

Caucasians address issue of racism

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3/20/2017

PLATTSBURGH — At a recent "White Like Me" event at SUNY Plattsburgh, 28 people sat in the 434-person-capacity Yokum 200 lecture hall.

Of those, 23 were white, and five were people of color.

That, said members of the North Country New York Chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice, is a representation of the amount of work they have to do to open up people of the North Country to talking about anti-racism.

"Having conversations with white people about their whiteness is not popular and is not something folks feel comfortable doing," said Anna Epshteyn, student affairs conduct office professional at the University of Vermont.

"Addressing your own privilege doesn't feel good."

The local Showing Up for Racial Justice group facilitated the event, held during SUNY Plattsburgh's Diversity Week.

The movie "White Like Me," based on a book by activist Tim Wise, was shown. The film focuses on conversations about white privilege in the United States, institutionalized racism toward people of color and how white people can use that privilege to be a voice in the struggle for racial equality.

LOCAL CHAPTER

Showing Up for Racial Justice is a national network of organized groups or individual Caucasians for racial justice, with chapters in all 50 states and some provinces of Canada.

The local chapter, organizers said, was founded in the summer of 2016 as a reaction to the killings of several black men by police officers around the nation.

Madaline Hope and other people from the area discovered each other through the Standing Up for Racial Justice website.

They later had a conversation about how to start a North Country chapter. Hope, Anna Epshteyn, Tara Glynn and Carol Shuttleworth are members of that group; others are located in the High Peaks area, Canton and Potsdam.

Together, they are on a mission to "generate discussion and action about racial justice and anti-racism in the North Country, NY Community by bringing white people together," the group's Facebook page said.

They hope to increase membership by establishing their roots in North Country society as the white voice for racial equality.

STARTING THE DISCUSSION

They want to call people in instead of calling people out, Hope said.

The goal is to validate the person and question the action. Instead of immediately calling someone racist, introduce the idea instead of questioning the identity of the person, she said.

Showing Up for Racial Justice has nationally recommended door-knocking campaigns with scripts to help start the conversation. One starts with the question: "How do you feel about reparations?"

They also recommend chapter members welcome people into their homes and show them films like “White Like Me.” Members are encouraged to include people who might be new to the idea of white privilege and racial justice or may not agree with it.

NETWORK

Plattsburgh’s chapter has started to create a network of accountability partners, such as Black Onyx, SUNY Plattsburgh’s Black Student Union and Association of Latino Professionals for America.

Members are hoping to reach out to schools and the Plattsburgh police.

“Pulling from the local community is something that is important to us,” Epshteyn said. “I think that it is not only attracting folk who are exposed to those ideas but also attracting folk who have not been exposed to those ideas.”

BEST APPROACH

Glynn compares the struggle to comprehend white privilege to feminism.

She asks herself: How do you get really sexist men to understand feminism?

“Sexist men need other male voices to combat with. People who struggle to understand white privilege need a white voice to explain it to them,” Glynn said.

POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE

Glynn said there is “a lot of anxiety with people about (President) Trump and about the federal government. It is here, too; it is not just at a national level. I think that is why it’s so important to have these conversations.”

She used the example of St. Lawrence County Legislator Joel L. LaPierre, who made racist comments about Obama in a Facebook post.

Standing Up for Racial Justice got involved in that situation through a letter-writing campaign that helped bring about the censure of LaPierre, who is now barred from holding a leadership position with St. Lawrence County.

The group meets the second Thursday of every month at Plattsburgh Public Library.

Glynn hopes they can facilitate conversations that are otherwise ignored because of the lack of diversity in the North Country.

“I don’t think people generally have an understanding of how privilege affects them because they live in a vacuum of whiteness their whole lives,” she said.

ENLIGHTENED

The “White Like Me” event was meant to be an introduction to that conversation.

Keith Pidgeon, 27, a Plattsburgh resident, commented that they were watching a film about what it means to be white, “and I honestly don’t think ‘white’ was ever said in my house when I was growing up in that (racial) context probably ever.”

Some referred to that as living in a “vacuum of whiteness.”

Pidgeon believes Trump is creating a lot of division and that people who want to see inequality are being more vocal.

He called himself naive to think that racism was “getting a little better” and said he recognized in the past year that it was getting worse.

“As strange as it is to say, race is a new topic to me. And I didn't think that it was the case, and I've suddenly learned to realize it.”