



TONAWANDAS: Taking a stand against racism

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— Rarely — and thankfully — are the old days of overt racism in America revisited. Polite society shuns the ugliest racial slurs and actions.

While few people are tolerant of overt racism anymore, Grace McKenzie of Housing Opportunities Made Equal pointed out, that doesn't mean it's all gone away.

"Often discrimination is very subtle," McKenzie said. "It's couched in language like 'This area has a lot of traffic. Are you sure you'd want to live in an area like this?'"

As she spoke at Friday's "Stand Against Racism" event sponsored by the YWCA of the Tonawandas, McKenzie said approximately 36 percent of the documented discrimination cases her office dealt with last year were race-related. The event was organized to bring together leaders of community organizations and service providers to discuss the problems they encounter, said YWCA Executive Director Jill Townson.

"We're hoping maybe this is where we can start to come together and identify where we have some problems," Townson said.

To that end, McKenzie said people shouldn't hesitate to contact someone if they feel uneasy during a home tour or about an ad they see for a home. Even on-line listings like "Great home in Amherst, no children wanted" are outside the bounds of the law. "There should be no difference in the way anyone is screened for housing," McKenzie said. "Everyone should be asked the same questions."

Housing isn't the only place where racism rears its ugly head. Frank Cannata, executive director of the Riviera Theatre, said working or living somewhere every day, people might not think about how their community is perceived. But when he tried to book the Colored Musicians Club for a show at the venue, Cannata said he was told members didn't feel the area was somewhere they'd be welcome. For some, that mindset came from personal experience. For others, it was things they'd heard.

"I think that's the biggest challenge, fighting what people have heard," Cannata said. While racism wasn't a problem Cannata said he'd ever thought much about early on,

that wasn't the only event that brought it front and center. Once, when Cannata's mixed-race son ran upstairs at the theater, he said a volunteer pulled him aside to let him know a "black youth" had gone up there.

"I described what he was wearing and they said, 'Oh, you know who he is,'" Cannata said. "I said, 'Yes, he lives under my roof. He's my son.' They turned beet red, and rightfully so."

But teaching people to question their own preconceptions is only part of the issue. Getting those in the minority actively involved with civic groups and organizations becomes more difficult when they don't feel welcome, and when those groups don't know how to reach out, nothing changes. Joyce Santiago, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce of the Tonawandas, said when her Hispanic husband considered running for office they did some research on the local Hispanic population.

"We found out there are hundreds if not thousands of Hispanic people in North Tonawanda," Santiago said. "But I've never really seen them."

Cannata agreed, saying a quick glance in the restaurants, bars and stores of the area show more similarities than differences. Marvin Henschbarger said it's easy for those in the minority to feel excluded and intimidated, leading them to be less likely to think anyone would want them to participate in the community. Henschbarger, who works for the Gay and Lesbian Youth Services of Buffalo, said during a recent talk at Niagara University she was told by a North Tonawanda High School teacher that it's often not other students, but the teachers themselves who are hostile to homosexual students' preferences.

"If you're a GLBT student at that high school, it doesn't seem like that's a good place to be," Henschbarger said.

Since minorities are more likely to form groups around their shared similarity if they feel the majority isn't accepting, Henschbarger suggested having local non-profits take their message directly to these minority groups. Cannata said he liked that idea, since the Riviera's volunteers are from all over the region and would benefit from greater diversity.

"It would be nice to sit across from the table to tell them what our organization is about, find out what their organization is about and see how to reach out the communities they serve," Cannata said.

While Townson said the meeting was only a very early start, she was hopeful the approximately 20 attendees would take the message back to the community, start conversations and meet again to discuss actions that could be taken.

"The more we discuss this, the more we understand others, the more we break down barriers, the more we strengthen our community," Townson said.

To find out more about the event or get involved with the group, contact Townson at 692-5580 or jtownson_ycwatona@hotmail.com.
Contact reporter Daniel Pyeat 693-1000, ext. 158.

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TONAWANDA, N.Y. - Taunya Englert, right, and Kwadwo Fosu sign their names during a Stand Against Racism event at the YWCA, Friday, April 3, 2009.