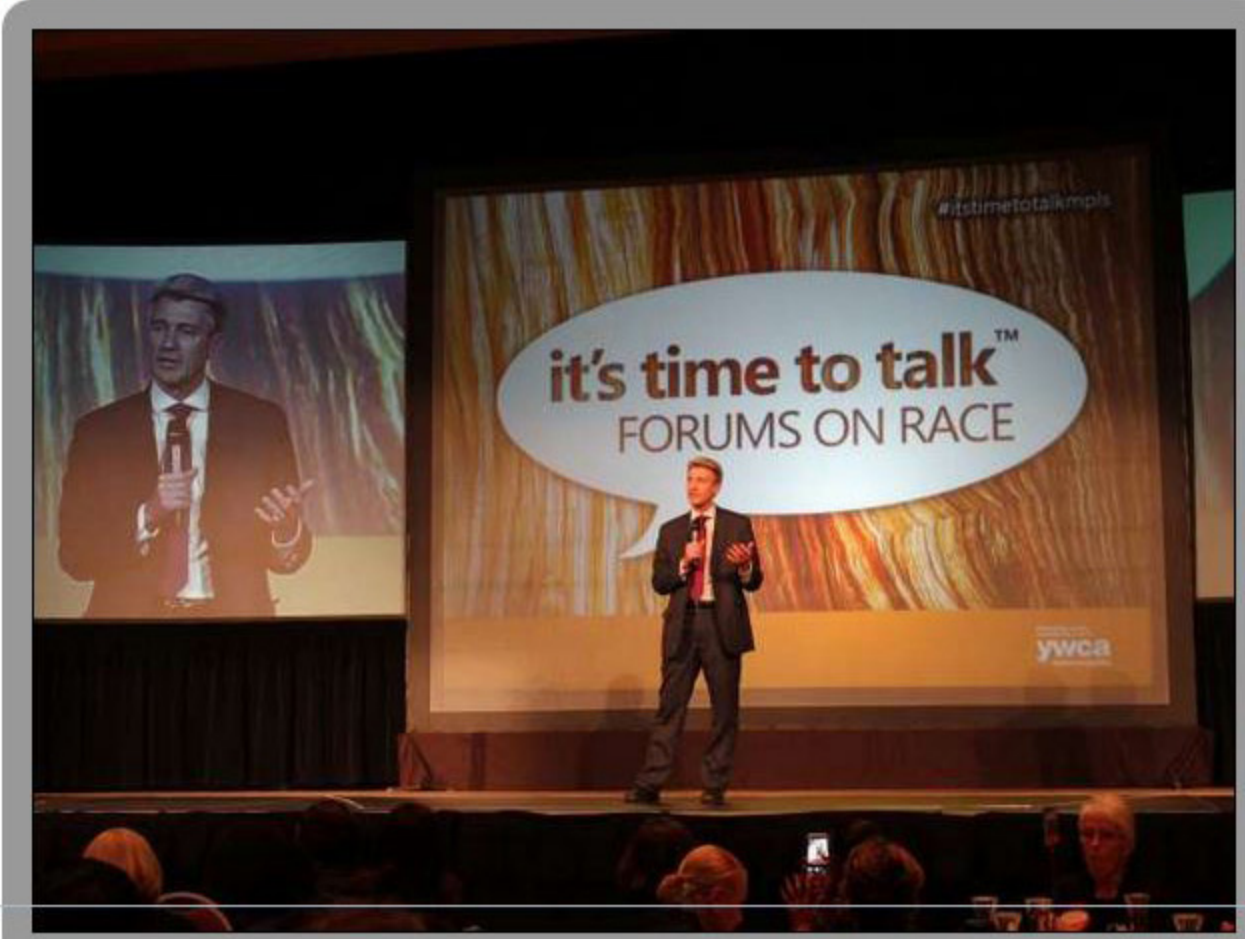


HOME

YWCA forum tackles racial issues head-on

November 13, 2014
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YWCA of Minneapolis hosts a discussion on race with more than 1,200 community leaders.

While many may avoid talking about race, hundreds of community leaders met at the Minneapolis Convention Center last week to do just that.

The event, the annual "It's Time To Talk" forum hosted by the YWCA of Minneapolis, is meant to break down cultural barriers and elicit change in the workplace and in the community.

Former Mayor R.T. Rybak gave the keynote speech, telling hundreds of leaders from local businesses and organizations the importance of tackling the city's and the state's racial disparities, which are some of the worst in the nation.

"There is no other community in the United States of America where you can look at two children walking down the street and predict their chances of success by looking at the color of their skin," Rybak told guests. "Let that sink in."

"It's Time to Talk" is the largest forum on race in the nation, growing from 600 attendees in its first year to about 1,200 of local business and community leaders now in its 12th year. YWCA hosted its first forum in Atlanta this year and hopes to expand the program to Cleveland using its nationwide reach.

The forum consists of speeches from YWCA staff and guest speakers and private, often personal discussions among guests over lunch.

Through these discussions, YWCA of Minneapolis hopes to teach leaders, who come from the everywhere from the private sector to government offices, to rethink ways of approaching race and their own words and actions.

"We were taught sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt me," said Becky Roloff, YWCA president and CEO. "At the YWCA, we don't believe that."

To guide conversations, YWCA also trains about 140 racial discussion facilitators per year to manage discussions at "It's Time To Talk" events and in their own workplace or community. Facilitators initially train eight hours with the YWCA but continue to receive ongoing resources and development.

Talking about race with coworkers or strangers can be uncomfortable — Rybak joked "it's the single most dangerous thing to do in the United States of America" — but facilitators are tasked with making sure everyone feels welcome.

Facilitators shift the discussion to push guests listen to understand and not to reply, along with other skill-building exercises, said Anita Patel, YWCA vice president of racial justice and public policy.

Many facilitators return each year, but the conversations don't simply repeat; they've grown deeper and more practical, she said.

"So often, people can feel hopeless or overwhelmed," she said. "It's clear people are hungry to have a conversation about race in a productive way."

Generation Next targets racial disparities

The forum is especially relevant for Minneapolis, which has some of the country's worst racial disparities.

Rybak, who as mayor became a nationally recognized figure on youth development and education, now leads Generation Next, a local coalition of civic, education and business leaders working to close these gaps in the metro area.

In his keynote, Rybak outlined an expanded list of the group's goals to handle racial disparities. Its hope is that every child is ready for kindergarten, meets third and eighth grade reading and math benchmarks, respectively, graduates high school ready for their post-secondary plan and, ultimately, earns a post-secondary degree or certification.

In each of these areas, Generation Next found that white students succeed at higher rates than students of color across the board.

For example, nearly three in four white third-graders in Minneapolis schools achieved reading standards this year, but less than one in four students of color did the same, according to Minnesota Department of Education data.

The group also found that some of these achievement and opportunity gaps also extend to non-English-speaking and/or low-income students and students who have switched schools.

To address these goals, Generation Next is partnering with an action network of individuals and organizations to support a "cradle-to-career" approach to every child's education. It's an approach that puts less focus on blanket solutions and more on assessing individual needs.

"It's not about treating everyone equally; it's about treating everyone fairly," Rybak said.

Talking race in the workplace

The event also targets business leaders who continue the discussion of race and racial disparities in the workplace where they can better develop employees of color and make long-term goals.

The city's private sector regularly has issues retaining people of color, Rybak said.

Patel said YWCA of Minneapolis focuses on getting businesses to recognize diverse talent and works with organizations to build institutional policies promote inclusivity from their marketing, to hiring practices and other areas.

This is a problem for the Twin Cities region where the jobless rate for black residents in the Twin Cities averaged 18 percent, more than three-times that of white residents, according to a 2012 Economic Policy Institute study. The EPI found that the Twin Cities' employment gap was the largest among major metropolitan areas in the study.

While racism or racial disparities won't be solved in single conversation, let alone a dozen forums each hosting hundreds of conversations, Patel said guests have grown more eager to bring these topics back into their communities to include others in the discussions.

And it appears some are listening. The cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, along with the state of Minnesota, call declared Nov. 5 "Dialogue on Race Day."

"We're different in Minneapolis because we have [this forum]," Roloff said. "We believe these conversations have made a difference."



Calendar Highlights

- MISC Mutable Landscapes
- MISC Destination Northeast
- MISC Doorways to the Underworld
- MUSIC Music at Mario's Keller Bar/Gasthofs
- MISC Give to the Max Day
- MUSIC Music at the Red Stag
- MUSIC Live music at Mayslack's
- ON STAGE River Songs and Tales with Mark Twain: Greater Minnesota Tour
- OUTDOOR Summer Rooftop Fitness Series
- HEALTH AND WELLNESS Meditation at Plymouth Congregational Church

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