

JUNTOS: Understanding an often invisible issue

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Access denied and access granted are truths brought to the surface during a recent workshop that delves into the deceptively subtle side of racism and privilege.

“I’ve had people of color say to me, ‘When I leave my house at the beginning of the day, I don’t get to be myself until I return home at the end of the day,’” said facilitator Johanna Eager during her workshop, “Race, Racism, & Privilege: Entering the Dialogue Without Blame, Shame or Guilt. “I just had no awareness that not everyone was experiencing the world the same way as I was – in particular, people of color.”

Eager is a social justice consultant from the Office of Equity and Integration in Minnesota and she is Caucasian.

Her six-hour workshop was sponsored by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Board and hosted by JUNTOS, (Joining & Uniting Now, Teens Overcome Separation). The program has held meetings since April to identify and overcome issues that keep youth from Española and Los Alamos separate.

“I worked with youth from both communities and I fell in love with the youth of both,” said JUNTOS-concept creator Lori Heimdahl-Gibson. “But I saw a great divide and I know there is a way to bring youth together. It’s taken us a long time to get ourselves into this separation and it’s going to take some time to erase it. We won’t be impatient.”

Reading a quote from “A Course in Miracles,” Heimdahl-Gibson said, “‘The most sacred place on Earth is where an ancient hatred becomes a present love.’ That seems to resonate with the JUNTOS mission. Making changes is not easy, raising consciousness is not easy.”

During her Sept. 30 workshop at the White Rock Baptist Church, Eager told participants she is part of the “dominant culture” and hadn’t had to think about race. She spoke to the importance of critical thinking in raising one’s consciousness.

Through material attributed to Heather Hartman Consulting, Eager explained that critical thinking involves rigorous self-reflection. “How do I actually know what I think is true?” she asked. “Or have I just thought this for so long that I am mistaking it for fact?”

Critical thinking involves examining issues from multiple, non-dominant perspectives and sources of information, she said, including being aware of who is not at the table, whose perspective is not being represented and how one would think or understand an issue if looked at from other people’s perspectives.

“Critical thinking always considers issues of power and privilege at the smallest to the most significant levels and understands that power is always a part of the discussion,” Eager said. “Ask yourself who benefits from this, who is not served and who is disadvantaged.”

A participant shared a generational wound. His told the group his mother left school after 10th grade because she was treated badly. The final straw was getting in trouble because she translated for another student.

“Her second hurt was (years later) when she was called to the school and found her oldest son (me), a first-grader, in his classroom with a piece of tape over his mouth for the same reason,” he said. “My mother’s third hurt was a couple of years later when she walked into the bathroom and found that same son (me) using a towelette with bleach trying to rub off the skin of his arms.”

He spoke of a “Medicine Wheel,” which is divided into four parts labeled red, white, black and yellow. “It acknowledges the races and in the absence of any one, we are diminished as a human race,” he said.

Another participant spoke of fasting Ramadan children forced to sit in a cafeteria while other children ate.

The definition of racism – as adapted from Beverly Tatum’s “Defining Racism: Can We Talk?” – states, “The cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of white people and the assumed inferiority of people of color, plus, a system of advantage based on race that benefits white people and disadvantages people of color.”

The roots of racism were examined during Eager’s talk using the Cycle of Socialization exercise adapted by Natalie J. Thoreson and T. Aaron Hans.

At the cycle’s core are ignorance, confusion, insecurity and fear, Eager said.

People are born into the world without stereotypes, prejudices or biases, forming the lens of identity. Children are taught by those closest to them, including family and teachers — the shapers of expectations, norms and values.

The cycle’s middle stage is the lens of socialization and teaching. Children are bombarded with messages from institutions and culture on both a conscious and unconscious level. These messages are enforced through systemic rewards and punishments, privilege granting and persecution, discrimination and empowerment.

In the cycle’s final stage, the lens of experience, results in dissonance, silence, anger, dehumanization, collusion, guilt, self-hatred, violence and internalization of patterns of power. Eager explained it’s at this stage people can decide to do nothing and maintain the status quo, or make a change.

Eager hopes her workshop sparks ongoing dialog around the issues of race, racism and privilege and helps people develop a “critical lens” to inequality.

Since 1993, Eager has been involved as a professional educator with equity issues in K-12 education. She serves as a consultant to school districts and presents at professional association meetings on topics related to educational equity.

For information or to schedule a workshop, contact Eager at johanna.eager@isd623.org or (612) 987-3213.