



JOEY KENNEDY: Groups deserve apology from Mary Moore for her use of 'retarded'

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Joey Kennedy -- The Birmingham News

By



State Rep. Mary Moore, D-Birmingham, offended many people with her outburst.

Just before last Tuesday's Birmingham Board of Education meeting got started, state Rep. Mary Moore, D-Birmingham, crudely called News staff writer Marie Leech "retarded." Then Moore, ever determined to prove herself completely, totally, socially incapable, loudly repeated the insult, and then asked folks in the audience to pray away the demons that Moore said possess Leech.

Leech, consummate professional she is, didn't respond to Moore. But Moore's casual and careless use of the word "retarded," and then linking the term to demonic possession, has upset more than a few people.

The Arc of Alabama, a volunteer-based membership organization made up of individuals with intellectual, developmental and other disabilities as well as their families and friends, and other interested people, sent a letter to Moore Friday demanding a public apology.

People First, another advocacy organization for intellectually challenged individuals, also demanded an apology from Moore.

Like the N-word

Hoover's Trisha Powell Crain, founder of Alabama School Connection and a volunteer in Birmingham city schools for years, was stunned at Moore's lack of sensitivity.

"I'm hypersensitive to the use of that word, because I work with a lot of people who have disabilities," Crain said. "It's very similar to the N-word."

Crain was at that Birmingham school board meeting, but was across the room talking to another reporter when Moore blurted the insults. Leech and other observers immediately Tweeted the incident, and Crain learned about it from those tweets.

"Literally, my jaw dropped," Crain said. "I clasped my hand over my mouth, which is my gesture for 'I cannot believe this.' It was not just the fact that she used the word, but it was the manner in which she used it: in a derogatory, pejorative manner. It was meant to say Marie was bad. I hear people use (retarded) to make fun, and that hurts. But when it's hurled at somebody as an insult, that's beyond comprehension to me."

Murray Townsend, president of the Arc of Alabama, was as stunned when he heard what happened.

"I think it's pretty awful, that in this day and age, an elected official in Alabama would use that kind of language, and suggest that people with intellectual disabilities are possessed by demons," Townsend said. "This is a real shock to me that anyone who would be a state official would even think of saying something like this.

"We've worked hard with organizations like People First to remove this language from the state," Townsend added.

And, in fact, People First language was approved a few years ago by the very Legislature in which Moore serves.

"She should make a public apology to that person (Leech), everybody who heard her and the people she offended all around the United States," says Darren Morris, president of People First. "That offends so many people."

Morris said just as the N-word is a terrible insult to African-Americans today, so is "retarded" to those intellectually challenged or "crippled" to those physically challenged.

"The N-Word was used a long time ago, but today you don't hear it as much," Morris said. "It's the same for the R-Word and the C-word."

A refresher course

Jeff Ridgeway, co-coordinator with People First, said lawmakers may need a refresher course in the People First language they adopted.

"It sounds like we need to go down to the Legislature and give them a little training," Ridgeway said.

"To take the word 'retarded' and tie it to being possessed by demons, that's very offensive," said Tom Holmes, executive director of The Arc of Alabama. "It also reflects a lack of understanding of people with disabilities in general."

Moore is well-known for feigning offense over any number of issues, race first among them. It's time now for her to take responsibility for being the offender. Moore's public apology is overdue.

Joey Kennedy, a Pulitzer Prize winner, is an editorial writer, blogger and editor of the Sunday Viewpoints section for The News. E-mail: jkennedy@bhamnews.com.

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