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STUDENT VOICE

Why Not Talk?

Beyond an Evasive Culture

By Adrian Parker

Why is it so hard for us to have uncomfortable conversations at Xavier? Why could I be in a room with some of the most intelligent people and still refuse to talk about race relations in our country or even on our campus?

These are questions that I came face to face with during my second year of college. They are questions I asked only after realizing that almost every student, including myself, fell in line with that evasive culture. At the time I had only taken one class that made me squirm in my seat. Only one class out of twenty challenged me to get out of my personal comfort zone.

In my understanding, the goal of a Jesuit institution is to help students become whole, well-rounded people through education and reflection and asking the tough questions. That goal is hard to accomplish when those questions are not being asked by everyone in the university from the administrators down to the students. So while working on a research project last summer I got an idea that would draw every incoming student at Xavier into having those difficult conversations about race.

What makes a topic uncomfortable is the fact that it is a reality, a reality that we would prefer to sweep under the rug. And for the most part universities have done just that. Solutions are not found by acting like nothing is wrong. And yes, racism goes further than just the individual, but that does not mean the topic should be avoided. Xavier has done a wonderful job bringing in guest speakers and installing a Chief Diversity Officer, but more is required.

Rev. James Wallis has written: "We must find safe and authentic ways to hear one another's stories across the racial boundaries that insulate and separate us from others..." Inside a classroom and outside our comfort zones is where the magic will happen, where we can find safe and authentic ways to hear. This is why I want to introduce a first-year seminar that would allow stu-

dents to talk about race relations in the United States. It would catch students before they get settled into their friend groups across campus, which is vital. Research shows that who we pick as friends often does not reach across the color line.

A professor would be there to learn just as much as the students but also to facilitate in case dialogue becomes debate. I envision a class that uses a number of different books and scenarios to encourage conversation. Theological sources would be used alongside some of the most secular, all trying to answer the same questions of "Will things ever change?" and "What can we do to make sure race relations change both on campus and in the streets?"

The class would build on top of what Xavier is doing with the Dorothy Day Immersions and Days of Dialogue. The door would be open for students to truly start thinking about their relationship with the surrounding communities of Norwood and Evanston. To cite Jim Wallis again, "Loving our neighbors means identifying with their suffering, meeting them in it, and working together to change it."

The evasive culture has to change. Uncomfortable talks can no longer only be had because of an "explosion" on campus. In order for Xavier to perform up to its full potential, having uncomfortable conversations can no longer remain a rare occurrence. It is not something that can be done overnight, but "a faith community demands personal engagement and commitment," stated theology professor Dr. Christopher Pramuk. Xavier cannot call itself a proud Jesuit university if it does not take on that challenge.

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