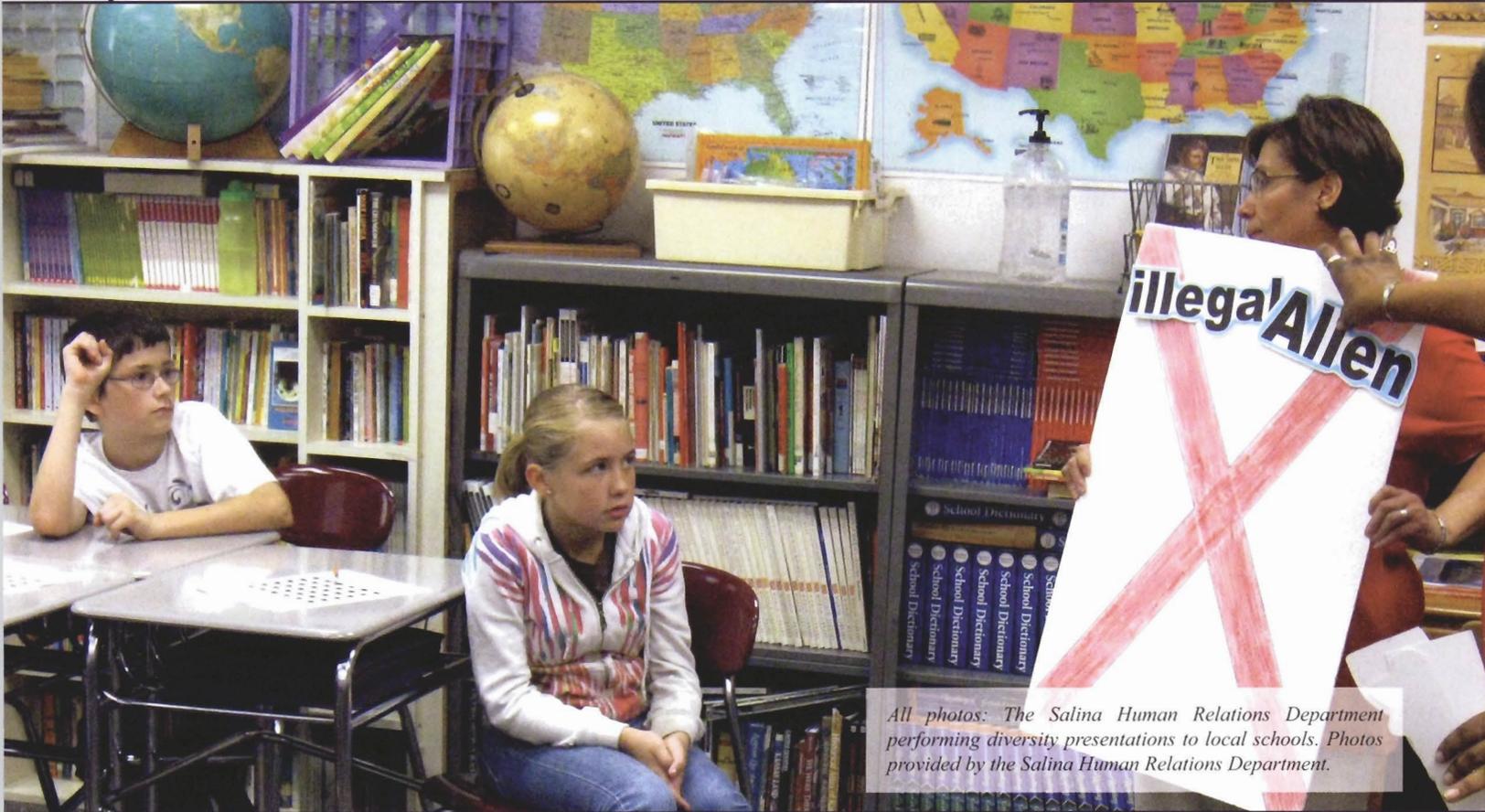


# EMBRACING DIVERSITY

## The City of Salina Promotes Equality at Its Schools



*All photos: The Salina Human Relations Department performing diversity presentations to local schools. Photos provided by the Salina Human Relations Department.*

"It helped me understand better how to judge a person correctly without making assumptions. And it helped me learn more about the Hispanic culture."

"I liked the presentation, and with this I think I'll change my thoughts."

"The presentation changed my way of looking at people."



## By Darrin Stineman

The goal is to be unemployed.

That may sound like an odd statement, but it does serve to get the students' attention when a group from the Salina Human Relations Department does diversity presentations at local schools.

The students' mouths begin to return to the closed position when explained that the mission of the Department is to eliminate discrimination and to establish equality and justice through civil rights enforcement, advocacy, and education. And if there is no longer any discrimination, there is no longer a need for the Department—or therefore, jobs—to exist.

Since starting the presentations in October 2011, the Department has made presentations to more than 1,000 middle and high school students, challenging them to look at themselves and how they treat others—especially those who are different from them.

The group starts out with an ice-breaker called the Herman Grid. It consists of a sheet of paper with grids of black rectangles which are positioned in such a way that gray dots seem to appear between them. The dots, however, are just an illusion. They're not really there.

That illustration helps to explain that sometimes that's how we are with people. We see things that aren't really there. We form an opinion about them based on appearances or a first impression which may or may not reflect who the person truly is.

When the group began to develop the presentation, one of the things they were most excited about was having the students hear from Human Relations staff members

Sandy Beverly and Dina Girón, who have tremendous personal experiences to share with regard to civil rights and appreciating diversity.

Sandy begins by asking the students if they know what landmark civil rights event occurred in Kansas, referring to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954, *Kansas v. Topeka Board of Education* decision which called for an end to school segregation. She then

talks about her own experience 11 years later living in Hogansville, Georgia, where schools—and, in fact the entire town—still were completely segregated.

She talks about various activities—going to the movie theater, shopping, going to the ice cream shop, etc.—which everyone in the room could not have done together at that time. Walking from table to table with small groups of students, Sandy points out that she and the “colored” kids—those who appear to be anything other than white—would not have been able to join the white kids in those activities. In the case of the theater, for example, the colored kids would've had to sit in the balcony.

We try to relate it to current times by pointing out that the federal government even just in recent months has had to issue orders to school districts in Southern states to integrate their schools. Even though black students may legally attend any school they want to, in practice, some towns still have all of the white students at one school and the black ones at another.

The training also points out that even here in Salina, our office can have as many as 10 active discrimination cases at a given time.

The students also easily relate to the story of Dina, who at the age of 17 was sent to the United States by her parents to escape the civil war that was taking place in her native El Salvador in 1980.

At that time, warring factions were forcibly recruiting even middle-school-age children to fight in the war. Many of them were taken from school and were never seen again by their parents.

Dina came to the United States not knowing the language, the culture, or any of the relatives she was sent to live with. She shares many of her experiences, including how she hated English at first because people would make fun of her when she tried to speak it, and how she and a group of friends were denied service at a restaurant because they were speaking Spanish with each other.

She also shares about the culture of El Salvador and other Latin American countries, and the importance of appreciating other cultures, and what they contribute to American society.

Dina and Sandy then do a presentation on labeling others, using a piece of poster board with a big red “X” on it to illustrate their point. Sandy asks the students to assume that she has just met Dina, and as they begin to chat, Sandy begins to make assumptions about her.

Dina speaks with an accent, so Sandy assumes that she had better talk to her in a loud voice so she will be understood. Sandy places a card that says “DEAF” on the poster board Dina is holding, and with each label that is added (“ILLEGAL,” “MEXICAN,” “CATHOLIC,” “LIKES JALAPEÑOS,” etc.) the poster board rises higher until Dina can no longer be seen.



Sandy makes the point that because of the labels, the true person can't be seen anymore. But she says that as she continued to get to know Dina, she found out that none of her assumptions about her were true. The poster board drops a bit each time as Sandy removes the labels, until the person finally can be seen again.

It was the first time the Department had ever done these kinds of presentations in schools, so they weren't sure what to expect. The results, however, have been encouraging. On evaluation forms from the most recent presentation to about 300 students on January 10, 2012, 70% indicated it was "very useful" and 28% "useful;" 78% said it was "excellent," and 20% "good."

Comments from students included the following:

"It helped me understand better how to judge a person correctly without making assumptions. And it helped me learn more about the Hispanic culture."

"I liked the presentation, and with this I think I'll change my thoughts."

"The presentation changed my way of looking at people."

One teacher said, "The presentation really was outstanding. The students learned a lot about discrimination and stereotypes. The presentation helped the students understand how the local government provides many services that can help them deal with a variety of issues. Also, the students learned about segregation that took place in American history."

More presentations are scheduled for this school year, and the Department intends to continue giving them in the years to come—until that day when we are happily unemployed.

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