

NORTHWEST SCHOOLS

St. Viator puts school on hold for diversity
Day is set aside to discuss issues

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Students at St. Viator High School in Arlington Heights took a break last week from their normal routines. Instead of absorbing their daily dose of geometry or biology, students opened their minds to the school's first Diversity Day, a special event that gave them a glimpse of life outside St. Viator and a lesson in tolerance.

In a series of sessions, speakers addressed social, political and personal topics, including the Holocaust, the Middle East and Northern Ireland, hate crimes, homosexuality and homelessness.

Science teacher John Garrett detailed the difficulties he encountered as a young African-American salesman, and religion instructor Barbara D'Urso described the challenges and joys of being a white mother with an adopted Korean son.

"I think they need to know that there's even more diversity in their own community than they think," D'Urso said.

Personal accounts help to pique students' interest in the bigger picture, D'Urso said. "They need to have the story first. Then the history makes sense," she said.

Diversity Day came about after Sept. 11, 2001, when faculty and staff realized how little students knew about issues in the Middle East and other regions of the world.

"Our students are really sheltered in terms of the outside world," said Eileen Manno, the school's director of counseling who helped spearhead the program.

She hopes such efforts, at St. Viator and other schools, will help

students "look at the world with a broader perspective. If we understand each other and talk with each other, maybe we can prevent future 9/11s."

Patrick Tax, a junior, attended an early talk by Sam Ozaki, a former Chicago school principal and a Japanese-American who was put in a World War II internment camp. It "really made me think about our government and how it operates, especially in wartime," Tax said.

In a session on religious diversity, senior Anne Young said she was surprised to learn how many faiths are represented in the surrounding suburbs. "It really made me think about the things I believe in," she said.

About 30 St. Viator students who participated in workshops last fall with members of the Anti-Defamation League also hosted diversity workshops last week.

St. Viator juniors Jessica Jacoby and Mike Lamberta led some freshmen in skits and discussions highlighting the ways students contribute to hate speech through name-calling and stereotyping. The workshops aim to make students aware of their own biases and "what we can do personally and in our own community" to be fairer, Lamberta said.

The message echoed that of keynote speaker Susan O'Halloran, an author who leads diversity workshops in corporations. She kicked off the day encouraging the roughly 1,000 members of the student body to set aside their preconceived notions when encountering new people.

"To keep an open perspective is really a habit," O'Halloran said. "It's a decision you make again and again and again."

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