

# Minority students share experiences: 'I am not who you see'

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*Campus Editor*

It takes effort and a genuine desire to really get to know someone. This is why diversity issues are not only about skin color, but largely about what lies beneath.

Six students came together for an intense discussion on stereotypes and cultural identity at the "Perceptions & Misconceptions of Race: I am not who you see" panel discussion on Thursday, Dec. 8.

It is the spiritual, social and intellectual dimensions that make people who they are, according to discussion moderator Dr. Hector Cruz, Diversity Liaison to the Chancellor and a professor in the School of Education.

"[We need to] look at indi-

viduals as individuals and not just as members of a group," said Cruz, who stressed that people cannot be defined merely by how they appear.

Cruz asked the audience to come up with stereotypes they have heard about groups of people. They brought up several stereotypes about gender and race. One example offered was that "African Americans are less intelligent than those of fairer skin."

Another example given was that "Mexicans are lazy." Cruz, who grew up in Mexico, responded to this comment with a story about his father.

"My father died early and it may have been because he worked so much," said Cruz.

His father had worked as an accountant in Mexico, but when

their family moved to Texas, he could not continue this work in the U.S. due to language barriers. Because he was no longer able to make as much money, his father had to work extra hard to continue to support their family.

The panelists reflected still more stereotypes.

"When I came to Stout people assumed I was an athlete," said Anderson Perryman, whose ethnic background is mixed. "[Some people] assume [minority students] are just here to play sports, and not here for an education."

"One of my worst experiences when I was a freshman is when the teacher said to choose our own groups; the other students turned away," said Perryman. "They assume I'm not in class to learn or that I don't want to be part of a group."

A few students said they suspect they had been pulled over because of how they appear. One student said he doesn't drive to school anymore because he gets pulled over for no reason.

"I have gotten pulled over for driving too close to the curb," said Perryman.

Other panel members said the Menomonie commu-

nity is in need of diversity education because the area is not very diverse.

"Back at home [in Milwaukee] it wasn't a big deal to be mixed," said Christian Ward, a senior in technical education. "But here it is a big deal; it depends on the community."

Ward, whose parents are African-American and Caucasian, talked about his identity struggle.

"I'm not black or white," said Ward, "But at the same time, I'm both."

Other panel members also expressed issues with cultural identity. Pa Thao, a psychology senior, is Hmong. However, she grew up in Chicago and describes herself as very "Americanized."

"I have been singled out in class," said Thao. "If the issue of ethnicity came up, the professor looked to me for answers."

"It was embarrassing because I don't know," said Thao. "I get looked down on because I don't know my own culture—by the class and by other Hmong."

Why do people make these kinds of judgments? Where does it come from?

"None of us are born with bias; we develop bias," said Cruz. "Prejudice is learned through

contamination by family, friends and others."

According to Cruz, every person learns attitudes from the people they spend the most time with. Another way prejudice is learned is through negative experiences with someone belonging to a certain group.

How do we become truly aware of each others' cultures?

"There are a lot of organizations," said Avie Xiong, a human development and family studies senior. "You can always attend meetings and get to know people from other cultures."

"Stout needs to promote diversity better," said Deron Drummond, a senior in human development. "When people see 'multiculturalism' only minorities show up to the event. Multiculturalism means everyone."

"Going to a place where you feel like a minority can be a life changing experience," said Thao. One way to experience this is to study abroad.

"The issue of race is such a taboo area," said Thao. "People think, 'if I bring it up it will cause tension.' Not asking or bringing it up is causing problems. If you really want to know something about another person just ask."