

Family Night Teaches Tolerance

*Lowndes Middle School
Valdosta, Georgia*

With a little over 1000 thousand students, Lowndes Middle School has a richly diverse population. Unfortunately, due to stereotypes, cultural differences, and fears of the unknown, a significant amount of racial tension existed among the student body.

The school's Parent Action Team decided to hold a family night to teach tolerance, embrace differences, and celebrate cultural diversity. The Action Team, along with school faculty and administration, sought to create a climate where all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, could feel accepted, included, and welcomed.

On October 28, 2003, Lowndes Middle School welcomed families and students to Teaching Tolerance Family Night. Guest speaker, Dr. Shirley Hardin, Director of African American Studies at Valdosta State University, encouraged her audience to value the differences in all people and to celebrate diversity. She emphasized her point as she declared, "We are more alike than we are different." Dr. Hardin involved the audience by having them share some of their family traditions that still influence their lives today, some familiar stereotypes that have affected them, and some personal experiences with diversity. Many participants were astonished at the similarities in family traditions and experiences between those of different ethnic and racial groups.

Family Night included participation from students, teachers, parents, community partners, and central office personnel. Two seventh-grade students performed Tracy Spencer's rendition of "Imagine," and a teacher

recited a modified version of Pastor Martin Niemöller's, "First They Came for the Jews." District Parent Involvement Coordinators decorated the tables with crafts from various ethnic groups and supplied literature on teaching. After all the activities, everyone attended a barbeque chicken dinner prepared by one of the school's community partners, the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity.

The Parent Action Team made a concerted effort to include parents of culturally diverse backgrounds in this event and share their experiences with the audience. Posters advertising the event were written in several different languages. Students of various ethnic backgrounds gave input into the designs of the posters. Each student received a flier to take home. The local newspaper and radio stations assisted with advertisement for the occasion.

The Family Night was a huge success and opened avenues for other activities aimed at teaching tolerance, such as, "Mix-It-Up," which encouraged students to eat lunch with students of a race or culture different from their own. Family Night also opened a dialogue among students in the classrooms on racial differences. Lowndes Middle School approached a sensitive, yet potentially explosive, issue in a positive manner that helped everyone in the school community appreciate diversity and practice tolerance.

*Johnetta J. Henry, Teacher Liaison
(229) 245-2280
jhenry@lowndes.k12.ga.us*