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FOCUS: RACE IN AMERICA

Opening a conversation on race

Obama's speech invites people to speak frankly about the differences in their life experiences

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When Sen. Barack Obama gave his speech on race Tuesday in Philadelphia, he broached a subject few Americans would dare address except, maybe, with close friends.

Obama talked about anger in the black community and its roots, but also how that anger can be dangerously counterproductive.

He spoke of resentment among whites and how it is real and sometimes legitimate.

Whether the Illinois senator succeeds in his quest to lead the nation, he touched a nerve when he called for action to end "a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years."

His call has touched off a national dialogue on race, and it's a discussion going on right here in Western New York.

"It was a tough conversation, but it touched all walks of life," said Minnie Clemmons, an African-American woman who lives in the University District, a mixed neighborhood in the city. "Everyone could relate."

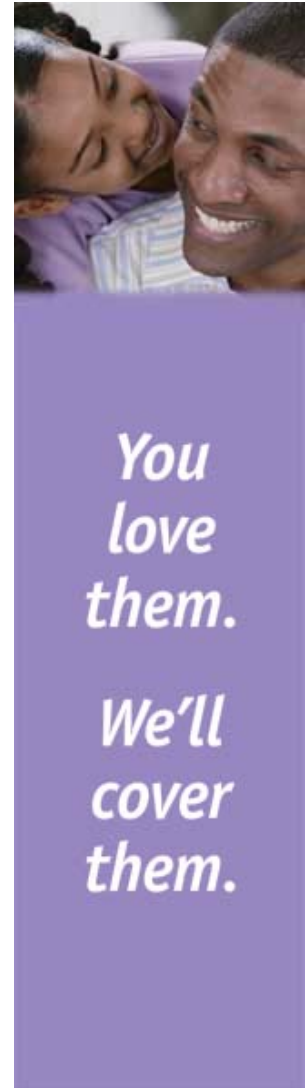
"It addressed the 800-pound gorilla in the room," said Patrick Allaire, who is white and is president of the Harlem Kensington Cleveland Community Association.

Henry Taylor, director of the University at Buffalo's Center for Urban Studies, said after the speech, he ran into a colleague who asked Taylor what he thought of it. Neither had ever talked about race in all the time they had known each other.

"Obama opened up discussion of race in perhaps one of the most honest ways we've seen among a major politician in this country, either white or black," Taylor said.

Getting past the walls

There is no doubt that the Buffalo area has been witness to great leaps in overcoming racial barriers recently.



Byron W. Brown became the first black mayor of the city in 2006. His police commissioner, H. McCarthy Gipson, is the first African-American to hold that post. Policies aimed at diversifying the ranks of the police and fire departments have brought in more African-Americans and other minorities.

But this progress has come with new racial problems. Obama called it a “zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense.”

Eugene Margerum is a living example of this flip side of affirmative action. He is one of 13 white firefighters locked in a legal battle with the city in a reverse discrimination suit.

“We were told we can’t be promoted because we’re non-African-Americans,” Margerum said.

In September, a State Supreme Court justice found that civil service promotions lists had been set aside for racial reasons and granted the firefighters the right to sue the city for financial damages. But U.S. District Judge John T. Curtin blocked the case until he hears another suit brought to federal court by black firefighters.

Margerum is adamant that he has “no ax to grind against the black man,” he said. “I have no animosity toward anyone. But wrong is wrong.”

He believes it’s not only ethically wrong but dangerous to put race above qualifications when hiring and promoting firefighters.

“We transcend all that,” he said. “We have to . . . [Firefighters] are willing to die for their fellow man.”

Margerum said being told he won’t be promoted because of his race was deeply hurtful.

“What’s wrong with being white?” he said. “Why would I feel ashamed of being white?”

He said he would like to see local politicians listen to what Obama had to say about white resentment of affirmative action policies.

“Let’s bring up the discussion,” he said. “Let’s say, jeez, why are blacks in this country always waiting for the other shoe to drop? Why are white men angry?”

Accepted by mandate

Buffalo Police Officer Kenneth Barney, who is African-American, believes that the only way the Police Department was going to become more diverse was through a court order.

When Barney joined the police force in 1982, he was part of Curtin’s ruling that brought hiring quotas for women and minorities into the police and fire departments because of evidence that those groups were being excluded.

“I remember hearing officers saying, ‘This department is going to hell,’ and they were talking about the hiring of black officers,” Barney recalled. “If they didn’t have that ruling, it would have been business as usual with that old boys network.

“It was so political back then that you didn’t have to take a police test, and when you finally did have to take a test, their uncles and aunts were on the civil service commission and helped their cousins and their family members to get in,” he said.

Officer James T. Reese, who is white, pointed out that a new proposed two-prong exam process for promotions in the Police Department, aimed at making the playing field more even for minorities, is just as unfair as the practices of the white old boys network.

The exam would include a standard written test and an oral interview assessment.

“It’s like going back to the old ways,” Reese said. “You can’t change it all up because there’s not enough minorities. . . . Why are you making it a racial thing?”

Another black officer, Duane Luchey, believes that even with efforts to diversify the police force, there are still white officers with racist tendencies.

He pointed to an unofficial police officers blog, which is filled with blatantly racist, as well as sexist, anti-ethnic and anti-gay rants.

“If you have these types of racist feelings, you shouldn’t be on this job,” Luchey said. “If you’re writing racist stuff on [that Web site], then you may take that sentiment into your job.”

A loaded topic

Many white people expressed nervousness about bringing up the topic of race at all.

“If you start to talk about it, people perceive that you’re racist,” said Allaire, whose integrated neighborhood spans Amherst and Cheektowaga. “No one wants to talk about it because no one wants to be painted with that brush.”

He added that it’s hard for many whites to know where the line is drawn between a simple lack of understanding and unaddressed preconceptions about race and outright racism.

He gave the example of how the hip-hop-style clothing favored by some young blacks is foreign to many white suburban residents. That visual difference alone can trigger racial assumptions.

“You don’t see them as a person — you see them as a color,” he said, “and I don’t know how to get around that.”

Shelly Schratz, a white woman who is the owner of Bing’s Restaurant and an Amherst Town Council member, admits to being concerned about crime when she sees someone who is black walking down her street at 1:30 a.m. in a dark hoodie that totally obscures the face, and low-riding, baggy pants.

“I call the police,” she said. “I do it all the time.”

But Schratz said she often second-guesses her own thoughts and reactions to people she runs across in daily life.

“There is a fear in me when I see people, because I fear I’m judging,” she said. “I have to ask myself, ‘Are you judging? Is there some reason why you’re uncomfortable?’ ”

Eric Clay, an African-American 18-year-old who lives in downtown Buffalo, knows what it’s like to be considered suspicious by white people.

“If I go to a certain store in a different region, you get these looks like: ‘You’re not supposed to be here,’ ” said Clay, a senior at the Charter School for Applied Technology.

James Robinson says he was the victim of even more blatant racism. One evening last year, Robinson, an African-American roofer and construction worker, walked into a South Buffalo bar near where he lived at the time. When he ordered a vodka-and-cranberry, the bartender told him: “Look around.”

Robinson checked out the crowded bar. He asked for his drink again. The bartender advised him to leave.

“I’m not going to serve you,” the bartender told him, Robinson said. “Why not?” he asked.

“I’m not going to serve you because you’re black,” came the response.

A couple of regulars at the bar offered to get him a drink, but wouldn’t believe Robinson when he said the

bartender refused him because of his race.

Robinson decided to pursue the case, which is now going to be heard by the state Division of Human Rights.

“I’m not trying to take down the bar,” he said. “He discriminated against me. He disrespected me. . . . I didn’t do anything wrong. I want them to stop.”

Misperceptions abound

Sometimes the signs are not as obvious.

Throughout Melvin Watkins’ life — in school, in the military, and as a branch manager at a suburban library — he has found himself being one of just a few minorities among whites, and he says that has given him insight into how white people view blacks.

Many whites, Watkins said, had preconceived notions of who and what he was.

“One of the things I saw was that people couldn’t understand the fact that I was head of a [library] building,” said Watkins, who is now retired and lives in Amherst.

“People have no idea what goes on in the life of a black person,” Watkins said. “In this city, everybody thinks all you have to do is put on a black face and everything is handed to you, and just the opposite is true. I don’t know a single soul that got a job through affirmative action. There must be, though, because they talk about them.”

But Watkins understands the opposite is also true. Blacks have preconceived notions about whites, too.

“I know a lot of young people think all white people are rich, and that a lot of white people are handed things and don’t have to work for them,” Watkins said.

Marlies Wesolowski, a former Buffalo School Board member and now executive director of the Matt Urban Center, believes some white people are too quick to make assumptions.

“Sometimes white people just see what they see, and it’s not right,” said Wesolowski, who is white. “We’re quick to ascribe to people what we think.”

She said she is surprised at how many white people assume she shares their sometimes racist thoughts. She has heard white parents complain about why their children are forced to take a bus to school in another part of the city. She also has heard complaints from whites about “who gets public benefits and welfare,” and thinly veiled fears about crime.

“The drug culture has a very negative effect on white people’s views,” she said.

Fear and misperceptions about crime also feed into racial stereotypes.

High profile crimes committed by African-Americans against whites have not helped matters, even though a 2007 study by the University of Illinois found that nine out of 10 crimes are committed by people against others of their own race.

But Department of Justice statistics show that when a stranger kills someone, perhaps the most feared crime, 5 percent involved whites killing blacks and 18 percent were blacks killing whites.

Locally, two years ago, Sister Karen Klimczak and Tony’s Ranch House owner George Pitliangas were killed in separate attacks. In both cases, their assailants were black.

And yet, the African-American community will never forget Joseph G. Christopher, the “.22-caliber killer,” a

white man who went on a killing spree of blacks in 1980.

Joe Mancuso, who describes himself as a “white Italian-American that is not racist” left Buffalo’s West Side in 1969 for West Seneca and then Orchard Park because of crime.

“This was back in the days when the Italians dominated the West Side. You could walk down the street at 4 a.m. and nobody would bother you,” he said. But as the neighborhood became more integrated, with both blacks and Puerto Ricans, he said, things changed.

“You’d have to have a gun on both sides of you if you did that now,” the ex-Marine said.

Separate neighborhoods

The region’s changing demographics have led to some of the misunderstandings and discomfort.

The Buffalo region was the eighth most residentially segregated metropolitan area in the nation at the start of the decade, according to a University at Albany study based on census data. Just 12 percent of its 137,000 blacks lived in the suburbs.

At the time, 40 percent of blacks around the nation lived in the suburbs.

John Wright sat in the barber’s chair at Sonny’s Barber Shop on Fillmore Avenue late last week as he talked about Obama’s call to tackle race issues, and the area’s divisions.

“We’re too separate in our communities,” said Wright, a retired electrician who lives in the Masten District. “They stay in their communities. We stay in ours.

“We have to talk about it to get past it,” said Wright. “but I don’t think white people will ever really understand how we feel about this, especially the older generation.”

He believes there’s still not a level playing field, and he’s not sure if most whites understand that.

“I don’t like to generalize it, but I think most [whites] feel we’re not equal to them,” he said.

Mary Hanley, a white nurse from Williamsville, got to know a young black woman years ago while she was a waitress at a Your Host restaurant.

“She was probably the first black person I ever really knew,” Hanley said.

She remembered going to her friend’s house.

“You’re going to find out what soul food is all about,” the new friend told Hanley. “She was probably my best teacher. It’s not that she tried to teach me. It was just because of who she was.”

Samuel A. Herbert, a longtime East Side activist who is African-American, said that while he’s been subjected to racist comments — a supervisor once called him the n-word — he has been pleasantly surprised by the white people he has come across in his life.

Although a grandfather, Herbert recently graduated from Buffalo State College. Most of his classmates were white and much younger.

“They helped me with the computer, and I talked to them about my life experiences,” he said.

He also recalled going to the Quincy Senior Center to talk to seniors during one of his bids for a Common Council seat. He met with an old Polish- American woman who asked him to help her son come over from Poland. He

agreed to do what he could and sent letters to New York's senators. He returned to the senior center to tell her what he'd done.

"This is for you," the woman said, handing Herbert a macrame notebook holder for his kitchen. "The fact that you helped me and you came back."

Herbert believes mutual acts of kindness and respect will make racial harmony possible.

Common interests

Opening the race discussion is hard but not impossible. Throughout the region, integration and acceptance are more than an ideal. They're a reality.

In the neighborhood surrounding Kleinhans Music Hall in Buffalo, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Native Americans, refugees and immigrants of all colors and faiths live side by side.

They work together to protect their common interests of neighborhood preservation and safety, and just as importantly, they enjoy their diversity, said Chris Brown, president of the Kleinhans Community Association.

The community has learned to band together to protect their quality of life, which is often under threat. Multigenerational poverty, mental illness and drug addiction are problems that neighborhood residents struggle to fight together.

"I often tell people that we're the wave of the future," Brown said. "I think we're about 20 to 30 years ahead of most communities."

The Rev. Stephen Andzel, pastor of New Creation Fellowship Church in Cheektowaga, is white, and presides over an integrated congregation with more than 300 families. When he expanded his church from the West Side to Genesee Street in Cheektowaga, he recalled, it was hard to get past some racial prejudice.

Even within his congregation, he said, there have been moments of discomfort among parishioners who would tend to self-segregate within the church's walls. But by building personal relationships within the church and in the community, acceptance and friendships blossomed.

"You've got to put some effort into it," he said. "You can't just wink at it and then go your merry way. It's something you have to talk about and help people understand. . . ."

"There's only one race," Andzel said. "It's the human race, and everybody's in it."

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