

Students moved by White Privilege Conference

by Vanessa Virbitsky - Tuesday, May 13, 2008

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/876/students-moved-by-white-privilege-conference/>

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh education Professor Marguerite Parks accompanied five UW Oshkosh students to White Privilege Conference (WPC) April 2-5 in Springfield, Mass.

At the ninth-annual WPC, themed “Critical Liberation Praxis: Creating Transformation for Social Justice,” students discussed issues of race and critically examined social constructs by attending workshops on issues related to white privilege, white supremacy and racial oppression.

Discussion forums about diversity, multicultural education and leadership, social justice, race/racism, sexual orientation, gender relations, religion and other systems of privilege/oppression also were offered.

“Seldom are people afforded the opportunity to think about how race is a part of our everyday lives,” said Parks, who has attended the WPC since 2004. “This conference is about critically examining the society in which we live and is a very personal and informal experience where students learn about what they can do to make a difference.”

According to the [WPC Web site](#), the workshops and keynote speakers informed, engaged and challenged participants to understand the ongoing work to dismantle the system of white privilege, while providing practical tips and strategies for combating inequality.

UW Oshkosh student attendees included education majors Sohrab Akhavein, Rosa Alvarez, Krystal deLeón, Victoria Harmon and Pa Nhia Lee. Students’ registration was funded by the Campus Diversity Center and the Associate Dean of the College of Education and Human Services.

Other conference participants and presenters were corporate and non-profit community members, students, educators, activists, musicians and artists from across the U.S.

Keynote speakers included John Palmer, assistant professor at Colgate University; Rhea Almeida, founder of the Institute for Family Services (IFS); Salome Raheim, associate professor at the University of Iowa; Jawanza Kunjufu, educational consultant; and Joe Feagin, professor at Texas A&M University.

Students tell their story

“I wasn’t sure what to expect at all,” said Lee, who grew up in Oshkosh, a predominately white suburban community. “My best friend, who is Caucasian, was joking around that it sounded like a white-bashing conference, but it was definitely not that.”

For seniors Lee and deLeón, the inspiring atmosphere of the WPC was actually a life-changing experience.

“The conference gathered together a wide variety of people from different ethnic backgrounds of different ages, occupations and sexual orientations,” Lee said. “As a college student, I thought I was fine with being around people of other racial backgrounds, but I pretty much hung out with my own group of friends.

“At the conference, I was submerged in diversity, and I had the opportunity to talk about my own experiences and, most importantly, to really listen to other people and hear their stories.”

By attending the conference, Lee also realized the vast amount of similarities that exceed cultural and even national lines.

“This conference gathered people who care about basic human rights, social justice and making sure everyone is able to live freely and authentically regardless of who they are as a sexual, racial or moral being,” Lee said.

DeLeón’s experience was backed by frustrations of being a minority student and her interest in ending racism and reaching equality.

“It was such a relief to find both people of color and white people together as allies in dealing with the realities of the unjust world we all live in,” deLeón said of the WPC.

“At this conference, I was able to witness the walls of racism crumble down in groups of 20 to 30 people at a time. I left the conference with hope, desire, and motivation to be an effective part of change on my campus and also in my own world.”

Allowing students to share their conference experience, the Faculty College sponsored “Bringing the White Privilege Conference Home” May 1 at UW Oshkosh.