There must be better ways than ‘V-Day’

Wednesday Journal readers may have missed an important social occasion in the village in March. I’m not talking about the Ridgeland Common Ice Show or the La Leche League meeting at the Buzz Café. No, the high point of the past month’s social calendar was Vagina Day.

V-Day was hosted by an Oak Park and River Forest High School club, the Students for Peace and Justice. Despite my best efforts, it has been a bit difficult to uncover any official information on the event, but it appears that it was held at Pilgrim Congregational Church on March 14 and was intended to raise awareness of violence against women and children and to support Sarah’s Inn, a very worthy organization that provides various services to the victims of domestic violence.

The event featured a band concert, a condom giveaway and included the distribution of chocolates shaped like a ... well, like a vagina. Students tell me posters promoting this event were all over the school.

The V-Day official website indicates this local event is part of a national movement that advocates joining Eve Ensler’s The Vagina Monologues in the crusade to end worldwide domestic violence. How, you may ask, does passing out condoms and giving out crude candy ease the plight of the victims of domestic violence? How indeed? How does a play where women verbalize feelings about their genital proclivities and giving out crude candy ease the plight of the victims of domestic violence? How indeed? How does a play where women verbalize feelings about their genital proclivities and activities foster respect for women? It doesn’t. Frankly, it is part of the problem.

A major goal of modern American feminism involves making young women sexually available to irresponsible men. The feminist establishment insists that we educate our daughters to feel comfortable about their sexuality, years before prudence dictates they should be sexually active. We outfit them with pills and condoms, and warnings to practice safer sex. Predictably, the results have been disastrous. Since the early 1970s, millions of abortions have been performed on teenagers, and 1 in 4 teenage girls has a sexually transmitted disease. Although declining in recent years, the United States teen birth rate is still the highest in the industrialized world. One need only turn on the television to realize that the sexual objectification of women contributes to this misery.

The V-Day website presents Ensler’s play as somehow liberating because “it gives voice to experiences and feelings not previously exposed in public, and reflects how shame and self-deprecating thoughts of women’s bodies has kept women separate from power and pleasure.”

Wow, that’s enlightening! For years I

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The evolving black middle class

The latest in our continuing series of community commentary on anthropologist Jay Ruby’s ethnographic study, “Oak Park Stories,” focuses on the Taylor family, chosen by Ruby to represent the African-American experience in the village.

It was written by George Bailey, who lives in Oak Park with his wife and two sons. He is a professor in the English Department of Columbia College Chicago, where he teaches writing, rhetoric, and Literatures courses. A social activist, he advocates for under-powered and at-risk students in need of levels of education and schooling that will enhance their lives.

As I viewed and read this engaging material, I grew to appreciate the scope and social implications of Jay Ruby’s work. The four-CD set is about families and institutions he investigated to explore Oak Park’s experiment in liberal humanistic social engineering in a community consciously struggling to reconcile issues of race, class and economics. Ruby’s use of new media in conducting his visual anthropological inquiry is quite edifying and inspirational.

I was drawn to the unfolding of Craig and Yolanda Taylor’s family stories. Thinking about their story from a historical perspective, it occurred to me that young middle class African-American families like the Taylors, living in established, but evolving multicultural communities, like Oak Park and Evanston, are vanguards who may shatter the strong and persistently negative views held about them by some whites and poor blacks.

In many ways their story is my story and the story of most middle-class African-Americans moving into Oak Park or into other transitioning suburbs. Like whites, African-Americans also view the suburbs as safer, with better schools, well-kept parks, and in Oak Park’s case, the culture of family for which the community is nationally known.

Ruby’s useful local history of where and how African-Americans settled in Chicago and in Oak Park helped me to understand the Taylor family story in the context of how the African-American middle class has always continually pushed beyond the geographical borders originally designated to hold them in. Ruby has provided a discussion and inquiry into the African-American middle class that has been heretofore unavailable.

These histories layer and vivify the important events stemming from the migrations of African-Americans to the north from the south. Chicago’s labor and housing histories supplied illuminating contexts for his interviews with Craig and Yolanda. The documents about the 1919 Red Summer riots, the rigidly enforced separation of the races from the time of the First World War, block-busting, redlining and the riots during the ‘60s that left Chicago permanently scarred, were all compressed and meaningfully focused in this landmark investigation of how resident and immigrant whites responded to the large southern black presence in Chicago and other

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northern cities. I must admit that I was not well acquainted with the rich details of African-American history in Oak Park until interacting with Ruby’s work—black community activists who were living in present-day Westgate, centering around Mt. Carmel Church, is surprising, and I found myself curiously comforted viewing the old photographs of the faces of well-dressed black people who gazed back at me across time. I wondered what kinds of thoughts they had, what excites them, caused them anxiety, what made them fearful or happy.

Many African Americans currently living in Oak Park are probably unaware of the history of turn-of-the-century blacks who lived here. In some ways the early 20th-century African-American presence in Oak Park is an invaluable reconnection to the Taylors and other middle-class African-American families choosing this community. The ways the Taylors met, fell in love, lived together, married, were able to remain mobile and have choices about where they lived and with whom they associated, is the great African-American story. Getting up and out has always been evidence of engaging the American dream and having elements of it fulfilled. For middle-class African-Americans, and all Americans, the process is accompanied by complex challenges that are either overcome or that halt and arrest the dream.

Perhaps one lasting effect of African-Americans, colonized in America by restrictive covenants, segregated neighborhoods, and housing projects is the surprise some whites register when African-Americans actually achieve the middle class and begin practicing middle-class behavior. Often, when middle-class African-Americans arrive in any suburb like Oak Park, preparing to live out their dream, they often encounter a struggle between the stereotypical perceptions of them coming from affluent whites and poor blacks alike.

**Telling the black middle-class story**

A recurring theme in Ruby’s Taylor Family Portrait, is the argument that the sagas of middle-class African-Americans have not been fully told. Ruby’s work suggests that affluent whites are more familiar with the narratives and perceived values of poor and working-class blacks, although not necessarily more comfortable. Generally, affluent or middle-class African-Americans do not trigger as much discomfort for whites as poor blacks, but both middle-class and poor blacks tend to make some whites uncomfortable.

Craig and Yolanda gained training for professional careers that enhanced their earning power and allowed them to purchase a condo in Uptown before moving to Oak Park. Although Craig currently works as a supervisor of art projects for a well-known company, for five years he owned his own company. Yolanda was trained to work in sales and worked in wood and metal restoration. The depth of their training in their chosen vocations meant they could broker their skills in the marketplace with greater certainty. Growing up with goals and someone to remind you of them separates them from elements of the working poor. The widening geographical spaces between middle-class and poor African-Americans, coupled with differences in earning power, have also caused African-Americans to view their other with suspicion, perhaps sometimes resentment as well. As Craig said, sometimes you feel that you don’t fit into either group.

Craig and Yolanda Taylor, with their son Jahai and their daughter Jittuan, are in pursuit of a life centered on the strong core values modeled by their parents. Yolanda, at the time of Ruby’s interview, was a stay-at-home mom. Although it may not seem like it, this is a great achievement for most people and doubly so for African-American families. Young, middle-class black parents are often stereotyped and lumped in with poor black families who are generally viewed as too young and without sufficient education and resources to provide productively for their children. Yolanda said her mother raised her to have common sense and the book learning would take care of itself. Values of self-reliance, independence, persistence, knowing and valuing one’s roots and traditions, are products they carried over from their middle-class rearing into parenthood. Such a foundation and acculturated outlook has enabled Craig and Yolanda to realize a measure of mobility and access that working-class and poor blacks have yet to realize.

Ruby’s inquiry reveals the flash points of difference around the general responses of whites to skin color. Increasingly many young, poor African-Americans are growing up without values modeling, and we can safely say that when the two cultures (middle-class black and poor working blacks) share the same location, there is often distrust, resentment and conflict.

**Learning to cross boundaries**

Yolanda had experienced living in integrated and black segregated African-American middle class communities—Avalon Park and Beverly. She and Craig came equipped to live in various kinds of communities, and I think this is a real-world skill.

They wanted their children to see other things than what most black children see. Their ability to do so separates them from working-class black and whites, and it’s an example of what some black people would call, being bougie. Unlike some poor, working-class black children, Craig and Yolanda’s children are positioned to understand and deal with socio-cultural complexities not often engaged by working-poor African-American families.

These interviews illustrate how Craig and Yolanda negotiate and navigate the persistent stereotyping from both white and black people. The residual effects of skin color continually reveal a paradox: Some affluent whites as well as some poor blacks are uncomfortable with the African-American middle class. The Taylors have a phrase for what many African-Americans understand about dualities in America, having to engage the American landscape with what Du Bois called “double consciousness.” The Taylors define it and describe it as walking the line of relationships and work. By virtue of their experience of living in several different and diverse communities, Yolanda sees herself as being able to move freely across cultural, class, and ethnic borders that some of her African-American friends cannot.

Craig makes a critically important point about how his middle-class values have enabled him to read situations that some working-poor blacks cannot. He knows that if he speaks properly and adopts the non-threatening behaviors that cause whites to remain comfortable in his presence as he’s transacting business, it is beneficial to him. He knows how the game is played. He is short and light-skinned, not tall and dark, the latter making some whites uncomfortable.

He does not see this as “selling out,” nor do I. This walking the line, which all African-Americans understand, is a response to having to deal with the world as “other.” Ruby’s work here is terribly “diffticult” because it is not only hard to talk about. Both Craig and Yolanda speak of these places because it is where both working-poor and middle-class African Americans share common values.

Another psychic burden that I think all African-Americans carry is the feeling of having to be authentically black. This is charged with ambiguous feelings about solidarity, which is one reason why the Taylors struggle to represent their African-American heritage. Craig, for instance, grew up Catholic-educated and wants to be viewed as unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian. The Taylors also decided to participate in Jack and Jill of America, Inc, a family organization that provides cultural, social, civic and recreational activities that stimulate and expand the mind to enhance life. This historic African-American organization has provided its members “the opportunity to meet and socialize with individual sharing similar goals and aspirations.”

The Taylor Family Portrait represents a timely inquiry into the vaunted ideals with which Oak Park has come to be associated. I am left with several impressions and statements both Yolanda and Craig made during their interviews about their growing attraction to Oak Park. Craig said Oak Park is all about kids. He recounted the day he and his wife and children took a day off to look at this community, the tree-lined streets, the parks and the people. Viewed from the outside, the experience of the Taylors in Oak Park seems to set this community apart from other communities. And thanks to Ruby, readers and viewers do, at just a few key-strokes, access to rich, informative details and reflections about an African-American middle class Oak Park family.

Oak Parkers are indebted to Jay Ruby for exploring the stories that describe the workings of an established multicultural community struggling to recognize itself as it evolves.