

High school students take step towards fighting racism

Forum gave youths tools to fight racism

By Mary Coletta
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

Many Oakville high school students believe that anyone who can't see the ugly spectre of racism in our community today is wearing "blindfolders".

But that doesn't mean they're prepared to sit back and accept the status quo.

On March 21st, a Youth Leadership Training Program in Race Relations, sponsored by the Halton Multicultural Council (HMC) and Healthy Community Funders of Halton was held, with 29 high school students taking part. The program was held at the Halton Region Administration building in Oakville.

More than one quarter of the students came from Oakville-Trafalgar High School (OTHS), the site of a recent skirmish between Sikh and Caucasian students.

Most of them admitted their attendance at the program was at least partially due to the incident at their school.

"It was scary", said OTHS student Andrea Hamilton. "I wish I had done something right after it happened."

Although some of the students are unsure whether the events that took place on Feb. 15th were racially motivated, most do feel that race was a factor. All wanted to prevent a similar recurrence.

The attack on two Sikh students at OTHS resulted in one victim being treated in hospital for a fractured skull, while the other received minor injuries. Since then, six youths, all 15 or 16 years of age have been charged with assault.

Students agreed that the atmosphere at the school has changed. Now they are "more careful of what they say around people, at the risk of offending someone," said Hamilton.

Yet the OTHS students attended the program precisely because of that change, and the need for even greater awareness and sensitivity.

"We're here to start up our own multicultural council at the school because we don't want what happened to happen again", said Hamilton.

Katie Garton and Tara Dehmer, OAC students at Queen Elizabeth Park High School (QEP), don't see racism as a major problem at their school because of its multicultural mix of population. The school has an existing multicultural organization called SPEC-TRUM, which led an anti-racism rally at the school on the same day as the forum.

The QEP students were painting themselves various shades of the rainbow to illustrate that colour doesn't matter. Yet, Garton and Dehmer admit, that as white students, they may not be as attuned to the more subtle mani-

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festations of racism.

"It might be different for ethnic minorities", Garton conceded. Although they recognize the presence of "racist kids at QEP too", they "don't know them and don't associate with them."

Garton and Dehmer attended the program because they "thought it would be interesting."

Whatever the students' various reasons for participating, Frances Cordero de Bolanós, Managing Director of the HMC, brought this diverse group together for a singular purpose.

The United Nations declared March 21st the "International Day for the Elimination of Racial

Discrimination" in 1966, to commemorate the deaths of 69 peaceful black protesters in Sharpeville, at the hands of South African police on March 21, 1960.

Cordero de Bolanós herself, is no stranger to racism.

At the age of 13, she was forced to flee her native El Salvador along with her parents and two siblings. Her parents, both teachers, had received death threats from the military regime in their war-torn village of Ciudad Barrios, home of the martyred Archbishop Romero, who is today revered as a national hero.

"In those days you took the threats very seriously", she said. "My cousin was assassinated by the death squads."

Following their arrival in Costa Rica, the family applied for refugee status in Canada, but were turned down. Cordero de Bolanós attributes the rejection to her brother having Down's Syndrome.

"Because I was a refugee from El Salvador, and spoke with a slightly different accent, even in Costa Rica, I experienced racism", she says. Five years later, she came to Canada alone as a government-sponsored refugee.

Her family remains in Costa Rica.

As a new immigrant to Canada, an 18-year-old woman who spoke no English, Cordero de Bolanós felt the bitter sting of racism again in her newly-adopted home.

"There was some discrimination because of my background, but also just because I was female", she recalled. Determined to rise above it, she immediately set out to become proficient in English and complete her education. She became involved in volunteer activities while working and going to school as a way of "paying something back to Canada."

Today, the soft-spoken, diminutive mother of three small children, flashes a brilliant smile as she contemplates the past while planning for the future.

"My vision is to expand and reach out to even younger grades than these high school students", she said.

She feels "lucky" that the organization has a highly educated pool of volunteers, who go out into the community to promote better racial relations.

2000- In cooperation with Healthy Community Funders of Halton the Halton Multicultural Council sponsored a Youth Leadership Training Program in Race Relations. The training was attended by

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Halton
Multicultural Council