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Racism takes center stage at Palomar College forum

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SAN MARCOS Students of different colors and ethnic derivations put the spotlight on racism Thursday night at Palomar College's Howard Brubeck Theater, as they gathered to discuss their own experiences growing up.

Billed as a town hall-style forum on whether the U.S. educational system is racist, the 90-minute session mainly focused on the perspectives of high school and college students of different backgrounds.

One Cal State San Marcos student who attended high school in Virginia said the educational system is obviously racist, "from textbooks to everything else. I had no problem seeing pictures of white people. The only black person I read about was the guy who invented the stoplight. It's unreal."

The event was sponsored by Speak Out, a program of the Palomar Performing Arts Department and the college's faculty-staff diversity committee. Afterward came a performance of "Stand and Deliver," a stage adaptation of a film about an idealistic teacher and his students in an East Los Angeles high school.

"People ask me what race I am," another student told the crowd of more than 150. "My skin looks white, but I'm adopted and I have no idea where my mother and father came from. So when they ask me, I say I don't know."

The session started off with audience members taking a survey aimed at finding out their experience of race. They ranked, for example, how strongly they felt they could live anywhere they wanted, given adequate money, and how much they thought their race could be blamed when they were having a bad week.

The lowest scorers were the ones who felt the most prejudice; the highest scorers, the least.

At one end of the spectrum was Christopher Hall, the son of a New England trucking heir, whose college education was paid for by his grandfather's trust fund. He had an 85.

At the other end stood Cinnamon Gladney, a 16-year-old junior at Oceanside's El Camino High School who moved to North County two years ago from Shreveport, La., where she was the daughter of the first black and female police officer in the suburb of Bossier. She scored a 17.

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"Basically," Hall said, "the lion's share has been unfairly heaped upon me, and the best I can do is make it possible for this (high-scoring group) to be squished in the middle. I have absolutely no fears, because of the privilege I've had. ... (It's) one of the most unfair things I can think of."

Cinnamon told the crowd from across the theater, "Everybody makes us feel like we're a little bit less than the people on the other side of the room."

As the session wound up, Katie Carnett, a student at Escondido High School who sat with friends in the back row, said she decided racism is out there, but how it affects people is all in the way they decide to look at it.

Carnett, whose mother is Jewish and father is Christian, said, "I think as long as you have faith inside, if you believe in yourself and you believe you're as good as anyone else, then you can do anything you want in life, and racism doesn't matter."

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