Lesson 5: Personal Prejudice

Personal prejudice is a view or judgment that someone has for another person or group based on their real or perceived group membership. A personal prejudice can shape the way that people interact with others and can often last a lifetime. In extreme cases, a personal prejudice can become so strong that a person commits a crime against another person or group of people; this is called a hate crime.

In the news, we often hear stories of extreme instances of hate crimes such as a person being beat to death for being gay, homeless or of a certain religious background. However, we rarely hear about people who were once prejudice but have changed their views over time. It is true, people can change and often times when they do, they make it their life mission to educate others to help stop hate crimes and intolerance from happening.

Before passing away on June 28, 2010, Senator Robert Byrd served the United States as a political leader for over 50 years. Some people will remember Senator Byrd for his political contributions but others for his racist past. In the early 1940’s, Senator Byrd started a local chapter of an organization called the Ku Klux Klan or the KKK. People who are a part of this group believe that because a person is “white” they are better than everyone else and determine if someone is good or bad based on the color of their skin.

As he grew older, Senator Byrd realized that he had been looking at people the wrong way. Instead of judging people for the things they can not change, like the color of their skin, Senator Byrd began to tell people about the importance of celebrating diversity and learning from past mistakes as the following quote shows. In 2005, Senator Byrd said the following about his past beliefs, “I know now I was wrong. Intolerance has no place in America. I apologized a thousand times…and I don’t mind apologizing over and over again.”

1. The news is filled with stories of people being treated unfairly, in some cases even being killed, because they were seen as different. Online or at your school library, research a crime that was committed based on a personal prejudice. What was the motive behind the crime? How did the person who committed the crime develop their prejudicial views? What was the impact on the victim of the crime? What could have been done to avoid that crime?

2. In order to celebrate diversity, it is important to know how you think and where your thoughts about others come from. Track your thoughts about the people you encounter throughout the day in a journal for a day, week or semester. When you see a student walking down the hall, do you catch yourself saying, “She’s so fat” or “He’s so retarded”? If so, write it down! When you had that thought were you seeing him or her as less of a person? Did it make you think he or she wasn’t worth your time to be friends with? How did your assumptions change your interactions with others? How many of your assumptions were something that person could control? Once a week, talk about those assumptions you made (keeping in mind to be respectful; leave out other people’s names) and how your views have changed now.