Chicago Tribune

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OUT IN THE CO
CBS has canceled South," but the quir entertaining show not be dead ye
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Lancing the past

Donna Carter (facing camera) hugs Bonny Burke after the four-day session held at Roosevelt University.

Reconciliation is the goal when descendants of slaves, owners meet

By Melita Marie Garza
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

It seemed like a logical newspaper in which to place the want ad. Its readers were deep in the heart of the old Confederacy, close to the plantations where slavery flourished.

"Wanted: Descendants of slaveholders to participate in the 1st joint meeting between descendants of slaves and descendants of slaveholders. . . ."

There were few responses.

Selling racial reconciliation—what for many would amount to a confrontation with the enemy—was not as easy as selling a car or an antique armoire, the Chicago-based meeting planners quickly found.

But the planners, a team of Roosevelt University graduate students headed by Mona Weissmark, an assistant professor of psychology at the school, and her husband, Daniel Giacomo, medical director of outpatient psychiatry at the University of Chicago, were convinced they were selling something far more useful than a mode of transportation or a place to store clothes.

'People are basically the same. There's pain on both sides.'
Researcher Vera Adams

"These are things that blacks might discuss with other blacks," said Darlene Williams, 28, a member of the research team whose great-great-great-grandfather was a slave in Mississippi. "But it would be nice to have a genuine relationship with someone from the other side."

Williams, a Roosevelt senior, did not have to wait for the recent four-day conference held at the university to develop that relationship. Several members of the research team were from "the other side," including two descendants of slaveholders and one descendant of a Ku Klux Klan member.

A four-day rap session may seem like an odd antidote for the "peculiar institution" of slavery and its legacy in the U.S., but Weissmark and Giacomo have a track record of bringing together victims and victimizers to break the silence.

In 1992, Weissmark, whose parents survived Nazi concentration camps, and Giacomo teamed up with Ilona Kuphal, whose father was a Nazi SS officer, to organize a meeting between children of Nazis and children of concentration camp survivors. Weissmark, then a lecturer at Harvard University, and Kuphal, a Cambridge, Mass.-based actress, teamed up the next year and held a similar meeting with different participants in Stuttgart, Germany.

In taking on a new group of descendants of oppressors and oppressed, Weissmark, Giacomo and the rest of the Roosevelt researchers are tackling a topic that team member Vera Adams calls "the U.S.' dirty laundry."

"We talk around it and we don't acknowledge it," said Adams, 47, whose great-great-grandfather was a slave.

Only this year, for example, are visitors to Mt. Vernon getting guided tours of the slave quarters on George Washington's 8,000-acre plantation. Likewise, Colonial Williamsburg only recently

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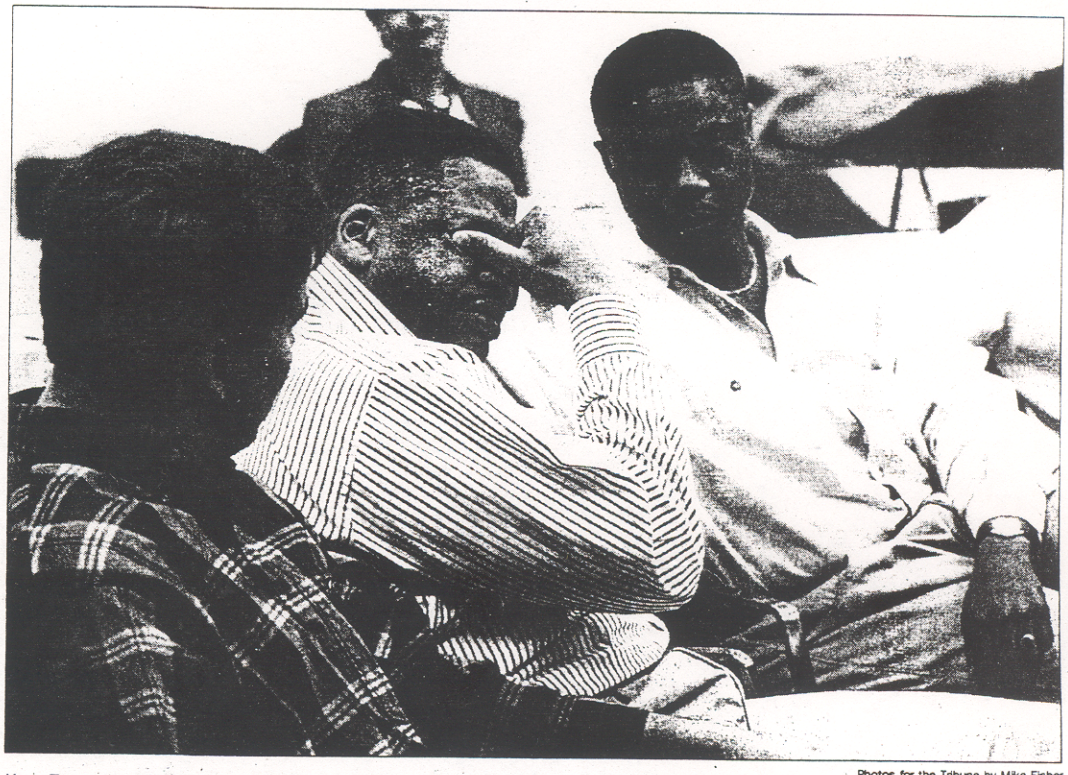
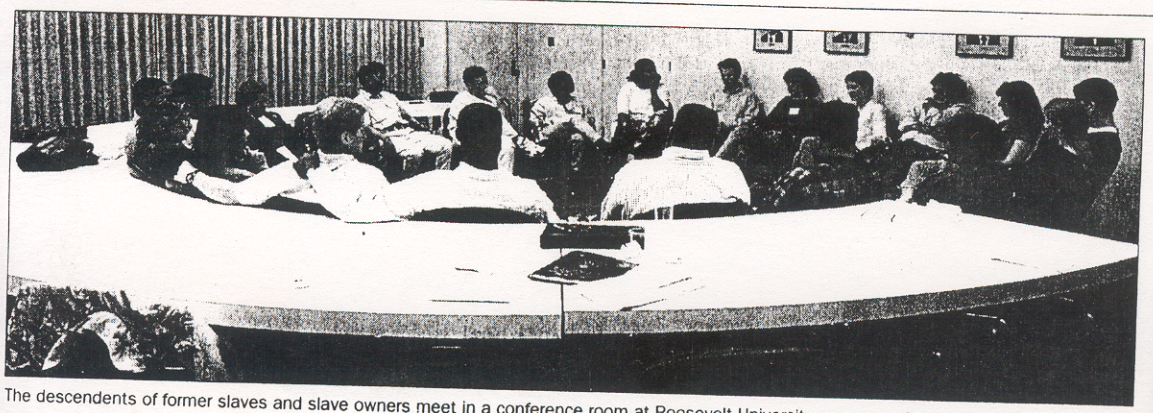


Photos for the Tribune by Mike Fisher

Kyev Tatum (center), whose ancestors were slaves, fights back tears as he expresses how much the meeting has meant to him. He's flanked by Philip Pratt (left), a descendant of slaveholders, and workshop leader Yaw Ofosu, a family therapist originally from Ghana.



The descendents of former slaves and slave owners meet in a conference room at Roosevelt University as a way of finding common ground.

Photos for the Tribune by

Philip Pratt (right) and Nolan Ellis found they have a historical l
During slavery, Pratt's ancestors owned members of Ellis' fam

Slavery

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

added a re-enactment of a slave auction to its depiction of Colonial life.

"The fact that we haven't dealt with this issue has had some impact on the polarization of the races in this country," said Adams.

In fact, Weissmark's earlier study of descendants of Holocaust victims and victimizers found both sides shared a need for more information about the past, a personal feeling that an injustice had been done and a sense that the two groups were connected by this unjust past.

In a paper about the Holocaust study published in the Journal of Narrative and Life History, the researchers concluded that joint psychotheraphy sessions for descendants of such trauma victims might depolarize groups and help redress injustices.

It's research that could keep Weissmark busy for years. She's already planning more discussions between blacks and whites. "Then there are Native Americans and Mexican-Americans—we've never addressed the injustice of taking their lands, and it's having all kinds of repercussions, including the dispute today about immigration," she said.

Unlike the Holocaust study, in which participants were only one generation removed from victims and victimizers, in the current study the links between the participants and slavery are generations in the past.

Lingering impact

The slave trade between Africa and the British North American colonies officially began in 1619, but the Spaniards brought the first slaves to the New World long before that.

Many participants in the study had only limited information about their family's role in slavery, yet virtually all felt the aftermath of slavery has left its mark on them and their country.

"They have the stories that have been handed down from generation to generation, and those stories still have an impact," Weissmark said. "I think it's actually more hopeful to work a few generations down. People can be a little bit more objective about the experience."

The participants were mainly recruited through word of mouth, after the newspaper ads failed to draw enough candidates. The 15 participants, eight black and seven white, came from as far away as Texas and Louisiana, and included college students, independent business people and university administrators.

They all had to agree to be closeted six hours a day for four days in an eighth-floor boardroom at Roosevelt for an intense discussion of slavery, race, guilt, resentment, injustice and reconciliation.

"The racial issue is really part of this past injustice of slavery that never was dealt with," Weissmark said. "It's the same problem created in a marriage if the husband has an affair and the couple never talks about the husband's infidelity. They end up arguing about the kids, the money and everything else rather than dealing with the real source of friction."

Getting at the real issues

The volatility of the topic required that the discussion be led by neutral parties who had no family history of being slaves or slaveholders. The leaders were Weissmark and Giacomo, who are both white, and Yaw Ofosu, 29, a family therapist who emigrated from Ghana. Ofosu, who is black, said his family was not involved in the slave trade in Africa.

By day two, the discussion around the diplomatically curved, half-moon, white formica tabletop had gotten down to basics.

Adams and Brian Pratt, 25, who doesn't know exactly how many slaves worked his family's Louisiana plantation, could barely look at each other at one point.

"The frustration that he feels because he's not getting anywhere [in the discussion], that's the frustration I feel all the time," Adams said about Pratt. "What you said earlier, 'No matter what I say, no matter what I do, it's not enough,' that's exactly the way I feel. He spoke the very words I say many times."

Giacomo, one of the discussion leaders, asked: "Are you forcing him to feel black?"

"No, I wasn't deliberately trying to frustrate him," said Adams, as the group laughed.

While Adams wasn't purposely trying to frustrate Pratt, she stuck to her convictions nonetheless.

It was the opening for which Rachel Loftin, 20, a red-headed descendant of slaveholders who now lives in Kankakee, had been looking.

"When we were speaking about the job situation I was remembering that my mom was born into a family of 11 kids. She raised me alone, and when I was 12 she went back and got her college degree.

"Two or three times, jobs she was more qualified for than a minority were given to a minority so employers could meet their quota.

"And I was thinking the whole time [you were talking], what about that? What about that? What about *that?* We kept hearing [the black] situation, and I know that [discrimination against blacks] happens far, far, far more frequently, but still this is *my* experience," said Loftin, echoing a position many white people hold in the debate on affirmative action.

"And so, when they throw that quota term in there that brings up a whole new ballgame," said Kyev Tatum, 29, a college administrator from San Marcos, Texas, whose ancestors were slaves in Texas.

But group leader Giacomo disagreed. "She's saying, 'I don't care about that quota thing; it hurts anyway.' "

Loftin nodded. It hurts, she said, "because she worked her butt off and raised herself out of poverty."

The discussion had gotten to the crux of the affirmative-action debate, the notion that the limited slices of the American Dream pie have been and are being divvied up unfairly in favor of one group or another.

On affirmative action

But the discussion was not so simple as black and white.

Phillip Pratt, 22, Brian Pratt's cousin and a student at Southwest Louisiana University, said when blacks and whites paint themselves as victims of discrimination it builds a future of self-defeat.

"In job situations, you don't know for a fact they gave the job to another person because they [the employers] were racist, but say you go home and spread that around. Doesn't that build a barrier and stop us from going further? Let's say you go home and say that to your children. You are doing them a great injustice. The kids will grow up and go in for their job interviews and say, 'Man, I'm never going to get that job.' "

Loftin said it was "absurd" that color should even be an issue. "Every boss in the world should just want the best-qualified person," she said.

Tatum agreed: "But sometimes it's true. Sometimes you don't get the job because you are black. Sometimes you don't get the job because you are white or because you are a woman.

"You know it happens. Many times my mother was sent home crying because it happened to her. But she told me, you go above that."

Said Phillip Pratt: "I'm not saying don't talk about the injustices at all. I'm saying talk about them, but don't use the injustices as a crutch to lean on—"

"—or to hold you back," Tatum said, finishing Pratt's sentence.

Reaching out

At the end of the four days, the participants were no longer afraid to look each other in the eye. Instead, they hugged each other goodbye and squeezed out so many tears that one participant, Norine Ashley, 41, fled to the bathroom to get the group a 6-inch wad of paper towels to soak them up.

The participants had learned the history behind their feelings, and those facts changed the way they saw each other.

Etched in Adams' mind were the stories her grandmother told her about her great grandparents, who were born into slavery.

"When my great grandfather was 8 or 9 he belonged to the master's daughter, as if he were a pet," said Adams, an office worker at Ameritech. "He had a little rug he slept on at the foot of her bed."

Despite this history, Adams said, "the conference has made me aware that people are basically the same. There's pain on both sides. People on the white side have to live with what their families have done and they share in the aftermath of slavery that is visible today."

It's some of those vestiges of slavery that Brian Pratt stumbled over growing up hunting and fishing on his grandmother's land in Lafayette, La.

"There'd be these older shacks still standing on the land," Pratt said. "The term slaves was never used, but I kept thinking, 'Those poor people.' There's even an old slave graveyard, about 20 feet by 20 feet, with a bunch of old tombstones behind an iron railing. It's in the woods, grown-o
spooky.

"Growing up, I don't re
hearing that black peop
ever anything but slave
Pratt. "My family are stil
generation that hasn't bro
silence. Slavery and ra
tions—it's not the sort o
they would talk about in
company."

Cindy Fabry, 24, a Ro
graduate student from Y
town, Ohio, and member
research team, was familia
such family reticence.

"I've heard stories ever
was 10 or 11 about how my
grandfather would disa
every time there was a
parade," said Fabry. "But
my family was aware I was
this project, they wouldn
about it.

"Growing up, I think I t
being a member of the Kla
something to be very pro
because they were very b
about it. I had no idea wh
Klan was until the movie '
in the Heart.' "

"The message I got fro
parents growing up was,
people were good if they
white," she said. "I'm not
where I got the courage to d
project, but I want to be dif
from my family."

It's that desire to change
Weissmark, that will help
down the walls of silence
have isolated so many Amer
from one another.