

# Neighborhood News

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## KC councilmen share lessons of diversity

By NORA CORONADO  
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Two well-dressed men — one white, the other black — stood waiting in front of sixth-graders at Plaza Middle School last week and spoke about their similarities.

Kansas City Councilmen Jim Rowland and Troy Nash told pupils how both were raised in single-parent homes, grew up in the Kansas City area, married their high school sweethearts, had children and are passionate about politics and public service.

But they also mentioned their differences, pointing out the most obvious one: that Rowland is white and Nash is black.

"People look at Troy and I and they say we're different," Rowland said. "But we share so much in common."

Rowland and Nash visited the northland school to discuss discrimination and diversity as part of the Kansas City, their initiative on race relations modeled after former resident Bill Clinton's One America.

The two elected city officials have met with pupils in about 50 schools



Troy Nash



Jim Rowland

across the metropolitan area since starting the local initiative in April. Last Thursday, they led discussions in four sixth-grade classrooms at Plaza Middle School, located in the Park Hill School District, throughout the morning.

"Our kids need to know about differences among people and that they need to respect those differences," said Edna Schlieber, a counselor at the school who invited

the councilmen to speak.

An estimated 67 percent of Plaza's students are white, according to the school's statistics. About 7 percent are black, 3 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian. The breakdown closely mirrors the district's demographics, which is about 88 percent white, 6 percent black, 3 percent Hispanic, nearly 3 percent Asian

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and fewer than 1 percent American Indian.

Some pupils said that the topic of discrimination and stereotypes are not often brought up in class.

"I think it might have helped a lot of people to stop and think that they were being mean to people," said 11-year-old Jayne Bart-Plange after listening to the councilmen.

Jayne said peers excluded her when she first arrived at the school. She's from England and so classmates assumed she was a snob, she said.

Rowland and Nash started the classroom discussions by asking pupils to figure out which one of them has earned several college degrees and which one was an accomplished athlete in high school. Some pupils incorrectly identified Nash as the former athlete.

The councilmen recounted how they became friends on the campaign trail. Nash said he could not have approached Rowland, after all, Rowland was white and wore expensive suits and sought to represent one of the wealthiest districts in the city. Nash was looking to represent a poor section of Kansas City.

How much common ground did they share?

What is doing that called, Rowland and Nash prodded.

"Um, you judged him," sixth-grader John Morrill told Nash.

Classmate Jacob Hilden quickly followed with the specific answer Rowland and Nash were looking for: "You stereotyped him."

Rowland then told of his experience with discrimination. In high school, spectators at basketball games in the city didn't think he was a good player until he showed them, he said.

"I had to earn their respect but I shouldn't have had to," Rowland

said. "We all deserve respect simply because we're human beings."

Asked how many of them had formed opinions of their classmates without getting to know them, almost every pupil's hands went up.

The real life examples of Rowland and Nash prompted some pupils to relay their own stories about coping with discrimination. One girl said her friend's mother did not like her because she was black. Another talked about the discrimination she faced in France as an American when she lived abroad.

So what can be done, what are some solutions, the councilmen

asked.

"You can get to know someone," said pupil Mark Siegel. "You can talk to them maybe at lunch or something."

And he their friend, classmate William Henry, said.

In closing their discussions, Rowland and Nash gave pupils an assignment, a challenge: "I want you to reach out today...to one person you don't know," Rowland said. "I want you to say, 'hi.'"

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