Racism in our backyard

Maine can be quiet. Humble. Secluded. Lost in the upper northern woods of New England, the large state can feel separated from the rest of the nation. Problems and politics are diluted by the rocky shores of Acadia, the dense enclosures of forests and the strong sense of community. This is “Vacationland” after all.

So when a small, rural Maine community is thrust under the bright light of the national media spotlight, it tends to burn.

Jackman, Maine is one of those small communities. Recently featured on media outlets including The Washington Post, CNN and USA Today, the story of a racist town governor being fired has grabbed headlines and sparked controversy.

When there is a lack of representation, first-person perspectives and life experiences, there is a lack of understanding and acceptance. In their place is fear — fear of intrusion, expulsion and loss of control. Those of different races and identities are vilified as monsters seeking to enter a community, destroy its morals, take away jobs and eliminate the rights of white individuals.

These are the beliefs held by Jackman’s previous town manager, Tom Kawczynski, and his white supremacist group called New Albion. They promote the ideas of white culture and heritage as something to be preserved, because they feel white people are under attack. When a new group of people gains a voice and starts pushing back for the rights and liberties they deserve, others believe that the only way they can gain those rights is to take them from white people. However, this is not the case.

In his parting speech, Kawczynski claimed to persist in his fight for white civil rights. What he meant to say was that he will persist in his fight to keep different ethnicities and races out of his rural towns, because he feels they pose a threat to his control and comfort. This is not to preserve a culture, or to preserve an idea of white heritage, but an effort to exclude groups of people based on their ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Kawczynski also followed the same routinely used scapegoat of those who start to feel the burn caused by the aftermath of their hateful ideas. He cited “fake news” in his parting words, stating that only one side of the story was told. This was only an attempt to create an excuse for those who agree with his radical ideas to have an argument against the plain fact that he is racist.
Individuals like Kawczynski deserve to be thrust into the national spotlight. When you promote radical ideas in the public sphere, and choose to promote hatred and bigotry disguised as “love for white people,” you deserve to have the eyes of the nation look down on you and tell you that you are wrong. We can no longer choose to ignore hateful words and violent ideas. It is time our nation understood that we cannot reject, discriminate or exclude people because we have a radical notion that they are somehow different.

There is racism in our backyard. As Mainers, it may be easy to overlook and ignore the fact that officials like these exist in many of our hometowns. But they are there, and they are festering in the lack of diversity, building support on bases of fear and loathing. If we want to see progress on the national and global scale, we need to start small, by removing radical racists like Kawczynski from office. Jackman, Maine made the correct choice.