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Live, Learn – and Let Live

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Live, Learn – and Let Live

By Anthony Major
UCF Forum columnist
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I grew up in a segregated community in Florida and attended supposedly “separate but equal” schools in a small town that had separate water fountains, bathrooms and even beaches, among other restrictions. We were expected to cross the street when a white woman was approaching and never look a white man in the eyes - that is if you didn’t want to appear defiant.

So after I graduated from high school and moved to New York, I had to become educated very quickly about other cultures and how the big city worked, including my Harlem neighborhood block.

My big-city life lessons came from the streets of New York, but an important one that would serve me throughout my life came from The City College of New York.

The first week of school there was a Jewish holiday - and I was glad to miss a day of classes. In addition to all the traditional holidays, the school observed several more Jewish holidays during the year because most of the faculty was Jewish. This was my first encounter with Jews and the Jewish culture.

I later transferred to Hofstra University in Long Island, N.Y. I not only earned my college degree there, but the experience broadened my education of Jewish culture.

I learned that the Jewish people say “never again.” I understood that to mean that every opportunity they get to teach their history and what they suffered is taken to the highest degree, so racism such as the Holocaust will never be repeated or forgotten. They still

experience anti-Semitism, but have communities, customs, universities, curriculum and resources such as books, paintings, plays and movies to study and present to the world.

My life experiences in New York City, with its diverse population, also educated me on most cultures of the world. I became aware of the differences of other cultures and gained respect for them. I made lifelong friends with a diverse group of people and even obtained more knowledge of my own culture.

I believe a large part of racism directed toward people of African descent, especially males - such as a noose recently found hanging at Duke University, disrespect for the office of the U.S. president, police shootings and the disregard for black life, sometimes in our own communities - is a direct result of the lack of knowledge about the culture of people of African descent and their contributions to society.

The recent rash of shootings by police of unarmed black men around the nation puts a spotlight on this issue. In most of the cases these atrocities were accepted by local officials as justified and the officers were not charged. If we don't take the time to teach and to learn about our fellow citizens, then a group of people - especially young African-American males - will continue to be viewed as "a menace to society" and continue to be ignored, mistreated, disregarded and gunned down, even though they are an important part of the fabric that makes up this great nation.

It is most crucial that Africana studies and African-American studies be supported and not shut down or under-supported. Students, faculty and administrators, along with police, politicians and community leaders need to take mandated courses in Africana history to gain a greater respect and appreciation of the human aspect of a people who have been stripped of their culture.

Corporations need to expand and diversify their boardrooms in order to help in this matter and increase their bottom line. We need Africana studies to be the guiding light to teach its culture to all - as I learned about the Jewish culture - until it is fully included as part of American history.

It is a fact that the story of America cannot be truthfully told without the story of people of African descent. If we are going to close the gap and confront racism, we need to learn and understand others' history and way of life.

If we all can accept that our fear of people who do not look like us is unfounded and grounded in ignorance, and begin to respect all cultures, then America can become the salad bowl it is designed to be. Live, learn - and let live!

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