

Diversity Circles

Dialogue, Action, Change

April 2006

UW-IRE Funds Reading Seminar at Racine Correctional Institution

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Since the start of the Spring 2006 semester, ten inmates at the Racine Correctional Institution (RCI) have been taking part in a reading seminar sponsored by the University of Wisconsin Institute on Race and Ethnicity. The course is called “Diversity in the United States,” and sessions are held weekly on Monday evenings. Its instructors are RCI teacher Kathy Reyheart and Roseann Mason, the Director of the Diversity Circle program in the Center for Community Partnerships at UW-Parkside.

During the course, par-

ticipants have been reading a book called *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. The book was written by Ronald Takaki, and it explores the history of the United States through the experiences of various immigrant groups. Every week, the participants are expected to read two chapters, and to go along with each chapter, they are required to write a two-page journal entry that discusses what they learned from the reading, what surprised them, their opinion of the reading, etc. as well as why their newfound knowledge is important.

Furthermore, all participants were required to write a final essay about their experiences and discoveries in the class, which they presented to the rest of the class during the second-to-last meeting.

Throughout the semester, the majority of the participants have been very interested in the course’s discussions, and they seem to have gained a new perspective about the world around them. Their eyes have been opened to many racial issues they did not know existed, and they appear to have a greater appreciation for the hard-

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Park High School Holds First-Ever Diversity Circle



Members of the Park High School Diversity Circle

April 2006 marked the start of the first-ever Diversity Circle held at Park High School in Racine County. The group meets every Wednesday evening, and it is comprised of teachers from various de-

partments in the school. There are seven members total, and the group is facilitated by Roseann Mason, the Director of the Diversity Circle program in the Center for Community Partnerships at UW-Park-

side

The Circle was started by math teacher Matthew Geisler because he realized that there have been many racial conflicts taking place at Park High

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ships many racial groups have faced while living in the United States.

Says one participant, "The most surprising thing I [have] learned from this course is how so many different groups have [had] similar plights [while] assimilating [into] this country."

Adds another, "...America has a strong, diverse history that I was totally in the dark about."

Indeed, both instructors have witnessed positive changes in the partici-

pants' attitudes, and Mason has noticed that they have a great desire to learn as much as possible about the topic at hand.

"They ask thoughtful questions, and they are making connections to our world today," she says.

However, despite the fact that the participants have benefited from what they are learning, at times the information has been difficult to take, and a few participants have had trouble trying to cope. Nevertheless, Mason and

Reyheart have been very patient and supportive, and they have even encouraged the participants to discuss these issues in other forums.

Explains Mason, "...One of the inmates quit the course after the second [meeting] because the readings made him so angry. [As a result,] Kathy is going to invite him to participate in an upcoming Diversity Circle. I hope he will attend."

All in all, though, the participants know that the knowledge they are ac-

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United Way
of Racine County
Helps Here



*****New Study Circles Resource Center Discussion Guide Available*****

This year, the Study Circles Resource Center, in cooperation with the Northwest Area Foundation, has created a new discussion guide for talking about poverty and how we can eliminate it. The Study Circles Resource Center is the national affiliate of the Diversity Circles program in the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, and its members wanted to create this guide "to help cities, towns, and neighborhoods involve all kinds of people in dialogue and problem solving." The guide is called "Thriving Communities: Working together to move from poverty to prosperity for all," and topics include what poverty looks like, why it exists, what can/should be done about poverty, etc. The guide is available in both Spanish and English, and it can be purchased for \$5 at the Center, or downloaded for free from their website.

***-To get more information about the guide, please go to
www.studycircles.org or call (860) 928-2616.***

UW-Parkside Diversity Circles Director Attends Workshop at Study Circles Re- source Center

On March 23rd, Roseann Mason, Director of Diversity Circles, was invited to attend a one-day workshop at the Study Circles Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut, with other directors from across the country. The goal of the workshop was to review the Facilitator's Guidebook and get feedback from the group as to how they used the current guidebook and what changes they thought were required to improve it. The new guidebook is scheduled to be released in the fall, and Mason may get the opportunity to pilot the new guidebook in her facilitator training in September.

School. Several of the other teachers were aware of these issues as well, and so they are trying to use the Circle to bring to light the topics that each member feels are the most important.

Says member Carol Ruxton, "I personally am concerned by the lack of achievement in graduation rates among minority students. [I believe] there's...a difference in achievement [due to] a 'them and us' mentality [that needs to be eliminated.]"

Adds Marianne Maleske, "We should never stop providing ways to enhance race relations."

All of the participants

seem hopeful that their discussions will lead to positive results because each has discovered that a great amount of power comes from talking about people's concerns. In turn, this power can then cause great changes to occur in their school.

Says Geisler, "Dialogue is so much more supportive than debate. I feel that if staff members can understand where other staff members are coming from, through the discussion and storytelling, then we have a better chance to build a more positive work environment and policy for students."

Adds Ruxton, "One thing

I learned that I didn't anticipate learning is the remarkable value in speaking as honestly as you can about an issue."

One problem the Circle has faced so far is having to deal with conflicts in scheduling. The group is not exceptionally large, but it has still been difficult to work around everyone's daily activities, and Geisler admits that they must overcome this hardship in order to be successful and meet their goals.

"Although I believe this group is very capable, having the time to concentrate on the problems and work together is a huge challenge," he explains.

Nevertheless, many members are still optimistic about the group's capabilities, and

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-Diversity Circle member
Matthew Geisler*

University of Wisconsin System Holds LGBT Conference

On April 22nd, Roseann Mason, the Director of the Diversity Circle Program in the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, attended a UW system conference about LGBT issues. LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, and Transgender, and there are many people in the UW-Parkside community who fall into one of these categories. As a result, Mason felt it would be a good idea to take part in the conference so that she could learn more about the struggles LGBT people face and improve the Diversity Circle curriculum. While at the conference, she attended sessions on LGBT inclusivity in the classroom and teaching LGBT texts in general literature courses. Mason also presented a session on conducting Diversity Circles that pertain to sexual orientation. All in all, the conference proved to be very useful and informative, and the Diversity Circle program at UW-Parkside will surely benefit from Mason's newfound knowledge.

UW-IRE Holds Informative Conference at UW-Milwaukee

On April 6-7th, 2006, the University of Wisconsin System Institute on Race and Ethnicity (UW-IRE) held a conference on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus. The conference was called "Enriching Racial/Ethnic Studies: Health, Education, and Cultural Knowledge," and it involved several sessions that looked at various issues pertaining to diversity. While attending the conference, Roseann Mason, the Director of the Diversity Circle Program in the Center for Community Partnerships at UW-Parkside, along with teacher Kathy Reyheart, presented feedback from a reading seminar they conducted at the Racine Correctional Institution (RCI). During their presentation, they explained what the course entailed and why it was beneficial for the inmates to take part in it.

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quiring is invaluable, and as a result, most of them are willing to deal with the harsh topics that are examined. They realize that learning the truth may not be fun, but they are better people because of it.

“My view of America as a democracy has changed as a result of this course,” says one inmate.

“[I’ve learned] how laws and acts were passed and put into place. [I’ve learned that] some [were] fair, some unfair...”

Adds another, “By teaching the truth about America and its [diverse]...cultures, I believe [we]

will come to understand and realize we all have a lot in common and [then] learn from one another.”

In addition, both Mason and Reyheart are proud to be teaching a course that looks at some of the crucial issues that exist in our society because they understand how helpful talking about these issues can be.

“...So many people do not know the truth about the history of our country from a multicultural perspective, and everyone needs to know [about it,]” explains Reyheart.

Ultimately, the course has proven to be a huge success, and Reyheart hopes that more sections of the

course will be taught in the future.

“I have had many requests from other students who are interested in taking this course if [it is] offered again,” she says. “I would like to see this course offered at RCI on a regular basis.”

During the course’s final meeting will be on May 22nd, the participants received certificates to commend them for all the hard work they have put in during the semester.

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they recognize the incredible impact the Circle has had on them personally.

“Each experience that has been shared with the group has given me a...different...insight to reflect upon later,” says Maleske. “After each session my awareness seems to be heightened. I [now] have a better appreciation for differences and value situations that respect these differences.”

Because sessions have been going so well thus far, the members hope their accomplishments will inspire other Park High School teachers to

start their own Diversity Circles.

With the emergence of more Circles, Geisler knows that the school can be changed drastically for the better.

“I...have renewed hope that the staff of a large, urban high school can work together and truly improve the climate of the school,” he says.

The group plans to continue with sessions for the next few weeks, and many members are planning to take part in other Circles in the fall.