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Lamorinda community works to defend DEIB work

By Sharon K. Sobotta

As pushback against affirmative diversity, equity and inclusion practices show up in Lamorinda along with fears about critical race theory being a part of the academy, allies, educators, students and parents call on the community to move forward not backward.

Parents in the Diversity Equity & Inclusion committee at Campolindo High School aren't surprised about the Oct. 27 Lamorinda Weekly letter to the editor raising a red flag about local DEI efforts, as they'd already read similar messages in neighborhood social media platforms and heard similar resistance in school board meetings. Yet, they say they are not willing to go backwards.

"There's so much momentum in the school(s) right now around diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. It's the students, it's most of the teachers, the admin and the board. And then people on the other side (seem to be worried) that they're losing their grasp on what they believe school should be," Robert Schwartz, the DEI Campolindo co-chair says.

Nick Harris, a Saint Mary's College student, says the critical race theory class he takes on campus helps him make more sense of the community he lives in. As a 6'4" tall athletic African American guy, Harris says he notices the discomfort of others when he's out running or grocery shopping in Moraga. "When I'm at Safeway, I tend to have my backpack that says Saint Mary's on it. It's like my right of passage as an African American to be in this community."

Harris says he also takes extra steps if he's ever pulled over by a police officer anywhere in the country by keeping his hands on the steering wheel, his keys out of the ignition and his license and registration in sight at all times. In terms of the pushback about critical race theory courses, Harris says it leaves him with more questions than answers. "Why would we not teach the truth? I don't understand why we would doctor (or tamper with) history?"

The DEI committee members say experiences like the ones Harris describes underscore the importance of DEI work in the Lamorinda community. "Perception is reality. We can't deny people the experiences that they're having," Schwartz says. "There is increasing engagement now. It's going to take time but it is changing."

Anne Naffziger, the other parent DEI co-chair at Campolindo, says that diversity, equity and inclusion work is good for everyone, even white children whose roots are in Lamorinda. "These kids will need the tools to either be good citizens of this town or to go off in the world and be good citizens somewhere else," Naffziger says. "It baffles me that the work of making Campolindo and other schools in the area more inclusive for all students could be negative in the eyes of any parent (or community member)."

In terms of the critical race theory pushback that's happening across the country, Naffziger and Schwartz aren't surprised that the resistance has seeped into Lamorinda. "When you look at the term critical race theory, very few people are going to argue that school should teach kids to think critically, and very few people are going to argue that school should teach kids different theories, and how to examine a theory and look for evidence of that," Schwartz says. "So what is it all about? It's about the word race."

Gender and Race Sociologist Cynthia Ganote, a former professor at Saint Mary's College, says that resistance to critical race theory is the result of fears not facts. "CRT is a specific theory that explains systemic racism," Ganote says. "Most people had never heard of it before Christopher Rufo appeared on the Tucker Carlson show claiming (incorrectly) that it posed an existential threat to the United States."

That, Ganote says, ignited a national fear campaign based on misinformation and mischaracterization of facts used to divide an already divided nation even further. Since then, 28 states have introduced legislation to regulate critical race theory. Ganote says regulating the teaching of history and context as it relates to race in the classroom is an injustice to education as a whole. The part that's most concerning to scholars like Ganote is the widespread efforts by political leaders to make the term critical race theory inflammatory without ever telling people what it actually is.

"(People like Christopher Rufo spread the claim that) CRT causes white people to be bullied or shamed. It doesn't. (They say) that it's being used to bash our American history. It's not. (They say this while) never presenting what CRT actually is."

Ganote says that in order to truly understand and dismantle issues like racism, it's necessary to get beyond the "one bad apple" approach and look at institutions at a systems level. "We need to get beyond individualistic thinking, beyond blaming and shaming. We can make our institutions more inclusive, we can make them fair and equitable for everyone," Ganote says. "We have to be able to use these analytical lenses and see where racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism exist and make our policies better as we grow into, as was named in our constitution, a more perfect union all of the time."

Lynn MacMichael is a proud member of the Lafayette city committee on diversity, equity and inclusion. She's been on a mission to make the town feel like and be a home for all since she moved here in 1969.

MacMichael has advocated for inclusive representations and murals of art, affordable housing so that people of all backgrounds and income levels can live in this community and so that those who work here can afford to live here. And, she is cheering the schools on as they work to make their curriculum and policies more inclusive. MacMichael has lived through segregation and interracial violence, which is why she's encouraging the Acalanes Union High School District to keep moving in the direction they're going and resist pressure of naysayers.

"I was 8 years old, living in St. Louis. My dad brought me to Clayton pool on a hot day," MacMichael, who is white, recalls. "At the time black people had no place to swim." MacMichael recalls the violence that erupted when some black people attempted to swim on that particular very hot day. "(They were hit by) bats and

hammers. Everybody was bloody," MacMichael says. "I never forgot that. I never read that and it deserved to be in a history book. Watching local schools take this on and tell the truth about our history, so we can do better and not repeat those same mistakes is a wonderful thing."

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