

ONE WORD PAVES PATH FOR POSITIVE DIALOGUE

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We pulled our chairs into a large circle, knowing we were about to tackle a delicate subject.

It could have gotten ugly. Or at least uncomfortable.

But something pretty darn cool happened with this group that gathered in the training room of The Beacon News earlier this week.

Dialogue. Communication. Back and forth. Give and take. Frowns and smiles. And in the end, handshakes and hugs. The group consisted of Beacon representatives, Clayton Muhammad and members of his **Boys II Men** fraternity, as well as two of our teen columnists and their supporters.

One of those young writers, an Aurora senior, had recently written a column we published about white people emulating phrases, mannerisms and fashions associated with rap culture. It was a thought-provoking piece, written from the viewpoint of a kid who can't figure out why his peers would chose to model themselves after the negative components of any stereotype.

Obviously, it was intended to stir emotions and, yes, a little controversy - which is exactly what we want from our panel of teen writers.

And it did. But not quite as much as the writer or some editors here at the newspaper expected.

That's because the column contained the common term used by teens and those in the hip-hop culture that refers to white people taking on black stereotypes - a word morphed from an ugly racial slur.

The column raised concerns with some black community leaders who were not as much upset by the content as the fact we allowed that word to be printed.

As wordsmiths, this is one we didn't get. We should have. But we didn't. We did, however, see our misstep as an opportunity to open a dialogue about word use, about pop culture and about racial sensitivities.

Just days before this gathering, the **Boys II Men** group met to discuss that very topic - in particular, the increasingly common use in pop culture of the N-word. It was, by all accounts, a lively meeting that was both passionate and reflective - and one that education reporter Justina Wang covered for today's Voice section.

From that meeting, we asked members of this group to talk to us, as well as meet with the teen author (who is white) of the controversial column. In addition, we invited another teen columnist (who is black), who had recently written an excellent piece about her feelings when people accuse her of acting white.

Obviously, whenever there is a discussion that involves race, there's always a chance dialogue will dissolve into ill will. Certainly there was plenty of passion in the room on Monday evening. And not everyone landed on the same page. But no one raised his or her voice. No one was interrupted. There was no outward animosity - only a civil and intelligent exchange of ideas and feelings.

In the end, it's fair to say, most came away from that meeting knowing their voices had been heard and that progress had been made. Perhaps there were even a few new relationships forged.

Editors made it clear at this gathering, just as I want to make clear in this column, that we regret publishing the word that offended some wonderful people in this community. But as one teen so eloquently pointed out at the end of the evening, "If that column had never been written, we would not be having this great discussion."

Hopefully, that is something we can all agree on.