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Teaching how to overcome bigotry

By Gillian McAinsh

DO you choose your friends as you would your socks – that is, they have to be the right colour?

That would be as ludicrous as choosing your socks on the basis of their character and yet that's exactly what many South Africans do, says Port Elizabeth psychologist Leanne Naidoo.

Leanne is often called on to talk about how to overcome prejudice and has developed an anti-prejudice toolbox to help deal with this sensitive subject, as she did at a recent schools conference in Grahamstown.

As a qualified counselling psychologist, Leanne finds people's reactions when they first meet her to be most revealing.

"I didn't expect a blonde," is one common response – but Leanne was born into what she calls "a staunch National Party home" in George.

She married Vernon Naidoo in 1997 and has had great fun confounding people's expectations and popping their prejudice bubbles.

"Culture is a very complex aspect of a person and it's best not to make assumptions," she warns. All too often, we make "horrendous oversimplifications".

"Life is the best teacher of all and our personal experiences often bring tremendous growth. Just passing on information about history does little to change attitudes."

The former maths teacher has an MA from Vista and went into private practice after leaving Newton Technical High School at the end of last year.

"We need to tackle prejudice in schools as it can have a very adverse affect. Prejudice is a preconceived opinion that is not founded on reason or experience, where you pre-judge before you know the facts about or have experienced something yourself."

In 2000, Leanne researched this topic in Port Elizabeth high schools as part of her studies and found the high level of bigotry "quite disturbing". Race and sex were not the only issues.

"It takes a special kind of openness to see people and know people, as they really are. Are older staff really too set in their ways? Are younger people really too inexperienced to handle something? Are our pupils really too irresponsible?"

"What goes through our minds when we see fat people?"

A bad experience could also, needlessly, reinforce prejudice. For example, when



Port Elizabeth counselling psychologist Leanne Naidoo uses a toolbox filled with visual reminders as part of her anti-prejudice arsenal. Picture: Mike Holmes

Leanne looked for home help to look after her two small sons while she worked, she heard of a friend's unpleasant experience with domestic staff.

"This person – and many people – went so far so to tell me 'they' are all the same – 'they' are all dishonest. That was his experience but it has not been mine."

Similarly, many unthinkingly perpetuated racist beliefs in their own families.

"There is power in your example. How many adults don't we hear talking about the garden 'boy'?"

"Sometimes our openness to see is hindered by filters. We label people or situations, putting them in boxes and limiting them. For example, her surname is Naidoo, she must be Indian. She is still single, what is wrong with her? She is a blonde, she must be stupid."

She mentioned seemingly harmless jokes – and yes, she has been the butt of quite a few: "That is another form of a conclusion drawn from faulty reasoning. Children started to learn about classification at the toddler stage.

"They can put all the blue cars together, all the yellow cars together and all the red cars together. However, if they are not taught to think critically or logically, it can limit their thinking later. That lack of critical thinking can lead to prejudice."

Prejudice was a double-edged sword. Apart from the hurt of those on the receiving end, there were negative consequences for those dishing out this behaviour, such as:

No relationships may be formed with the person against whom you are prejudiced, or with the idea that you are prejudiced against.

For example, if you think maths is difficult, you might not take it as a school subject although it may well be within your capabilities.

If you are afraid of people with a different religion – she cited Muslims as often being targets for this – you may miss out on rewarding friendships.

The depth of your relationships is limited.

There are missed opportunities to grow, learn and meet new people, think outside the box.

Negative emotions such as fear, guilt, anger, superiority, inferiority, pride and anxiety are given room to breathe and grow.

PSYCHOLOGIST Leanne Naidoo has developed an anti-prejudice toolkit for children – and adults – to help them be aware of how we view the world.

Cape Town peace educator Val Dovey, who works for the General Motors South Africa Foundation in schools, uses a similar toolbox to show pupils how to resolve conflict.

"I've taken her idea and adapted it to be an anti-prejudice toolbox," said Leanne. Her version contains:

A mirror to remind you that the journey starts with yourself. Leanne suggests that we need to take care of, and love, ourselves before we can love others.

Dark glasses which remind you to see others through the eyes of love.

Leanne noted six styles of vision: fearful, beady, judgmental, resentful, inferior or loving – of which loving was the preferred option.

A tortoise, to remind you to slow down and listen. Don't jump to conclusions.

Soap, to show that your speech should be clean, clear and unambiguous.

A heart, to highlight that your heart should be open to new ideas.

A photograph of a loved one. In Leanne's case, the photograph is of "my guys" – her husband and two sons.

"Most children do have at least one parent who really loves them and would not want them to be treated with prejudice."

Treat others, therefore, as you would like your loved ones to be treated.

A torch, to remind you that some things will be kept in the dark until trust is established. "Until we know, people deserve not to be judged."

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