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Alliance For Interracial Dignity

Group hosts "Living in 63119" community conversation on race

Jim Merkel
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The African-American man could feel it when he went into a Webster Groves store to shop with his daughters.

"We were looking around and the salesperson, the owner, whoever she was, she did not let her eyes off me," the man said. "She was watching us like a hawk. Not until a prominent Webster resident came into the store and gave me a hug did she relax."

The man telling the story is Emerson Smith, president of the Webster Groves School District Board of Education. He related the tale of how even the most successful African Americans can be racially profiled during a panel discussion on Jan. 29 at the First Congregational Church.

About 60 people listened as Smith and three other prominent local African Americans talked about how race relations in the 63119 ZIP code have changed – and how they have stayed the same. The others speaking at the event sponsored by the Alliance for Interracial Dignity included John E. Thomas, 47, an assistant principal at Webster Groves High School; Rock Hill Mayor Edward Mahan, and Willa Washington, 73, a local community leader and former member of the Webster Groves Planning Commission.

Thomas spoke of growing up with a father who was born in white Arkansas.

"He didn't care much for white people," Thomas said.

However, it's a different time, he added.

"The things that were done to him, the things that were done to people that look like me don't happen. There are still things that do happen, but not to the extent of outright racism," he said.

When asked how he would like people to perceive him, Thomas said: "I wish people would understand we're not all what you see on TV. We have families, we are professionals."

Mahan echoed that sentiment.

"People will look at you and think that you only had a mother. Did you have the same father as your other five siblings?" he said. "To me, I don't know anything about that. There's six of us. We all had the same mom. We all had the same dad."

It's important to realize that all white people are not prejudiced, said Mahan, who is a human resources manager at Mercy Hospital in St. Louis.

"People are people for how we want to be treated and talk to people like you want to be talked to," he said.

As with the others, Mahan said it's important for African Americans to be involved in their communities.

"You want to make a difference," he said. "To sit at home and say, 'My vote doesn't count' is not true."

Bridging the gap isn't easy, Smith acknowledged.

"You're not comfortable with me. I'm not comfortable with you. It takes that courageous step. That's why we're all here now – to open up that conversation, to understand what makes me tick, what makes you tick and how can we tick together," Smith said.

As for how people of both races might socialize, Washington said everyone should be thoughtful of those who are around them.

Smith said he was born in the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in the city and then moved to the Central West End.

"We had a very mixed neighborhood. We did not know at that period of time that we were poor," said Smith, who is now vice president of operations of Anheuser Busch Credit Union.

Washington said she enjoyed attending the segregated Douglass High School and then finishing up at Webster Groves High School after Douglass closed. All of her family went to Douglass and graduated.

The panelists didn't see any reason to mix the local black and white churches that exist today.

"You have generations who have attended those churches," Washington said. "If it's a church that you're attending, and you have no problem attending, why would you change?"

Washington wouldn't speak about how her opportunities might have been different, if she were white.

"The Lord has a plan for each of us," she said.

The evening ended with audience members breaking into small groups and discussing what they'd heard. Afterward, one woman remarked that it's important for people to take time to build relationships with others they don't know.

Zack Eswine said his group wanted to keep pursuing relationships in a creative way.

The next event hosted by the Alliance for Interracial Dignity will be on Thursday, Feb. 19, 7 p.m., at the Hudson Elementary School gymnasium, 9825 Hudson Ave. in Rock Hill. Guest speaker Rev. Clinton Stancil will speak on "Promoting Change In Your Community and What's Happening in the St. Louis Area."

For more information about the Alliance for Interracial Dignity, call 918-4008 or visit www.talk-heal-change.org.