



April 30, 2010

Taking a stand

By Neale Gulley
The Tonawanda News

— — A small ceremony was held at the midpoint of the Twin Cities Friday to honor a civil rights hero and to take a stand against racism.

YWCA members Jessica Notwell and Joelle Logue walked south on Webster Street just as the first few dignitaries began to form what would become a gathering of no more than 20 atop the Renaissance Bridge around 10 a.m. to celebrate Stand Against Racism Day.



100430 AGAINST RACISM1DOUG BENZ/NEWSNORTH TONAWANDA, N.Y., April 30, 2010 - From left, Joelle Logue from YWCA of the Tonawandas, Assemblyman Robin Schimminger, Senator George Maziarz, and Jessica Notwell of Canada, a board member of the YWCA World board, are on the Renaissance Bridge, Friday, for a Stand Against Racism event.

Casually, they each carried one end of a bright orange paper sign displaying the words: “eliminating racism, empowering women.” They did not carry it in protest, but as a means to transport it about a hundred yards to the apex of the bridge spanning the Erie Canal.

In a city that’s always been dominated by whites and sometimes plagued by prejudice, perhaps it’s noteworthy that at this very moment a car driven by a black man slowed, honked and waved in approval of the message. In the next car, less than two seconds later, a light-skinned male honked again and waved in approval of what he had seen.

Moments later, other members of the YWCA of the Tonawandas met with elected officials near the World War I monument at the height of the bridge. State Assemblyman Robin Schimminger, D-Kenmore, and State Sen. George Maziarz, R-Newfane read a joint state resolution in honor of the day.

City of Tonawanda Mayor Ron Pillozzi and North Tonawanda Mayor Rob Ortt read a separate joint resolution, even as 71 affiliated YWCAs including YWCA Niagara and some 2,000 independent organizers throughout the nation similarly honored Stand Against Racism Day, dedicated this year to civil rights pioneer Dorothy I. Height, who died April 20.

Local YWCA Program Director Joanne Mierzwa said it’s the third year members and individuals have been encouraged to congregate and to host events geared to help others understand the harm caused by racism.

“She was an author and wrote some very succinct works,” Mierzwa said of Height’s legacy.

“Her career certainly showed when it wasn’t popular for a woman to be an activist, certainly a black woman.”

In fact, according to the resolution read in turn by Schimminger and Maziarz, Height as a child was turned away from a YWCA swimming pool in Pittsburgh because she was black. She would, however, go on to become a high ranking employee of the organization when in 1937 she was appointed director of the Harlem offices. Then it was on to the national offices where she worked until her retirement in 1977. It was there that she presided over the integration of the group’s facilities in 1946 and all levels of the group during the 1960s.

“This area is a predominantly white area and has been a predominantly white area for its history,” Mierzwa said of the Twin Cities. “We need to develop an understanding and an atmosphere that lets people know they’re welcome here.”

The honorary Chairwoman for the event Friday was Katherine Lucas, whose father, a Lithuanian immigrant who moved to the United States because of World War II, was sometimes chastised for having an accent even though he spoke several languages.

A member of Mensa and the author of critical thinking skills books for gifted children, Lucas has played a positive role not only for the YWCA, but the Chamber of Commerce of the Tonawandas, Herschell Carrousel Society, Riviera Theatre, Niagara Hospice, Ujima Theatre and the Abiding Savior Lutheran Church, among other organizations and groups with which she is affiliated.

She has close ties to the YWCA mission and, in 2007, produced five videos about the stories of domestic violence victims for presentation at the World YWCA Council meeting in Nairobi, Kenya.

In addition, Lucas produced a public service TV announcement for use during Domestic Violence Awareness month and has helped other non-profits get their messages in the media, according to Jill Townson, executive director of the YWCA. She is the owner and president of Emedia Studios in Tonawanda.

She addressed the crowd Friday by asking about the color a polar bear. Then quickly she explained a more thoughtful answer to an otherwise easy question: that the animal’s fur may be white but its skin underneath is black.

Later a luncheon featuring a presentation by the National Federation for Just Communities was held at the YWCA’s headquarters around the block.

“The luncheon was very interesting,” she said. “There was a workshop ... we divided up into groups and talked about our perception of stereotypes and where we think they originated. It was almost painful to discover how well versed we were in ethnic stereotypes — the fact that we could sit there and just rattle off a list of repugnant stereotypes. We didn’t own them but we knew them.”

On the bridge, Lucas had related a very personal story about the death of one of her employee’s children recently. Hearing about the death of a child was heartbreaking but it was the way people of all races and creeds had tried to save him from the vehicle that caused a pileup on the I-190 last year, and later, the diversity encompassed in the show of support for his parents that warmed the heart.

Last summer Asa Hill of Buffalo was killed in the tragic accident. Everybody else walked away but Asa suffered what would be a fatal head injury, she said.

“People just streamed out of their cars to help, and men who had trucks with tools actually cut the door off the car to help this boy ... and if they hadn’t (done that) Asa’s parents wouldn’t have had the chance to hold him one last time and they wouldn’t have had the chance to donate his organs ...” she said.

The youngster’s organs saved 12 other lives.

A day after his death, she said an event was thrown at the Unitarian Church on Elmwood Ave.

“You looked around and it was like the United Nations — every age, every creed, every kind of person you could possibly imagine were there ... That to me would be a perfect snapshot ... that’s what this whole event is about; not because you want to single out races and differences but because you share a common goal, and that’s our goal. It celebrates the fact that Western New York should not just be known for chicken wings and sports teams but what’s in our hearts,” she said.

Tonawanda News 435 River Road North Tonawanda, NY 14120