

Folks break bread together, talk race
800 people take part in Dallas Dinner Table to exchange stories

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Ginny marched in Selma, Ala. Suzee is biracial. Tim's brother attended a segregated school for blacks. James' mother forbade him to befriend a young boy because he "looked Mexican."

Over bowls of salad and pasta Monday night, the four swapped tales of racist parents, small-town mentalities and growing up looking different.

The Dallas-area residents were among 800 people who participated in **Dallas Dinner Table**, an annual event held on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

The idea is simple: Bring people of varying backgrounds together to offer - and hear - intimate and personal stories about race.

The inaugural **Dallas Dinner Table** attracted 160 participants in 1999. Attendees at Monday's events more than doubled the 300 who participated last year. Event founder Jeff West said the firing of Dallas Police Chief Terrell Bolton and the racially charged environment might have led to the higher attendance.

At Maggiano's Little Italy, one of about 80 homes, churches and restaurants hosting diners, one group of seven huddled around a table to tell personal stories to strangers.

Suzee Bow, 53, of Dallas remembers well her first day of school in Dallas. With a Chinese father and a mother of English and Irish descent, she didn't look like anyone else.

"There were no other biracial people," she said. "The people I related to on TV were 'I Love Lucy' because that was the only show where the mom was white and the dad was not white."

Ginny Griffith, 65, of Richardson shared her proudest race-relations accomplishment - marching in Selma at the height of the civil rights movement.

"It always seemed to me a privilege to make a great stand," she said. "In the case of Selma, I feel I put my life on the line for the civil rights movement."

James Wallis, 56, of Irving said he is proof that upbringing does not necessarily affect opinions on race.

Growing up in Abilene, he befriended a boy who looked Mexican. Mr. Wallis said he could never forget the confrontation after the boy overheard his mother forbidding them to play together.

"He stuck his finger in my face like this and said, 'I hope one day you are ashamed of the color of your skin,'" said Mr. Wallis. "I lost a good friend."

The idea for the dinner came out of a brainstorming session among Leadership Dallas Alumni members.

"We reflected about various programs we've been to as leaders," Mr. West said. "There was not a lot about how we change individuals and understand the personal nature of racism."

The event has grown so much that it's starting to get national attention.

Cities such as Boston, Denver and Birmingham, Ala., have contacted **Dallas Dinner Table**, interested in starting similar programs. The group is considering presenting a workshop so those who hope to duplicate the success will have an idea of where to start.

The encouragement of openness and learning sets the annual event apart from traditional town-hall or forum-style discussions of race.

"Everyone says they have a positive experience," said Mr. West, also executive director of The Sixth Floor Museum. "They learn things they didn't know. If you can achieve that in this day and age, I think you've accomplished a lot."

Organizers based table settings on residence and race, hoping to create more diverse tables. A registration deadline was enforced so organizers had enough time to place people in diverse groupings.

"For a lot of people who haven't thought about race in Dallas in a long time, they realized there was stuff to talk about," Mr. West said. "They realize there are still race issues in Dallas, so I think that prompted people to think about it again."

Tim Hamilton, 52, grew up in Wichita, Kan., in the 1950s, about 180 miles from Topeka, ground zero for the landmark school desegregation case Brown vs. Board of Education.

As a black man, Mr. Hamilton, of Cedar Hill, said he doesn't experience many everyday problems because of his skin color.

"But on the whole, people are out there who dislike me, not because of me, but because of my race," Mr. Hamilton said. "Most people don't sit down with people. Doing what we're doing here tonight, I'm proud of that."

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