

JOURNAL STAR

SERVING CENTRAL ILLINOIS SINCE 1855

A4

PEORIA, ILLINOIS, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1989

Continuing

The Peoria Transcript
Established 1855

The Peoria Journal
Established 1877

The Peoria Star
Established 1897

Coping with ignorance

□ The KKK imitation in Canton is not just a depraved, racist joke

It is difficult for white people to comprehend how terrifying it must be for a black person to confront someone posing as a Ku Klux Klansman, or to know that a Klan magazine is being circulated in her school, or to find a racial slur written on a locker.

And it is difficult for decent people of any color to fathom that this kind of sickness thrives in 1989 in central Illinois in a high school.

Every thinking person deplors the racial depravities which have made headlines in Canton. Every compassionate person is saddened at the cruel way in which black students have been reminded that the cancer of racism lurks beneath the surface, capable of erupting any time, any place. What occurred in Canton, and earlier in Pekin, diminishes the humanity of all of us, regardless of where we live or what color our skin.

So what do we do?

There may be those in Canton who, believing that the incidents grew out of a classroom study of South African apartheid featuring a mock United Nations session, would urge that such activities cease. A teacher who sticks to the facts and the book, without fully engaging students on controversial issues, is less likely to provoke a hostile response simply because he is less likely to prompt any response.

It would be a shame if the incidents at the high school discouraged thought-provoking classroom adventures. The

cure for youthful brainlessness is more stimulation of the mind, not less. The cure for hatred is more stimulation of the conscience, admittedly difficult in a school setting but not beyond a good teacher's reach. As far as we can determine, that is what the Canton teacher, Kim O'Reilly, was trying to do, and she should be applauded for it, not criticized.

Besides punishing the guilty students, the best approach is an open and inviting one. That means more education about the history of racism in our country and elsewhere, more discussion about the problems our tragic legacy has delivered to us, more efforts to try to understand those of a different race, or sex, or religion or political philosophy. America is strengthened as much by our differences as by our similarities, and appreciation of both is needed.

It has been said that the new racism springing up on college campuses throughout the nation, and in some high schools, may be partly blamed on the fact that this generation was born after the civil rights movement. Today's students grew up in a world of open housing and fair employment laws, of integrated schools and playgrounds, of affirmative action programs and quotas. It is, therefore, difficult for them to appreciate the impact of centuries of segregation and bigotry, or the extent to which racism remains institutionalized.

If this is the case, then those of us who are old enough to remember those times — parents as well as teachers — have failed to pass on their lessons. That is something all of us must do.