



a podcast by the Southern Poverty Law Center

Not Okay Final Script PART ONE

Zi Booska: After hearing a lot of people's stories about being discriminated against for many different reasons, I decided I would want the Black Lives Matter flag being raised.

Layne Millington: We have some dug-in camps in this town that if you are not extremely careful about how this unfolds they're gonna to get angrier and there may be violence.

Aamir: I've been physically assaulted and was repeatedly called the 'N-word' and told that I was going to get shot.

Jamila Paksima: *Sounds Like Hate* is a new podcast series from the Southern Poverty Law Center. I'm Jamila Paksima.

Geraldine Moriba: And I'm Geraldine Moriba. This first season is about how to prevent people from becoming radicalized and how some disengage from a life of hatred.

Jamila Paksima: *Not Okay* is a two-part story. The principal and teachers at Randolph Union High School in Vermont are at the center of a battle ripping their community apart — whether to remove a mascot some say has a disturbing resemblance to a hooded Klu Klux Klansman charging on a horse — and whether to fly the Black Lives Matter flag. We were granted exclusive access to document their struggle as it was happening.

Geraldine Moriba: Some of what you hear will disturb you. But keep listening. These stories are far from simple.

Amy Cruz: In Vermont, unfortunately, if you're not white, you're black. There's no Indian. There's no Puerto Rican. There's no African-American. It's all: You're just black.

Jamila Paksima: Amy Cruz is a parent of five boys. Her fraternal twins, Aamir and Aakosh are biracial. When we met them they were in the ninth grade at Randolph Union High School.

Amy Cruz: There is a part of me that does worry about them and their safety at school.

Jamila Paksima: Between the brothers, Aamir has been the target of racial, verbal, and physical attacks.

Amy Cruz: I kind of almost breathe a big sigh of relief when they get home and I always tell them that I love them before I leave them off from school.

Jamila Paksima: This school looks like almost every other high school I've seen in America. Red brick, probably built in the '60s.

Jamila Paksima: As we arrive at the school, buses are dropping students off in the slush and snow.

Jamila Paksima: You've got parents dropping off kids before the bell rings.

[Bus breaks]

School Secretary: All the doors are locked at 7:55. Everybody comes and goes through one door.

[Sound of wet footsteps]

[Bell rings]

Elijah Hawkes: We have about 400 students here, grades seven through 12. We're about 95, 90 percent, 96 percent white.

Jamila Paksima: Principal Elijah Hawkes is concerned about a surge in hate symbols, name calling, and threats.

Jamila Paksima: I notice the flag that says "Dialogue".

Elijah Hawkes: I had that flag made just to remind us about one of our core responsibilities is to have conversations about matters big and small, and controversial and not. If everybody's voice is not heard, we won't understand what our problems are.

Students: *Ready, set, go... [Sound of students racing cars]*

Geraldine Moriba: The students we saw in this science class were so excited.

Jamila Paksima: Geraldine, who wouldn't be? They were competing with racing cars they built. The teachers were trying to make learning fun.

Students: "Wahoo"

Jamila Paksima: The students come from three neighboring towns: Randolph, Braintree, and Brookfield. Randolph Union High School has a graduation rate of 91 percent, with 62 percent attending college and 24 percent moving directly into the workforce or apprenticeships. Most students come from farming families, some have been working the land for generations. Most other families earn a living working in healthcare, social assistance, and educational services.

[Skateboard sounds]

Jamila Paksima: When I met Aamir, we learned we both had family from the same part of the world.

Aamir: Mumbai, India?

Jamila Paksima: Mumbai?

Aamir: Ya, that's exactly where my dad is from.

Jamila Paksima: Um, hmm..

Aamir: Wait, really, oh wow.

Jamila Paksima: How many different times have you had incidents involving racial issues and you in this school with other students?

Aamir: There's a lot. I don't know if I can even keep track. I don't really go to the superintendent's because I've had stuff in the past of them not understanding or hearing my voice.

Jamila Paksima: So, you got in an altercation with a student.

Aamir: Yes.

Amy Cruz: And Aamir didn't tell me until about 10:30 that night.

Jamila Paksima: Aamir's mother, Amy.

Amy Cruz: That he actually was physically ill.

Jamila Paksima: One of the students at school had picked a fight with Aamir.

Aamir: I said, 'We can talk about this with somebody else on Monday.' And he was, like, 'There's not going to be a Monday because I'm gonna shoot up the school.'

Amy Cruz: When I finally got it out of him, I was, like, 'Oh, we need to call the police.'

Female Anchor: Student in Randolph threatens to shoot up a school.

Male Reporter: A student allegedly threatened to shoot up a school in the Orange County School District.

Jamila Paksima: This scare closed four schools in the district for 24 hours while police investigated.

Police: *It was determined that the child wouldn't have had access to any firearms he could have brought here.*

Jamila Paksima: The student denied he made the threat. There were no arrests.

Zi Booska: They had to shut down our school for a day.

Jamila Paksima: Zi Booska, a senior at the time, also recalls the frightening day.

Zi Booska: During that time, almost, like, every week there was a school shooting somewhere in America. And I was, like, I just knew that I couldn't be, like, this wouldn't happen here because it could happen anywhere.

Scary reality.

Jamila Paksima: 2018 was the worst year on record for student safety in the United States: The Center for Homeland Defense and Security reports there were 116 school shooting incidents and 55 deaths across the country. The shooting threat at Randolph was not racially motivated, but for Zi, Aamir, and other students of color this only added to the stress and uncertainty.

Elijah Hawkes: So, in a school environment, in a county where there's one of the highest rates of guns per capita in the country, I hear this from law enforcement; I have to be concerned about people's access to guns when they're feeling the strong emotions that people can so often feel in adolescence.

Jamila Paksima: Vermont doesn't issue permits for carrying firearms. Any person 16 or older can legally possess one. For Principal Hawkes, this is a reality he faces every day.

Elijah Hawkes: And in the era of mass murder that we're in, with its frequency and the fact that it sometimes plays out in schools by teenagers or by young men who used to be teenagers not long ago. Dylann Roof was 21. He was a teenager not long before that. And in schools, um, so, one has to imagine the worst and one has to do what one can to ensure that it's prevented.

Aamir: I've been physically assaulted by the person at our school and was repeatedly called the 'N-word' in that I was gonna get shot. And I didn't put my hands on them at all. I just stood there just, like, stood there, just taking it.

Jamila Paksima: In his first three years at this school, Aamir has reported over 10 incidents of racism and physical threats. Students were disciplined, but Aamir and his mother say not enough is being done.

Elijah Hawkes: Yeah, I worry about the young people of color in our community.

Jamila Paksima: Is this school a safe place for students like Aamir?

Elijah Hawkes: I see Aamir smiling, happy, in the company of young people and teachers who care about him, and it's an unsafe place for Aamir.

James Baldwin's talk to teachers is ringing in my mind. Where he says, 'Look, I would tell this young boy of color that the world in which he lives was designed to destroy him.' So, it's important that we have frank conversations with our young people, again, about the historical reality in which they live.

Jamila Paksima: Do you think there are racists in your school?

Cadin: Yeah.

Jamila Paksima: Students and faculty are just as aware of the rise in expressions of hate.

Cadin: We had a thing go on.

Jamila: Cadin is an eighth grader.

Cadin: A student had written something on one of the bathroom stalls and, you know, it was a big concern. It said: 'Burn All Blacks'.

Elijah Hawkes: A hate symbol would be something that causes distress that you might call harassment. Hate speech, um, negating someone's identity based on who they are, race, religion, sexual identity. So, it's not allowed.

Dana Decker: We saw an uptick in racial slurs, racial graffiti, racial symbols in the high school.

Jamila Paksima: Dana Decker has been teaching at Randolph Union for 11 years.

Dana Decker: I just was, like, ‘What is happening?’

Jamila Paksima: In response to the rising numbers of incidents of xenophobia and racism, she and a colleague created a racial justice class in the fall of 2018.

Dana Decker: A couple of years ago, I’m, like, walking down the hall...

Jamila Paksima: She says there were students seen making the infamous “Heil Hitler” straight-arm salute.

Dana Decker: I see my students with Nazi symbols on their hands. I’m hearing an uptick in the ‘N-word’. A couple of us had to take some kind of lead on changing the climate here.

Zi Booska: I think that’s why I also hit me so hard that, like, people I knew and were friends with had these beliefs of prejudice and racism.

Jamila Paksima: Zi wanted to be a change agent too and joined the class. His family is from Nicaragua and he’s often mistaken as Mexican. One day a classmate asked him how high he could jump.

Zi Booska: I interpreted it as saying, like, ‘How high can you jump?’ Like, ‘Did you get over the wall over the Southern Border of the United States and Mexico?’ So, that’s my first memory of being called out for being different.

Geraldine Moriba: Jamila, how have other students reacted to the school’s effort to address these incidents?

Jamila Paksima: It’s caused a few students to flex their white power, like Cadin, the student who told us about the racist phrase in a bathroom stall. In the fall of eighth grade, Cadin showed up at school wearing a Confederate flag baseball cap he bought online, only to discover he had crossed a line.

Cadin: I got in trouble for it.

Rebecca Maxham: He has a hat that he takes pride in wearing.

Jamila Paksima: Rebecca Maxham is Cadin’s mother.

Rebecca Maxham: He was told that the Confederate flag was not okay to have at school because it hurts people’s feelings. He was given a new hat that he was told that he could wear. And on his Chromebook that is provided from the school he was made to remove the Confederate flag from his screen.

Jamila Paksima: The most common Confederate battle flag originated from Robert E. Lee’s army and is often used to whitewash and glorify the Confederacy.

Jamila Paksima: So, what if a student says they feel unsafe seeing the Confederate flag on your grandson’s hat?

Paul Brink: That’s something you’ll have to ask him.

Jamila Paksima: Cadin's grandfather, Paul Brink, met with Principal Hawkes over the matter.

Paul Brink: He was told if he wore it again on school property he was gonna get written up and possibly suspended.

Jamila Paksima: So, Cadin replaced his Confederate flag hat with a "Make America Great Again" Trump campaign hat – and he wears it everyday.

Paul Brink: A lot of people don't like it. I felt his First Amendment right was violated. These snowflakes ran right to the principal and said, 'Oh, I'm offended by it.'

Jamila Paksima: This term "snowflake" is tossed around today as a derogatory term to describe someone who's overly sensitive.

Paul Brink: I understand they have their First Amendment right...

Jamila Paksima: Words, like symbols, can change meaning overtime and, it turns out, in the 1860s in Missouri a "snowflake" was a term commonly used for a person who opposed the abolishment of slavery.

Paul Brink: This generation nowadays wants to erase history. And I believe it's wrong. When I was in high school, we had Confederate flags in the back of the trucks, windows, and stuff. And people were flying it on their front porch. Nobody said a thing. Now, you mentioned the Confederate flag they friggin, their head explodes, like, 'Oh, Jesus, you know, that represents slavery.'

"Hello, it's Jamila."

"Hi, Jamila, this is Eric Ward. How are you?"

Jamila Paksima: Eric Ward is the executive director of Western State Center. He's also a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center and an expert on the relationship between hate violence and inclusive societies.

Eric Ward: We don't have a real understanding of American history, and so we have sanitized those symbols and most of the public are unaware of the horrifying terror behind those symbols. We tend to judge other people's experiences based off of our own. We don't realize that people of color, gays and lesbians, Native Americans, African-Americans are carrying a different burden when it comes to American history. That burden can be framed through racial terrorism and those are often reflected through these Confederate symbols. You don't get to fly the Confederate flag, just like you don't get to fly the Nazi flag, and not claim that you are racist. It is a racist symbol.

Cadin: That's when Mr. Hawkes brought me to his office and, you know, we had a little talk about it.

Jamila Paksima: To address this incident, Principal Hawkes met with Cadin and brought in a faculty member who, he says, Cadin trusts more than anyone else in the school.

Elijah Hawkes: She said to him, 'I know in your heart you're not trying to put this person in my family down or this, but that's what it means to me.' And she's crying and she and he's listening to that and seeing those tears fall. That's an important aspect of this conversation, too. One of my mantras is personal stories, historical facts; personal stories, historical facts. That's how we're going to make our way towards truth.

Geraldine Moriba: Is this really a question of freedom of speech like Cadin's grandfather says or is it a reflection of the false idea that racism only happens if harm was intended?

Jamila Paksima: Geraldine, that's one of the many distinctions educators want families to understand, but the community's patience has been wearing thin.

Kristin Chandler: "Well, I think..."

Jamila Paksima: In February of 2020 at a monthly meeting, I spoke to the only two parents who showed up.

Kristin Chandler: There's a real divide here among very, a very conservative faction and a very liberal faction.

Jamila Paksima: Kristin Chandler is one of them. She's a former athletic coach at the high school.

Kristin Chandler: Enough of the conservative folks entrenched in their views.

Clotilde Hrystzo: I think there's just, literally, an oblivious self-righteousness.

Jamila Paksima: Clotilde Hrystzo is a parent of two students.

Clotilde Hrystzo: A lot of it is legacy families; families that have stayed here having economic decline. We used to have, you know, the level of manufacturing that was in this town 30 years ago was completely different with good-paying jobs.

Jamila Paksima: And you think with good-paying jobs people were less racist?

Clotilde Hrystzo: No, but they felt less threatened and so that it didn't come out.

Jamila Paksima: More than 34 percent of the student population at Randolph Union receives subsidized school meals and 14 percent of the community are unemployed. Tev Kelman, a history teacher, says limited life opportunities are putting real strains on families.

Tev Kelman: Issues that the vast majority of people struggle with: economic issues, issues of oppression based on identity. I think that people are increasingly seeking more extreme solutions as their problems grow more extreme. So many people are in real pain. They are much more susceptible to embrace a solution that feels like it's somehow extreme enough and that the ability to weigh whether it's actually right or productive maybe falls away.

Jamila Paksima: Amy Cruz, mother of ninth-grader Aamir, says there's no excuse or justification for the frightening incident of hate you're about to hear.

Amy Cruz: My son, Aamir, was riding his bike to his friend's house...

Jamila Paksima: Aamir was 14 at the time.

Amy Cruz: And his friend wasn't home. So, he was just kind of riding around the little cul-de-sac and was confronted with a truck that was coming, speeding towards him.

Aamir: I don't know if they saw me or not, but if I didn't move the truck was gonna to hit me.

Jamila Paksima: He made a split-second decision to ride his bike onto the lawn, not realizing he was now on the driver's property.

Aamir: I just didn't want to get hit. We have, like, a verbal argument, him saying that I was a 'spook'. I'm a 'sand N-word'.

Jamila Paksima: Aamir says the argument spilled out onto the road, but his bike was still on the lawn and he wanted it back.

Aamir: I was scared because I wasn't on his property -- I was in the middle of the road.

Amy Cruz: The guy grabbed Aamir and told him that 'if he didn't fucking leave, he was going to shoot him and the rest of his family'.

Aamir: 'Get off my property or I'm gonna to shoot you.' He was on me, not, like, on top of me, but, like, pushing me and grabbing me like that. And his wife, like, stood between us and, like, the little girl was, like, 'Stop it; stop it, daddy'. His wife was, like, 'Go home Aamir; just run, run Aamir'.

Jamila Paksima: When Amy returned with her son, the police had arrived and Aamir says the driver of the truck changed his story. He claimed Aamir was trespassing. Police threatened to charge the driver and the teen both with disorderly conduct. The driver did not respond to our request for an interview.

Ultimately, no charges were pressed and, instead, no trespass orders were issued: One to the driver and the other to Aamir. It didn't end there.

Amy Cruz: It trickled over into school because the guy's son witnessed the entire thing and then went to school the next day and called Aamir a 'sand N-word'.

Aamir: He was saying, like, racist stuff towards me just because of the way I looked and putting his hands on me because of the way I looked.

Jamila Paksima: The school says they took appropriate action to discipline the student. Throughout the ordeal, Aamir kept asking his mom, 'Why does it have to be this way?'

Amy Cruz: Honestly, I don't think there's any educating people like that because they've already determined and already got that hatred into their mind that they're not going to change. I mean, this is a grown man in his 30s.

Jamila Paksima: One big question is: Can the cycle of racism be broken through education and dialogue in schools when students go back to homes where parents feed them racist beliefs?

Cory Collins: I think what we first have to get past is this idea that only horrible people say racist things and good people are never racist...

Jamila Paksima: Cory Collins is a senior writer with Teaching Tolerance, a division of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Cory Collins: If you are raised as a white person in a white supremacist society or in a society where white supremacy is baked into one of the systems, you are going to enact racism in your speech and in your actions throughout your life.

Jamila Paksima: He says often white people claim they can't say anything without being labeled a racist.

Cory Collins: You're going to perpetuate racism at certain points and that doesn't need to be labeled as good or bad. It is simply harmful and needs to be interrupted. Students have First Amendment rights. Students have the right to explore ideas and to explore where their identity fits in the world. But if someone is showing you how what you're doing is harmful that is something that you should interrogate. They have that right as well, to speak out against what you're saying and to speak against harm.

Jamila Paksima: Collins says it's important to teach students to have an ability to think critically about the impact of their ideas and the current meaning of the words or phrases they use.

Cory Collins: The way that they move and speak through the world affects other people. That means calling them in and making sure that they have the faculties to back up what they're saying.

Jamila Paksima: None of this comes out of a vacuum, says Collins.

Ng'oma Lungu: I'm one of the only black people in my school slash town.

Jamila Paksima: Ng'oma Lungu is 18 years old.

Ng'oma Lungu: I've been in Randolph since third grade.

Jamila Paksima: Growing up, his mother would speak to him about being black in America.

Ng'oma Lungu: Mostly, my mom would tell me things just, like, most people are racists. Just, like, don't get into trouble, don't get into a fight just 'cause people already assume that you're gonna be, like, an aggressive human being. Some people might just look at me and think I'm black and assume that I'm gonna do something violent.

Jamila Paksima: What was one of the first racist symbols that you saw in this school?

Ng'oma Lungu: The mascot is probably the first.

Jamila Paksima: This 15-foot school mascot on the wall of the gymnasium is called the "Galloping Ghost." It's on every clock in every classroom. It looks like a human figure covered by a white sheet, riding a white horse. And generations who've attended Randolph Union have called themselves "the Ghost Nation". For many students and visiting athletes, the image of the Galloping Ghost is all too close to the Ku Klux Klan.

Ng'oma Lungu: It just shows that people kind of turn a blind eye to racism.

Elijah Hawkes: I direct messaged her...

Jamila Paksima: Back with Principal Hawkes, he's planning for students in every grade to participate in special advisory sessions.

Elijah Hawkes: I'm working with these young people and I'm worried about them.

Jamila Paksima: It's a chance to look at symbols from the past and teach their modern day associations to extremist groups.

Elijah Hawkes: And so I know that I'm working with a vulnerable population. I know that recruitment can start in the teenage years. I know that young people at the age of 14 or 15 are capable of wielding adult tools to complete adult tasks.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: He had concerns about...

Jamila Paksima: Hawkes contacted Cynthia Miller-Idriss.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: Not just among students, but among in, in the broader community.

Jamila Paksima: He wanted to know whether some of his students were in danger of radicalization.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: We, in the U.S., are at the very beginning of understanding what combinations of factors lead to violent outcomes on the extremist fringe.

Jamila Paksima: Miller-Idriss is the author of *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*. She's a professor at American University and the director of its Polarization and Extremism Innovation Lab.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: I don't think you really know if someone's being radicalized until signs of things, like, the swastika showing up at a school. It's a sign of exposure. It's a sign of desensitization. It's a sign that young people are trying to get a rise out of adults by doing this...

Jamila Paksima: Many educators and parents worry that racism and non-violent expressions of hate may be gateways to extremism and violence.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss: We know that there are vulnerabilities that lead people to be more susceptible to extremist rhetoric and recruiting. If you have and hold racist beliefs, um, it makes it easier to adapt those extremist exclusionary beliefs. Identity and belonging is one of the two major emotional drivers that lead people into far-right pathways...

Jamila Paksima: Miller-Idriss says one of the ways to prevent extremist behavior is to engage young people with purpose.

Elijah Hawkes: Radicalization happens along a continuum and there are steps that people take towards the most extreme viewpoints and actions.

Jamila Paksima: In the initial sessions, some students were receptive. Others couldn't get past the rhetoric and online messaging they've accepted as true.

Elijah Hawkes: So, when we approach a conversation with a young person about whether what you said is a joke, whether it's harmful or whether it's both, you know, we're treating the problem and also preventing something perhaps more extreme from developing.

Geraldine Moriba: Jamila, is this what the advisory sessions are designed to counteract?

Jamila Paksima: Yes. Principal Hawkes is using dialogue and the advice from Cynthia Miller-Idriss to engage students like Cadin to become more aware of each other's racial experiences.

Jamila Paksima: So, in the case of the student Cadin, is he someone you're working with?

Elijah Hawkes: He was in my office as a seventh grader and...

Jamila Paksima: Principal Hawkes says Cadin took notice of an old relic on his office wall.

Elijah Hawkes: A bell system or a communication system, some kind of gears and there's a box. So, I put a sticky note on the metal panel with his name and one of the facility's directors to open it up and have a look. So, honoring his interests, recognizing his needs is a way to keep him part of the school. So, engaging him in dialogue and meaningful work and projects.

Jamila Paksima: Is it working?

Elijah Hawkes: Yeah, it's working. He hasn't shut down.

Jamila Paksima: But do you have a Post-it in your office with Aamir's name to remind you that you need to do something with him?

Elijah Hawkes: I have a Post-it in my office that is, uh, eight or 10 pieces of black paper that have been-torn up, but I stuck a tack in 'em. It's a swastika from school, someone had made it in school. Doesn't look exactly like a swastika, only I know what that is, that reminds me of the racism in my world. We have a lot of work to do to create those spaces where Aamir feels cared for and supported in his skin.

Jamila Paksima: But is Aamir getting any special attention, specifically because of all he's experienced at the school? Who's working on his self identity?

Elijah Hawkes: Well, we, as you know, we have a class that is focused on race and racism and identity and very intentionally working to create a space in the school where young people can be supported, feel supported, and feel comfortable talking about who they are.

Jamila Paksima: He's not in that class.

Elijah Hawkes: He's not in that class.

Jamila Paksima: In 2018, a neighboring high school in Montpelier, Vermont was the first in the country to fly the Black Lives Matter flag as a sign of their own commitment to inclusivity.

Zi Booska: After hearing a lot of people stories about, like, being discriminated against for many different reasons, I decided I would want Black Lives Matter being raised.

Jamila Paksima: Zi Booska, a former student, wanted their school to be the second one to do this, so he approached the principal.

Elijah Hawkes: One student said, 'Hey, Mr. Hawkes, can we raise the Black Lives Matter flag here at our school?'

Zi Booska: The Black Lives Matter flag is means to me a kind of symbolization of safety for children and schools where there's not a high minority rate. Kinda like "Minority Lives Matter".

Jamila Paksima: Principal Hawkes said he was potentially supportive of those efforts.

Elijah Hawkes: But I want you to have more dialogue and I'd like to hear more about why.

Jamila Paksima: After another national story of a police killing of a black person, frustrations grew and some students ran out of patience.

Ng'oma Lungu: My friend had bought a Black Lives Matter flag at the time.

Jamila Paksima: It was nine p.m.

Ng'oma Lungu: We're all hanging out that night.

Jamila Paksima: And Ng'oma and his friends headed to their school.

Ng'oma Lungu: We just decided to go put it up at the school.

Elijah Hawkes: One of my colleagues came into my office and said, 'So, I see you're raising the Black Lives Matter Flag?'

Jamila Paksima: The next morning, Principal Hawkes discovered the change.

Elijah Hawkes: And I said, 'Well, why are you asking me about this today?' And he pointed out the window and said, 'Look'.

Ng'oma Lungu: I don't think we could get it onto the flagpoles, but we did hang it almost like a banner.

Elijah Hawkes: I, uh, wrestled with it for a while privately in my heart and my soul in my office, and I went out and I took it down. If it's to happen at our school to be only done by a couple of people that's not how this is going to happen here.

Jamila Paksima: Why did you want to fly a Black Lives Matter flag on the school and why did you do it without permission?

Ng'oma Lungu: I guess, I kind of just guess the main intention was to make people uncomfortable and provoke something, I guess. Kind of like poking the bear.

Jamila Paksima: Working with students and teachers in the racial justice class, Principal Hawkes hoped that together they could lead a campaign to raise support for the flag with the school and the community.

Zi Booska: He was very supportive in our efforts...

Jamila Paksima: Here is Zi.

Zi Booska: I think at the end of the day he was for the Black Lives Matter flag and everything we're doing. But he, just as a principal, had to play the devil's advocate because he was the one receiving calls from parents complaining about it. And, like, he was the one hearing from students saying they won't come back to school.

Jamila Paksima: So, they spent a full semester organizing with other classmates. To make their case, they hosted many discussions on white privilege and held lunches to explain the challenges and experiences for students of color.

Zi Booska: I was more surprised about the, like, actual positive feedback we got from people that were saying this should have happened a long time ago and that they're so glad that somebody actually stepped up for this.

It was surprising to see, like, how, like, people were uneducated about the Black Lives Matters flag and race in general.

Paul Brink: When I see that flag, and I read it, it tells me my life don't matter because I am not black and that flag should read, "all lives matter".

Jamila Paksima: That's Cadin's grandfather. He marched into Principal Hawkes's office to challenge him on even considering raising the Black Lives Matter flag.

Paul Brink: I agree. All lives matter. And I agree, you know, black people are being, you know; they have a hard time nowadays, and I have a grandson who's half black. And I hope he doesn't have to go through all this crap and I'm going to teach him, 'You got something to say? You believe in it. Express your opinion.'

Jamila Paksima: Paul Brink also says Cadin is not a racist for wearing a Confederate hat.

Paul Brink: As long as that Black Lives Matter flag is flying, he has a right to wear his Confederate flag hat because the school's expressing their First Amendment right; he should have a right to express his First Amendment right. And they said, 'No, he cannot. He's on school property.'

Eric Ward: Wearing symbols that terrorize other children is not only immoral, but it is also not protected speech.

Jamila Paksima: Eric Ward doesn't buy the free speech argument.

Eric Ward: You know, I would say to parents, 'Whoa, take a step back. Are you literally comparing, right, the history of the Confederate flag to the history of Black Lives Matter's on a flag? Do you really think that's a fair comparison? Are you really standing up and defending 500 years of slavery and racial terrorism that included lynchings and beatings?'

Jamila Paksima: Ward says adults need to listen to students who come up with their own solutions.

Eric Ward: Black Lives Matters is not a controversial statement. It just simply isn't. And if students feel that it is the best way to signal that racism isn't tolerated here, if it's the best way for schools to signal that racism and other forms of bigotry will not be tolerated in here, and if there are adults who disagree that that's the best way, really, like, put up or shut up. If you have a better solution that makes these kids feel safe, that doesn't expose your children to racial taunting and racial abuse, it is time for you to step forward with those solutions. And if you don't have those solutions, don't spend your time attacking the solutions that have been put forward by children. What does that say about you?

Grace: I understand that, but just my opinion is...

Jamila Paksima: One student, Grace, remembers seeing students protesting the Black Lives Matter flag by wearing the "It's Okay To Be White" T-shirt in school.

Grace: I wasn't one of those people because I just, I wouldn't do it, but I think that that's their opinion and they're allowed to wear that.

Jamila Paksima: Teacher Kelman believes the student campaign to try to raise the Black Lives Matter flag further exacerbated the divisions at the school.

Tev Kelman: Seeing kids wearing clothing with the slogan, 'It's Okay To Be White'; um, which I think, to a lot of them, did not feel like a racist statement. I know after doing some research into that that it was something that was quite purposefully circulated by white nationalist groups with the express purpose of giving talking points to sort of get this white supremacist ideology into the mainstream.

Grace: We can still have the Black Lives Matter, but I think we should have an "All Lives Matter" flag.

Zi Booska: If we raise a flag to say "All Lives Matter," we're putting out a statement that we hope that all people agree with. By putting it in the same as Black Lives Matter or in "Minorities Lives Matter," that is putting out a statement that not everybody believes in. And it starts a conversation for people who are not in agreement with it.

Jamila Paksima: Trying to protect their fellow classmates, Zi and the organizing students also set up community forums.

Dana Decker: They said some really harsh things.

Jamila Paksima: Teacher Decker says there were frustrations on both sides.

Dana Decker: One family stated, 'You shoved the gay stuff down our throat and now you're shoving this down our throat.' And, like, 'I see all of your black power all over the walls, but where is, you know, white power?'

Zi Booska: I mean, it's hard, um, because it's, like, you, the grownups in the community, should be the people we look up to and the people that we should aspire to be. But they're more like acting childish in the way at our first community forum when it came to having a civil discussion about the topic Black Lives Matter and about the topic of racial diversity in our community.

Jamila Paksima: The superintendent of the school district, Layne Millington, attended those community forums.

Layne Millington: And after two or three rounds of those open forums and those conversations had one group way over here more extreme than they were when the conversation started. And then the other group way over here and one more dug in than they were when the conversation started. And it was obvious and clear that there was no education, there was no bringing folks together at that point in time.

Jamila Paksima: There were vocal parents who questioned whether student experiences with racism were fabricated.

Geraldine Moriba: Jamila, is that true? Were there any indications the racist graffiti or acts of hate were made up?

Elijah Hawkes: There was some doubt that the stories that our kids of color were telling were true.

Jamila Paksima: That's what Principal Hawkes had to set straight.

Elijah Hawkes: If there's a harassment complaint, I hear about it. If there's something that needs to be removed, I hear about it. I felt compelled to write a letter to the paper and say, 'I'm telling you, it's the truth.'

Jamila Paksima: In his letter, Principal Hawkes describes over 10 incidents of hateful acts which occurred that school year. The principal wrote: *"There is love and friendship... and there is racism as true as Vermont's green mountains."*

Eric Ward: When you are telling children, um, that they are not experiencing something, which they are evidently experiencing, that's simply a form of abuse.

Jamila Paksima: Eric Ward says we can do better.

Eric Ward: This is an opportunity for them to listen to their neighbors. Good people listen to their neighbors.

Jamila Paksima: Principal Hawkes and the student leaders of the Black Lives Matter flag initiative were faced with a backlash at their attempts to address inequity. Some parents speculated it was a calculated agenda. One parent resorted to intimidation.

Zi Booska: He put his arm around me. I am not close to this person whatsoever and started saying things to me.

'Don't continue your work you're doing. Don't touch the mascot and, like, stop at the Black Lives Matter flag.' And then once he said it he walked away.

Jamila Paksima: In our next episode of *Not Okay*, tensions escalate.

Layne Millington: I potentially have a fire here that can devolve into violence.

Jamila Paksima: Randolph Union grapples with changing their beloved, longstanding mascot: a "galloping ghost" resembling a KKK knight.

Layne Millington: Do I really want to be throwing more rocket fuel on it at this point in time?

Jamila Paksima: Will the racial justice students and Zi raise the Black Lives Matter flag at their high school? And also...

Black Lives Matter March, June, 13, 2006: *What do we want?*

Justice!

When do we want it?

Now!

Not one more life!

Not one more life!

Jamila Paksima: What will happen when the demands to confront systemic racism move from the high school to the streets of Randolph?

Black Lives Matter March, June, 13, 2006: *Not one more life!*

Not one more life!

Geraldine Moriba: These are complicated stories about people who hold onto false histories and terroristic ideologies and draw boundaries that are skin deep.

Jamila Paksima: If you or anyone you know has experienced a hate incident or crime, contact the appropriate local authority or elected official. You can also document what happened at splcenter.org/repothate.

Jamila Paksima: This is *Sounds Like Hate*, an independent documentary podcast series brought to you by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Additional funding provided by the Ring Foundation. I'm Jamila Paksima.

Geraldine Moriba: And I'm Geraldine Moriba. Please subscribe to find out when new episodes are released. And remember to rate and review. Thanks for listening.