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Intergenerational dialogue inspires learning & growing in Lamorinda

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Gabe Gardner (far left) on July 27 at Lafayette Learning Center discussed intersections of ethnic and religious identities as ways to curb misconceptions. Siena Billings, Taryn Veronda and Cassidy Keely shared their work on the UMBRELLA (Understanding, mentoring, belonging and racial equity through listening, learning and advocacy) committee.

with fellow middle and high schoolers in the Lafayette Learning Center during the summer. "You don't have to bring a friend. Bring yourself and your true personality and you'll make one there," Evans said. "You can make real friends (that won't judge you)."

Gabe Gardner, a rising junior at Acalanes High School, said that when he realized many of his classmates didn't know the difference between ethnicity and religion and found himself struggling with side comments about his Jewish identity, he wanted to do something to promote understanding and acceptance. "I realized that misconceptions within religion were prevalent. Some people thought to be fully Catholic you needed to believe a particular thing or to be fully Jewish you had to be kosher," Gardner said. "There are many sets of beliefs. I wanted to cover that and make sure misconceptions were cleared and also show where there are intersections (of religion and ethnicity). These aren't binary things. It's like a gradient."

As a Jewish person, Gardner said he can empathize with the struggles people of other marginalized religious identities might encounter. "You don't have to hide (who you are or what you believe in). I hear comments about my nose and get asked if my dad is a banker (and other slurs). These things can make you feel hidden," Gardner said. "But rising up and speaking up and identifying that Jewish people aren't just A, B and C or that Muslims aren't just A, B and C really can help people feel visible. I sometimes didn't feel like I had a voice and then I started standing up for myself."

Gardner and some of the other high school presenters were confronted with lots of tough questions by parents in the audience at times. Gardner said that it's all part of the learning process.

Maria Gastelumendi, the owner of Rising Loafer, didn't ask questions or offer comments to the youth who presented. She just listened and left feeling both inspired and hopeful about the youth. "I think sometimes adults are not as mature as kids on these topics," Gastelumendi said. "Adults need to learn to listen. It's by learning new ideas that we grow in a society. Not by carrying our own ideas. Life is a constant evolution. Ideas are evolutionary. Languages evolve. We need to learn that other voices are as important for building community."

Although Gastelumendi said she's proudly served high quality, sustainably sourced food to the Lafayette community for the past two decades, she also prides herself on serving up authenticity and open heartedness to those she encounters. "I was born in the Highlands of Peru. I'm Quechua, an ethnicity that is never available to be checked off on a form," Gastelumendi said. "Business owners have to participate in these conversations because we are part of the community. Our relationship with the community keeps us in business and we owe it to the community to listen."

Pam Dawkins and her daughters Olivia and Ash said they were glad to attend the event. As multiracial students, both Olivia and Ash said these kinds of events and conversations make them feel heard and seen.

An intergenerational crowd of about four dozen Lamorinda community members came together in the Lafayette Learning Center on July 27 to talk, learn, share and grow.

Lynn? McPhatter-Harris, EdD set the tone for the evening by inviting people to lean in, connect with their neighbors and begin thinking about what they can do for the community as a whole to make it a more inclusive place that values diversity, equity and inclusion. "We can't point our fingers at others and hope the work gets done," McPhatter-Harris said. "We all need to think about what we can do."

Students from the Lafayette and Acalanes Union school districts took turns at the mic sharing what they're doing to include their peers and younger students in conversations about topics ranging from embracing and honoring intersectional identities to promoting acceptance and feeling like they belong.

Jacqueline Evans, a rising sixth grader at Stanley Middle School talked about what it means to be part of the community SWELL (Student Wellness) program, where she had a chance to connect, produce art and have lunch

"I learned a lot. This is a good reminder that you don't have to be an expert to get involved in the conversation," Olivia said. "If we keep an open mind and listen to new ideas and experiences, we can learn a lot. Adults can even learn from kids," Ash added.

Pam Dawkins said she got more involved in DEIB work in schools after the death of Miles Hall (in Walnut Creek) and George Floyd (in Minneapolis). "It's great to see high school kids engaged with these topics," Dawkins said. "I'd encourage everyone in the community to get involved."

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