

Getting beyond hateful things

Daily Herald
Monday, January 22, 2007

Utah Valley State College's commemoration of Martin Luther King Day consisted of more than platitudes. All this month, faculty and students have been given an up-close look at the segregation and racism that King battled throughout his life.

"Hateful Things," a traveling exhibit from Ferris State University's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, is on display at UVSC's Losee Library through Saturday.

The 39 items on exhibit are a fraction of the museum's collection, but they pack a potent message.

The exhibition is an uncomfortable reminder of America's past, when citizens were denied rights, and even basic humanity, solely because of skin color. Among the artifacts are signs designating "Whites Only" and "Colored" areas of public places and photos of mannequins strung up in trees as a warning of what fate awaited blacks who dared attempt to vote. There is even a Utah artifact, a menu from the Coon Chicken Inn in Salt Lake City that is packed with offensive racial references.

The display brings to life an era that many students only know about through history books. From their perspective, the Jim Crow era is as distant as the Great Depression is to their 50-something parents. These tangible reminders of conditions endured by blacks through the Civil Rights movement are sobering. They remind us that we cannot truly understand where we are without looking back at the path that brought us here.

As philosopher George Santayana observed, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

We've come a long way from the days of lynchings and racial epithets used shamelessly in public by whites. Today a black man, Sen. Barack Hussein Obama, is one of the leading contenders for the presidency of the United States. (Actor Morgan Freeman has already been president.) Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is the second black person to serve as the nation's chief diplomat.

By many measures, King's dream of racial parity has been achieved. The burden for the success of minorities has largely shifted from the state to individuals.

Of course, the Jim Crow Museum's curator, David Pilgrim, is correct when he points out that America has not completely eliminated racism. Clearly, that will never happen. So long as people have the freedom to think as they choose, some of them will choose intolerance. But we can be thankful that much of the overt racism of the past has at least gone underground.

It is unfortunate, as Pilgrim laments, that college campus gatherings are sometimes advertised as parties for "pimps and hos." A little more refinement of language among the younger generation would be a good thing; but then, if youths were not continually tweaking "the man" (once quaintly known as "the establishment") in speech, dress, relationships or other ways, they wouldn't be youths. Bugging their parents is what they do.

Pilgrim believes that such language perpetuates subtle racism, linking prostitution and ghettos with blacks, and he may be right. But whether this phenomenon represents a deep fissure in society or part of a different trend remains to be seen. Race does seem to be moving toward irrelevance for the younger generation. Increasingly, they intermingle with no recognition of racial lines. Many of the old racial stereotypes are seen as relics of their parents and grandparents.

True, the racial vocabulary of the young can be startling, but their expressions often do not carry the underlying message of hatred they did before the 1960s. While there continues to be racially motivated violence in some inner-city hot spots (stories such as the one told in the current film "Freedom Writers" keep this fact before our eyes), the general social picture is encouraging. Interracial romantic relationships, for example, appear increasingly common these days and less subject to social reproach -- or even serious notice.

The generation to fear is the older one, the generation that has been nursing racism for decades and which will imprint its values on the young if given half a chance. But for careful coaching, many of today's kids would never have thought of skin color as a way to measure a human being.

That's not to say that other flavors of social status will be going away. Certain markers will be with us as long as humanity survives and people strive: wealth, athletic ability, intelligence, beauty. But it is time to let go of skin color once and for all as a yardstick. MLK was right.

Recalling history is a good way to help cement the principles of justice and equality in the hearts of the next generation. We applaud the efforts of Pilgrim and others who encourage us to reflect upon American values. The Jim Crow exhibit

reminds us all -- whatever the color of our skin -- that we share a very small planet and live very short lives. There is simply no room for racism.

This story appeared in The Daily Herald on page A6.