

Embracing Diversity

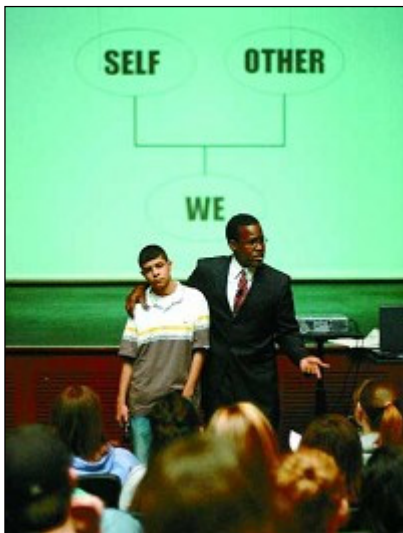
Black scholar urges students to dump racial stereotypes

Kathy Aney

Johnny Lake, a black University of Oregon doctoral student, stood before an auditorium full of mostly-white and Hispanic teenagers at Hermiston High School Thursday morning and messed with their minds.

"Where do you think I'm from," he asked them with a grin.
"Africa," someone yelled out.

"Africa?" he said with mock incredulity. "I don't have African clothes - I'm not wearing an African headdress."



He asked how many students were Irish. Several brave souls raised their hands.

"Are you from Ireland?" he asked them.

They laughed.

His point? Don't make assumptions about people by looking at them.

Lake, who's actually from Tennessee, spoke to several student groups, sharing his observations about diversity. To start, he told them his own story of growing up in the segregated Deep South. Almost

everything, from water fountains to buses to restaurants, was labeled for either black or white use.

Until fourth grade, he attended an all-black school. Everyone - students, teachers, janitors, the ladies who worked in the cafeteria - they were black.

He lived on an all-black street that butted up against an all-white street. The boys gathered and played football at the intersection. But, for school and most everything else, they went different directions.

"What did I know about white people? A little above nothing," he said, "enough to develop stereotypes."

It was the same for whites, he said.

"Racism was the norm," Lake said. "Racism was accepted."

Then, when Lake was in 5th grade, integration happened and the little boy was sent to a white school.

"I was the only black kid in the class," he said.

Lake described himself as cocky and confident, despite his situation - which got worse when a big, blonde boy swaggered into the room and sat down in the desk next to Lake's.

"He looked at me and screwed his nose up," Lake said.

The two boys began a confrontational relationship, fighting and harassing each other at recess. The contentiousness dissolved slowly as they got to know each other. They played football and basketball together and eventually became best friends.

Lake and this boy, now a veterinarian, are still friends today.

"Do you think I see some white man when I look at him? No - I see a man who's my friend," Lake said. "Do you think he sees a black man? He sees me. He sees Johnny."

Interaction is the key to honest relationships between people, Lake said, something that is still often lacking today. He urged students to engage with people of different races.

White students may soon have more opportunity for such engagement.

Shining on a screen behind Lake was a bar graph showing the changing demographics of Oregon students. It showed percentage of white students at about 92 percent in the early 80s. In 2003, that percentage dropped to about 76 percent.

In the same time period, the percentage of Hispanic students in the state went from about two percent to around 12. The number of black students rose, too, but not as dramatically.

After the session, Lake commented on a story that hit the news during the State 5A Boy's Basketball Tournament. The stories involved allegations of racial slurs and harassment against black players and others from Portland's Roosevelt High School during the tournament.

White students allegedly told an administrator "we're going to burn your school down."

Lake had a chance to speak with some white Eugene students after the incident.

"It's a real lack of cultural interaction," Lake said afterwards. "They need engagement with people different than themselves."

Some of the kids he spoke to agreed with Lake, saying stereotypes often masked reality.

"The kids at Roosevelt - they probably think we're all white, rich and racist," one student told Lake.

Aney, Kathy Aney is a reporter for the East Oregonian in Hermiston. She wrote this article on April 29, 2007

Johnny Lake is a Doctoral Candidate, which is the formal advancement right before the Ph.D, at the University of Oregon. He is also the assistant principal at Churchill High School.