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Diversity in the workplace means everyone feels they belong

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By **MARTY LEVINE**

When Sherdina Harper — cross-cultural programming coordinator and advisor in Student Affairs — accompanied a busload of mostly sorority women to Pitt Make a Difference Day a few years ago, her group was assigned to help clean up a local park. The group got off the bus, she recalled, and a male park worker immediately expressed doubts that women could handle the park improvement work.

After the women picked up their shovels and completed the project, the same man could only say, “I bet you all got your ADHD out of your system.”

Finally, when sounds from the shooting range at the bottom of the park became audible, he couldn’t resist saying, “I bet you hear shots all the time” — since Pitt in Oakland is right next to the Hill District.

Harper, born and raised in the Hill, told the man she had never actually heard a single shot growing up. But he wasn’t done; as the women boarded the bus to return to campus, he told the Pitt bus driver, “Let’s take these women for a ride.”

Harper had been trying all along to tell the man that his comments were inappropriate, but he wasn’t listening. She had had enough. “It’s our job to teach first,” Harper said. “I teach. I nibble. Then I chomp.”

Harper — speaking as part of the latest Staff Council diversity talk, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor: Diversity In The Workplace,” on Aug. 14 — said that such comments are not part of the workplace: “We have to make sure when (people) come to work, they are protected.”

Everyone has heard of safe spaces, where people feel OK to be themselves without facing the atmosphere those Pitt sorority women experienced in the park, Harper said. She’d like there to be “brave spaces” as well.

She invited participants to ask “questions you have never asked before It’s never my intention to offend anyone in these trainings. But to walk away feeling challenged is a great thing.” She hoped the talk would take assumptions we have made over the years and “dig them up by the roots.”

“Are we ready to say that it is OK to disagree but I still accept you and respect you?” she said.

First, Harper said, diversity extends beyond those distinctions protected by law, such as race, religion and sexual orientation, to include socioeconomic status and language, political and occupation diversity, immigration status and overall life experiences.

How to change our culture at work? “We want to establish a sense of belonging for everyone. It’s not a one-size-fits-all approach. We have to create these environments in our own workplace to accept everyone’s strengths.

“Hiring goals may boost diversity numbers,” she cautioned, but “no one is going to come with all the knowledge of understanding everyone’s culture.”

Harper offered a series of hints for respecting differences and recognizing different ways of communication among colleagues:

- *Maximize joy and connection, minimize fear:* “We need to not only put out where there is room for improvement but spotlight the moments of success and celebrate them.”
- *Forget ‘fix’ and focus on helping individuals thrive:* Don’t just hire, train and reward “people who ‘fit in.’”
- *Recognize your own bias, prejudice and stereotypes:* “We work in a place where people from all over the world work” and can learn much from this breadth of diversity.
- *Identify similarities:* “Find some things you have in common and build relationships on that.”
- *Recognize body language:* “It sometimes speaks a lot more” than words.
- *Understand voice volume:* “That’s just my culture. That’s just me coming forth with my passion and my zeal.”

Asked for ways in which white people can be better allies for other groups, she answered: “The fact that you want to is a first step. One of the things you can do is to try to educate yourself about as many cultures as possible.”

Harper recalled her frustration at how she was being treated by one white Pitt colleague a few years earlier, and how another white colleague stepped in. “Sometimes when you can see your colleague has had enough, be a listening ear.

“Privilege is not bad,” she added. “It’s what we do with our privilege. I have ability privilege,” as well as other privileges she can use to help those without them. “Look at some of the people who don’t have that privilege and meet them to help them out.”

At the end of Harper's talk, Staff Council President Andy Stephany asked her: "As a leader of different types of teams, I want to acknowledge my privilege and encourage new voices to come forward. How do I walk the line of inviting, welcoming and mentoring new voices, while recognizing their potential reluctance to speak up?"

"Everybody's not going to be there first," Harper responded. "I don't fear confrontation ... if we create confrontation in a very respectful way, that conflict can be resolved.

"A lot of students come to me and my colleagues and ask questions," she said. "One of the things I always say is, at the end of the day, I'm always going to be truthful and I'm always going to empower."

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