

Letter to the Editor (STAR LEDGER)

12/12/11

It's No Laughing Matter

There is something called the "Cycle of Prejudice" where individuals or groups are not depicted in fair ways, and it's no laughing matter.

Here's how it goes. The "Cycle" starts with Conditioning (what early messages do we receive about others who are different); Thoughts and Expectations (what we think and expect of people when we label them, like on the map); Deliberate Avoidance (staying away from people who are different; whom we fear or don't "like"); Verbal Dehumanization (name calling, labeling, taking away humanity, like on the map); Physical Violence (moving from one level to the next can lead to violence – like broken store windows in Highland Park recently); Institutional Bias (we put systems in place in society which discriminate against those who are different (think about voting restrictions in the 60's); and Life Threatening Acts (murder, suicide, genocide based on bias and prejudice).

Now let's look at the colorful map published in the December 8th article "Trying Comedy in Cartography". It looks cute; sounds witty or clever. But for those who are targets of the "joke" – the name-calling or the labeling, it's just not funny.

So according to map, we know where "Asians" live; "sad Black people" live; "Italian guys" live; "Jews" live; "Indians" (who by the way are Asian unless the meaning is for Native Americans) live; "poor minorities" live; and, oh yes "friendly white families."

Interesting how the positive connotation is aligned with white.

This is all very interesting because according to the, Census New Jersey is 40% minority.

19.7% NJ residents are foreign born (12.4% for US) and 27.6% NJ residents (aged 5+) speak a language other than English at home (19.6% for US) according to the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Division of Labor Market and Demographic Research, May 26, 2011.

If we don't find a way to get past the stereotypes of the color-coded map, our New Jersey society will sure have issues when, in the not too distant future, we become a "majority of minorities" state.

Some pertinent questions: How will all of that diversity be described? How will we get past the stereotyping that leads to divisiveness and is the basis of prejudice, bullying and discrimination? You can dress it up in pretty colors; try to make a joke of it; say it's all in fun but ultimately, it's no laughing matter.

And it sure won't be funny to future employers who are looking for people who can work with and lead diverse teams; help companies and business achieve their goals.

The American Conference on Diversity is a human relations organization which works to value diversity, educate leaders and promote respect. Our society certainly needs people who can treat others with respect.

Clever at the expense of others doesn't and shouldn't make us laugh.

Sincerely,

Diane Schwartz
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