

Special seating on Muni emerges as hot issue for graduating seniors

BY TOM CARTER

TALK about racism and the n-word comes up. "So what's with one black man calling another this awful word?" Ed Evans asked out loud during Session 3 of the four-session Senior University. Racism was topic A in the Diversity discussion in the Dorothy Day dining room.

Al Stewart, 65, stood to answer Evans. The African American former bus driver is a self-described "behind-the-scenes" person with no public-speaking experience. He was there, he said later, to support the endeavors of his significant other, Ava Handy Beckham, a vocal participant, and not because of activist aspirations.

Stewart explained that blacks own the n-word and like to use it for shock value.

"Blacks are on the cutting edge of negative commentary," he said. "The n-word is used with special familiarity (among blacks). It's a term of endearment that empowers them while it's shocking to others."

"People are frightened when they hear it and they're repulsed," Stewart said. "I understand it but it doesn't appeal to me. But it's about empowering oneself (as an African American)."

The diverse gathering of more than 40 seniors included Asians, Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Latinos and Caucasians. A half a dozen, including Evans and Beckham, are in wheelchairs or use walkers. Everyone had seen or personally experienced racism but no one

seemed to know a good way to deal with it. Most said that rather than confronting racists, they'd avoid them.

"If I thought there was racism in this room," Stewart said, "I'd walk out."

"I try to rise above it," said Yoko Takahashi. "If they'll listen to me, I'll tell them it's wrong. But I'm not going to waste my time on someone that's hopeless."

"Racism is illegal," said Jacquie Bryson, who played the mayor in a previous mock exercise. "When it crosses that line you wonder where the niceties went. But my mother taught me to stand up. And I take action."

Anti-Semitism, sexism, classism, homophobia and ageism were also discussed. The latter topic brought Muni's seating for seniors and disabled to the forefront. The seniors complained that youngsters sit in the special section and don't relinquish their seats, as required by law, but they chalked it up to youthful ignorance while generously accepting some of the blame.

"Lots of seniors never ask for it," said Carol Hudson. "Kids aren't educated and don't know. We make enemies when we order them out. But somebody fought hard to get that for us."

"Yes," said another woman, "young people don't understand and that's why we have that problem."

The topic struck a chord. Many here had some nasty experiences riding the bus to the point that senior and disabled seating could become a cause. Evans told how Tenderloin residents saved some bus stops on the 38-Geary line last year through tenacity and compromise. Winning something from Muni is not only possible, it's been done, he said.

But if action on bus seats is to be pursued, it will require leadership. And after a lunch of boneless chicken breast, brussels sprouts, roll and cheesecake with cherries in syrup, the final discussion of the day concerns just what a leader is and where does one come from?

The seniors suggested so many leadership qualities that they quickly filled sheets of butcher paper at the end of the stage where Sr. U's Anh Le recorded the group's exclamations: "empowering," "charismatic," "credible," "gracious," "diplomatic" and "have guts" and, yes, someone says, "an understanding for wildlife." That finds a place on a sheet, too.

"How are you a leader in your community?" Le asked them.

The question was a near bust. People insisted on continuing to define what a leader is. Le interpreted for the Vietnamese women at one end of the room. They, too, described characteristics: "A good leader should set a good example" and "get things done."

"But you can't be a good leader unless you've been a good follower," Ava Beckham said.

"You've got to have due diligence," Jacquie Bryson said.

"I don't consider myself a leader," Stewart said. "I'm a background person. I lead by example."

"To be a leader, you have to take care of yourself first," Yoko Takahashi said.

With that, Le concluded and reminded everyone to be prepared at the next session to deliver their three-minute speeches — and maybe even sing a song — before graduating with a certificate recognizing their achievements.

ANTICIPATION was in the air at the final session, completion day for 40 seniors who had shared a lot, and got to know each other. Not one to understate an occasion, Sr. U Director Le was at the back of the Dorothy Day dining room fiddling with a tape of "Pomp and Circumstance" that he planned for graduation (with mortar boards) and the awarding of certificates. But the tape player was failing him. Helene Thuy Vu was reading her four-page speech as the seniors took their seats. Evans held up his five pages in 26-point type. "Here," he said, "read this. I really worked on it. Whaddya think?"

Shirley Bierly and Le welcomed everyone in five languages and the final round of self-introductions became a groundswell of spontaneous commentary. For some it was evidence of newfound confidence.

The first up, Ben Lee, who said he'd always been too nervous to speak, rattled on for two minutes about his origins and his life. All the Vietnamese ladies spoke, each stating the year she immigrated. Some said how glad they were to be in San Francisco. A Filipina said she had worked with "boat people in Chicago." Another had helped two supervisors write a pedestrian safety ordinance. The Russian couple said they came here in 1991. John Wood, a retired postal worker, said he had lived in the Tenderloin 41 years and how he "enjoyed this organization."

The night before, Le had called most of the seniors to remind them to be ready for today. Of one woman, originally from the Netherlands, he asked to find some "words of wisdom" to contribute.

So when grandmotherly Minnie Fry stood and identified herself, she said:

"We have a right to say yes to what we like and no to what we don't. And that's what this country is. And I've learned a lot being here."

Kitt Ellis turned to Le and said, "You should take this to TV."

Introductions were the warmup. And although their "demand" speeches were supposed to introduce a problem, tell a personal story relating to it, and make a demand about how to solve it — as part of the activist training — more than half the seniors ignored the structure as well as the lectern and microphone at one end of the room. They were emboldened now — some as never before — with the freedom to speak their minds. They also knew

nothing was wrong with whatever they said, and that they would be praised for expressing themselves.

In an animated delivery, Evans told a complicated, seven-minute tale about security problems at an apartment building, getting a petition signed by the tenants, contacting the Housing Authority, the city's Disability Council and congressional representatives for improvement. Bryson, wearing her trademark floppy brown hat with a large white flower, told of blocked and cracked sidewalks in SoMa that "punish" the disabled, her exasperation over dealing with the Department of Public Works, and how double-parked trucks endanger pedestrians. She ended with an impassioned plea for the city to create a Department on Disabilities. Beckham, who lives in the low-income Madonna Residence, got a smile or two when, in the spirit of equality, she asked to be placed in "housing in Pacific Heights."

Angelo D'angelo gave a rambling speech about creativity and concluded saying, "God bless America."

"Thank you, Angelo, for sharing from your heart," Le said.

Carol Hudson strode to the back of the room and turned to face everyone. Her motto, she said, paraphrases JFK: "Ask not what your community can do for you, but what you can do for your community." Her activism began 40 years ago as a naïve young mother, she said. The diminutive Hudson said she was "proud" so many seniors enrolled for Sr. U because too many people as they get older tend to "run out of gas." Not her.

"I'm going to leave Sr. U with Muni's lax attitude on seating for seniors as my burning issue to pursue," she said. "I've written many letters with no reply. I don't like being ignored, and I don't think anyone does. We've earned the right as senior citizens to speak out. I don't think buses should take off until seniors are seated and maybe people should be ticketed if they don't turn over their seats to seniors."

Don Mark said people have to find the courage to speak up for their entitlements.

"Some members of my family are bus drivers," said Mark. "And if they weren't doing their job, I'd complain. It's my job to insist on the American dream."

Hudson's speech sparked several comments and inspired others, in turn, to speak out on panhandling, blocking sidewalks, homelessness, safety in the streets, illegally selling medications, wheelchair access and lack of public restrooms. But Stewart addressed the moment as a benchmark in his life.

"This has challenged me to take on a leadership role in my community," he said. His brown hat was pulled down near his eyes and his gray mustache added a distinguished air. "I was encouraged every time to express myself." He thanked all the participants for speaking out, too, and enriching his experience. "I accept my honorary degree with pride, and I

hope it leads to something."

Le noticed how moved Stewart was.

"Can I share what I see?" Le said. "There are tears in his eyes." And to Stewart he said, "You are a blessing to us all."

The Vietnamese ladies all spoke up and contributed more than usual. Full participants now, their personal stories came out for the first time, some so poignant they generated generous responses.

Ba Nguyen said that when she returned to Vietnam she was a target of disparaging political remarks and she didn't feel welcome. John Wood likened it to Europeans returning after World War II to countries that had been occupied by the Germans. "They had left instead of staying," Wood, an avid history reader, said. "And when they came back, people wanted to know why they hadn't had faith (that the country would survive). There was a built-in resentment."

The woman also said that because the cost of bribes to officials was soared it is now every

difficult to leave Vietnam. Another woman, Dan Nguyen, who came here in 1992, said her daughter left behind in Vietnam fell ill and died and soon after her husband was killed in a car accident. They left three children, 21, 19 and 16. "They want to come to the United States," she said through Le, who interpreted. She started crying. "I don't know how to sponsor them," she said.

Suggestions flew across the room. Contact the offices of Sens. Feinstein and Boxer, someone said. Try the Vietnamese consul, said another. The government would want to know if her family could support them, someone said. Yes, she said, she has a sister here who can help.

Then the activities turned to entertainment. Le wanted everyone to contribute something, a song, a poem, a reading. He asked the Russian woman to sing a Russian song and she said no, she'd prefer an American one, "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," which she stood and sang. The Vietnamese ladies went to the front of the room. One introduced the 1968 Doris Day song, "Que, Sera, Sera," and they sang it together.

D'angelo followed at the microphone, energetically reciting "The Impossible Dream" song. With every impending challenge that the lyrics cited, his voice rose.

There were other outpourings — "Feliz Navidad," "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," thank you prayers, extemporaneous thank you songs, "Jingle Bells," Vietnamese love songs



Hyung Shin, flanked by Shirley Bierly, Price and Le, holds her certificate after speaking to a group in English for the first time.

and poems "Remembering Mother" and "Humble People."

Hyung Shin stood and announced in English she would play the piano. The 81-year-old Korean in a bright red sweater took out her sheet music, went gingerly to the piano by the big American flag on the wall, put on her glasses and haltingly played through a sweet Beethoven piece. She said later it was the first time she had ever spoken to a group in English and the first time she played the piano in the United States.

Seniors who attended at least three sessions were eligible to graduate. Le and a half dozen others hadn't found out how to work the machine to play "Pomp and Circumstance," but the excitement level was high enough without it. As carrot cake was served, everyone whose name was called went up front. They got their picture taken holding their framed certificate of graduation, a purple iris and a blue mortar board on their heads, standing with Shirley Bierly, or Le, or Bill Price, the Senior Action Network president, a co-founder in 1994.

"This is the largest Senior University group I've seen," said Price, 92, who wore a suit for the occasion. "We're always looking for more."

SAN groups had gone to Sacramento to lobby four times during the year, Price proudly said afterward. And the association, he added, was deeply committed to pedestrian safety. Who knew what tottering seniors or disabled person now brimming with satisfaction as they left the cafeteria would become a burr on the seat of civic complacency. ■



PHOTOS BY TOM CARTER

Al Stewart (left) got a graduation certificate from SAN President Bill Price and Sr. U Director Anh Le and an experience he didn't expect.

C O V E R **EXTRA!** S T O R Y

Fight for fresh food in Bayview shows grassroots guerrillas in action

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Network for Elders that serves Bayview-Hunters Point and Visitation Valley, sent 21 volunteers to Senior University. By the second meeting of the four-session course, they had identified FoodsCo as a problem store. So the activists-in-training did their shopping one morning for hard evidence, then picketed outside chanting, "Oh baby, baby we're tired of FoodsCo," working in spoiled meat-and-vegetables lyrics, fitting them to a Supremes song "Where Did Our Love Go?" The action was born of the university's session, "Taking Action in the Community to Achieve Changes."

At FoodsCo, the protesting seniors were joined by a few shoppers. Clonce, manager for less than a year, came out with a security

guard and invited them inside to talk. "He was angry," Taylor said. "He thought we were unethical and had surprised him. But he refunded the money for the food."

Although the seniors aired their grievances, no agreements were made with FoodsCo. And a letter to the company later didn't get results either, Taylor said. Nonetheless, buoyed by their new skills, protesters returned to the store for spot checks, once in August and again in September, but there had been no improvement in vegetables or meat, she said.

The lack of fresh fruit and vegetables in Bayview-Hunters Point has been a point of contention since the nonprofit Literacy for Environmental Justice took it up four years ago and established a Good Neighbor program to encourage small groceries and liquor stores to stock more of it and less alcohol and tobacco.

Supervisor Sophie Maxwell in 2003 got city agencies to support LEJ's efforts by offering store owners incentives.

"The SuperSave on Third Street is one of ours," LEJ spokeswoman Anjali Asrani said in an interview. "In the last two years, it has increased its sale of produce from 1% to 15%. Its tobacco and liquor sales are down 10%, but the store's overall receipts are up 12%."

"We don't deal with FoodsCo because it is a chain and it's hard to get to. I was last in there two weeks ago (in December) to look around. The produce was rotting, discolored and overpriced. I don't buy anything there. It's past edible."

In the July 19 issue of the San Francisco BayView newspaper, protester and university graduate Mary Booker was quoted about the Senior University action: "I've believed for a

long time that this type of organizing is what we need to bring changes about in our community. And I am glad we got the training and took decisive action at FoodsCo. This is just the beginning."

After the first demonstration, Senior University Director Anh Le followed up with a call to Clonce.

"I telephoned him to provide the seniors with an update regarding the seniors' demands, as he had promised he would do," Le said in a Jan. 19 e-mail to The Extra.

"In that telephone conversation, he refused our invitation; he also spoke in an unprofessional manner regarding the seniors from the Bayview. I refused to listen further to his language denigrating the seniors."

Reached at the store by The Extra in early December, Clonce referred all questions to

Ralphs spokesman Terry O'Neil in Los Angeles.

O'Neil said the Bayview FoodsCo has been renovated at a cost of several million dollars and a side door was expanded to a double-door exit. He told The Extra it is store policy to remove food that exceed the "sell by" date.

"We made the renovations because we believe in the community," O'Neil said. "We invite everyone to come back to the store. We share their concerns and take them very seriously. It's the way we stay in business. We like it that the people take ownership. We encourage them. We'll have a meeting with Senior Action Network before the end of the year."

But Beverly Taylor wasn't satisfied. "It still isn't any better than before," Taylor said. "He (Clonce) put (orange) cones outside the door to keep it accessible but the handicapped parking is still bad. You'd think a store

would appreciate someone bringing these things to their attention."

O'Neil did not contact Senior Action Network or leaders of the Bayview protesting group, Le said, and no meeting was held. The Extra's repeated attempts in January to reach O'Neil, who was gregarious and helpful when contacted in December, never got further than his secretary, who assured us he would return the calls. But he never did.

Taylor says she has 30 seniors on a committee ready to spring back into action.

"We'll keep his (the manager's) feet to the fire," Taylor says. "If he doesn't clean up he's going to get cleared out. These are our stomachs we're talking about, our health. We want the same considerations as elsewhere. It's the only big supermarket in the neighborhood." ■