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Kiosk

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WHITE PRIVILEGE

The two stories beginning on this page by staff writers Rick Moore and Pauline Oo tell of their experience with the University's Race Circle. —Ed.

What do I know about race and racism? I'm white. I'm also male and relatively educated. By almost anyone's definition, I am firmly situated in America's dominant class. To take a phrase of the Race Circle's mission statement a bit out of context, I hold "unearned race privilege." Ten years ago, that term would have made me cry foul. It probably would make a lot of white Americans angry, the way people feel when they're called on something that is true but hurts to admit.

And it is true. By virtue of the random deal of my genetic and demographic cards, I have the privilege of being able to go virtually any place I want in this country—let alone this state—without anyone eyeing me or judging my character because of the skin tone and facial features I inherited. There have been exceptions, but they are nothing more than that. In general, I can dawdle aimlessly in a department store, loiter on a street corner, cruise Franklin Avenue with a bad muffler, or ramble casually into an upscale restaurant just to use the phone and rarely will anyone ever care, much less confront me. Moreover, I have the privilege—and I didn't do a thing to deserve this privilege—of not having to think about my race and how it affects my identity on a daily basis.

I can and do acknowledge my own racism. Like it or not—and I don't—it's a subtle but very real part of me. I grew up with flesh-colored crayons (when flesh meant pink); history books that marginalized minority cultures; and strangers, friends, and loved ones who instilled racism in me. I have at various times perpetuated racist behavior, laughed, or looked away. Ingrained, racist thoughts dart in and out of my mind—uninvited, insidious, inescapable.

That's what I know about racism; rather, that's about the extent to which race affects my life. And that's why I wasn't much offended when it was suggested that I might not be the best candidate to report on the Race Circle. Fortunately, the ensuing discussion led to the notion that two perspectives—a white male and a Malaysian female—might be better than one, and I received an invitation after all.

I was a bit apprehensive and, as the group of us arranged our chairs in a circle in the basement of Peik Hall, my apprehension turned to fear. I'm not much for speaking in public, much less pouring out my heart to relative strangers. And it became clear early on that my colleague and I were encouraged to fully participate. I had even brought my own personal object to place on the mud cloth in the center of the circle—an item that to me signifies racial unity—but felt too much an outsider to actually offer it.

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RACISM AND THE POWER OF THE CIRCLE:

BRINGING HUMANITY INTO THE WORKPLACE AND THE WORLD

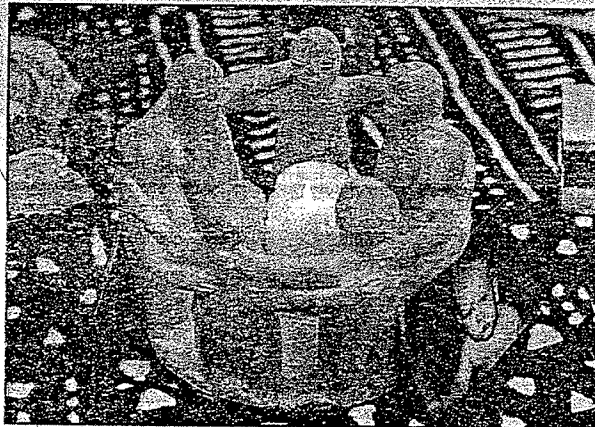


Photo by Tom Foley

A candle lights the center of the Race Circle.

"Racism and privilege are significant societal problems, and universities, including this one, are not immune," says Julie Switzer, director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action (EOAA). "The University's mission statement says that we will prepare students 'for active roles in a multiracial and multicultural world' and the regents diversity policy says that we will 'establish and nurture an environment that actively acknowledges and values diversity and is free from racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice, intolerance, or harassment.' Each year race concerns are one of the top two issues brought to our office, and they tend to be the most difficult."

More than a year ago, the University began an effort to combat individual and institutional racism using an ancient process—the circle. "The circle is about creating a space that often doesn't exist—creating a space for someone to apologize, for someone to have a voice who doesn't normally have a voice, for truth to be revealed," says Jessica Hughes, founder of the University's Race Circle and equal opportunity consultant with the EOAA. "It's about creating a space to tell the stories that equip us and empower us to do better and to build relationships in a good way."

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WALKING ON EGGHELLS

I grew up in Malaysia, a land as ethnically and culturally diverse as the United States where battles and tiffs between ethnic groups are common. Race discrimination and prejudice were subjects of discussion and debate among certain people around me, but they never affected me personally. I had a multicultural group of friends and my family lived in an upper middle-class suburb made up predominantly of those from our own ethnic background. I had what the Race Circle calls "unearned race privilege." Five years ago, when I was 24, I left my tropical homeland for new challenges in the United States.

In America I came face-to-face with people who, through body language and words, did not welcome nonwhite "foreigners" like me. I was no longer a part of the privileged society, but relegated by the actions of total strangers to a marginalized group. By now, I have become more attuned to the behaviors of those around me and more acutely aware, too, of my own actions. I do not lead a life of constantly fearing racial discrimination nor do I always feel as if I am being stared at because of my distinctly Asian features, but there are moments when I find myself walking on eggshells—being ever so careful about what I say and how I behave—because I fear my actions and speech will lead others to stereotype those who look like me. If I am curt with someone, does that make Malaysians rude people? If I make grammatical mistakes while speaking, will all Asians be seen as poor speakers of the English language?

I readily volunteered for this Race Circle assignment because I believed myself the perfect candidate—with my heightened sense of awareness and my personal experiences with racism—to shed light on this hopeful initiative and the way it operates. Moreover, I was intrigued by this seemingly novel concept of healing racial tensions within society by gathering in a circle and speaking from one's heart.

The circle I chose to attend began to take shape when Jessica Hughes, the keeper of the circle, laid an intricately designed African mud cloth on the floor of the room. We then placed 11 chairs around the cloth. I grew increasingly curious as I stole glances in Hughes's direction. She was patiently setting a vase of colorful summer blooms, books and magazines, a sprig of dried sage, and photographs on this cloth that was to become the sacred center of our circle. As we settled into our chairs, people around me began pulling objects from their pockets and their purses. Each object was treated with a mixture of love and respect by its owner, who was either clutching it tightly or touching it gently before carefully placing it next to an item that was already on the mud cloth. I felt like an intruder as I sat witnessing what was obviously a ritual for the people who have, for over 12 months, shed all pretenses of comfort to talk about the state of racism in their private lives and at their workplaces.

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