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Fostering Ethical Decision Making

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Almost 220 11th grade students from 20 different Madison area high schools met for the 16th annual Rotary Club of Madison Ethics Symposium on Friday, Feb. 19 at Monona Terrace in Madison, affirming at the culminating luncheon the need not just for adolescents but all of us to “think all the way through decisions.” This kind of thinking, the students expressed, could be enhanced by discussing dilemmas with others including those whom we do not know and those who are different than us.

“Discussing issues with others can broaden your viewpoint,” said Katie Feller of La Follette High School. “It’s interesting to see how people can change their view (by thinking and talking it through),”

added Liz Dominguez of Marshall High School.

The five-hour symposium kicked off with real-life reminders that ethical decisions abound throughout history and contemporary life. **Steve Johannsen**, the 2016 Rotary Ethics Symposium Chair, reminded students that the day was a significant date in history as US President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack, authorizing the deportation of Japanese Americans to internment camps. “It is a decision that is still being discussed today,” he said, leaving “tacit” the current political dialogue on the Syrian refugee crisis and immigration.



It was a group of UW students by name of “First Wave Hip Hop Theater” that in the opening session framed and underscored the importance of ethics by its artistic representations of the Holocaust, slavery (particularly vivid and thought-provoking through a simulation of a public whipping of a slave), police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement with particular reference to the Madison protests in the wake of the March 5, 2015, police shooting of 19-year-old Tony Terrell Robinson, Jr. First Wave is comprised of a diverse group of UW students, all of whom are part of the first university scholarship program in the U.S. centered on the spoken word and hip-hop culture. The group’s performance

helped the assembled 11th grade students indeed grasp how ethics not only shape individual lives but instead entire cultures and societies.

In three separate breakout sessions of about 20 students each, the high school students with the aid of a Rotary facilitator discussed the ethical implications of adolescent alcohol use and the potential for drunk driving, affirmative action directed toward youth of color, and the use of a locker room by a transgender student who has not had gender reassignment surgery. Many of the students remarked not only how timely these topics were, but also incredibly important for them to discuss.

The three sessions not only provided rich dialogue among the high school students, but also introduced them to a hierarchy of moral and ethical thinking. Students initially were challenged to record their gut decision, and subsequently made decisions through the lens of “egoism” (What Action Will Benefit Me the Most?); “social group relativism” (What Action Do My Friends or Group Members Think I should Do?); Utilitarianism (What Action Would Produce the Greatest Amount of Good and the Least Amount of Harm?); and the “Right Approach” (What Action Will Best Respect the Rights and Dignity of Each Person?).

“We want the students to think about these stages. Our goal is to lead them toward the Rights Approach,” said Denis Collins, who, as a Business Ethics Professor at Edgewood College, has lent his expertise to the symposium since its inception. “Creating a forum and a framework in a safe setting with new acquaintances,” is what defines the essence of the symposium, according to Johannsen. Affirming the sense of safety was a student speaker who proclaimed that “sometimes, but not today, our opinions get discounted.”



Photo 1: Edgewood Professor Denis Collins & Melanie Ramey; Photo 2: Mike Casey & Rotary District Governor Mary Van Hout; Photo 3: Karen Christianson & Ben Hebebrand; Photo 4: Edgewood Rotaract student Idah Karonga

The sense of safety is no accident. All Rotarian facilitators underwent a five-hour training session, stressing ground rules best summarized by the mandate that participants need to “treat every single person with complete and unconditional respect.” The training for the facilitators included a presentation by local psychologist Dr. David Lee on “LGBTQ Discussion on Transgender and Identity Issues.”

The symposium also offered accompanying teachers and principals the opportunity to ponder possibilities to introduce further outlets for students to discuss ethical dilemmas. Rotarian **Bob Shumaker** pointed out that often it is the kids who bring back to their schools the need and desire for further ethics education. “Belleville High School kids created an Ethics program,” he said. “The kids created and gave their teachers ethical dilemmas relating to student discipline and assessment of student work.”

Education, including learning about an ethical framework for decision-making, is of course enlightening. Thomas Mulholland of East High School summed it up this way: “Apathy is dangerous; ignorance is more dangerous.” Equally uplifting was an impromptu remark by a student during the public comment session that “after today, we can still have faith in humanity.”