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Survey sheds light on Greenvillians' attitudes on race

Local organizations find more religious than racial tension

By E. Richard Walton
STAFF WRITER

Greenville began its newest conversation about race before Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama gave his recent speech on race.

Russ Stall, Greenville Forward's executive director, and Paul Guy, a partner in Beyond Differences, started the discussion here when they sent out 1,200 copies of a survey with 32 questions about race.

Obama was all but forced to talk about race, while it was optional for Stall and Guy.

Stall is white, Guy is black. Both say they're trying to bring Greenville together racially. Stall shared the survey findings with more than 75 people of various races at a luncheon last week.

He tried to put the survey in perspective. He reminded everyone that the findings were simply "people's perceptions." In setting the tone, he said we all should do more than just get along.

"Tolerance isn't enough," he said. "Tolerance is just putting up with people."

Greenville Forward, an outgrowth of 2025, is attempting to see Greenville as it will be in the future. Beyond Differences is concerned with improving race relations.

Both Greenville Forward and Beyond Differences try to attract thinkers and doers with influence, financing and the patience to work below the radar on a touchy issue like race.

Some of what the survey uncovered was typical, some of it eye-opening.

"There's greater religious tension in Greenville than racial tension," Stall said. "That surprised me."

More than 95 percent of black people said they are discriminated against, while whites say it happens to them "rarely."

One in three people surveyed wrote that race relations in Greenville are better than other cities. Eighty percent said relations are the same or better.

Calder Ehrmann, an executive overseeing diversity at the Riley Institute at Furman University, said he was surprised when he learned of the tension in Greenville's religious community.

Still, he said, "Are we at a point where we're on first base (as far as making racial progress)? Probably not."

Brandon Blanding, 23, commented on the issue of race just after he and a friend finished a meal at Island Blend, which serves Jamaican specialties such as jerk chicken.

"Interacting between the races is OK," said Blanding, 23, who is black. But Blanding, a recent Furman University graduate, said there always seems to be something unspoken.

"It's more beneath the surface," he said. "They don't have an interest in crossing that boundary.

Kinneil Coltman, head of diversity at Greenville Hospital System, gave a pep talk. This self-described "tall, attractive blonde" from a middle-class, two-parent household said we all need to "give something back" when it comes to race.

Guy, who brings a range of race-related experience to the table, gave a viewpoint different from Stall's.

"I'm going to dialogue with you, not debate you," he said. "If I dialogue with you, I'm going to change myself and hopefully change you."

The review of Greenville's racial views comes at a time when some things seem to be shifting, again some of it good, some not.

Many Greenvillians think race relations are better now than in their parents' day, the survey found. Others perceive the quality of life in Greenville as somewhat better or slightly higher for minorities compared with the rest of the nation, the survey said.

Florida just joined five other states that have apologized for slavery.

For black people, trust can be a major issue from friendships to marriages to co-workers, according to the survey. Blacks have higher rates of distrust, the survey found.

Ehrmann said he was advised that anyone who was willing to talk about race should be ready for a few tough moments.

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