Talk about race

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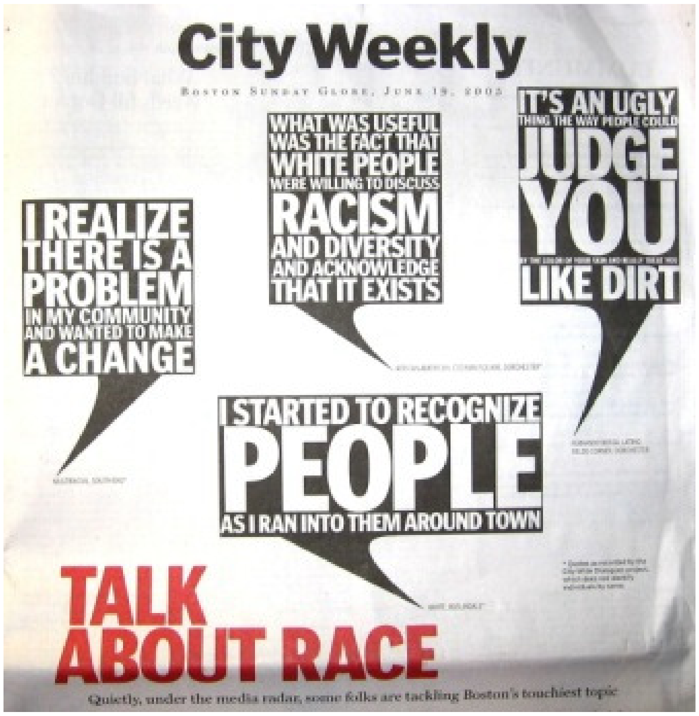
By Christine MacDonald, Globe Correspondent



City Weekly

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE, JUNE 19, 2005

I REALIZE THERE IS A PROBLEM IN MY COMMUNITY AND WANTED TO MAKE A CHANGE

WHAT WAS USEFUL WAS THE FACT THAT WHITE PEOPLE WERE WILLING TO DISCUSS RACISM AND DIVERSITY AND ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IT EXISTS

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TALK ABOUT RACE

Quietly, under the media radar, some folks are tackling Boston's touchiest topic

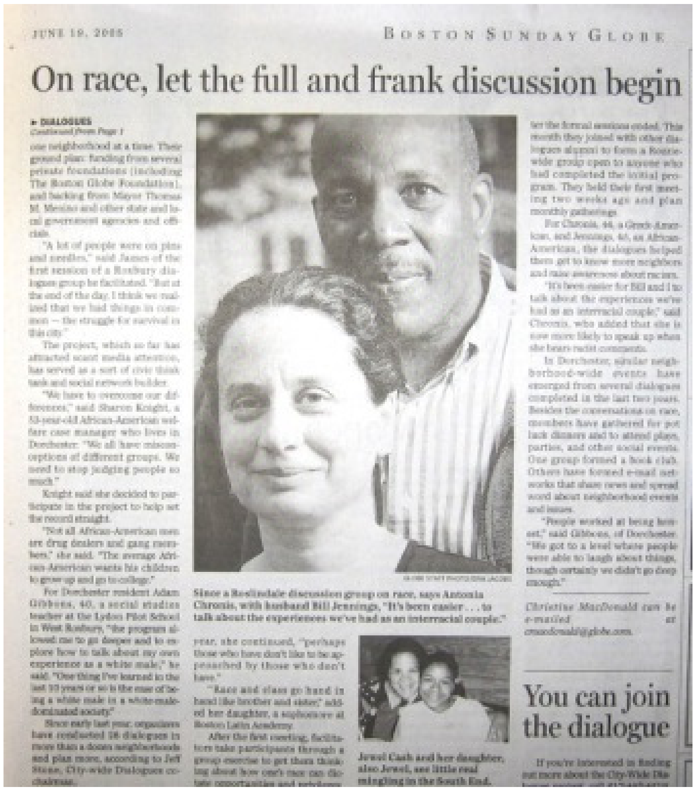
As a black child riding a school bus from Roxbury to East Boston in the 1970s, recalls Michael James, he was frightened by stone-throwing whites protesting forced school desegregation.

As one of the few white children growing up in the Bromley-Heath public housing project, says Paul MacEachern, he often got into fights with other white boys, who picked on him for hanging around with African-Americans.

As a member of one of the first Latino families to move into the Fields Corner section of Dorchester, says Fernando Bossa, he was spit on as a boy, called names, chased by kids with bats, and told repeatedly that he should go back to where he came from.

"It's an ugly thing the way people could judge you by the color of your skin and really treat you like dirt," Bossa says.

Today minorities make up the majority of residents in a city that has gone, according to the US Census, from predominantly white to multiracial and multicultural in recent decades. While this diversity is sometimes touted as one of Boston's strengths, many residents and community leaders lament that people from different races, economic brackets, and lifestyles often share the same city blocks without acknowledging one another's existence.



JUNE 19, 2005 BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE

On race, let the full and frank discussion begin

You can join the dialogue

So James, Bossa, MacEachern, and a few hundred others have set out to build bridges between different groups and make Boston a more neighborly place for all of its residents.

As participants in City-Wide Dialogues on Boston's Ethnic & Racial Diversity, they aim to have frank conversations about the often painful, even unspeakable topic of race. Since the project's launch in late 2003, about 450 people have taken part.

The goal: to attack the city's stubborn standoffishness, ease tensions, and build civic trust one neighborhood at a time. Their ground plan: funding from several private foundations (including The Boston Globe Foundation), and backing from Mayor Thomas M. Menino and other state and local government agencies and officials.

"A lot of people were on pins and needles," said James of the first session of a Roxbury dialogues group he facilitated. "But at the end of the day, I think we realized that we had things in common -- the struggle for survival in this city."

The project, which so far has attracted scant media attention, has served as a sort of civic think tank and social network builder.

"We have to overcome our differences," said Sharon Knight, a 53-year-old African-American welfare case manager who lives in Dorchester. "We all have misconceptions of different groups. We need to stop judging people so much."

Knight said she decided to participate in the project to help set the record straight.

"Not all African-American men are drug dealers and gang members," she said. "The average African-American wants his children to grow up and go to college."

For Dorchester resident Adam Gibbons, 40, a social studies teacher at the Lydon Pilot School in West Roxbury, "the program allowed me to go deeper and to explore how to talk about my own experience as a white male," he said. "One thing I've learned in the last 10 years or so is the ease of being a white male in a white-male-dominated society."

Since early last year, organizers have conducted 28 dialogues in more than a dozen neighborhoods and plan more, according to Jeff Stone, City-wide Dialogues co-chairman.

"Originally the goal was to get 1,000 people to participate. We didn't have long-term plans," Stone said. "Now we've written grants and plan to continue" running dialogues in Boston neighborhoods, along with multi-neighborhood dialogues launched for the first time this spring. Next year, Stone added, the organization may add groups that bring together urban and suburban residents to build relationships that could lead to better regional cooperation, he said.

"We are creating the space," he said, "so people can finally have these conversations, but in a respectful way, neighborhood by neighborhood."

Each group meets four or five times for about two hours each. To assure that everyone has a say and no one dominates the conversation, the exchanges are led by facilitators trained in a dialogue model developed by the organization's steering committee.

Creating cross-cultural relationships is a particularly difficult task, notes Jamaica Plain resident Wendy Loveland, 41, a white marketing executive who joined the initiative hoping to strike up neighborly relationships beyond the block where she lives with her partner, Margaret Williams. The two were married last year.

"In Jamaica Plain there are white neighborhoods and Latino neighborhoods. . . . It's not integrated because of the price of housing. So people don't socialize," says Loveland. "We don't know how to bridge the gap between people from one side of Centre Street to the other side of Centre Street."

Longtime Villa Victoria residents Jewel Cash and her 15-year-old daughter, also Jewel, say the same is true in the South End. Gay and straight people, residents of housing projects and those who are affluent -- all share the same turf but rarely interact, they said.

"Only on Halloween does everyone sit out on their stoops and talk to each other. It's beautiful," said the elder Cash. The rest of the year, she continued, "perhaps those who have don't like to be approached by those who don't have."

"Race and class go hand in hand like brother and sister," added her daughter, a sophomore at Boston Latin Academy.

After the first meeting, facilitators take participants through a group exercise to get them thinking about how one's race can dictate opportunities and privileges. Have they ever been followed around a retail store by a security guard? Been evicted from a childhood home because their parents couldn't make the rent? Did they attend public or private schools?

"I think some people might have felt guilty about doing well," said Melida Arredondo, 39, of the exercise in which people had to reflect on how race often dictates opportunities. The Roslindale resident of Costa Rican descent said the exercise angered her by highlighting her disadvantage as a minority.

"I've been taught the American way that I can get ahead, and it's really not the case," she said. "There are still a lot of barriers."

The discussions varied from neighborhood to neighborhood, depending on the changes underway in each place and the experiences participants brought with them.

"A lot of people were really skeptical," said Michael James, 39, who as a child faced whites who threw stones at his school bus and now, as a diversity consultant, led a Roxbury group's discussions. "They thought there was a hidden agenda. It took a long time to get past that and to a level of comfort.

"It did not happen until we got into the adversarial issues," he continued. "People were saying things that were politically incorrect. That's when things opened up."

One man in the group brought a Pulitzer Prize-winning news photograph from 1976. It showed a white youth thrusting the pointy end of a flag pole toward a black man during a busing protest that turned violent outside City Hall. (The victim, not so incidentally, was Ted Landsmark, who in 2003 would be named chairman of a task force that recommended changes to the school assigning process so more students would have a shot at attending high quality schools in their neighborhood.)

"Everybody in the room -- no matter their race -- was appalled," James recalled. "It accelerated the conversation. It was like: 'We do have something in common. We don't want this to ever happen again.' People started sharing."

In contrast, a predominantly white South Boston group of longtime and newer residents of the neighborhood, which played a central role in the busing crisis, didn't discuss busing except in passing, according to Rebecca Cheezum, a white former South Boston resident, who presided over the group.

"Since there wasn't much representation of people of color, class issues were a big topic. They talked a lot about the escalating cost of living being brought on by the high cost of real estate in South Boston," she said. "Some people there recognized that although they were white, they hadn't had all the opportunities other whites had."

And there were generational differences, too. Roslindale's Arredondo said she was struck that her stepson Brian, 16 when he participated, was less concerned about racism than were older members of the group. For the Cashes too, mother and daughter had different perspectives, they said.

"I'm coming from a different generation that hasn't gone through that hatred," said the younger Cash, who was born in 1989 and has experienced the busing crisis only through books and movies.

Racism does seep into student life, Cash said. But students in the Boston Public Schools, where nearly nine in every 10 are persons of color, may be better prepared than their parents to confront and engage issues of racism, she said.

For example, Cash said she recently confronted a South Boston classmate who made a comment about African-Americans that she found racist. The boy later apologized to her and the class. More common than racial confrontations, she said, are cross-cultural friendships.

"Socially, I don't think race plays that big a role. If you are black you will have at least one Asian and one white friend," she said. "I see Asian people who are more ghetto than me. Then, you have some black kids who are very preppy."

All the participants interviewed were enthusiastic about the dialogues and said they developed genuine friendships, even with participants with whom they had clashed. But they nearly all agreed that the four- to six-week initiatives only began what must be an ongoing effort.

Bossa, who as a Latino child in Dorchester experienced racism firsthand and is today a community activist and host of a bilingual television show on the Boston Neighborhood Network, said his group lost momentum after the formal dialogues sessions ended. Several groups also dwindled despite efforts to keep meeting, participants said.

Others, like the Roslindale group joined by Antonia Chronis and her husband, Bill Jennings, continued meeting for months after the formal sessions ended. This month they joined with other dialogues alumni to form a Rozzie-wide group open to anyone who had completed the initial program. They held their first meeting two weeks ago and plan monthly gatherings.

For Chronis, 44, a Greek-American, and Jennings, 45, an African-American, the dialogues helped them get to know more neighbors and raise awareness about racism.

"It's been easier for Bill and I to talk about the experiences we've had as an interracial couple," said Chronis, who added that she is now more likely to speak up when she hears racist comments.

In Dorchester, similar neighborhood-wide events have emerged from several dialogues completed in the last two years. Besides the conversations on race, members have gathered for pot luck dinners and to attend plays, parties, and other social events. One group formed a book club. Others have formed e-mail networks that share news and spread word about neighborhood events and issues.

"People worked at being honest," said Gibbons, of Dorchester. "We got to a level where people were able to laugh about things, though certainly we didn't go deep enough."

Christine MacDonald can be e-mailed at cmacdonald@globe.com.