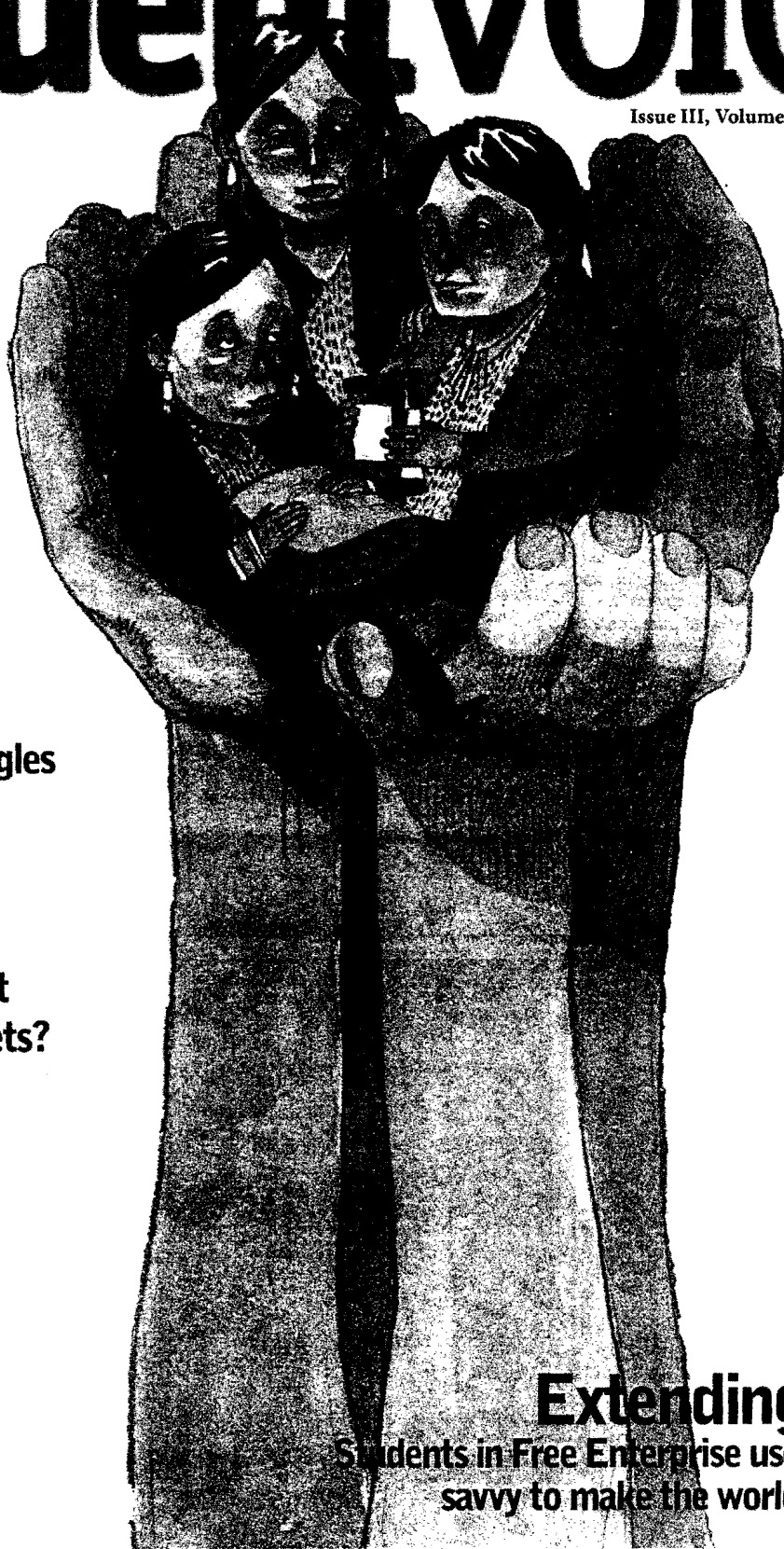


the student VOICE

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The Consequence of Ignorance

Intergroup dialogue courses can change your perspective on others and the world around you. They can also help you learn about yourself.

By Bettina Shore
Illustration by Asli Whitham

Looking back on my hopes for the intergroup dialogue class I took, I was excited to take a course that posed a challenge to my knowledge about race and ethnicity. I hoped the class could help me become more open-minded. In the beginning, I also thought this class was a way to prove to others that someone of my background could defy the established stereotypes.

Although I was more excited for the class than nervous, I had many fears about what the semester would hold. On the first day, I looked at the faces around me and was intimidated. I feared my ability to control my emotions, that people would judge me based on my religion, that I would say a racist comment and offend someone, or that I wouldn't be able to be honest with everyone when telling my own experiences. Race is a touchy subject, and my fear was that someone's feelings would get hurt if people really said how they felt.

This class would have been nowhere near as effective without the help of my unbelievable classmates. I truly think we had a special group of students, and over time we really began to care for each other like we do our close friends. When we gave testimonials, I felt a connection and an understanding of where others in the class were from. I felt an immediate bond with my classmates because I could relate to them. And little did I know how close I was going to be with them by the end of the semester. Even now, I feel like I could recite what every student said in his or her testimonial.

When I came into the class, I had only a vague understanding of my own racial/ethnic identity. But from listening to others, I started to learn about myself. Looking back, I seemed to care least about being white, yet I had no idea why. Now I understand that we do not look at white as a race. Rather it is considered neutral, normal – the status quo.

I realize that before the course, I had little

understanding of the term "white privilege," and I certainly didn't think it was a big deal. Little did I know that is the exact definition of white privilege, something that doesn't seem a big issue because it is the norm. White privilege allows white people to get away with things that non-whites may not. Sarah Palin, for example, could get away with her ignorance, lack of experience, and family issues because she was white. Had she been black, she may have been nowhere near the White House.

One day, after meeting with my professor, I walked out in tears and couldn't quite figure out why. That's when it hit me: I was crying because I had never

The key word in intergroup dialogue is dialogue, and we had a lot of it. Some were difficult. I will never forget how awkward it felt to say what I liked about being white. I had never talked about it because I had been raised to think of white as neutral and not its own race.

A white classmate of mine said she liked her hair. I didn't understand how she could say this when some of the most beautiful women I've ever seen are women of color. Others around me were also shocked by the comment. Then it occurred to me how much we are taught that being beautiful means being white with long blonde hair, and "nappy" hair, as she called it, is not considered beautiful. I realized that instead of getting upset with her and judging her because of the comment, I needed to put myself in her shoes and realize what society has taught her to think.

During our last few classes we discussed what we should do with the knowledge we have learned from intergroup dialogue. One of the most meaningful parts of the dialogue was when Janet and Roslyn, the professors, said that even if someone doesn't change when you try to teach them, the best part is that you have changed. This statement means so much to me because it's a reminder to not get frustrated with people who can't think the way I do. Sometimes I just need to be proud that I have changed and can now look at life very differently than before.

Although at times trying to make people understand you may be tough, you can't give up. I feel very motivated to go out and do something, and I actually feel like I have begun. I convinced my best friend to take this class. I'm ecstatic about how much she will learn and can't wait for her to understand the transformation I have gone through. Also, one week I was at a basketball game and confronted the stranger next to me who yelled out 'faggot.' Whether or not he cared that I got upset with him is beyond my control, but I will not tolerate someone talking like that, and I was not going to sit next to him and not say something to him. Before taking intergroup dialogue, I would not have had the courage to do that.

The last week of class a student said that when someone says something disturbing, a good way to confront them is to ask, "What do you mean by that?" This phrase is effective because so many people speak without thinking. Asking this question makes them aware of what they are saying and hopefully makes them realize the true meaning of their words. We need each other to survive. We have a right to confront those around us and try to understand the meaning of the world in which we both live.



realized what meant. I never that I was racist, no I didn't want to be. I started to see white privilege in almost every situation I came across: from Barbie, to bandages, to Sarah Palin. I know I'm not over the hump yet, but I've finally become more aware – and it's driving me crazy.

being white truly realized matter how much I