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In This Era of Racial Divide, How Do We Bridge the Gap?

By Cynthia Schmidt
UCF Forum columnist
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(Photo by Capri23 at Pixabay)

I facilitated an event in the community last year following the screening of the WUCF documentary *The Groveland Four*. I hope everyone is already familiar with the story out of Lake County, Florida. If you are not, then you must read *Devil in the Grove* by Gilbert King, and watch for the documentary to make the film festival circuits and PBS channels.

The 1949 story involved a woman who unjustly accused four young black men of rape. The case led to a race riot, multiple murders, two trials (including a Supreme Court reversal), and the assassination of a well-known civil rights leader and his wife.

But this column is less about the film or the facts of the case, and instead about my experiences as a white facilitator in black spaces, or more broadly, as a white person in black spaces.

This wasn't the first time I have facilitated a conversation about race, but this particular experience has stayed with me. Perhaps it's because the film itself actually depicted some of the atrocities visited upon the black defendants by law enforcement.

Miles Mulrain Jr., a community activist and speaker on the panel, said it is one thing to read about this history in a book, but it is another for young people to watch images of it through film. While watching the film, the audience – almost exclusively black – audibly reacted to the harsher scenes. I wonder, as a white person who has studied race and who has friends and family who are black, if I am left to merely perceive our American racial history as one reads it in a book, whereas to a person of color this history is portrayed in their mind's eye with the painful vibrancy of a live action film?

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So where does that leave us? In this era of racial divide, how do we bridge the gap?

Here's the hard part. Black folks do not bear the burden of creating the bridge. They cannot, as it is already hard enough to be black in America without having to educate white folks along the way. Merely existing as a black person here is enough work. Novelist and social critic James Baldwin said that "To be black and conscious in America is to be in a constant state of rage."

There are two Americas: In one you can get arrested for sitting in a coffee shop or for having a barbecue at a park. In the other America, the one I live in, people are given the benefit of the doubt, and there's virtually no reason to think I can't get a key to the coffee shop bathroom or cook my food in a park. Because it's virtually inconceivable for white folks to have police called on them for merely existing, and because white people are able to surround themselves in white bubbles, it's like we white people are reading the book of racial history and racial current events, while our black countrymen are watching the film, or harder yet, starring in the film.

So how do we white people put the metaphorical book down and get to the point of feeling it like you would with a film, and get closer to breathing this history instead of just catching it peripherally from the corner of our eye?

First, white people would be wise to study up on the topic of race since our nation's school systems do an inadequate job on the topic.

I recommend *White Fragility* by Robin Diangelo. You could read *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson for a deep dive into Jim Crow and the Great Migration. And, of course, *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander is the gold standard. For film I recommend *13th* or videos by anti-racism activist Tim Wise. Whether you agree with the points made you will learn something.

After getting some background, then go into places where you are one of few white people. Visit a black church. Join a traditionally black student organization. Find a Rotary chapter or Lions Club that is predominantly black. Check out the Parramore Farmers Market on the west side of Orlando's downtown.

See what it feels like to be the representative voice of your race, realizing that black folks do that all the time.

Which brings me to my final point. On Aug. 26, UCF and Valencia College will open a joint campus in the Parramore community, which is not sure yet how it will fit into this collegiate space. I challenge the downtown campus to welcome and come to know the people of Parramore.

How will the campus be a good neighbor? How will administrators, faculty, staff and students bridge the racial divide?

Recall that a community existed before the campus showed up.

Cynthia Schmidt wrote this UCF Forum when she was director of the university's Center for Law and Policy in the Department of Legal Studies. She can be reached now at CynthiaSchmidtEsq@gmail.com.