

# Diversity Circles

## *Dialogue, Action, Change*

March 2006

### Annual Diversity Circles In Action Conference Comes to UW-Parkside



*Students enjoy the Diversity Café at the annual conference.*

March 16th marked the date of the fourth annual Diversity Circles in Action Conference for high school students held at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. In the past, the conferences have proven to be invaluable by getting students to open up about some very important issues, such as race, gender, etc. and this conference was no different. Students took advantage

of the time they were given, and in the end, the conference was a big success.

All in all, eleven high schools sent students to participate, and there were about 350 total participants.

Upon their arrival, the students were greeted by the sound of pop/rock music, and signs posted everywhere reminded them of things like "Opening up to others opens others up," and "Keep an open mind." These little touches helped increase enthusiasm and made the students feel more at home.

In fact, when walking into the room, Horlick High School eleventh grader

Danielle Johnson exclaimed, "I know it's going to be an awesome experience for everyone! It [will] bring them all together in one room."

After a brief speech by the conference's keynote speakers, Claudia Chender and Sera Thompson, the day started off with a Diversity Café. During the café, students sat at tables with random groups of their peers and discussed important topics that were raised by Chender and Thompson, such as "What could we do differently to create a culture of tolerance and dignity

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### Keynote Speakers Kick Off Diversity Conference



*Speaker Sera Thompson warms up the crowd at the Diversity Café.*

This year, the Southeastern Wisconsin Diversity Circle in Action Conference had two special people fly in to help get the conference off on the right foot. Claudia Chender and Sera Thompson both have spent a lot of time working to promote diversity, and to-

gether they have hosted "dozens" of World Café's to help people open up about the issue. Since they have done so much work in the field, it seemed they were the perfect people to host the Diversity Café because they would get students motivated and excited about

the day's topics.

Says UW-Parkside Diversity Circle director Roseann Mason, "I had seen them in action last summer at a workshop. I thought they were young and very dynamic, and they have a lot of experience with the World Café style."

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## Study Circles Center Sends Observer to Diversity Conference



*Deputy Communication Director  
Carrie Boron*

This year, the Southeastern Wisconsin Diversity Circles in Action Conference held at UW-Parkside had a very special guest come to witness firsthand the events of the day. Carrie Boron flew in from the Study Circles Resource Center in Connecticut, which is the national affiliate of the UW-Parkside Diversity Circle program. She was sent by the center to observe and record her opinions about the day's activities as well as to interview some of the participating students to see how they felt the conference was going.

Upon first arriving at the conference,

Boron was taken aback by how large the number of attending students was.

"I am amazed at how many students are here; I had no idea it would be so big!" she exclaimed. "It's great to see so much come out of diversity."

Boron spent the first part of the morning walking around the Diversity Café and taking in the depth of the students' conversations. Afterwards, she went to various sessions to see just how they were performed and to talk to the students who were hosting them. All in

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*Students enjoy an interesting conversation during one of the morning's sessions.*

converse with a new group about a different topic.

Throughout the Café, the lack of adult interference proved to be a very good thing. Students appeared to get a sense of their own importance, and they were much more willing to offer up their own opinions.

Said Chender, "I get happiness from creating spaces where [students] can talk to each other. I want to change the pattern of just sitting and listening."

Added Waterford High School senior Cheryl Choice, "[The café] brings the topics into view and opens up the discussion. Instead of being lectured at, we can give our points of view."

With the end of the café came the start of the first of three sessions to be held that day. During each session, students opted to go to different rooms on campus to listen to and take part in various student-led discussions. Each session lasted 45 minutes, and a plethora of topics was discussed. For example, senior Xavier Marquez chose to host a session promoting the importance of student voting.

"Once you turn 18, there's a lot of things you can vote for," he advised students. "[Be sure to] take advantage of that right."

Students next changed rooms in order to participate

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*-Keynote Speaker  
Claudia Chender*

in our families, schools, and communities?" and "Tell a story of a time when you felt (or witnessed someone being) left out or dismissed. Why do we treat each other like this?" The tables were set up café style with carnations, bowls of jolly ranchers, paper, markers, etc. and each group's discussion was student led. After spending some time talking about each issue, students then moved to a new table to

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all, she seemed very impressed with the layout and style of the conference.

“In Study Circles, we gear the dialogue for community change,” she said. “The World Café [and the sessions] are great because people jump right in [without a set dialogue.] They’re a great first step [toward more understanding.]”

Since the conference, Bo-

ron has been working on an article chronicling all that she saw, and she hopes to see more conferences praising diversity and promoting community change in the future.

“A community can only be healthy if everyone is communicating and working together,” she says. “The best results always come from a diverse set of viewpoints.”

**To view Carrie’s article, go to [www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org).**



Boron, seated at left, sits in on the “Why Vote?” session hosted by Xavier Marquez.

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Both Chender and Thompson have lived and worked in the United States and Canada, and Thompson has done some work in Southern Africa as well. In addition, both are active members of the Shambhala Institute, which explores meditation based on the philosophies of Tibetan-Buddhism. Looking at all the places to which they have been, one can see that all their worldly experiences have undoubtedly helped them to better understand the importance of celebrating differences and accepting others.

Says Thompson, “[Diversity] is one of the most important social changing issues. People need to honor who they are to accomplish

things together.”

Adds Chender, “I think [diversity] conversations are important everywhere, all the time. We’re in a time where we need to relearn to communicate...[Conversation] gives people a fresh perspective...You start to see the similarities and the possibilities.”

Educationally, Chender has a background in anthropology, law, and political science, and Thompson has studied environmental conservation. However, both seem most committed to continuing their work with World Cafés and other similar activities. They have seen the positive results that can come from opening up about people’s differences, and as a result, they have

found that leading such discussions can be very rewarding.

“It’s work that is about inviting out the best in people, and to do that, you must invite out the best in yourself,” claims Thompson. “I feel that I have grown immensely as a person.”

What’s more, Chender and Thompson are enthusiastic about encouraging young people to start a tradition of acceptance and tolerance, and they feel that World Cafés are very helpful in this area.

Says Chender, “I hope all the students who attended take a minute in the next day or week to think about how they can be part of a solution. [World Cafés] invite a greater

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*“[Diversity] is one of the most important social changing issues. People need to honor who they are to accomplish things together.”*

*-Keynote Speaker  
Sera Thompson*

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in the second session of the morning, and most seemed encouraged by how well the first set of discussions had gone.

Noted Waterford High School junior Korey Hodges, “People [seem to be] learning about each other and learning how to resolve issues they didn’t know they had. People from different backgrounds and schools who wouldn’t interact normally are sharing ideas on common topics.”

Continuing with the smooth progression of the day, students next took a

break to have lunch and to listen to the amazing drumming circles led by Tom Gill. While almost everyone seemed to be enjoying the musical performance of the day, some students still took time out to talk about the importance of the conversations students were having during the conference.

Burlington High School senior Alyssa Rodriguez claimed, “There’s a need [for conferences] because people don’t like to talk about issues. Many people don’t know what to do or

how to act when they come in contact with a person of another race or culture.”

Added Horlick High School junior Rosa Lopez, “Not everybody sees things the same way so we need to understand why different people react like they do.”

Following lunch, students were whisked off to their final session where topics such as “Teens and Materialism” and “White Privilege” were looked into, and then it was time for students to return to their respective high schools. Nevertheless, many seemed eager to share what they

learned and to start their own discussions once they returned to their home campuses.

Said Danielle Johnson, “[Discussions] will make students and teachers realize what they are doing wrong so that they can change it...”

Added Korey Hodges, “It will be impossible not to use my new skills and knowledge every day in dealing with people.”

The cost of the conference was \$10, and another Diversity Circles in Action Conference is already being planned for next year.

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level of self-awareness and create spaces where [students] can talk to each other.”

Adds Thompson, “[Cafés] help kids to be aware of their impact, to look for the best, and to go into every conversation with something to learn.”

In the coming months, Chender and Thompson will be working on a strategic planning process for a student union at a school in Canada, and next summer they will be working on an authentic leadership program. Their dedication to making a difference

never wavers, and we are sure to see even bigger things from them in the future.



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