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Intentionally Connecting with the Other

OSCAR F. CONTRERAS TELÓN

Program Host and Hispanic/Latino Marketing Specialist, Radio Poder 1380AM



I was only 12 years old when I moved from Guatemala to Virginia with my mom and siblings to reunite with my dad after 10 years. Everything was new to me. I remember coming out of the plane and even noticing that the air smelled different. I felt so far away from home, a stranger in a new land.

As strangers, we have to learn so much about so many things. Sometimes we have to rely on learning from others, but in doing so, we inherit their biases. I was told during my first few months in the USA to “be careful around Black people.” I was not to use the word “negro,” which is Spanish for black, around Black people. I had to think twice before saying something like “mis zapatos negros” (my black shoes). I was told Black people would be mad, that they were “violent” and could hurt me. I knew nothing then about the history of Richmond or the U.S., but at first, all I knew was what I was told. For the first two years, all I wanted was to go back home. I was not interested in finding out about others. I was just focused on myself.

What I know now is that the stereotypes that were communicated to me were embedded with racial prejudice and bias. We often hear negative and demeaning prejudices from various sources about other groups of people and about our own people throughout our lives. If we believe the lies and half truths about others, it will dictate how we act and react around them, thus provoking and feeding stereotypes that keep us all separated. We want to be comfortable, and accepted so we opt to stick to those we know and understand. Having no relationship is much easier than building a relationship with people different from us.

It wasn't until a few years after I moved to Richmond from Culpeper County that I began to connect with the real history and experience of Black people in America. I had the pleasure of walking the Slave Trail in Richmond. As immigrants, we often don't know this history. Our guide was explaining how the enslaved people would come out from the bottom of the boats after months to set foot in Richmond. He asked us to imagine them hearing different sounds, seeing different vegetation, smelling and breathing a different air. As I tried to imagine, it brought me back to my memory of that unfamiliar air as I came out of the plane when I was 12. My experience does not compare at all to the enslaved people, but I felt I was able to connect with them and it broke my heart even more. I was in a strange land. I did not speak English and people looked and sounded very different. This connection made me more open to building relationships.

I want to challenge other Richmonders to intentionally build relationships across people groups and have honest conversations to clear the air of any misperceptions and truly learn about each other. As a Christian, the Bible motivates me to take the challenge. Revelation 7:9 says: “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” Now in Richmond, we have people from many “nations, tribes, people and languages” and I believe we are a blessed region, but we don't know what to do with the blessing. How do we connect with others?

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Start Conversations Across Difference

I believe the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman illustrates the importance of starting conversation across differences. Historically, the Samaritans and Jews did not like each other. Jews would avoid going through Samaria and did not see Samaritans as equals. Jesus was probably told as a child to be careful around those Samaritans. During his ministry as an adult, Jesus was in Judea and was traveling to Galilee. He chose to go through Samaria and stop at a town called Sychar. Tired, seated by the well, Jesus saw a Samaritan woman coming to get water. Not only was she a Samaritan and a woman, she was alone and Jesus, by all cultural standards, was not to interact with her.

Instead of following tradition and expected norms, Jesus intentionally started a conversation and asked the Samaritan woman for some water. She was very surprised and quickly reminded him of the cultural precedent of mutual dislike. Nevertheless, she was brave not to follow the status quo. They began to have an honest conversation, talking about prejudice, politics, religion, personal problems, and ultimately, they opened up and built a relationship. Jesus planned to reveal himself as the Messiah to her. At one point, she asked him about where the right place was to worship. It was typical for Jews to worship in the Temple and Samaritans in the mountain. The answer to the question could elevate one group above the other. Jesus said all ought to worship God "in the Spirit and in truth." Who they were and where they were was not the emphasis, but the intention in which they worship. Soon after, he revealed himself as the Messiah. Her heart rejoiced and she ran to tell the good news to her people. In this conversation, Jesus and the Samaritan woman were able to clear the air by intentionally and openly discussing the prejudice of their people. This then opened the door for a conversation that addressed sorrow, but also brought joy and hope.

We can smile, and acknowledge each other. We can be kind and offer help. We can cry with those who cry and rejoice with those who rejoice.

Jesus knew how Jews and Samaritans felt about each other, but he did not speak negatively about Samaritans with other Jews. To the contrary, he referred to them in a positive light. One day, an expert in the Law of Moses asked Jesus, "who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers with a story where a Samaritan man was the hero. You can read the story in Luke 10:25-37 where we get the term "the good Samaritan." Jesus wanted the Jews to see beyond themselves and see the equal value in others. He challenged them not to be comfortable, but to intentionally do good to others. **As Richmonders, we need to seek out conversations, even if they are not initially comfortable, so we can learn about each other and act with compassion. This is true, especially if we find ourselves in a position of influence or privilege.**

Create Cross-Cultural Community Spaces for Joy, Healing and Sharing

One way to connect across cultures is by creating space for sharing our experiences, both the joys and struggles. About eight years ago at my church, the first year my wife and I ran Vacation Bible School (VBS), I was in charge of the adult activities. I had a group of around 25-30 people for five nights, two hours each night. Some spoke only Spanish and some only English. We worship every Sunday at the same time but in different locations in the church building. Normally, these two groups wouldn't get to see each other and share. In my church family, not speaking the same language is sometimes described as a barrier. To this I say: We can smile, and acknowledge each other. We can be kind and offer help. We can cry with those who cry and rejoice with those who rejoice. All these things do not require speaking another language or understanding a different culture. This VBS was an opportunity to be intentional. I wanted my brothers and sisters to get to know one another, make a connection, and care for each other. Each night, I had planned different games and activities for everyone to participate regardless of language or background. Even after all those years, I still see the positive results of that VBS. We made each other laugh and

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we cried with each other. A Spanish-speaking woman and English-speaking man also started a special friendship. They kept it up for years. Every time they would see each other, they would approach one another with a hug. They talked even though they did not speak the same language. They managed to laugh and make many great memories just by acknowledging and being kind to one another. Though he passed away some years ago, she still speaks of him with love and admiration. Their relationship would not have been possible without the space we created at VBS.

On another night, a Spanish-speaker shared some of the pain she was going through. Tears rolling down her face, she said that she had not seen her oldest son for almost nine years since she left her home country. She did not want him growing up being an easy target for gangs to recruit him. Everyone was crying with her. We prayed for them to be together. Sometime after, when the boy was able to be reunited with his mom and siblings, both the Spanish and English-speaking congregants rejoiced as one.

In all these examples, connections and relationships were established because there was an opportunity to be together through VBS. All it took for these people to connect was an opportunity where the only agenda was to talk, listen, and share. Creating more spaces like these in our region, both religious and secular spaces, is necessary for our shared understanding and healing.

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Conclusion: Moving Towards Transformation

In my line of work as a radio host, people often ask me how to reach out to and build trust with the Latino/Hispanic communities. From my more than 15 years of experience, I tell them it takes time. They have to be willing to put in the work. Not everyone is willing to reach out unless it fits their agenda. Making a transaction with someone is not the same as building trust. It may look like you care while you get what you want, but it will not last. This type of transactional relationship ends up creating a bigger gap and resentment.

We must move beyond prejudice in our thoughts and actions and invest the time to connect with others. Doing so gives us freedom to reach out. 1 John 4:18 says, "Perfect love drives out fear." We also have to be willing to sometimes be offended by ignorant comments or actions. We must take this as an opportunity to build a bridge or be the bridge. In the Bible, it says that God made us in His image. We all need love, justice, peace and relationships. Let us not act like complete strangers. We are all humans that come in different shades. Let's get to know one another to care for each other. If we only stay with our own, we will grow apart, creating animosity and fear of the other. If we are going to create a racially equitable Richmond, let's be intentional about creating hearts as well as physical spaces and conversations that can clear the atmosphere; giving all of us a familiar air to breathe.

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Oscar F. Contreras Telón

Oscar Contreras was born in Guatemala City, Guatemala. In 1995, he moved with his family to Culpeper, Virginia. After graduating from high school in Culpeper, he worked as an AmeriCorps volunteer with the Department of Social Services. For college, he moved to Richmond in 2004 and graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in photography and film in 2008. While pursuing his degree, he interned with the City of Richmond, working directly with Latino/Hispanic communities. He has worked as the program host and Latino/Hispanic marketing specialist at Radio Poder 1380 AM, Richmond's first Latino Christian Radio Station, since 2007.

Oscar lives in East Henrico with his wife, Rachel, and their four children. They are members of Branch's Baptist Church, where he serves as a deacon and leads a couple's class with his wife. Every Thanksgiving, for the last several years, he heads a community dinner event that provides hundreds of door-to-door meals in south Richmond. Oscar was named among the Richmond Times Dispatch's Person of the Year honorees in 2020.