



Is she a racist? A dialogue begins

Cathy Salustri's admission has drawn a spectrum of emotional responses.

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Reader response to Cathy Salustri's story

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The St. Petersburg Times recently detailed how two years in predominantly black Bartlett Park unmasked the budding racist in Cathy Salustri, a 34-year-old white woman seemingly oblivious to race for most of her life.

Salustri's story pierced readers, black and white, prejudiced and tolerant.

Salustri gave a frank account - in the newspaper she writes for, the Gulfport Gabber, and then in the Times - of living in the predominantly black St. Petersburg neighborhood and having things stolen, and starting to feel like all black people were bad. "I'm a white woman living in a black neighborhood," she wrote, "and I'm turning into a racist because of it."

WLLD-FM 98.7 devoted a half-hour to the topic on Friday's *Orlando & the Freak Show*. Reaction poured onto the Times' [Tampabay.com](#) and other Web forums.

In Salustri's initial openness and eventual intolerance, people saw pieces of themselves. Their naked outpourings, some anonymous and some signed, could be hard to read.

They were ugly.

Jim: *You can take them out of the jungle but cant take the jungle out of them.*

Unforgiving.

Shelly: *Cathy is the most illogical human being on the planet . . . and thats a lot of people to beat.*

Thoughtful.

Leonard Roberts, black, Tampa: *The sooner whites like Ms. Salustri can accept the fact that black people are not The Borg, that we do not share a collective conscious, and that we are not all driven by the same factors, the sooner we as a country can come to some sort of progressive discourse about this arbitrary thing called race in America.*

But why did one woman's story prompt so much response, elicit so much passion, tick off so many people?

"Race relations and talking about race is taboo still, " said Birgit Van Hout, the executive director of Community Tampa Bay, an organization that promotes cross-cultural and religious conversations. "When something like this happens, all of a sudden there is an opportunity for people to share their views, incidents they experience."

Salustri's story prompted an unfiltered conversation. It laid bare secret thoughts, things we wish we had the courage to say and things we wish we didn't think. It's what the dialogue on race really looks like.

It's real.

Andrew: *Too bad we can't send them all back to Africa.*

Skeptical.

Tina Newsome, black, St. Petersburg: *Something that small cannot turn a white person into a racist. She already felt that way.*

Arrogant.

angrygoy: *Just another stupid white guilt essay. Any white who lives in a black neighborhood deserves to see what real black are like.*

Harsh.

Cpt. Cacuya: *Let's face it, most blacks growing up don't have a father, are poor, and have too many siblings. If the mother is on welfare and has six kids, what shot do these kids have at anything? It takes a special person to rise up from the ghetto quicksand.*

Outlandish.

Jalesha: *Cathy was probably messing with somebody's man. Why else would a white woman move into an all black neighborhood?*

Uninformed.

Sue: *Let's face it, too many blacks like living in squalor and believe they're owed a living. The more you give the more they take.*

The responses didn't surprise Van Hout, of Community Tampa Bay. They saddened her. "People hold deep-rooted feelings of hatred," she said. "It shows how much prejudice there is in our community and how important it is we address that."

Some of it is self-inflicted.

Kaleb: *Im black and i think black people are crazy. U betta watch yo back, teenage brothers are the craziest on earth!*

Reciprocal.

Gilbert: *Who buys the most filthy rap songs? White males. Who has the fastest growing out of wedlock births in the past 10 years? White teenage girls. I can go on and on.*

Complicated.

Mark Waldbart, white: *It's not the color of the persons skin that creates the crime, drug infested areas. It's the poor socio-economic, underprivileged and uneducated class.*

Let's not pick at the scab; try working on the root cause, and do not confuse the issue with race.

Arbitrary.

Melissa: Black people wonder why racism exists. Bad apples that drop out of school, have 8 kids, spend their welfare money on drugs, jewelry, rims, etc. They make people think in a racist manner. I feel bad for the educated blacks that are lumped with them.

Unsympathetic.

Justin Sheehan, white, Tampa: If this woman looked a little deeper and tried to put herself in other people's shoes rather than how the world revolves around her she would see that the roots of poverty stole her things. . . . Make no mistake, she made herself a racist by choice.

Even optimistic.

Tony Grier, black, Tampa: I want to contact Cathy to help her.

Reactions like Grier's surprised Salustri most.

Her black neighbors - the same ones she stereotyped - ran to her defense. They called in to Orlando's show and denied she was a racist.

"The few neighbors I do know responded to some very hurtful statements with love," Salustri said, "with such a sense of community."

Then a white supremacist group e-mailed her. Members were discussing the Times article on the group's message board. She skimmed the comments, all of which were unprintable. They made her feel sick.

She realized she didn't want to become one of them.

So this week, she removed the red "FOR SALE" sign outside her house.

Maybe, she thought, Bartlett Park isn't so bad after all.

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