

Diversity Circles address racism through dialogue, action and change

Improving race relations is a challenge for many communities and a lifelong process. Diversity Circles in Racine and Kenosha create a new awareness of the issue of racism, develop sensitivity to others' experiences, and promote understanding of how racism affects us all. These discussions encourage participants to take action to make positive change. Since 2001, Diversity Circles have reached more than 1,500 Kenosha and Racine citizens – including incarcerated men – and 2,500 high school youth in 80 discussion groups. More than 350 high school students used Diversity Circles to develop community and school action plans. University of Wisconsin-Parkside students can receive academic credit for participation in Diversity Circles. About 95% of those who take part in Diversity Circles say they have increased their understanding of others' attitudes and beliefs about racism.

Situation:

Racism is a long-standing and underlying concern in Kenosha and Racine that affects the whole community. Individual citizens often feel powerless to address the issue. Residents have not had an opportunity to engage in meaningful activities or discussions with persons who are different from them, instead learning about others through the mass media or cultural myths.

Response:

The Center for Community Partnerships and UW-Extension at UW-Parkside initiated Diversity Circles to bring together diverse populations of community residents to address racism. Diversity Circles are a type of study circle; small groups of 8 to 12 people meet weekly for two hours for five weeks. Volunteer facilitators lead the discussions. The mission of Diversity Circles is to build a stronger community by expanding the participation of citizens in dialogues that will foster greater understanding, cooperation and community participation. Diversity Circles allow citizens to work through conflict to positive resolution toward solving a community's social and economic problems. This is accomplished in part through dialogue, the basis for our democracy. UW-Extension supports Diversity Circles through grants and staffing. The program also is in partnership with Sustainable Racine and United Way of Racine County. The UW Institute on Race and Ethnicity supported a high school diversity conference.

Since 2001, Diversity Circles have reached a wide range of Racine and Kenosha residents.

- More than 1,500 adults met in 80 Diversity Circles.
- 120 volunteers were trained to facilitate Diversity Circles for youth or adults.
- About 2,500 teens from Kenosha and Racine were involved in Diversity Circles in six high schools.
- 350 high school students attended the Diversity Circles in Action Conference held on March 20, 2003. The conference was organized by students for students and provided an opportunity for students to learn about issues of diversity in one of 90 diversity circles/discussion groups.
- Diversity Circles is offered as a one-credit class at UW-Parkside.

Impacts:

This program provided all participants an opportunity to discuss issues such as racism and diversity with one another in an environment that invited dialogue about an issue that continues to challenge the community.

From one to eight months after taking part in a Diversity Circle, 409 participants were asked in a mail survey to rate their ability to understand issues or change attitudes, behaviors or relationships as a result of taking part. Of the 93 respondents (23%) responding:

- 98% could discuss racial issues openly and frankly with people of other races.
- 96% increased their understanding of attitudes/beliefs about racism and race relations.
- 95% increased their understanding of others' attitudes and beliefs about racism and race relations.
- 89% increased their ability to communicate more effectively.
- 87% changed their relationships with people of other races.
- 20% served on a committee of some local organization.
- 17% attended a public meeting on town or school affairs.
- 16% attended a rally or speech.
- 13% communicated with an elected official.
- 11% wrote a letter to a newspaper.
- 8 % joined a Diversity Circle task force.

Success stories:

The value of Diversity Circles is well recognized within and beyond the UW-Parkside community. An article in the *Racine Journal Times* on Diversity Circles in the Racine Youthful Offender Correctional Facility recognized the impact of the program on inmates. The circles have received several awards, including the 2002 Sustainable Racine Education Award and a 2003 Office of State Employment Relations Affirmative Action Award. Other UW campus Continuing Education units are adapting the model to their communities.

Participants said:

- “Racism is huge. Diversity Circles are small, but they are an excellent step in the right direction. We have to start somewhere or perhaps realize all that I do not understand about others in the community, and it increased the amount of respect I have.”
- “Diversity Circles are an excellent source of communication for all races. A good learning and sharing experience without retaliation or judgment found.”
- “I really learned a lot from Diversity Circles, and the Diversity Conference at UW[-Parkside] was amazing. I feel like I have understood more about difference cultures, especially African American.”
- “Diversity Circles are an environment where people feel safe to discuss their differences.”
- “Diversity Circles have been an important networking tool for me with person from other agencies and building relationships with colleagues within my agencies.”

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