



Actor LeVar Burton , center, offers a suggestion to an educator during an impromptu gathering before the scheduled 'National Conversation on Race' meeting in the Joseph Room of the J.F.K. Library on Saturday. At his left are filmmaker Lee Mun Wah (of Stir Fry Seminars and Consulting) and Vallejo NAACP chapter president Jimmie Jackson and at his right is Vallejoan Aliah Majon, program facilitator. (Mike Jory/Times-Herald)

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An African American woman said at the back of her mind, she's always afraid for the safety of her mixed-race grandchildren. A blonde Latina said she has white privileges until she opens her mouth. A Vallejo councilwoman said she was married to a Nepalese man and witnessed first-hand the discriminations that he experienced.

Those were a few examples of the personal stories that were shared during what organizers called "a kickoff for a movement" Saturday.

The inaugural program, A National Conversation on Race: Walking Each Other Home, was brought to Vallejo to open an ongoing conversation about race in the community, organizers added.

Also featured was special guest LeVar Burton, a friend of Aliah MaJon's and an actor who first became known for his role as young slave Kunta Kinte in the historic 1977 miniseries, "Roots." Burton is also host of the PBS children program "Reading Rainbow," and Geordi LaForge in "Star Trek: The Next Generation."

Passionate about the issue of race and education, Burton donated his time to Saturday's free event, Majon said.

MaJon is a Vallejo resident and senior facilitator and key consultant for training design and program development for StirFry Seminars and Consulting.

Along with the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Vallejo Sister City Association, StirFry brought the workshop to Vallejo.

"I don't think people have really talked about racism," MaJon said. "We've talked about incidents that are race related, but not racism. ... This is about partnership, teamwork, creativity ... to innovate change for the children.

Everybody has to have a part in it. Not only the white people, or only the people of color."

The program began in the Vallejo Sister City Association room with a meet and greet for the public with Burton, filmmaker Lee Mun Wah and MaJon.

To a packed room of about 50 people, Burton shared his life story, his experience being a part of "Roots," and the issue of race in general.

"At any time I walk out of my door, I'm subject to that old way of thinking," Burton said. "The conversation on race is something that I have a stake in."

The public, including Vallejo City Councilwoman Marti Brown and school district Superintendent Ramona Bishop, also shared their views about race and racism.

In an interview with the Times-Herald Burton said Saturday's program was a necessary step to move forward as a nation.

"The space was opened for truth to be present," Burton said. "There was a distinct lack of resistance. ... It's clear to most people that wounds of racism hold us back as a nation. It's necessary for us to address this wound."

After the more intimate session, the program continued to a workshop led by Lee, executive director of StirFry, at the Joseph Room of the John F. Kennedy Library.

About 200 people filled the room to listen to Burton's introduction and participate in simple exercises, Later they watched Lee's new documentary, "If These Halls Could Talk," featuring college students of different ethnicities, facing each other while talking about race, and how it affects each other.

The film was then followed by a discussion.

"This generation is extremely afraid of each other," Lee said. "We are all recovering racists."

The program will continue today with a day-long workshop aimed at working with community leaders and facilitators. It will be held from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., also at the Joseph Room. The workshop is not free and is on a sliding scale. Tickets and more information can be found at www.conversationsonrace.com.

"We need the decision makers and leaders in the community to come and sit at the table with us," MaJon said. "It's their table."

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