



Plessy vs. Ferguson to Ferguson, Mo.: Community conversation explores roots, re-envisioning of Mobile's racial divide

Kelli Dugan | kdugan@al.com By Kelli Dugan | kdugan@al.com

Email the author | Follow on Twitter

on November 11, 2014 at 10:56 PM, updated November 11, 2014 at 10:57 PM

WPMI and Mobile United hosted a community conversation on race Tuesday, Nov. 11, 2014, at Davidson High School in Mobile, Ala. Panelists included Mobile Mayor Sandy Stimpson; Joel Lewis, a University of South Alabama professor, co-chairman of the community conversation on race and co-producer of the documentary "Mobile in Black and White"; Mobile City Councilman Fred Richardson; Estela Dorn, former director of the Mobile International Festival and author of "A Fusion of Cultures"; and John Switzer, associate professor of theology at Spring Hill College.

Kelli Dugan | kdugan@al.com

MOBILE, Alabama - Optimism and courage squared off against skepticism and reality as a crowd of several hundred joined Mobile's ongoing **community conversation on race** during a Tuesday night town hall meeting **hosted by WPMI**.

"This is about getting your questions answered," Mark Hyman of the Sinclair Broadcast Group told the crowd before the hour-and-a-half discussion **streamed live**.

And the questions were pointed:

- Where does the racial divide start?
- What keeps us divided?
- How might we re-envision racial problems as an opportunity to create the society we want?

And while the panelists spoke with conviction and optimism about embracing diversity, ensuring equitable opportunities and having the courage to stand up for what's right, the murmurs from the crowd - and occasional bursts of applause when a no-nonsense chord was struck - told a different story.

"I just don't think they were being truthful about it," Jacinda Hollins of Saraland said, acknowledging it's a difficult conversation to have in public because its roots run so deep its emotionally charged by each individual's personal experiences.

"I think a lot of people want to talk about (race). That's why we're all here tonight. But you can tell it's hard for them to just come right out and say what they think. It's just not comfortable, but that's exactly why we need to

talk about it," Hollins said.

Indeed, topics ranged from separate Mardi Gras celebrations and the role of community policing to educational disparities and who's job is it really to educate those not in attendance about the conversations taking place.

Panelists included Mobile Mayor Sandy Stimpson; Joel Lewis, a University of South Alabama professor, co-chairman of the community conversation on race and co-producer of the documentary "**Mobile in Black and White**"; Mobile City Councilman Fred Richardson; Estela Dorn, former director of the Mobile International Festival and author of "A Fusion of Cultures"; and John Switzer, associate professor of theology at Spring Hill College.

The town hall, the second such large-scale forum since the **racially divisive issue of appointing former Mayor Sam Jones to the Mobile Area Water and Sewer System's board of directors arose in June**, did indeed cover a lot of ground.

From **Plessy vs. Ferguson** to **Ferguson, Mo.**, panelists, invoked historical references to illustrate the depth - and duration - of the divide and also implored the community to look inside their own hearts and homes for the answers no government directive will ever provide.

Richardson said history - and **the courts** - might have embedded the idea that black citizens are "innately inferior to other beings," but he called that thinking a "false notion that has to go."

He urged forum participants to "recognize each other as fellow human beings" rather than focusing on the differences that will forever hijack the conversation.

"Fred Richardson is a member of the human race," he said.

Lewis said one of the "great things" about the "Mobile in Black and White" project is that while it revealed how far people have come in terms of the way they relate to each other personally and highlighted the strides that have been made economically, it also "found some complacency" with the 1960s-era structures and systems that remain in place and perpetuate disparities that extend far beyond simple skin color.

Meanwhile, Dorn said education and acceptance are key to continued progress.

"Having come from another country, I have always felt that I was welcomed here. Maybe it was because I am educated, maybe it's because I've always had a job,...but economics, education and learning to accept other people for their differences will make the world better," Dorn said.

And while Lewis said she agrees with Richardson's assertion that we are all members of the human race, the purpose for launching these conversations is to look a little deeper and really delve into what divides in order to better understand how to unite.

For instance, by analyzing the statistical patterns that emerge when race is examined as a social reality - such as

sentencing trends for identical crimes - the disparities are real, she said.

Ultimately, however, Switzer said the responsibility for sharing the message falls on each and every individual.

"My guess is people who are here tonight are the people who will go back home and do what they have to do to bring harmony," he said, noting the real fight comes the next time a stereotype or untruth regarding race makes its way into everyday life.

"You have to put our foot down,... and that takes a hell of a lot of courage," Switzer said.

© 2014 AL.com. All rights reserved.