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Overheard at Gettysburg

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Overheard at Gettysburg

Abstract

Monday. In Old TKE. A student of color is called in the hallway to hear the “funniest thing ever.” (giggling)
“Night night little nigglet.”

Tuesday. In an AFS class. “I’m pretty sure the majority of black students in my private school were there because of sports.”

Wednesday. In Musselman. Woman: “I can’t believe Trayvon Martin got shot because someone thought skittles was a weapon.” Man: “To be honest, he did look suspicious because he was black.” [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, race, ethnicity, racism, bias

Disciplines

African American Studies | Asian American Studies | Chicana/o Studies | Ethnic Studies | Inequality and Stratification | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu/) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

OVERHEARD AT GETTYSBURG

October 7, 2013

Take one week living on our campus:

Monday. In Old TKE. A student of color is called in the hallway to hear the “funniest thing ever.”
(giggling) “Night night little nigglet.”

Tuesday. In an AFS class.

“I’m pretty sure the majority of black students in my private school were there because of sports.”

Wednesday. In Musselman.

Woman: “I can’t believe Trayvon Martin got shot because someone thought skittles was a weapon.”

Man: “To be honest, he did look suspicious because he was black.”

Thursday. At LDs.

Man: “My car is too nice for a black person to drive.”

Friday. Student of color walks into a fraternity.

Guy walks up to her and asks her to “twerk”.

Saturday. At Diaspora house. A student of color walks into a room with her friends.

Man: “Sorry, black people aren’t allowed in.”

Sunday. In servo, a student of color walks in with a group.

Woman (to the student of color, jokingly): “Go fetch a table slave.”

Monday. In class.

Professor: “Does anyone know what this instrument is?”

No response.

Professor, turning to lone student of color in the class: “Are you sure you don’t know? It is from Africa.”

Welcome to life at Gettysburg College, where microaggressions permeate interactions eight days a week.



Racial microaggressions are [defined](#) as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color.”

Ask any student of color and they will tell you they have lost count of the number of times they have had to sit awkwardly in a class as sensitive topics that deal with race, socioeconomic status, and other social justice issues send a wave of eyes their way. When this happens, or when we hear comments and jokes like those above, it takes a definite emotional toll.

“You get used to it.” We tell each other, trying to downplay the severity of the situation and its effect on us. But why should we get used to “daily indignities?” And do we ever really get used to it?

In all honesty, we don’t. It still makes us uneasy. In those split seconds we are reminded of how ingrained racism is in our society.

Why don’t you call them out? you are wondering.

“Oh I didn’t mean it like that,” some will say.

“Well, I’ve said that before and my black friend didn’t mind,” is another common response.

But the worst reaction comes when a student who makes such derogatory statements becomes either offended or dismissive when they are called out for it.

“Calm down, I was only joking.”

But that’s the problem. For those affected by such comments, it is really not a joke. Suggesting that we can’t take a joke invalidates our reality; it denies the truth of our racial experiences.

We are tired of looking the other way. We can no longer grin and bear it. We are tired of smiling and acting like it doesn’t bother us. We are tired of sugarcoating the truth because we don’t want to be rude or be seen as the “angry black” person. We wouldn’t be doing justice to ourselves if we continue to let it slide and hand out passes. These comments and jokes have adverse effects on students. For one, it evokes a feeling of powerlessness. Being the only one in a group trying to explain why something someone said is wrong can be very intimidating. It also causes a distraction for us because we become preoccupied with these comments, constantly replaying the scenarios and the possible actions we could have taken.

It was encouraging to see our peers express their outrage and discomfort with the recent presence of the Ku Klux Klan in our community. The Klan is abhorrent. There should be anger and protest. But at least we know where we stand with the Klan: they openly express their discriminatory views. These microaggressions, however, come from peers, friends, professors, people who we believe care about us but whose actions at times, intentionally or unintentionally, cause pain. It is frustrating that we don’t generate as much outrage over the persistent racism in everyday life on our campus as we did about the arrival of the Klan.

Take for instance the recent emails of the increasing numbers of bias incidents on our campus. Many students admit shock and dismay that this is happening, yet they do not connect how their complicity in the microaggressions mentioned above contribute to a culture in which incidents like this are made possible.

As [Peggy McIntosh](#) emphasizes, privilege is invisible to those who have it. For many students, privilege protects them from being aware of such events (microaggressions, bias incidents). White privilege enables a white student to make comments or statements such as those mentioned above without giving a second thought to the implications they may have. It is this same privilege that protects a white student from being a target of such racially derogatory statements. It is white privilege that immunizes a white student from ever understanding what it may feel like to be made hyper aware of your race on a regular basis. In short, it is white privilege that fuels microaggressions.

Our goal is not to stimulate pity or sympathy. We are not labeling ourselves as the victims and all others as attackers. We are all contributors to systems that perpetuates disparities. At times, people of color are also guilty of micro-aggressive behavior directed at other students of color. Telling another student of color to not take offense at a racial comment or joke is just another way we encourage complacency.

Our aim is to make our peers aware of the effects of these comments and ill-thought of jokes. We acknowledge that a single blog post is not enough to change the bias and prejudice atmosphere here on our campus but it sure is a damn good start. We've got to recognize our own actions, so we don't continue to create a divisive atmosphere where we live in parallel worlds, blaming and scapegoating each other.

Start by sharing how microaggression are visible in your life through the [Microaggressions Project](#).

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