



The Times

Taking a stand against racism

Saturday, April 04, 2009

BY MICHELE ANGERMILLER AND CHRIS STURGIS

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Hundreds of people across the region figuratively linked arms with the YWCA yesterday to take a stand against racism, an annual event that originated in Mercer County and has spread throughout the Northeast.

"It's so exciting to see that a program that was created here in Mercer County is so successful that 320 other organizations throughout New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut are now reproducing it in their communities," Jose A. Hernandez, CEO of the YWCA of Trenton, said.

Some listened to speeches and songs at Trenton City Hall. Others pledged in writing to fight racism and discrimination of any kind at a booth staffed by the United Way of Greater Mercer County at the Quaker Bridge Mall.

Still more converged on Gilmore's Café on South Warren Street for an evening of readings on social justice sponsored by the I Am Trenton Community Foundation.

"Our core values align with the Stand's goals of breaking down barriers between people and developing ways to work cooperatively using shared perspectives," said Debby D'Arcangelo, board president of the I Am Trenton Community Foundation.

At the Lawrenceville Neighborhood Service Center, the after-school program featured a showing and discussion of the film "Pride."

The Terrence Howard film tells the true story of Jim Ellis, a man who used a rundown recreation center in Philadelphia to change tough street kids into competitive swimmers.

"We are going to keep things positive as we talk to the kids about their perceptions of racism," said Carlos Hendricks, director of the Neighborhood Service Center.

"It's a different social climate, now, with the election of the first African-American president. It has affected other things, and now the kids are looking at what their possibilities are," he said.

Also linking arms with the YWCAs were the Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce, the City of Trenton, Princeton Township, St. Francis Medical Center, Thomas Edison State College, Princeton University, Junior Achievement, Child Care Connection, Womanspace, NAACP, Planned Parenthood, Crisis Ministry, Rescue Mission and other hospitals, churches, universities, small businesses, and civic associations.

The Rev. Karen Hernandez-Granzen took the abstract idea of a fairer world down to the grade-school level for the children of the Get SET program, which meets at her church,

Westminster Presbyterian in Trenton.

"Racism exists when I look at someone and say she's a certain kind of person because she has dark hair, or because she wears glasses or because of the color of her skin," Hernandez-Granzen told the 40 children at Get SET.

"That's not right!" Hernandez-Granzen said, asking them how not to be racist.

"No hitting people!" one child called out.

"We show respect to one another!" said another.

Hernandez-Granzen said she experienced racism as a student at New York University. A professor told her he expected her to fail because she was of Puerto Rican ancestry. When she proved him wrong, his words were even more insulting.

He said: "maybe you are a rose on top of a garbage dump."

She said she tells her children not to let someone's cutting remarks hold them back.

On Thursday, the nation's one and only youth tolerance museum reached out to spread its message of anti-racism to children from Trenton's Grant School. The 40 fourth-graders spent the day at The College of New Jersey, home of the Kidsbridge Tolerance Museum, for the "Stand Against Racism" event.

The children worked with about 10 TCNJ student volunteers, including two Bonner leadership students, on a range of activities from literally shredding bad names to discussing anti-bullying to making puppets and putting on skits.

Kidsbridge executive director Lynne Azarchi said all the activities are designed to give the kids the tools they need to stand up and act when they encounter racism.

"If a child doesn't have the self esteem to stand up and speak out how can we fight racism?" she said.

Staff writer Michelle McGuinness contributed to this report.

©2009 Times of Trenton

© 2009 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.