

LTCC instructors tackle racial inequality



LTCC instructors, from left, Yasmin Sayyed, Scott Lukas and Albert Ponce, on May 19 discuss racial issues. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

White privilege. It's a concept that 50 years removed from the heyday of the Civil Rights movement is still hard for some people to grasp.

This was obvious by the questions being asked during a 90-minute seminar at Lake Tahoe Community College on May 19 on what would have been Malcolm X's 90th birthday. The civil rights activist was gunned down in 1965 at the age of 39.

"When you watch the coverage of what went down in Waco it's a system of privilege," LTCC sociology instructor Scott Lukas told the nearly 70 people in attendance.

Had the deadly biker gang fight on Sunday in Texas been between blacks instead of whites, Lukas believes the response by police and the media would have been much different.

Albert Ponce, political science instructor, said, "Relationship today exist vertically. It needs to be horizontally. We need intercultural dialogue – and not be told what we should become. That is assimilation."

He believes interculturality is the answer to people understanding and respecting one another, not multiculturalism.

Yasmin Sayyed, LTCC sociology instructor, stressed the need for people to not lose themselves as they blend in with the majority. It's about never losing your own story and not taking on someone else's.

"If education means you lose your mother tongue, then it is a hollow victory," Sayyed said.

Sayyed grew up in New York, where she knew Malcolm X. She met him in 1964 after she returned from Mississippi where she was getting people to register to vote. It was the summer before her 18th birthday. She said she returned to Harlem broken – having been beaten and sexually assaulted in the South.

She embraced much of what Malcolm had to say.

"Who are we to let our oppressors define how we fight our oppression against them. His words started having a different implication for me especially after my experience in Mississippi," Sayyed said.

"We stapled our picket signs to baseball bats. It was amazing we never got spat on again," she said. She never took a swing at anyone, but the gesture made people take notice.

From there the discussion in the Malcolm X camp became less about what drinking fountain blacks could drink out of, and more about moving away from protests and seeking political power.

Sayyed said the fight then and today is not against white

people, but it's against whiteness.