

The indifference of bystanders

Vic Alhadeff | The Australian Jewish News | 28 February 2013

After completing her day's work as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair Department Store in the southern state of Alabama, Rosa Parks, 42, trim and bespectacled, catches her regular bus home.

It's 1955. The bus is racially segregated, the front section reserved for whites, while African Americans are relegated to the rear. Rosa pays her fare and takes a seat in the 11th row. The "white" seats fill up, but three whites remain standing.

The driver, James Blake, orders four black passengers – three men and Rosa – to relinquish their seats. The men immediately comply. Rosa, on the other hand, shifts to a window seat from where she adamantly refuses to budge. Blake calls the police and Rosa is arrested and charged.

"People say I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true," she wrote later. "I was not tired physically. The only tired I was - was tired of giving in. I knew someone had to take the first step. Our mistreatment was not right. I was tired of it."

Fast forward to 2013 - 100 years since Rosa Parks was born. Malaysian-born ABC TV presenter Jeremy Fernandez is travelling on a Sydney bus with his daughter. After objecting to a woman seated behind him that her daughter is prodding him, she unleashes a torrent of racist abuse and tells him to go back to his own country.

In a bizarre twist, the driver reacts by instructing Fernandez – not the abusive woman – to find another seat. Fernandez initially considers moving, but after a quick recalculation, refuses to budge. The driver admonishes him, adding that it's "your fault for not moving".

Tweeted Fernandez after the incident: "I'm not moving because it has turned into a racial issue. I said I'm not going anywhere. I've not done anything wrong, I have a right to sit here, I'm going to stay here. Anyone who says racism is dying is well and truly mistaken."

He also needed to "hold his nerve" for his daughter's sake, he added. "All I could think was 'just hold your nerve, my little girl is with me, she needs to see a strong father right now'."

In Melbourne last year, French tourist Fanny Desaintjores, 22, boarded a bus with friends after a beach barbecue. They began singing French songs, whereupon Fanny was racially denigrated.

A survey of 800 young Australians by Deakin University and the Foundation for Young Australians found that 70 per cent had experienced racism – women from ethnic backgrounds, Indigenous and Anglo Australians, and immigrants who had arrived in the past five years six times more likely to have been targeted.

After 12-year-old students at a Jewish school experienced an antisemitic incident during a recent excursion, the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies was invited to counsel them on methods of dealing with such issues. Asked to indicate how many of the 120 students in the grade had had personal experience with antisemitism, a forest of hands went up. 12-year-olds.

There is another deeply disturbing aspect to this interminable disease. It is the inevitable component of untoward incidents - the bystander.

Not only did the bus driver remonstrate with Fernandez, he failed completely to exert his authority and intervene with the abusive woman. Ditto the Melbourne driver.

And what of the other passengers? Where were they? Did they have nothing to say? Were they not moved to raise their voices? Or did they hurriedly avert their gaze despite the fact that inches away, a fellow passenger - who happened to be in the presence of his child - was being racially abused?

As appalling as the incident was, the damning indifference of the onlookers - the bystanders - is possibly even more so. For while there will always be bigots and racists, it is those in positions of authority to whom we turn for leadership in moments of crisis. And it is the humanity of every individual that one hopes will prevail - that one hopes will surface - when a situation cries out for a humane response.

Jeremy Fernandez's situation was such a moment. So was Fanny Desaintjores'. Yet both were on their own. The other passengers will surely have reconsidered how they might have responded. And reflected on the truism that the only factor necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.

Observed Albert Einstein: "I am not concerned at the terrible things that men do. I am concerned at those who see the terrible things and look the other way."

Vic Alhadeff is chief executive officer of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies.