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OPINION

A tale of two cities. One racist, one striving to change

Finally, a loud, uncomfortable and un-Boston-like conversation is breaking out in public about institutional racism at every level, including the media.

By [Joan Vennochi](#) Globe Columnist, Updated July 20, 2020, 3:27 p.m.





After he addressed the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce in 2016, Fletcher Wiley (right) spoke to the media alongside Mayor Marty Walsh. PAT GREENHOUSE

On the night in May 1994 when Fletcher H. “Flash” Wiley was inducted as the first Black chairman of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, the Boston Globe prepared a story to mark that turning point in city history.

Somehow, [the file photo published with the first edition story showed Wiley wearing a sleeveless basketball jersey](#). How it happened is lost to time. When the presses rolled, the business editor was at the chamber dinner. When he returned to the newsroom and saw the photo, it was replaced with one showing Wiley in a jacket and tie. The original choice was attributed to laziness and ineptitude. Today it seems more sinister; it’s hard to imagine the same photo being pulled for a white chamber official.

All these years later, Wiley said he wasn’t upset — although his wife was — and he’s still not angry about it. A graduate of the US Air Force Academy and Harvard Law School, he said he also loves basketball and saw the photo as “common currency.” As the incoming chamber chair, he wanted to be seen “not just as a buttoned-down, brown-shoe business person. I wanted to be a human being, an African-American human being. I always played true to self.”

In a way, that story illustrates the last three decades in Boston: Nods to diversity and signs of progress, undercut by institutional racism, and acceptance of it by many. Fed by two pandemics — the coronavirus and blatant racism, demonstrated in the Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd in May — there’s finally more urgency about ending the pattern.

“It’s morning in Boston,” said [Colette Phillips](#), a Black entrepreneur and president of her own communications agency, who came to the city in the 1970s. “We have a new city. It’s time for people of color to take the reins.” For too long, she said, Black people waited patiently to be handed power that benefited only a few. Today, she believes in

“constructive disruption” that advances the cause of “us, we, and our, not me, mine, and I.”

I reached out to Wiley because I’ve been thinking about what it takes to change the face and style of power. There was some progress when [Deval Patrick won election](#) as the first Black governor of Massachusetts, in 2006. Then came the victories of US [Representative](#) Ayanna Pressley, [Suffolk County District Attorney Rachael Rollins](#), and the women of color who now [dominate the Boston City Council](#). But where power is wielded behind the scenes, seeking “common currency” is still the Boston way, and not just for people of color. The traditional path to acceptance required fealty to the city’s dominant “tribes” — Yankee, Irish, Italian, and male. With the blessing of designated power brokers, others might get a seat. But it was never at the head, and the wrong words could send you to civic Siberia. That has to change.

Still, no one should forget how hard it must have been to carve out a spot in the establishment during those turbulent times when Boston students were being bused under court order in the name of racial justice. Wiley did it through the chamber; his wife, Benaree, did it as head of [The Partnership](#), a nonprofit dedicated to bringing professionals of color to Boston. Yet, all these decades later, power is not shared equally, and overt racism remains a problem. After all, Wiley’s son, Pratt, who now runs The Partnership, [recently told the Globe](#) he always brings his ID when he leaves the house, even to walk the dog.

When I asked Flash Wiley how he could be so patient, he said he’s not. “I’ve been banging on doors ever since I got to town,” said Wiley, 78. “Not a day goes by when I don’t do something that tries to advance the positions, either politically or business-wise, of African-Americans in the city of Boston.” Micho Spring, [the new chamber chair and the first Latina to hold that position](#), said Wiley has been the “conscience of the business community,” who behind closed doors has always told Boston’s white power brokers more must be done.

Finally, a loud, uncomfortable and un-Boston-like conversation is breaking out in public about institutional racism at every level, including the media. But remember, real power is never granted. Fueled by righteous anger over insult and inequity, it's taken.

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