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The new faces of racism and discrimination

ENTERTAINMENT

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FEATURES

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There appears to be a new trend in racism and discrimination these days: high school and college-aged students, even teachers, who have learned the mistakes of their parents and grandparents. Or have they? There is a growing consensus of academics and college-age adults-racism has only taken new faces. Mostly gone are the days of using outright language and discrimination. Instead are new thinking and feeling groups of students and teachers who think they're doing the right thing, but are they?



By all accounts and purposes, Scott is a normal college kid; he grew up in a satellite city not far from Champaign, he played sports, and almost joined the Army. He says that he has a few "minority friends." But Scott has a secret that he decided to share with the Prospectus: he fears that he's racist without ever knowing how it happened.

BLACK & WHITE



Media Credit: Huamin Wang
Associate Professor of Humanities Matthew Hurt believes in breaking down discriminatory barriers through writing and having students acquaint themselves with one another.

"I grew up tolerant of other people. I actually argued against racist family members or friends. They would use the word "nigger" in a sentence, and I would say, 'That's totally uncalled for.' But today I'm having many issues with blacks-especially students," said Scott.

He emphasizes that he feels this way because of cultural differences that he deems "disrespectful" or "disruptive" to society as a whole.

"I don't look at black people and think of using the N-word, and I don't think they're less intelligent or less equal. But I've reached a point. Too many [black students] refer to women as 'bitches.' Too many think that dealing drugs is acceptable because of the 'position that they were put in by society.' Too many are promoting a lifestyle that is unacceptable in a healthy society," said Scott.

Associate Professor of Humanities Matthew Hurt is quick to respectfully refute the type of thinking that Scott exhibits. "What about the other students who are also exhibiting the same types of behavior?" he said. "As if there are no white drug dealers...as if it were mainly a race issue. People say, 'I don't see color. I don't see race,' but they say, 'they do THESE things...'. It's presumed natural for a white person to have opportunity, and for others to take that away."

After teaching diverse groups of students for years, Hurt has come across many instances where students "get things a little backward."

"For instance, in a writing class I had a student who was angry that 'other girls who were having

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lots of children and were being irresponsible'-making obvious references to [a minority group] without saying it-and were receiving financial aid over her. She was indignant. She didn't stop to think that financial aid was not an exclusive right of hers," said Hurt.

That same student didn't realize it, but she was exhibiting racial bias by the simple fact that she felt entitled to certain privileges. But what about Scott?

"Because so many [black students] do so many of these unacceptable things, I can't just look at a black peer and think highly of him. Is that my fault? No. Does that make me a racist? I hope not, because I hate the actions of certain people. I can't say this in public or I'm wrong. I'm a bigot and my opinion doesn't count. I'm sick of it," said Scott.

Former history teacher Kevin Hales doesn't flinch at talk like this, and it comes in handy as a teacher and educator. "I think ultimately you have to look into the mirror, and ask yourself if you can talk to your students-or colleagues for that matter-about race without flinching," he said. "If you have cancer, not talking about it doesn't make it go away."

Scott doesn't use harsh language, and he is quick to point out that he doesn't feel like he's racist; that he has no choice. Or does he?

Tiana Harris is a sophomore at Parkland, learning Spanish and elementary education. She hasn't experienced outright discrimination, but has experienced subtleties in the way people perceive her. "I'm a town girl. Sometimes the way I dress makes people not really know who I am. They would never know that I was in band, that I play the flute, that I was on the Student Council," she said.

"You know, most African Americans feel inferior to whites...it's a learned process. I'm to the point now where I feel confident and not inferior to anybody," she said.

Tiana credits the role of teachers in helping her get to where she is now. "I believe that it helps when people are around in a diversified crowd, and when they have a teacher that can reach everyone. I have seen a new side to things because of what teachers can do."

Meet Angela: she's a white sophomore that is scared of black men. Angela is also very quick to demonstrate that she not only doesn't want to feel this way, but that she thinks it's the fault of certain young black men that make her feel this way.

"More often than not, when I'm walking on a street at night and I pass by a black man or group of men, I get scared. And it's usually because they're dressed like they're in a gang; they stare at my chest, or make a comment," she said.

"I believe young black men feel the need to be tough. I have no problem with black men in a normal setting, like in the office, at a restaurant, or at the movies. But when they act like they need to have a certain personality of a thug, it scares me, and I wish there was change."

When students are thinking and feeling like this, there are different methods of approach by teachers.

Matthew Hurt believes that in his classes, such as English 101, that writing is a good course of action to breaking down walls.

"I prefer students to work out their issues in their papers," he said. Hurt also strongly discourages the processes that students use when they ask the question, "Can I find enough information to prove that I'm right?"

In general, Hurt prefers students should get to know other students as the basic means to opening up communication.



"It helps when people are around in a diversified crowd, and when they have a teacher that can promote that," Harris said.

But sometimes teachers can achieve the opposite effect. Although Hales and Hurt break down walls through dialogue and writing, respectively, other teachers tend to overlook students and can cause harm.

Joseph Williams and his wife, Jayner Bryant-Williams, have been active Parkland and community members. According to Hales, Joseph was previously the president of Brother-to-Brother, an African American male support group. Jayner and Joseph have worked with Club ACCESS extensively. But in spite of their contributions, they face an uphill battle.

"It's hard for me, being an African American who can barely read. I have to go through the wringer," said Joseph. "Teachers would get frustrated with me, and they would ignore me and help out [other] students who already knew what was going on. The teachers would just give up on me. But Kevin Hales, he took time to help me out," said Williams.

"I would go to Hales' class, and my husband would sit in with me, and after a little while, Hales said, 'Let's get you signed up' to my husband, and that really helped. My husband received credit for the course. He's taken classes from Hales there times. I've taken five," said Bryant-Williams.

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The husband and wife duo have had a miraculous life, always climbing uphill to reach the point where they're going to college. They've experienced the detriments of drug abuse, alcoholism, and even prison.

"Schools like Parkland have a great role in shaping the future, especially for folks like these," said Hales.

But Joseph's learning disability and the lack of overall attention to his condition, coupled with discrimination, have led him to depression. And this year he was denied reentry back into Parkland; his wife is returning this fall.

"I owe [Parkland] a lot of money, and I feel like I don't owe them any money when the teachers are the ones telling me to drop the class," said Joseph.

"There's a difference between being a teacher and an educator. A teacher gets a paycheck. An educator is interested in you, as a person, and your success. I know a couple of educators at Parkland, but there are a lot of teachers, too," said Jayner.

"Teachers make you or break you. It's the spirit of the teachers," she said.

"It's hearts, minds, and souls. Everybody has got one, and it's up to the person to know that it's all about hearts, minds, and souls. Then everything will be all right," said Hales.

Whether it's through writing or talking, teaching or educating, getting to know one another on a level beyond simple dialogue, there are many answers out there to facilitate the breaking down of racial and discriminatory walls. But ultimately it's up to the person to want to find which way works best, and to "look into that mirror" and, according to Hales, "not flinch."



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Sarah Murphy

posted 7/10/08 @ 10:24 AM CST

Yaaay!! I love the article.
My favorite parts are:

Kevin Hales' MO that we should be neither reactionary nor timid about race dialogue.

Jayner's point about teacher vs. (Continued...)

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ja'que

posted 7/10/08 @ 4:09 PM CST

about time somebody wrote something that made sense. people are always acting like there is nothing wrong. like we dont need to talk about it. like there is equality just because people arent calling other people names. (Continued...)

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toni

posted 7/10/08 @ 4:12 PM CST

The writer picked two of the best teachers at Parkland. Next time he should pick two of the worst and see what they have to say.

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hold the presses

posted 7/11/08 @ 4:28 PM CST

THANK YOU FOR WRITING THIS.

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