

Young people evolve on race

Whether true integration comes depends on those who are now in their teens

JUSTIN MURPHY STAFF WRITER Simone Johnson, a sophomore at the University of Rochester, knows plenty of people of other races on campus. She sits with them in class and passes them in the halls, and she's confident most of them are open-minded about diversity and racial equality, as she is. But.

"At the end of the day, you see black people sitting with black people and white people sitting with white people," she said. "It's not that I don't want to (mix with other races), or that other kids don't want to. That's just the way people are."

It's an interesting paradox: Even as younger people increasingly abandon the overt racism of previous generations, social segregation remains stubbornly in place. Research shows that teenagers are much more likely to make friends with those who share their skin color or ethnicity, just as their parents and grandparents before them.

"You kind of just go with who you look like. You'd think it would stop, but it doesn't," said Sierra Ballou, who like Johnson is a black woman and a sophomore at UR. "It would be nice to know people of

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Natalie Doughty, 5 years old, protests with her mother, Kristin Doughty of Brighton, after the grand jury's decision not to indict a New York City police officer in the chokehold death of Eric Garner.

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Race

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other races because you learn a lot. ... But it is what it is.”

The topic is pertinent to the millennial generation in Monroe County, a highly segregated place that demographers predict will diversify significantly over the coming decades.

Whether that diversification leads to true integration depends upon the attitudes and actions of people who are now young, and the social and economic structures they will either buttress or change.

“If you’re a kid growing up, it’s clear race relations are different from what they were in the past,” said David Baronov, chairman of the sociology department at St. John Fisher College. “Attitudes change, but behaviors change slower.”

High school experiences

At Penfield High School, where 86 percent of the student body is white, a group of 12thgraders this week considered some reasons why students of different races tend to congregate separately.

Some sports, classes and extracurricular activities tend to be more homogenous than others, they noted. And even when sports teammates bond during a season, they may not necessarily keep that relationship up once the season ends.

The separation, they agreed, isn’t based on prejudice — it simply happens.

“If I want to be friends with someone, I’ll be friends with them,” said Caroline McCusker, who is white. “I don’t just go out and say, ‘I want to be friends with a black person.’ ” Paul Gabbey, a longtime Penfield civics teacher, said students’ attitudes about race have progressed markedly since he was a student there in the early 1980s. And the district’s commitment to diversity is evidenced by its participation in the Urban-Suburban program, where minority Rochester students are voluntarily bused in.

One of those students, KayJona Rogers, has been attending school there since fourth grade, and her friends at school are mostly from Penfield, not other Urban-Suburban students. Still, she said she doesn’t always feel entirely at home in her school.

“Sometimes I feel welcome, but other times it’s like, ‘Why is she here?’ ” she said. “It’s understandable, but it’s also great to get to know who someone is and make a connection. I don’t think people take time to do that here.”

Julieta Birmajer, a Penfield senior, was born in Argentina but grew up mostly in Penfield and speaks fluent English. Straddling two cultures, she sees little overt prejudice but plenty of room for progress.

“I love Penfield, and I loved growing up here, but it’s very sheltered in terms of culture,” she said. “You either accept the culture that’s here or you’re an outcast.”

Weddings, funerals and movies

It would seem that softening of racial prejudices, would lead inevitably toward more social integration. But Baronov, the sociologist, suggested an examination of three sorts of social gatherings that tell a lot about who and what matters to a person: weddings, funerals and movies.

“Do people (of different races) watch the same movies?” he asked. “Not especially. There’s some crossover — of course white people will show up (at a Tyler Perry movie) — but they’re not *for* white people. That’s not the marketing.”

Similarly, he said, weddings and funerals are usually extremely homogenous, proving the point that most Americans’ intimate social circles have little diversity, even when those people have contact with other races. The reason, Baronov said, is continuing structural segregation in the institutions where people form their most lasting social ties. As long as housing is segregated, he said, people will attend school with neighbors of the same skin color, predetermining their friends later on. Similarly, as long as there are racial inequities in education, workplaces — another likely location for forming a social circle — will tend to be more homogenous, as fewer minorities attain a good enough education to compete for certain jobs.

“The data does not support the basic idea of familiarity resulting in any kind of accelerated integration or color-blindness,” Baronov said. “If you get a job, that’s your network, and that’s one of the most corrosive parts of segregation. Like people know like people. You don’t have to be racist, it’s just: ‘They’re not in my social network, so they get excluded.’ ”

Passive neglect

When assistant principal Jeff Henley takes his turn supervising the cafeteria at Greece Odyssey High School, he's interested in more than whether tater tots are being used as projectiles. Henley has done research on school segregation, and Odyssey, which like many inner-ring suburban schools is rapidly diversifying, is an interesting case. He was pleased to notice, for instance, that race is not necessarily the determining factor in where students sit to eat their lunch.

"You walk around and you see different genders and ethnicities, high and low-socioeconomic kids, sitting together and talking about things they have in common," he said. "It's a very encouraging thing to me. ... It's a lot different from when I was in school."

Research shows that even within an apparently desegregated school, there are still stratifications. For example, as students in Penfield noted, minorities are underrepresented in Advanced Placement and other accelerated courses. They are often overrepresented in special education.

Districts that have effectively addressed that social and academic gap, Henley said, have done so through proactive policies that prioritize integration and reach out to help minorities who are otherwise often passively neglected. "The school districts that are finding success in truly integrating classrooms are having topdown approaches: this kid goes in this room, this kid goes in this room," he said. "Each seat is filled in a very thoughtful way."

Changing patterns

Of course, prejudices and preferences of all kinds can be inculcated early by parents, knowingly or not. As Baronov said: "Kids aren't idiots. They see their parents and uncles and aunts, the pattern they're following."

And fraught moments like the present, after the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, can be a good opportunity for conversation.

Rogers, the Penfield Urban-Suburban student, said she doesn't talk about race with her classmates. But Kristin Doughty, a Brighton resident and Nazareth College anthropology professor, took her 5-year-old daughter Natalie to a rally at Brooks Landing in Rochester last week shortly after the officer involved in Eric Garner's death was not indicted.

Natalie held a "black lives matter" sign in her bright blue gloves. She pointed to another sign — "I can't breathe" — and asked her mother what it meant. "Remember, I told you, that's the last thing the daddy said before he died," Doughty answered.

"I decided it was important for her to come here and find out why this is important to people," Doughty said. "I told her that people don't look at her skin and make bad judgments about her, but it's not that way for everyone."

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Rochester residents took to the streets in protest of the grand jury's decision not to indict a New York City police officer in the chokehold death of Eric Garner.

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