

Saturday, January 13, 2007

Traveling exhibit stops at UVSC for Martin Luther King commemoration

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**KATE MCNEIL** - Daily Herald

Above a drinking fountain on the fourth floor of Utah Valley State College's library is a sign reading "white only." Below it, a similar emblem declares "colored." The days of segregated drinking fountains, buses and schools are long gone, but David Pilgrim doesn't want people to forget them.

"IT'S POSSIBLE TO TAKE OBJECTS of intolerance and teach tolerance with them," he said.

Over the years, Pilgrim has collected more than 5,000 racist objects, including these "white" or "colored" only drinking fountain signs, and compiled them into the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Michigan. Pilgrim spoke at UVSC on Friday about his traveling exhibit "Hateful Things," now on display at UVSC's library as part of the 13th annual Martin Luther King Jr. commemoration.

The 39-piece exhibit features everything from a "No Dogs, No Negroes, No Mexicans" sign, to a menu for the old Coon Chicken Inn on Highland Drive in Salt Lake City. Aunt Jemima, the symbol of syrupy servitude, made her way into the collection, illustrating that some racist symbols still prevail.

So why inundate people with bad memories and disconcerting images?

"Martin Luther King said you have to treat racism as a boil," Pilgrim said. "You have to lance the boil and let all the ugly pus run out. I lance these boils, not to make a shrine to racism, but to teach us these are mistakes made in the past."

The Ferris State professor (where UVSC President William Sederburg served as president from 1995-2003) took a no-holds-barred approach to his lecture, projecting disturbing and offensive images.

"We talk about race all the time," he said. "But we don't talk about it in places where ideas are challenged."

One postcard depicted a black slave working in the fields with an ape-like face. Pilgrim picked on Jiselle Torgerson, a freshman in the audience and asked her "Does this look like someone you'd want to vote? Someone you'd want to live in your neighborhood?"

The Caucasian student was reluctant to answer but later said Pilgrim's presentation made her think differently about visual communication.

Although many blatant symbols of racism were used in the past, racist symbolism still occurs in the present day. Take for example, Flava Flav, the rap artist and star of VH1's show "Flavor of Love."

Pilgrim said Flava's character furthers the blacks-as-pimps stereotype. What's worse, Americans love the show and it may be their only contact with black people.

"Is it funny? Yes," Pilgrim said. "It's especially pernicious because it's funny."

Pilgrim also mentioned "Pimps and Hoes" parties, common on college campuses, as another example of modern-day racism.

"We have allowed ghetto to become a synonym for the African-American experience," he said. "And it's not."

Tatiana Cadet agrees with that. President of UVSC's Black Student Union, Cadet says she still experiences racist comments from time to time.

"We are all brothers as Dr. Pilgrim said," Cadet said. "Even though I see racism today, there is still no such thing as anyone being higher or lower."

Pilgrim calls himself "the only sociologist who quotes Ross Perot" and considers this quote his credo: "The activist is not the man who says the river is dirty. The activist is the man who cleans up the river."

Later, Pilgrim said, "I don't want to live in a country where people can't sell racist objects, I want to live in a country where people are smart enough not to."

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If You Go

What: "Hateful Things" exhibit, a 39-piece racist memorabilia collection

Why: part of UVSC's 13th annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration

Where: UVSC Losee Center Library, 4th floor Gallery

When: runs through Jan. 27

Info: [www.uvsc.edu/events/mlk](http://www.uvsc.edu/events/mlk)

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