

# Tackling the tough topics



➔ A high school boy feels he's treated differently because he's the only Asian-American on his baseball team.

➔ A girl who is a minority repeatedly gets passed over by the cashier at an ice-cream counter.

➔ Two female cousins who are Hispanic attend the same college. The darker-skinned woman is shunned by friends of her lighter-skinned cousin.

Lynette DeJesus at first presented these three scenarios as hypothetical examples of prejudice during her April 7 workshop "Stereotypes, Racism and Prejudice" at the Diocesan Youth Convention. Yet DeJesus soon revealed to her teen audience that all are true stories — and that the second and third examples involved her directly.

DeJesus, the diocesan coordinator of urban youth-ministry, began her presentation by telling participants about her previous career as a housing advocate, through which she worked on behalf of citizens facing discrimination based on race, color, religion or sexism.

Regarding her experience in the ice-cream shop, DeJesus said she had to speak up firmly and say "I've been waiting" in order for the clerk to serve her. "Those of us who have been there know

how to use that tone of voice," she remarked.

The college situation was far less easily resolved. Recalling that her cousin didn't make efforts to integrate her with the group of friends, DeJesus briefly broke down in tears, saying "We don't really talk anymore."

These vivid examples of racism grabbed the attention of conventioneer Dana Marzovilla, 18, from St. Theodore's Parish in Gates. "It really opened up my mind. I learned that even families can be torn apart by prejudices," he said.

DeJesus' workshop was one of five "challenge sessions" offered twice each on April 7. They took place at Rochester's Sheraton Four Points Hotel, on the final day of the two-day youth convention.

Michael Theisen, diocesan director of youth ministry, said the format for each session was designed to raise two questions: What would the world do in difficult situations, and what would we do as disciples of Christ?

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The other teen challenge sessions were:

➔ **Sexuality:** Teens examined such issues as peer pressure, crisis pregnancy, dating violence, homosexuality and abstinence. Jimmy Samuels, 14, from Holy

Name of Jesus Parish in Greece, said the workshop was "very graphic," but because of its approach, led to an open and honest discussion. While teens may be already informed about sex, he explained, "It's hard for them to talk about it."

➔ **Friends in Crisis:** Participants discussed such subjects as depression, substance abuse, stress and family issues. When asked what the warning signs might be that someone is in crisis, teens responded with a long list including: becoming detached, talking of death, mood swings, taking greater risks and violent action. Presenter Lynne Boucher reminded participants that they can't solve all the problems of someone with such tendencies, but they should be willing to offer or seek help. "If we are to be followers of Jesus, we shouldn't be surprised to be walking with people in crisis," Boucher said.

➔ **Violence:** Teens debated various aspects of terrorism and war, and also probed violence in the home. They were asked, for instance, how they'd respond in the case of a teen whose father frequently shoves and yells at his wife and children, but becomes apologetic later. The group also discussed the effects of violence in movies and television. One way to offset some of society's violent influences, teens agreed, is to be less negative and more loving in our own lives.

➔ **Life and death issues:** Should a man who is a convicted rapist and murderer get the death penalty? Some teens said they wouldn't know how they'd feel unless they were in the situation. Sister Donna Del Santo, presenter, reminded them that the Catholic Church respects life in all its forms, and therefore stands against such actions as capital punishment, euthanasia and abortion. Emily Fields, 14, from Rochester's St. John the Evangelist Church, said she was intrigued by the workshop. Aside from abortion, she had "never really put a lot of thought" into these other controversial aspects of life and death, she said.

Theisen noted that the challenge sessions fell into line with the convention's theme of "Follow the Leader."

"I don't think you do that theme justice if you stay at the surface level and just celebrate the faith, rather than going deeper to where the faith is lived out on a day-to-day level," Theisen said.

# ON the MOVE

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