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MINORITIES FORCED TO 'ADJUST, ADJUST'

by Dianne Cutillo

Phillip E. Walker and a friend lived together in Hawaii. In her house, in a White neighborhood. She is White, he is Black. Together, they looked for a new home in Tennessee and found it - - in a Black neighborhood.

The apartment was affordable and near Walker's job. But she was reluctant to accept the apartment . . . After a couple days, "I said to her, 'I know what's bothering you. It's in a Black neighborhood and you're afraid they're gonna rape you every night on your way home,'" Walker said. "No," she told Walker, "I'm worried about my father coming here."

Walker circled his chair during the workshop at North Adams State College. "I worry about my mother walking around Vanderbilt University when the White fraternity beer fools are out," he said.

The apartment story is an example of how a White person was having to make an "adjustment" to race, the kind of adjustment minorities make all the time, Walker said.

"Minorities allow other's differences because they're used to it . . . I could have made the adjustment. But I've made enough."

Walker, an actor, theatrical consultant and lecturer, told the story in his workshop "Walk A Mile in My Shoes," sponsored by the Support Staff Development Committee, which organizes events for clerical, maintenance and support staff. The workshop was also attended by faculty and administrators.

Gesticulating broadly, he assumed other voices, changed position to play another part and took questions from his listeners.

"When I attempt to rent an apartment, 50% of them are not offered because of my color. I'm used to that. She's used to, "If I like it, [and] it's available, I get it," he said.

Walker, son of a janitor and a nurse, said he graduated from high school at just the right time for Blacks. "Everyone was saying, 'Please come.' It's like athletes feel today," he said. "After they recruited me to come, I found out they really didn't want me there," at then predominantly White Loyola University. It was the same thing at the University of Illinois, where Walker earned a graduate degree. "Why'd you ask me to come?" Walker said he wondered.

Walker said when he went to work at Lincoln University in Missouri (a Black college) he discovered, "I sure do feel comfortable." Until then, he said he thought college itself was uncomfortable. For minorities, college requires adjustments. Walker said, students are taught that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has "universality" and "applies to all mankind. But it's very weird that my people never wrote anything universal. Imagine if you were the young student who sees himself in Black literature. His young white friend can't see himself as Mr. Parker. 'That's an old Black man,' he would say. He does not see Oedipus Rex as an 'old White man'. Of Shakespeare, we do not say he's English first, then say he's universal."

And in college dorm life, Walker said, a Black freshman who left his comb at home could not borrow one. "There are plenty of combs in the dorm, but they're all White combs. They'd break in my hair."

Looking at his Black listeners, Walker said, snapping his fingers as if to enumerate a list, "You can think of many examples for you live it daily. We don't know what it's like not to have a long list of examples."

Minorities "adjust, adjust, adjust so they can be part of what's going on." But Walker advised encouraging students not to make adjustments because it is "to their advantage to work from their own base, in their comfort zone. [Further,] it is [also] to Whites' advantage because the minority is going to bring something new to the institution...something Whites can't bring, a whole 'nother culture."

"Education is not 'so and so taught me this [so] I'll teach it to you.' It's [knowledge is] supposed to grow and develop," he said. "Rather than saying they don't know what to do with a Black student, educators should say they can learn from him or her".

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