



Our bias slips out without warning

By ERNEST HOOPER

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Like a skip on a CD, it can interrupt the flow of the most pleasant conversation.

You may find yourself engaged and captivated by the banter between you and a friend when suddenly he lets slip a stinging stereotype or disheartening discriminatory remark.

How many times have you pretended you didn't hear it? How many times have you cringed and paused and thought, "I should tell him that comment was wrong?"

How many times have you been the one making the comment? I know I've been guilty on both accounts.

This is one of the topics likely to be discussed at Wednesday evening's symposium at Eckerd College titled "How Did You Grow Up?" The free program, from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m., is a collaborative effort between 10 local organizations and is designed to commemorate March 21 as United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

It's difficult to call out the friend who callously slanders an entire ethnic group, and even more difficult to look in the mirror and question your own biases.

You can dismiss it as an aberration, or you can delve deep into your psyche and do a little housecleaning.

"It takes courage to stand up to that because you have people you love and like and admire, and then all of a sudden they say something like that," said Birgit Van Hout, executive director of Community Tampa Bay.

Instead of having one expert endow the group with wisdom, the symposium in Fox Hall will stimulate conversation among all in attendance. The 250 participants will be divided into 25 tables, and each table will have a facilitator to raise issues and document eye-opening observations.

"We wanted to make this interactive and participatory so people could realize they can take a step toward eliminating racism in the smallest personal way," said event chairwoman Alizza Punzalan-Hall, director of media and community relations for Eckerd College.

The emphasis on upbringing draws upon the common thread each of us has in our background. The influences of parents, friends and environment are substantial, and while the specific impact varies from person to person, it should make for a good starting point.

"It's not academic, it's not complex," Punzalan-Hall said.

The list of facilitators is as diverse as Tampa Bay, and includes University of South Florida professor and former Community Tampa Bay executive director Roy Kaplan, Beth-El Rabbi Michael Torop, Mount Zion Pastor Louis Murphy, Council on Arab-Islamic Relations executive director Ahmed Bedier, WMNF-FM 88.5 news director Rob Lorei and [Studio@620](#) co-founder Bob Devin Jones.

Jones also will read three original narratives related to the topic.

I welcome the dialogue and applaud the organizers. The fact that preregistration has neared capacity indicates people have a need to discuss these issues. To RSVP, call 727-864-8297 or e-mail march21@eckerd.edu.)

Eliminating racial discrimination might seem like too lofty a goal in a community where hate groups still thrive and bigotry can be heard on any random radio talk show.

I mean, it's about as attainable as erasing Jim Crow laws from our statutes or ending apartheid in South Africa.

That's all I'm saying.

