

C.U.R.E. Symposium: A Time for Healing, Unity and Facing Difficult Challenges

By Matthew W. Daus

On September 21, 2001, Community Understanding for Racial and Ethnic Equality (C.U.R.E.) held its annual symposium at the City University of New York Graduate Center in Manhattan. The original topic to be discussed by the panel of speakers was: "Reflections on racial reconciliation and the changing face of America." Before the horrific tragedy of September 11th at the World Trade Center, the C.U.R.E. panel originally intended to discuss the way our lives have changed by immigration over the last decade. In the aftermath of the disaster, tensions throughout the City ran high and bias incidents were reported against persons believed to be of Arab or Muslim descent. At no other time was there such a need for the C.U.R.E. forum to take place.

The message of unity and understanding were dominant themes in the discussion, which was needed to combat the evil of hate that is bred by ignorance. Pastor Mateira led us in prayer and offered a religious perspective of the events of September 11th, moving the audience and setting an appropriate tone to commence the forum. As Commissioner of the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, I was asked by Mary Sansone to speak on behalf of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who was unable to attend because of his involvement in the crisis. The C.U.R.E. attendees prominently acknowledged the Mayor for his tremendous leadership, guidance and compassion. I also acknowledged and thanked the many volunteer taxicab drivers attending the forum, who provided free rides to the victims of the Trade Center disaster, emergency workers, and blood donors. Some of these taxicab drivers spoke about their concern that people may direct their anger towards them because of their appearance.

The forum panelists included civil rights activists, educators, social service and organization leaders, and of course, C.U.R.E. founder Mary Sansone. After Eddie Gonzalez introduced the panel, much of the discussion centered not only on the impact of the World Trade Center tragedy, but also on the role of education. Members of the audience expressed their feelings about the tragedy and the need for unity. The consensus of the panel was that the best way to combat bias is through education. To enlighten the ignorant before they judge others is so very important, and the best way to accomplish that goal is to ensure that children learn, at a young age, to live and interact with other children of different religions, ethnicities and backgrounds. It is also important to ensure that children learn about different religions and ethnicities in school. The panel concluded that such an approach was needed now more than ever in light of the enhanced diversity of America and the aftermath of the most horrible tragedy that our country has ever experienced. Last, but not least, Mary Sansone gave her closing remarks in a dramatic and powerful way, leaving a lasting impact upon the audience. Mary spoke about the role of poverty and the distribution of wealth that so often leads to class, racial, ethnic and religious divisiveness.

C.U.R.E. would like to thank Mary Sansone for her leadership; Eddie Gonzalez for his dedication, insight and program development; Charisse Renzi-Daus, for all of her assistance in coordinating the event; all of its attendees for joining us at such a difficult time; and the informative panelists who participated: Dr. Antonia Pantoja, May Ying Chen, Natalia Pavlova, Lois Blades-Rosado, Enrique Gonzalez, and Christopher Caracciolo. A special thanks goes out to Alfred Curtis, Jr., who was instrumental in helping to locate the forum at the C.U.N.Y. Graduate Center.

The C.U.R.E. forum was never needed as much as it was on September 21st, and it provided the opportunity for people to vent about their frustrations, to mourn, to pray, to heal and to unify. In sum, its goals were successfully accomplished, and we stand ready for the challenges that face us as America begins its war against terrorism and bigotry.