

## **Empathy in Action: University of Tampa Embraces Safe-Zone Training for a More Inclusive Campus**

*October 4th Event Inspires Unity and Understanding Among Students*

**By Sarah Sterling** October 7, 2023



*Two Students Isha Arvind Patel and Sanya Mishra pondering what a more inclusive world would look like*

In a heartwarming and transformative event that unfolded on the sunlit grounds of the University of Tampa campus this past Wednesday, students and staff gathered to participate in a Safe-Zone Training, a testament to the commitment of fostering empathy, understanding, and a safer, more inclusive campus environment.

Safe-zone trainings are opportunities to learn about the identities and terminology within the LGBTQIA+ community as well as confront one's own biases, prejudices, assumptions, and privileges in order to become more educated, inclusive and better allies. With October being LGBTQIA+ history month, there was no better time to host this training.

Under the azure Florida sky, a diverse group of students and staff from various backgrounds and walks of life convened to engage in interactive workshops and discussions. The event, organized by the university's Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, aimed to equip students with the tools to create a campus culture where everyone feels accepted and supported.

The event began with a warm welcome from event organizers, Dr. Tyler Hodges, Director of DEI Training & Community Support and Tess Aguilar, staff assistant in the Office of Student Leadership and Engagement, their passion for inclusivity evident in every word. As participants settled into the vibrant atmosphere, it became apparent that this wasn't just another workshop—it was a communal embrace of diversity.

Soft laughter and friendly chatter echoed across the room as participants, armed with open minds, delved into activities designed to promote empathy and understanding. Icebreaker exercises dissolved social barriers, fostering an atmosphere where everyone felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.

"I came here thinking it would be just another workshop, but it turned out to be a really powerful experience," shared Emily Rodriguez, a junior majoring in psychology. "It's amazing to see so many people genuinely invested in making our campus a safe space for everyone."

The Safe-Zone Training featured engaging sessions on various aspects of inclusivity, from learning the history of the LGBTQ community to understanding the terminology and importance

of specific language in the community. The workshops were led by experienced facilitators who skillfully navigated the delicate terrain of identity, ensuring that each participant felt seen and heard.

As the day unfolded, the space transformed into a melting pot of shared experiences and newfound connections. The air was filled with a distinct sense of unity, a testament to the transformative potential of fostering empathy within a community.

The event also featured a panel discussion with representatives from diverse groups, sharing their personal stories and shedding light on the challenges they face as members or allies of the LGBTQ community. The raw honesty of these narratives resonated deeply with the audience, sparking conversations that extended well beyond the scheduled sessions.

"It's not just about tolerating differences; it's about celebrating them," remarked Dr. Hodges. "Events like these create a ripple effect, inspiring students to be agents of positive change in their own spheres of influence."

As the training came to an end, participants were encouraged to carry the torch of empathy back into their daily lives, creating a ripple effect that would extend far beyond the bounds of the campus.

"Change starts with us, right here and right now," declared Ian McGinnity, Director of Community Engagement, Office of Student Leadership and Engagement "We need to commit to fostering a culture of inclusivity in every aspect of our lives, on campus and beyond."

The importance of events like the Safe-Zone Training cannot be overstated, especially in the context of a university campus—a microcosm of the world where diversity is not only present

but should be celebrated. In an era where societal divisions seem to be on the rise, the University of Tampa is setting an inspiring example, reminding us all that empathy and understanding are the cornerstones of a harmonious community.

For the students who participated, the event wasn't just a checkbox on their university experience or another line on their resume—it was a pivotal moment that challenged them to grow personally and socially. "I came here thinking I knew a lot about diversity, but today taught me that there's always more to learn," shared Jake Stanley, a sophomore studying business administration. "I'm leaving with a deeper understanding of my peers and (I feel) inspired to make a positive change."

The University of Tampa, with its commitment to fostering a culture of inclusivity, has taken a bold step toward creating an environment where everyone—regardless of background, race, or identity—feels not just tolerated, but genuinely embraced.

The success of the event lies not only in the workshops and discussions but in the hearts and minds of the students who walked away with a newfound appreciation for diversity. The challenge now is to translate this newfound awareness into sustained action—to weave inclusivity into the fabric of campus life, classrooms, and beyond.

As we reflect on the significance of this Safe-Zone Training, let it serve as a blaring call to all students at the University of Tampa and beyond. Let it be a rallying cry for a future where empathy triumphs over ignorance, where understanding conquers prejudice, and where every student, regardless of their background, can thrive in an atmosphere of acceptance.

The challenge is clear: carry the torch of empathy forward. Engage in open conversations, challenge stereotypes, recognize privilege, and be the ambassadors of change within your

spheres of influence. Together, as a united student body, the creation of a legacy of inclusivity that will be remembered long after four years are up, is a major goal.

The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion hosts many events to teach about and celebrate diversity on and off campus. With a focus on the LGBTQIA+ community for the month of October, the office has upcoming events such as a *Lunch and Learn: LGBTQ allyship beyond the classroom with Equality Florida* on October 12, *Job Searching with Pride* on October 17, and many others.

In the spirit of inclusivity, commit to embracing differences, celebrating shared humanity, and building bridges that span the divides that may exist. The University of Tampa has shown the way; now it's up to each student to walk that path with purpose and conviction. Together, let's create a campus where every voice is not just heard but cherished, where diversity is not just acknowledged but celebrated—a campus that stands as a testament to the power of empathy in action.