Night?

Shannon Cox, Sandy, Utah

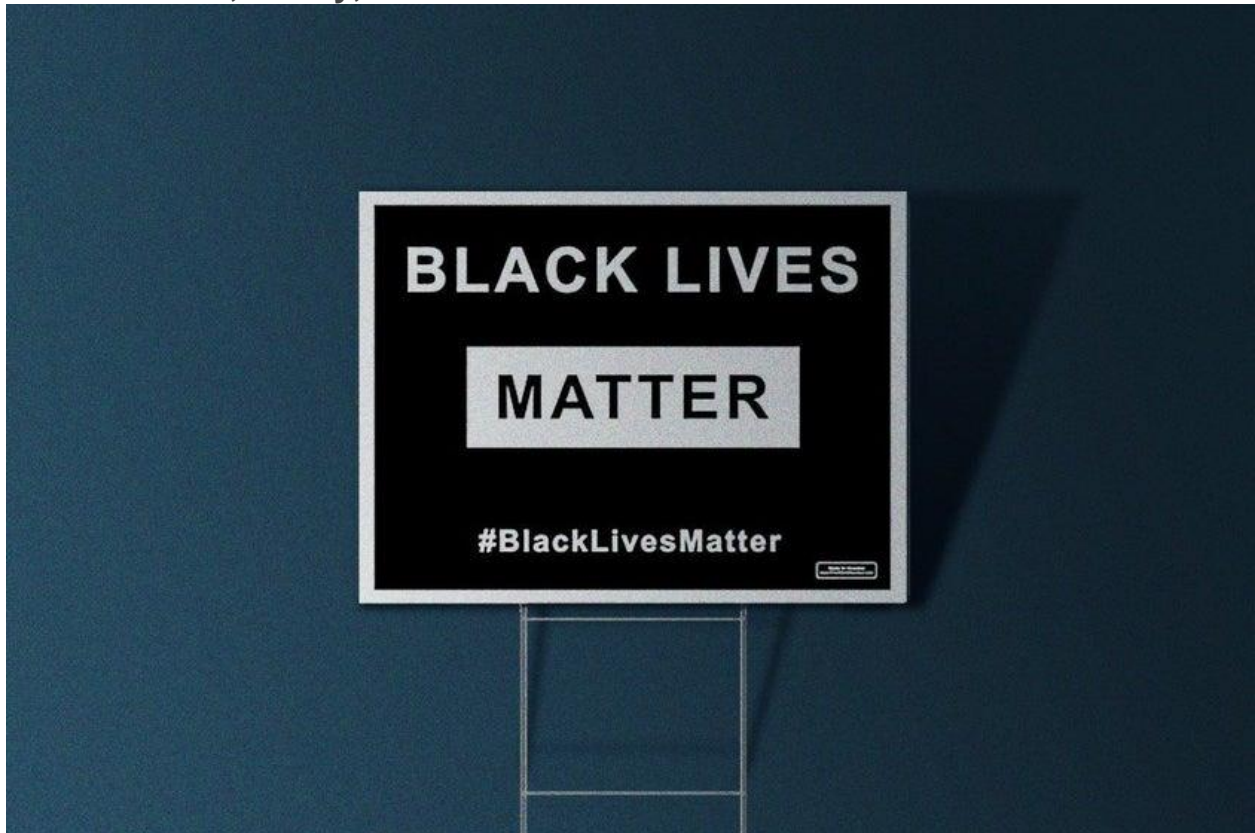


Photo illustration by Slate. Photo by Amazon.

by Lori Teresa Yearwood

Despite what Shannon Cox calls her “white privilege”—her beautiful, four-bedroom house in an upper-middle-class neighborhood full of educated professionals in Sandy, Utah; the COVID-19 vaccinations she and her husband have received; the adjustable platform bed and \$4,000 Purple mattress they lie on each night—despite all that, Cox said, she

spends most of her nights sleepless in fear and grief over the mental status of her Black daughter.

Just weeks ago, her 14-year-old, who wore soft brown curls hanging to her shoulders, walked into the family kitchen of light oak cabinets and black marble countertops and announced, “I am so depressed, but don’t worry, I’m not going to commit suicide,” Cox, 49, said.

Cox, a retired police officer, is a white woman from southeastern Virginia. Her husband, Steve Cox, is a Black man who supervises a state juvenile justice detention center and originally hails from Compton, California.

Their daughter, Shannon Cox said, is “struggling with isolation and with being a Black child in a white community that does not get the magnitude of racial injustice we have witnessed in this country.”

Around the nation, there have been recent and public homicides of Black people. There was the storming of the Capitol, with racist right-wing militias and conspiracy theorists calling for the overturning of Joe Biden’s election. And there were as many as 200 QAnon supporters protesting in their own neighborhood, on State Street and State Route 114 South, with “Blue Lives Matter” signs.

“My daughter is suffering,” Cox said, “and that brings fear into my space and into my mind.”

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among American teens aged 15–19, [according to the CDC](#). That statistic became painfully personal when two young people Cox knew in Salt Lake City died by suicide in the past year, Cox said.

Among her own daughter’s troubling questions, voiced in anger and fear: “Why is someone who hates me and hates my family and hates people of color in office?” Then: “Why are these people still standing with him?” And: “Why are they so afraid of the darkening of America?”

Cox is an advocate for marginalized women in her community; after retirement, she went on in 2014 to found Journey of Hope, a nonprofit

that has helped thousands of harmed women start new lives. She has always responded to her daughter’s anxious questions with long discussions about this country’s historical and systematic racism, ignorance, and ensuing fear.

This past fall, she and Steve put on their COVID-19 masks and took their daughter to some of the Black Lives Matter protests in Salt Lake City. “It was important for us to show support and for our daughter to see us showing support —that we’ll stand up and fight,” Cox said.

But when her daughter walked into their kitchen and uttered the words *suicide* and *depression* in the same sentence, Cox said her stomach dropped and her heart raced.

“She said: ‘I don’t have a plan, but lots of people are hurting themselves,’” Cox said. “I immediately got on the internet and googled ‘Black psychologist’ and ‘Salt Lake City, Ut.’ I want her to have someone that isn’t her parent that she doesn’t have to Blacksplain every fucking thing to.”

In their upscale neighborhood, Steve Cox has been regularly asked by his neighbors about the Corvette he drives, “Do you own that?” And, inevitably: “Do you live here?”

Shannon Cox was born in the small town of Waynesboro, Virginia. In that town, Cox said, the Confederate flag brazenly hangs on the sides of many homes and barns.

“Most white people are defensive about racial issues—including my family,” Cox said. “Black people are suffering in this country and what does my family do? They go to the beach like nothing is happening. Nothing at all.”



Shannon Cox. Steve Cox

During the summer, when Cox's daughter was posting on Instagram to express outrage over topics such as mass incarceration and the killing of George Floyd, one of Cox's sisters called the teenager and told her, Cox says, that "all of her posts were 'negative' and that the 'Heavenly Father' would want her to love her family and love one another. She told her that Jesus loved everybody and we need to love everybody and that my daughter wasn't being Christlike—that she was being 'disrespectful.' "

The high school freshman's response: "If you don't care that I'm suffering as a Black person in America, you don't need to be in my life. Because you're not trying to understand what is happening."

When her daughter was in middle school, a group of white boys walked behind her in the school hallway, calling her "the N-word," Cox said. "It was 'N,' 'N,' 'N,' 'N,' all the way down the hallway. She didn't let them see but she ducked into a room and started crying."

On Saturday, the 14-year-old is scheduled to meet with the Black therapist Cox tracked down.

Meanwhile, Cox has taken the Black Lives Matter sign from the family's front yard and put it in her office. It now leans against a wall featuring photos of the Cox family in a field of grass and white flowers.

"There were too many Trump flags, too many rallies, too many what we perceive to be dangerous people," Cox said. "We felt nervous that we could be a target, that our house could be a target—that our daughter could be a target."

When does she think she will sleep well?

"When QAnon goes away," she said. "When it's safe for the National Guard to leave the Capitol and for the fence to come down. That's when I'll breathe a sigh of relief."

The National Guard personnel deployed after the Jan. 6 insurrection attempt were expected to leave the Capitol on Friday. On March 3, though, following intelligence that showed a possible security threat from a militia group, the U.S. Capitol Police [requested a 60-day extension](#).



Lori Teresa Yearwood. Photo: Cass Studios of Salt Lake City
Lori Teresa Yearwood's work can be found at loriyearwood.com