

SYLVESTER BROWN JR.



*Two try to keep
 lines open among
 Jews and blacks*

OUR CONVERSATION had gotten hot and heavy inside the St. Louis Bread Co. in University City. Gene Carton and I have become fast friends since I wrote about him last year. Carton is Jewish and makes a point of keeping me informed on issues involving the Jewish community. We met recently for coffee and conversation. Gene, 64, looked in even better shape than I remembered and still reminds me of actor Ted Danson.

We debated our political differences with passion. Carton supports Bush and is confident he'll win come November. I disagreed with him. We raised our voices, cut each other off and argued strenuously. But, in the end, we shook hands, voiced our mutual respect and promised to keep talking.

That's what I like about Carton. He sends me e-mails after each of my columns. Sometimes he agrees with me. Other times, he doesn't. Still, we keep learning and talking. Whenever I read or hear about Jewish issues, I think about Carton.

He came to mind when I read about Cultural Leadership, a new nonprofit organization forming in St. Louis. The program promotes cooperation between African-American and Jewish youth. Twenty local black and Jewish high school juniors will participate in a series of functions that will help them get to know each other's religions, cultures and history.

Quoting from the 2001 Focus St. Louis report, Karen Kalish, executive director of Cultural Leadership, defined St. Louis as one of "the most racially segregated metropolitan areas in the country."

"St. Louis needs this," said Kalish. "There can never be enough programs that get young people talking."

Kalish modeled the organization after a successful program she started in 1993 that's still operating in Washington. Cultural Leadership will officially kick off in January. Applications are now being accepted.

Are relationships strained between blacks and Jews? Sure, there was unease in 1991 after the Nation of Islam published "The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews" that asserted Jews were a party to the slave trafficking. There was also Louis Farrakhan's definition of Judaism as a "gutter religion" and Jesse Jackson's "Hymie Town" comment. But neither reflected collective black sentiment.

It's about future relationships, Kalish stressed. Many blacks are frustrated and angered by racism and discrimination while many whites see it as isolated or nonexistent. Either way, Kalish points out, addressing the issue has not been a priority in the region. Throughout American history and during the civil rights movement, the African-American and Jewish communities suffered and worked together to defeat discrimination. The goal of Cultural Leadership is to create future generations dedicated to eradicating racism, anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination.

All St. Louis-area African-American and Jewish students are eligible to apply. Once accepted, they are expected to participate in cultural activities, dialogue sessions and to attend synagogues and churches. They will also travel to places of historical significance to both communities. After the program, students will be expected to take on leadership roles and facilitate discussions on race and discrimination.

"It's a very intense program," said Daniel Perl, 24, an associate project manager with McCormack Baron Salazar in downtown St. Louis. Perl participated in Kalish's Washington program in 1996. He said it was difficult for students to examine life beyond stereotypes and self-inflicted boundaries.

"I saw a lot of tears, but the experience sped up my maturation and has had a lasting impact," Perl said.

As we sipped coffee, I told Gene Carton about the Cultural Leadership program. He wasn't impressed.

"It sounds good in theory but sadly, there will always be animosity between blacks and Jewish people."

Carton and I don't agree there either. But, like I said, that's not important. All that matters is that we keep talking.

For an application or more information about the Cultural Leadership program, go to www.culturalleadership.com.

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