

“Better to Ask a Question Than to Remain Ignorant”

Category: Race

written by Sandra Shea | August 22, 2016

Any class of first-year medical students contains a mix of genders, races, socioeconomic ranges, ages and cultures. We try to convince students their tutor groups are safe places to ask questions and the only bad question is one that isn't asked. Sometimes that openness leads to challenges.

One year some students came by my office to talk about some questions they had been asked that made them feel uncomfortable, questions they felt were racist or insensitive. As it happened, these students were from big cities, specifically Los Angeles and Atlanta. Some of the questions were, “Did you have busing when you were little?” and “Are there gangs in your neighborhood?” I asked how they responded. They said they answered the questions but weren't sure how to say they were upset and felt targeted. When they told me who posed the questions, I realized the questioners were from very small towns, in some cases under 500 citizens.

I sought out the small-town students, many of whom had been raised on farms, and they confirmed they were curious, asking about states they'd never visited and things they'd seen in the news. In the case of Los Angeles, they were curious what it was like to live near an ocean—the rural, midwestern students had never seen an ocean.

One of the rural students added, “Did they tell you the questions they asked us?” When I replied no, they laughed and offered: “What's it like to milk a cow?” “How do you kill your chickens?” “Is it true you don't have a stop light in your town?” One student who was not from a farm felt farmers were being made fun of, but she wasn't sure how to respond to that.

So I gathered the students, and we talked about culture and perception, how television affects our views and how “-isms” exist in many ways. We discussed how the phrasing can cause some questions to be received differently than intended, and how best to respond when someone makes you uncomfortable. Finally, we talked about how we are all naïve about other ways of life, and how, if we maintain respect and sensitivity, asking questions is how we can learn every day of our lives from everybody around us.

*Sandra Shea
Carbondale, Illinois*