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Reflecting upon the 'White Space'

By Rev. Judy Thomas

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“What is it like for a Black, Indigenous or Person of Color [BIPOC] to be living on Cape Cod?”

If you are a member of the approximately 96% white population on Cape Cod, have you ever tried to imagine this? If you are one of the about 4% BIPOC, what have you known it to be?

This was one of the three framing questions addressed to panelists on a program presented by the Lower Cape Interfaith Justice Committee to members of the Federated Church of Orleans congregation and Am HaYam Havurah March 21.

Beginning with a viewing of panelist Michael Cestaro’s short film “White Space,” attendees heard the testimony of four BIPOC women on Cape Cod. Two, singer Mozelle Androlot and attorney Muska Yousuf, were panelists along with Cestaro and Damon Green, a member of the Cape Cod Times Diversity Advisory Group.

Cestaro was inspired to make the film by the experiences of his LatinX wife and concerns for what his two daughters might experience living in a “white space.” The isolation and loneliness expressed in the film and by the panel were a prime experience, one that is logical yet took me somewhat by surprise.

Muska, a child immigrant from Afghanistan whose parents located to the Outer Cape in 1986, commented on her isolated feelings when she looked around found that “nobody looks like me.” She said “loneliness was big,” and as schoolmates reacted to her, she was unsure whether it was because she was a POC or just too sensitive.

In the film, singer Tianna Esperanza echoed Muska’s thoughts, saying she has wondered if people would accept her as a queer black woman.

“This is where pain comes in – when you have to ask for something that you deserve,” Esperanza said.

Muska pondered how much to assimilate and try to not draw attention to herself to “be safe,” or if she should work “to be a spokesperson” for herself and others like her, a tack more recently chosen in her becoming an activist.

Green, who is mixed race, expressed similar confusion as a child about who he is, identifying as Black but not black enough for some peers and not light-skinned enough to be white.

As he matured, he said his answer became “just be yourself.” Painful for me to hear as a white-privileged person was his description of a conversation with his near-to-driving age son and a nephew about where to keep a driver’s license and car registration should they ever be stopped by law enforcement. How sad.

Andrulot is also mixed race. At Nauset Regional High School, she was accused of speaking “Queen’s English.” Both whites and Blacks accused her of “fake accent.”

Andrulot was the first to answer another question posed by program planners: “How can concerned neighbors become allies?”

She reported how much Black Lives Matters signs in her neighborhood meant to her and how appreciated phone calls were she received from friends who inquired how she was doing last summer. She urged supporting Black-owned businesses (see www.amplifypoccapecod.com).

Muska urged that parents get involved with the schools and inquire about the curriculum and working to ensure that U.S. history courses deal honestly with race issues. There was consensus that allies need to do more than just comment “I disagree” in response to someone who has expressed a racist thought or opinion. “Use your voice to amplify the Black voice.” They urged allies to understand their intervention is not so much an effort to change minds, which in most cases is nearly impossible, but to “let POC know that they have an ally, that you support them and are someone who has their back. Allies affirm that the Black experience is real.”

I left the discussion feeling educated and more informed about how to be an ally.

Rev. Judy Thomas is a part-time resident of Chatham.