

Gurnit Chima

Lassiter Award Entry

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“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”-Desmond Tutu

What is injustice? Defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “unfair treatment: a situation in which the rights of a person or a group of people are ignored.” Unfair treatment has most likely been experienced by everyone at one point in their lives; some more than others. Being a person of color at John Carroll University has given me the opportunity to continue the mission of Rev. Dr. Valentino Lassiter and Martin Luther King Jr. Many of my peers and I agree that not everyone on this campus is treated equal or with the respect they deserve. This year at the student involvement fair, I signed up for many organizations that are geared towards diversity and inclusion. I am a proud member of the African American Alliance (AAA), Latin American Student Association (LASA), Muslim Student Society, and Social Justice Club. At AAA meetings we have events, have discussions on various topics that affect the black community. In LASA, we finished Heritage Month by putting together six events for students to enjoy. For Muslim Student Society I get to learn about Islam and various aspects of their culture.

I am majoring in psychology because I am fascinated by human behavior and neurological processes. My overall goal is for when these individuals leave the workshop I want them to question the injustices around them. For my workshop I first want to discuss the justice issues people face because it is not an easy conversation and everyone should be aware of the

problems before we find solutions. I want the audience to interact with people they do not already know and give them questions to understand each other's mind set. Start by telling everyone that I am going to test their observational skills. Show everyone two sets of photos, (preferably using PowerPoint or a similar device). With the first set, ask them to look at each photo & write down the first word or words that come to mind about the person in the photo -- not a description, as in "He's wearing a blue coat," but what everyone can tell about the person or his/her character. Show the photos quickly, so that everyone does not have much time to rethink their initial impression/judgment. Photo examples might include:

- an African-American or Latino dressed in "gang"- looking or "hip hop" gear
- an "effeminate"-looking male
- a "butch"-looking female
- a "hippie"-looking male
- a person with missing teeth
- a teen dressed in "goth" gear
- an Arab/Muslim male
- a person with an animal rights protest sign
- a white person who's obviously very well dressed, with expensive jewelry
- a fit person

Briefly show students a second set of photos. Show the paired photos side by side; ask students to quickly write down their answer to the questions you ask them for each pair of photos. Examples might include:

- a female & male ("Which would you ask for directions?")

- a person of color and a good-looking white guy (“Which would you vote for Governor?”)
- a person with a disability and a young, fit person (“Which one would you hire for a job?”)
- an Asian male and an African-American female who looks of lower socioeconomic status (“Which one is smarter?”)
- a well-dressed guy in a suit and a grungy “tree hugger”-looking guy (“Which one is more responsible?”)
- a “normal” looking guy with glasses and a “gorgeous,” muscular guy (“Which one would you cast as leading man in a movie?”).

For this second set of photos – photos of known figures (e.g., for the “Governor” question, have Desmond Tutu vs. war criminal Ratko Mladic; Wangari Maathai vs. Jet Li, etc.), and then reveal who they are at the end. Then, have a discussion based on their answers and answer questions such as “How do our snap judgments affect our worldview and our ability to be good citizens?”

Then, I want everyone to act out scenarios. Examples might include:

- A homeless guy comes up and asks you for money.
- A fur-wearer and an animal rights person meet on the street.
- A person in a wheelchair who also has a language disability comes up and starts talking to you.

You can’t understand what they are saying.

- A person from an opposing political party comes up and starts arguing with you about an important issue.
- You overhear someone who looks to be Muslim criticizing lazy, violent, greedy Americans.

- One of your friends tells a racist joke.

Then I will discuss different standards society places on us and how it affects justice.

Lastly, have students write down one personal action they can take to reduce bigotry in their own lives, and one school/community-level action they can take to reduce bigotry in school/society.

It is not enough to simply discuss injustice, or to talk about institutional, structural, individual racism. People have to act on the injustices. Encourage them to speak up when no one else will because chances are others are thinking the same thought and just need someone to support their view. When no one stands up for an injustice they witness it is telling the oppressor that what they are doing is okay and it will remain the social norm.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr ‘An injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’”