

Teaching the Teachers

Dr. Khyati Joshi trains educators to promote social justice

WRITTEN BY CINDY SCHWEICH HANDLER

Dr. Khyati Joshi became interested in the systemic nature of bias the hard way: She was a victim of it herself. A naturalized citizen who emigrated with her family to the U.S. from Gujarat, India, when she was 18 months old, she says that, as a “brown girl,” she didn’t fit into her Atlanta community. “Folks didn’t know what to do with me,” she says. In middle school, she was bullied so relentlessly that her academic work suffered.

“A good day was when nobody talked to me because then nobody harassed me,” she says. “I’d leave school and think that the only communication I had was with teachers, but at least I wasn’t made fun of. No wonder I made all C’s.”

Though she grew up alongside many Hindu community members, it was reading *Night* by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel that changed her life. “I was obsessed,” she says. “It drove my history and English teachers crazy.” Joshi majored in religious studies at Emory University, studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for a year and returned to America to pursue her doctorate in Social Justice Education at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Dr. Joshi was then a visiting assistant professor at the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University, where she taught Asian American Studies and Comparative Ethnic Studies; she



DR. KHYATI JOSHI

COURTESY OF CHARMÍ PEÑA

also taught in the American Studies program at Princeton University. Currently, she is currently a social science researcher and professor of education at Fairleigh Dickinson University. She lives in Wayne.

With more than 20 years’ experience teaching students about race, religion, immigration and social justice, Joshi is well-suited to share her insights with other educators, which she has been doing for most of those years. “My students are current teachers and soon-to-be teachers,” she says, at public, charter and private schools.

Many of the educators are aware of Joshi’s expertise because they have attended the Institute for Diversity and Social Justice, a summer program she runs that began as a collaboration between Fairleigh Dickinson and the American Conference on Diversity (this year’s session was canceled due to COVID-19). Joshi has trained teachers in the Hackensack, Teaneck and Florham Park school districts, and has given presentations at private schools including Montclair Kimberly Academy and the Pingry School. Word of mouth, she says, brought her to the Millburn public schools, where she has been working with educators in recent years.

MUCH MORE THAN ‘SENSITIVITY’

The training that Joshi provides to teachers and administrators takes four to five days, though the sessions can be spaced out through the academic year, as is the case in Millburn. “You can’t do implicit bias training in a three-hour session,” she says. Group size is limited to 40 participants to foster “real conversations.”

“We need a place where we can say ‘My relatives came here and just assimilated. Why can’t these people



LEARNING NEVER ENDS Joshi speaks at an event for the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities in Richmond, Virginia.

do that?” she says. “Someone has to be able to say it and hash it out if there’s going to be learning.” Joshi points out that only ESL teachers are required to learn about multi-cultural education to be certified. “We can only teach what we know,” she says.

Just don’t call what she does “cultural sensitivity training.” “I hate that phrase,” she says. “This is about inequity and injustice, how to more effectively reach students who are different from you racially, religiously, in terms of sex orientation and gender and socioeconomic class. We want students to be authentically who they can be to learn the most and be happy. Then all of society benefits.”

Children understand the concept of inequality, she says. “You can talk about racism with a first grader. The sense of unfairness is there at the time.” She recalls being at an assembly a few years back and sharing how kids made fun of her because she ate unfamiliar food that smelled different. “The Indian and Jamaican boys came up to me and said that this happens to them now,” she says, “and the teacher doesn’t say anything.”

She concedes that when there are 30 students in a classroom, it’s

impossible to hear everything, but adds that some teachers hear the comments and don’t know how to respond to them.

Joshi gives Millburn an A for effort in trying to promote equality. While leaders in some school districts say they follow the guidelines of the Amistad Commission (requiring them to identify texts that share the Black experience), “You want to do more than be politically correct,” she says. “When the (Millburn) school district puts something out, they can say they’ve been engaged in this work.”

Nancy Dries, communication director for the Millburn Township Public Schools, says that feedback on Joshi’s work has been very positive. “I’ve heard teachers thank the superintendent for bringing her in,” she says. “They say they’ve learned so much about how to approach the world.” Joshi has also conducted several parent training sessions, Dries says.

In July, Joshi added to the national dialogue about racial inequities with her book, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*. “It’s about how whiteness and Christianity is embedded in our laws, which is evident when we look at what was done to the indigenous population, slavery, westward expansion, even in citizenship laws,” she says. “My goal is to build a more perfect union. It’s about making the invisible visible to readers.” ■



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