

Diversity program teaches students to be open to differences



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East Lyme High School students Zoe Gentles, 17, left, and Chris Cicchiello, 18, present choices regarding a number of current events as either setbacks or steps forward in racial relations during the culmination of the Encountering Differences program Thursday, May 24, 2018, at the school. Students from East Lyme, Plainfield and Norwich participated in the pilot program sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut in response to a series of racially charged incidents at high school sporting events. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

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East Lyme — When the Rev. Florence Clarke was growing up in Charleston, S.C., she faced segregation that forced her to attend a school with old textbooks, even though two other schools were closer to her home.

Every night, she and her friends stayed indoors out of fear of the night riders, the Ku Klux Klan.

Clarke went on to become the first in her neighborhood to go to college and had a career as a teacher and a pastor. She participated in sit-ins and marches during the civil rights movement.

Four East Lyme High School students recounted Clarke's story to a room full of about 30 students, staff and community leaders, including Clarke, on Thursday morning at the high school.

"For me, Mrs. Clarke bridged the struggle for equality and the constant hope you have to have," said Christopher Cicchiello, 18, a senior.

The students were speaking Thursday at the culminating event of the Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut's "Encountering Differences" pilot program, which paired small groups of students from East Lyme High School, Norwich Free Academy-Sachem Campus and Plainfield High School with African-American volunteers to experience living history. The program began in February and, since then, the 18 student participants have learned the volunteers' stories and also examined their own responsibilities in creating a just society, said Tammy Kaye, program coordinator.

The program is modeled after the Jewish Federation's Encountering Survivors program, in which students learn from Holocaust survivors or the children of survivors.

Clarke, who was moved to tears by the student's presentation, said she was thankful for the opportunity to participate and hopes the program is long lasting.

Jerry Fischer, executive director of the Jewish Federation, said incidents of racial taunting that New London High School sports teams experienced when they visited rural schools was the initial spark to start the Encountering Differences program.

But just as the Encountering Survivors program provided many students the opportunity to meet Jewish people for the first time, the Jewish Federation also realized that many students in Eastern Connecticut were not meeting African-Americans in their day-to-day lives, and this program gives students that opportunity, he said.

Fischer said it's important to not hide from racial problems in this country.

During Thursday's program, Plainfield High School students shared attorney Lonnie Braxton's story of growing up in Mississippi, being inspired by the civil rights movement and wanting to make a difference through law.

They shared quotes from him, including, "We're all part of history. The idea is to keep your eyes open and see you are part of it," and "Anyone can walk a smooth road, not everyone can construct their own."

"He just keeps on working, and he is this quote," Sean Corey, 16, a junior, pointed out. "He lives it. He breathes it. He constructed his own road and that is so inspiring. ..."

Norwich Free Academy students read aloud letters thanking volunteer Donetta Hodge, who is retired from Sonalysts in Waterford and involved with the Child & Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut and the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Trust Fund. They expressed the lessons they learned from her:

"The color of our skin or who we hang out with does not define us," said Jaleesha Nunez, 17, a junior.

"This world was made for not only you or me but for everyone," said Jasmine Green, 17, a junior. "There could be people that want to see you fall and many others but if you come together and evolve, they may want to join you."

During Thursday's program, John McKnight Jr., Connecticut College's dean of institutional equity and inclusion, said it was meaningful to hear the youths reflect back the older generation's stories.

Recapping the lesson from the program's beginning, McKnight told students that the "oppressive racial caste system established in the U.S. with enslaving of Africans has continued to rebrand itself in every generation," including through lynching, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, police brutality and the resurgence of white supremacy.

In an exercise, students reviewed recent current events and decided if they were a setback or a step forward for racial justice.

The students then watched a short film by **Todd Gipstein** (<http://www.gipstein.com/amplacesfilms.html>) that shared reflections from Peggy Steele Clay, a black teacher in residence at National Geographic who visited the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery.

"If you continue to encounter and understand differences, if you be open to understanding your neighbors and embracing their stories and their humanity, then we'll have a better world," Gipstein told the students after they watched the film. "If you do all that, you'll give hope and justice life."

Fischer said he hopes that as a result of the program, students will be open to another human being.

"A person is a human being because that person has a story to tell," he told students, "and you become human beings because you listen to the stories — and you become empowered because you realize that you, too, have stories that you can tell and share."

At the end of the program, students and volunteers illuminated electronic candles, each with a symbolic meaning: to remember the people captured and sold into slavery in the Americas; to mark emancipation and the end of the Civil War, and to acknowledge that the end of slavery did not mean the end of oppression; to recognize the tens of thousands of African-Americans lynched; to memorialize the martyrs of the civil rights movement; and to remember the African-Americans killed without justification by police, as well as those who are wrongly incarcerated.

They pledged to prevent bigotry and racism and teach "that our country's future depends on the realization of a free and equal society, with love for one another and equal justice for all."



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Lonnie Braxton, right, places an electronic candle on the table during the culmination of the Encountering Differences program Thursday, May 24, 2018, at East Lyme High School. Students from East Lyme, Plainfield and Norwich participated in the pilot program sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Eastern Connecticut in response to a series of racially charged incidents at high school sporting events. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

Zoe Gentles, 17, a junior at East Lyme High School, said she has faced racial slurs and has been barred from hanging out with people because of her skin color, and she found inspiration in the way Clarke dealt with similar issues.

"I always saw them as bad things that happened in my life, but this program really helped to show me what I can learn from these things and how these incidents or troubles in my life have helped me become the person I am today," she said.

At a time when there's so much division and people feel like they need to choose a side, Clarke further helped her understand the need to be her own person and look inside herself for what she believes, she added.

Abigail Bessire, 18, a senior at East Lyme, said she always had thought of the civil rights movement and segregation as being in the past but realizes now that incidents of racism still are happening.

"Even after having an African-American president, we're still facing all sorts of racism and violence, so that really was eye-opening to me," she said. She added that she hopes to work toward change.

Eric Brodeur, 16, a junior at East Lyme, said he learned from Clarke that your character isn't based on what other people say or how they treat you but instead on who you choose to be and the people you choose as role models.

The Jewish Federation said schools interested in participating in next year's full program should call (860) 442-8062 by the end of the school year or email Kaye at **strochlitzhrc@gmail.com** (<mailto:strochlitzhrc@gmail.com>).

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