



Whether the hanging of a chair in a tree by a Camas couple was free speech or evidence of racist attitudes, Clark College uses incident to prompt a

DIVERSITYDISCUSSION



Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

Clark College students Vitaliy Stepanyuk and Cetara Davis talk about differences of opinion after a Tuesday forum on a Camas couple who hung an empty chair symbolizing President Barack Obama from a tree in their yard. The forum allowed community members to share their thoughts through a moderated conversation. Top: Clark College professor Debi Jenkins, center, shares her opinion.

By STEVIE MATHIEU
Columbian staff writer

The three-legged chair hung from a tree in Camas to protest President Barack Obama has stirred up fear and painful family memories for Camas resident Debi Jenkins.

Jenkins, a professor at Clark College, is a relative of Abram Smith, a black man who was lynched in 1930 in Indiana. More recently, when Jenkins' son was 18, he ran into the road after a basketball and was chased down by a driver and called the n-word. Onlookers did nothing to help, Jenkins said.

These painful experiences with prejudice are what prompted her to speak up on Tuesday afternoon during a discussion at Clark College's Diversity Center.

"I do understand that there are people who just don't have to live a life in fear because they have so much privilege," Jenkins said to a room packed with about 25 people. "They have the privilege of being white, which gives them protection against a three-legged chair. ... To them, it's a three-legged chair. To me, it's my cousin, Abram Smith."

The Diversity Center hosted the community forum



Brian Myers of Vancouver raises his hand before speaking Tuesday at a Clark College forum on the recent "chair lynching," in which a Camas couple hung an empty chair in their yard as a protest against President Barack Obama.

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to give the public a chance to discuss the patio chair Camas couple George and Kathryn Maxwell hung from a tree in their yard. Kathryn Maxwell has said the couple was inspired

to display the empty chair following Clint Eastwood's Republican National Convention speech, in which Eastwood spoke to an empty chair that was meant to represent Obama and his policies.

Diversity advocates have called the display racially insensitive, given that the president is black and that the U.S. has a painful his-

tory of racially motivated lynchings.

Several participants at the forum tried to figure out the couple's motivation behind hanging the chair. Kathryn Maxwell has said they hung the chair up to prevent it from getting stolen. The couple was invited to participate in the forum but was not present on Tuesday, organizers said.

Perhaps the couple was ignorant to the fact that their display would be so offensive, several participants said.

Vancouver City Councilman Jack Burkman said he was disturbed that there hasn't been more community outrage about the hanging chair display.

"My concern is honestly less about the individual, because they might not have known," Burkman said. "My concern is the uproar around the community saying, 'Hey, it's just fine.'"

Burkman said the community should stand up and say: "Whether you knew it or not, let's talk about what this means to a segment of our community. ... Hanging something is a message to African-Americans that you have stepped out of your place, and we are sacrificing one of yours to teach you to stay back in place, and that's what our history is."

One participant at the

forum, Clark College student Vitaliy Stepanyuk, said the Camas couple should not be labeled as racist because they only hung the chair to prevent it from being stolen. He also said there is a double-standard surrounding the incident.

"Not only black people are lynched," Stepanyuk said. Later, he also said: "Effigies of George W. Bush were hung. ... It was bloody, and there were pictures of him with the mark on there to murder him. It's a double standard if you make the correlation that (the hanging chair) has to do with racism."

The conversation also touched on the couple's free speech rights to hang the chair, regardless of how others in the community interpreted the display.

Brian Myers, a Vancouver veteran who described himself as a constitutionalist, said that although the Camas couple probably didn't fully think about the implications of what they did, it is ultimately their right to protest the president in that way.

Hosting a forum about the "lynching in effigy (of) a black president is in my opinion ridiculous because

they're just hanging an empty chair from a tree," Myers said.

Another participant pointed out her own First Amendment right to criticize the hanging chair display and interpret it any way she wants to.

Others said that, although the lynching of black citizens was more common in America's past, such hate crimes still occur today.

"I really don't care about the intent of the (Camas couple)," Jenkins said. "I can appreciate people who don't think racism is still alive and well here, who want to defend the couple. But I do think there should be a feeling of empathy at least for the people who don't have the privilege to not live in fear of being lynched."

Clark College diversity adviser Sirius Bonner said she was glad to see such a broad range of opinions present at Tuesday's forum, adding that all participants involved brought the conversation "to a deeper place."

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