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White privilege demystified

FEBRUARY 8, 2009

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TOMS RIVER

ADVERTISEMENT The man arrived early and sat in the front row. He had a clipboard on his lap, lots of notes. He crossed his legs and clenched his jaw.

He had come to the Ocean County Library fully prepared to engage the enemy at an open seminar, White Privilege 101. There might have been 50 other people in the room, but only he would have the facts and figures at his fingertips.

He was loaded for bear.

"Every once in a while, I'll have people come to these things like that," said Art Munin, a young professor from DePaul University who put on the seminar. "But no, it's not typical that they come that prepared.

"I have to give him credit for being there, though. I know this kind of discussion can be stressful for some people."

In fact, the man in the front row was one of only three people in the room who seemed in any way put off or bothered by the idea that someone might think white folks have privileges in our society simply by virtue of their skin color.

All three of the people raising objections during the course of the discussion were older. All three were male. All three were white.

One of these men said he never realized he was the beneficiary of such privilege. He said he felt bad about this. He was 71 years old, and suddenly, for the first time in his life, he felt guilty.

"I thought that man was sweet," said Laura Rickards, the director of the Educational Opportunity Fund and Office of Multicultural Services at Ocean County College. OCC is holding a seminar on white privilege March 19.

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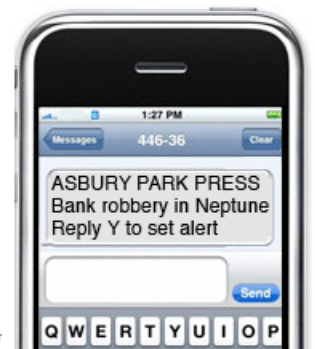
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"He never heard anyone talk about this," Rickards added. "He wanted to know more. He didn't know that this doesn't mean you're guilty of anything."

ADVERTISEMENT The concept of white privilege is not to be confused with prejudice or racism. Benefiting from white privilege doesn't make you a card-carrying member of the Ku Klux Klan.

Benefiting from white privilege says only one thing about you, that your skin happens to be white and that this is how others see you.

It's the matter of awareness that interests people like Art Munin. So in his power point presentation, he brings up an old editorial cartoon, the one with the little fish being eaten by the medium-sized fish, who in turn is being eaten by the big fish. Little fish: "There is no justice in the world." Medium-sized fish: "There is some justice in the world." Big fish: "The world is just."

The moral of this story is simple. As Munin put it, "The irony of privilege is that nobody knows they're the big fish."

While the irony was not lost on most of the people in the room, others recoiled, as if by reflex. The conversation soon grew lively.

The man in the front row was fighting a lonely battle. He was badly outnumbered. Yet he kept up his one-man protest. Eventually one woman got so frustrated with him that she shouted across the room. "Of course you can't see it," she said. "You're granted that privilege. You're inside it."

If the world seems just to you, how could you know you're the big fish?

"What we were talking about was being played out before us," Kathy DeLorme of Seaside Park would say later. "You could see judgment unfolding, and a lack of tolerance. It was like we were living the topic."

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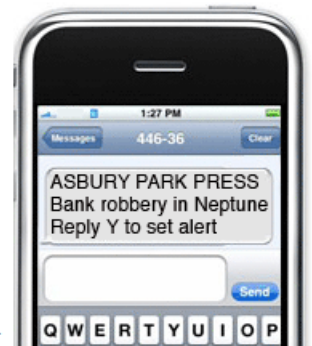
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Ten years ago, when he was a presidential candidate, Bill Bradley delivered a strong speech in the wake of the fatal shooting of Amadou Diallo. "White skin privilege is the flip side of discrimination," he said. "While discrimination is negative and overt, white skin privilege is negative but passive."

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He went on to illustrate his point: What do African American parents tell their children before they hand over the keys to the family car? "The conversation is called DWB, driving while black," Bradley said.

Mainstream politicians don't normally say things like this. There must be some sort of statute that prohibits them from speaking the truth. Maybe that's why Bill Bradley is no longer a mainstream politician.

There are no such rules regulating academics, or eggheads as the man in the front row likes to call them. So Munin was free to explore the historical basis for white privilege, modern-day racial profiling, skewed media representations and other points of interest.

Why was a young black Katrina survivor carrying a bag of food described as a looter on a wire service photo, whereas white people doing the exact same thing had simply "found food," according to the editor who wrote the cutline? Why does possession of five grams of crack carry the same penalty as possession of 500 grams of cocaine? Could it have anything to do with the perception that poor black people smoke crack and only rich white people can afford cocaine?

Munin also got into other brands of privilege — gender privilege, heterosexual privilege, Christian privilege, class privilege, even able-bodied privilege.

These are all things some of us take for granted. Because we can't see what's happening, because we are privileged, because the world is just.

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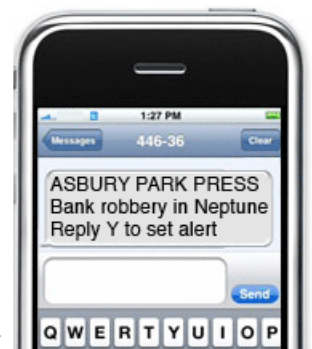
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An hour into the seminar, a kid standing in the back of the room raised his hand. "This stuff doesn't really affect our generation," he said plainly.

ADVERTISEMENT People applauded him, perhaps recognizing the hope he represented.

Timothy Rizvanov is an eighth-grader at Toms River Intermediate North. He is 13 years old. He looks like he belongs on a skateboard. He looks like your average white kid, but he is actually of Euro-Asian descent.

He was there at the library with his mother and two younger brothers. He went to see an art exhibit. He was standing out in the hallway, looking at the paintings, and he heard a sound coming from Mancini Hall.

"I heard people screaming, so I went in to check it out," he explained.

And there were all these adults, shouting at each other across the room.

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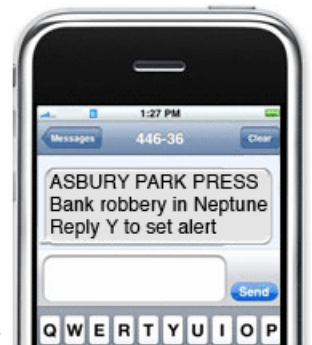
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