

# When you extend your hand, open your mind, too

"Dear Women."

So began countless e-mails I received my undergraduate years as a member of the group Black Women Jewish Women: Discovering Common Threads, or BWJW for short. My university's student body was about 40 percent Jewish, while the surrounding city's population was just over 50 percent black.

I thought of the greeting and of the group after seeing the movie "Pray the Devil Back to Hell" in mid-September. The documentary chronicles the lives of ordinary Christian and Muslim women in Liberia who, through a series of peaceful demonstrations and petitions and with unbreakable solidarity, brought an end to the civil war that had turned their sons into war criminals, their daughters into rape victims and their husbands into

corpses. Although they had been forced into refugee camps and were essentially without resources, they accomplished a feat greater than what most heads of state have proven capable of.

After the film, a moderator from Louisville Girls Leadership, the group that hosted the screening, ended a discussion with two questions: What are some of the ways women in wealthy nations can come together to support and empower women in poor nations to fight violence in their com-

munities and to enhance the recognition of the fundamental human rights in those places? And is it possible to do so in ways that are not ethnocentric and that truly empower women?"

As rich as our country is, we don't have to go outside its borders to find communities where women feel powerless or need a hand in stopping the violence that surrounds them. Nor do we have to go abroad to ask ourselves if we can leave notions of ethnocentricity behind.

BWJW hit the question head on several months into our volunteer effort at an after-school literacy camp for children attending a failing school. The children were mostly from low-income neighborhoods, and all the children were black. When the topic of the group's bi-weekly discussions came around to social responsibility, the importance of continuing to volunteer at the camp came up. One of the black women asked why white people feel it's their duty to teach poor

little black children to read but don't consider educating rich white children about privilege and prejudice.

One side heard, "We don't need your help." The other responded, "Why won't you examine your own prejudices?"

This happened several years ago; details of the verbal catfight that ensued have faded. I do remember that it caused a rift that took weeks to repair, and that even the kids at the camp felt it.

Even had we made an effort to educate and empower the mothers of those children, the fallout would still have been the same. BWJW was full of scholars and leaders, women who commanded respect of their gender, race, faith and opinions, women who believed in the power of getting to know someone. And yet we couldn't escape those thoughts that we were right, that we were better, that some of our greatness had to be imparted on the other.

The post-film discussion also

covered how the very nature of women played into the Liberian women's strategy of ending war. As nurturers, the women simply cared about their families and were tired of seeing of them ravaged. They called everyone in their country "dear," regardless of religion or wrongdoing.

As nurturers, the women of BWJW cared about one another's feelings. We made amends and redrew lines of respect. By examining ourselves and knowing that no one had to bite her tongue, we made the group stronger. That's why our e-mails continued to begin with "Dear Women." It's also why I think the answers to the moderator's questions are both "yes," and why a mass e-mail that begins "Dear Citizens of the United States" is possible. ♣

*Mariam Williams is a Louisville native who writes about the random thoughts that hold her attention for two minutes or more.*



**MARIAM WILLIAMS**