

Front Doors & Trap Doors

Hate Crimes and Institutional Racism Student workshops about the extremes of racism. Teacher forums about diversity-responsive curricula and diversity programs.

Held Saturday, December 4, 1999
10:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Location: Queen of Peace HS, Burbank, IL

The second C.O.R. event of the year was held at Queen of Peace High School on Saturday, December 4, 1999. In order to continue the year of Unlocking Doors C.O.R. focused on providing the keys of information to unlock the front doors of hate crimes and the trap doors of institutional racism.

The day began with students telling stories of their reactions to recent hate crimes. Students felt shocked, disappointed and frustrated when they heard about the dragging death of James Byrd, Jr., the beating and crucifixion of Matthew Shepard, the beating of Lenard Clark, and the killing spree of Benjamin Smith in Chicago and Indiana.

After hearing these stories, the 140 participants from 20 schools in the Archdiocese of Chicago were introduced to the facilitators for the day: Georgianna Torres-Reyes, Fleurette King, and Jim O'Keefe, all of whom work on issues of diversity at DePaul University.



STUDENT COMMENTS

Opening Stories

Hector

When I first heard about the man that viciously attacked the Jewish day care center, I felt NOTHING. I felt nothing, just like the rest of society. These repetitive acts of hate continue to numb society's emotions until we no longer care about anyone or anything.

Yesenia

When I first heard about James Byrd being dragged to death by members of a white supremacist group, I felt FRUSTRATED. I felt frustrated because I thought the Civil War ended over 100 years ago! How could a tragedy of this sort happen in this day and time? Every time I hear of another hate crime, I feel as though another door has been slammed in the progression towards racial unity.

Krystal

When I heard that Saezly Richardson was shot, I was SHOCKED. Saezly Richardson was shot by two white boys as part of an initiation into an all-white gang. I was shocked and disappointed because I thought this one simple, but evil act erased all the hard work we've done in America to stop racist actions and threw us back into the years of Jim Crow laws and lynchings.

Jessica

When I first heard about the beating of Lenard Clark, I felt AGGRAVATED. I felt aggravated because I couldn't understand why two people would commit such an immoral act on another person. This incident also bothered me because it was so close to my home that it made me question the ignorance in my own community.

For the first activity of the day conference attendees headed to the gym, where they observed approximately 30 students go through the diversity exercise The Level Playing Field. During this activity, participants were told to hold hands as long as possible and to take a step forward or backwards depending on their answers to questions, such as Have you ever been stopped by the police because of your race?; Can your parents afford to buy you a new winter coat each year? Do you ever have to consider whether or not a place is wheelchair accessible before you go somewhere with your family?; and Can you easily find Band-Aids that match your skin color?

Most of the questions focused on race and class; by the end of the activity, all present were overwhelmed by watching students unwillingly drop one another's hands as the distance grew between participants based on their answers to questions about their daily experiences.

The following break-out sessions allowed students and teachers to discuss their reactions to this activity and to discuss how society privileges some groups while putting others at a disadvantage. Those who participated in the activity talked about the distress they felt at being left behind, watching friends fall behind and having to drop another's hand because of the way society is structured. By the time participants were ready to head to lunch, they had a strong emotional and intellectual understanding of the way racism and other -isms in our society don't have to be blatant in order to do harm.

Following lunch, students attended break-out sessions in which they participated in The Other Side of the Tracks. This activity first asked students to write down the first words that came to mind when they saw words describing certain groups of people, such as African American, Latino, Asian, atheist, working class, gay, lesbian, and disabled. Then students stood on a line and were asked to make a series of choices about which side of the track to stand on, depending on such things as their race, class, gender, religious beliefs. After each group was identified, students chose a side of the track and then faced each other across the tracks as the facilitator read the words students had written moments earlier describing the group just named. Students were surprised at some of the stereotypes people had written down and at seeing themselves or their friends characterized negatively based on their group identification. This activity helped students see that they still have stereotypes imparted to them by society and just how painful those stereotypes are. They also saw that not only are people hurt by stereotypes about the group to which they belong, but we are all hurt when we have to look across the tracks at others who are being harmed by the stereotypes.

The final break-out session had students divide into ethnic work groups: biracial/ multi-racial people, white people, and people of color. In these groups students identified why they are proud to belong to that group, what kind of help they need from other groups and how they are willing to work for their own group and act as allies for other groups.

While students worked in break-out sessions after lunch, teachers went to a session with Terri Johnson from the Human Relations Foundation to discuss the structure of racism in American society and how to discuss issues of race and diversity in school. Teachers shared the difficulties they faced at their own schools and then began sharing ideas for how to respond to their own school culture.

Larissa

When I heard about the Benjamin Smith killing spree, I felt CONFUSED and ANGRY. I felt confused and angry because I wondered why people couldn't come together and help each other in solidarity!

Lisa

When I first heard about Benjamin Smith, I was DISGUSTED. Benjamin Smith's rampage made me feel so many emotions. I was shocked, disgusted, and worried. I couldn't believe that a person could actually have so much hate inside them that they could kill an innocent person based on the color of their skin or their religious beliefs. I also wondered what would stop someone in my neighborhood from following in Benjamin Smith's footsteps.

**HATE CRIMES
SLAM THE DOOR
ON ALL OF US!**

After the break-out groups, students met in the chapel to share reflections from their work groups. A representative from each work group finished the following statements: As a person of color/white person/bi-racial or multi-racial person I am proud of . . . and As a person of color/white person/bi-racial or multi-racial person, I never want to hear again . . . and, finally, As a person of color/white person/bi-racial or multi-racial person, I pledge to . . .

The day ended with a liturgy that focused on the themes of unlocking doors and forgiveness. Father Paul Novak, OSM, campus minister at De La Salle Institute celebrated the mass while three C.O.R. Steering Committee members provided the homily. Students exchanged keys during the Passing of the Peace to represent the key of information they had received during the day to unlock front doors and trap doors.

This supper was one of the larger events that C.O.R. has hosted during its two years of existence, with 140 people (109 students and 31 adults) and it had the greatest school representation with twenty schools from the Archdiocese represented.

C.O.R. is sponsored by Queen of Peace High School a Sinsinawa Dominican-sponsored school for young women and Angels Studio, a communications ministry of the Chicago Province of the Society of the Divine Word.