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Christian Science Monitor (Boston, MA)

October 23, 1989, Monday

Righting the Wrongs of Racism

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SECTION: PEOPLE; Workshop Leader; Pg. 14

LENGTH: 1050 words

DATELINE: ARLINGTON, MASS.

HIGHLIGHT:

Cherie Brown has battled prejudice all her life; now she's teaching others do the same.

AS a girl of 10, Cherie Brown vividly remembers a discussion in her Jewish youth group about extending the period allotted to hunt down Nazi war criminals. She simply stood up and said the Germans should be forgiven.

"I remember feeling that if you didn't forgive people, you continued to hate," she says. "That was as bad for you as it was for them."

Ms. Brown's compassionate impulse as a child has grown into a healing commitment. She devotes her life to eliminating prejudice and discrimination.

Brown is a teacher of teachers. She trains community leaders from all over the world how to educate local citizens (students, laborers, professionals, and others) to identify and reverse prejudicial attitudes.

In 1984 she established the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) in Arlington, Mass., where leaders are trained in "prejudice reduction ... an umbrella term for racism, sexism, class conflict, anti-semitism, homophobia, etc.," she explains.

Brown trains 30 to 50 people at a time in workshops that last from three to eight days. She uses story telling, role playing, word association, and small group discussions to teach participants how to train others to identify and settle conflicts.

Brown's approach focuses on compassion, not guilt. Beginning with the premise that everyone has been the target of some form of discrimination at one time or another, participants in Brown's workshops begin by sharing personal experiences to establish common bonds. Brown says this approach makes people more receptive to discussing the prejudices others are encountering.

She stresses the importance of teaching people to overcome feelings of guilt associated with prejudices that they uncover within themselves, and healing the wounds of prejudice inflicted by others. And she encourages participants to become active in opposing prejudice.

Unyong Kim, a community mediator in Washington, D.C., was impressed with Brown's approach to healing prejudice when she attended a workshop in 1985.

"It helps them reconnect with the things they find of value in their life," she says. "(Brown) took the work to a level I always thought it needed to be (at), but didn't know how - healing."

When asked where prejudice begins, Brown shrugs and says forcefully, "we're certainly not born with it!" Children pick up attitudes from their parents, and adults adopt the views of their peers, she says. "Every piece of misinformation that you've been taught about another group is hurtful and requires healing."

Brown estimates that she has trained between 8,000 and 10,000 individuals over the past five years. Participants include church officials from Northern Ireland, teachers from South Africa, and the director of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in Birmingham, Ala. She also has plans to conduct a workshop in the Soviet Union.

Her institute offers three- and five-day seminars in Boston in April and August each year. Additionally, Brown estimates NCBI gives training workshops in 10 to 12 cities each year, and on three college campuses each month.

To ensure a balanced approach, she has equipped NCBI with associates who are able to handle a wide range of problems associated with discrimination - among them are blacks, Asians, Jews, and Christians.

In an interview from her modest home, which is also NCBI headquarters, she talks about her work. "I've been doing this work since I was born, but as an adult professional for about 18 years."

As long as she can remember, Brown has involved herself wherever she saw racial tension - especially between blacks and Jews. Now, by training instead of mediating, her impact has been broadened.

Empowerment of the individual is a key element in Brown's program. "Changing the world requires people who see themselves as powerful and do not have the illusion that they cannot stand up for anything," she says.

Also essential in Brown's approach is the rejection of guilt as a means of getting people to recognize their prejudices. Alan Dean, director of human relations in Montgomery County, Md., says this alone gives her a rare approach.

"I've been in the field of human relations for 18 years, and this is the best thing that has happened to the field," he says. Mr. Dean believes the program's greatest strength is its flexibility. "You take what you learn (from Brown) ... and use it to understand the underlying cores of tension" in various situations on the local level, he says.

"I was embarrassed to find out that after working in the field for 12 years, I still had issues (of prejudice) inside that needed to be brought out," he says.

After years of prodding from colleagues to write her ideas down, Brown was commissioned in 1981 by the American Jewish Committee to create a training manual for coalition building. She was also asked to co-produce a video at Brown University. The project was sponsored by the American Jewish Committee's Institute for American Pluralism. The result was a film entitled "Working It Out: Blacks and Jews on the College Campus."

Racial conflicts on college campuses have been an area of concern for Brown since her days as an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles. Today, NCBI devotes about half of its time to colleges and universities, and Brown says she conducts 30 to 40 workshops on campuses each year.

"College administrators described their students as 'apathetic, conservative,' and 'only worried about going to business school'" three to four years ago, she says. But Brown says this is no longer the case, and cites both a rise in racial incidents as well as the reporting by the media of incidents. She is quick to emphasize that the key is "an increased awareness and consciousness of wanting things different."

NCBI is funded on a fee-for-services basis, and also receives grants. The fees for the workshops are determined by how much the sponsoring organization can afford. But fees usually range from \$200 to \$800.

Despite the dedication and confidence she has in her work, Brown recognizes that attitudinal change is only half the battle. "Economic division is at the core of racism," she says, "... and changes in attitudes need to come alongside changes in economic oppression as well."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: BROWN: She says compassion, not guilt, heals prejudice., ROBERT HARBISON - STAFF