

## Author, activist encourages community to keep race relation discussions going

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Deepa Iyer, author of “We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future,” led a discussion at Waldorf West Library on Tuesday about racial equality for minorities in the United States.

Staff photo By TIFFANY WATSON

Kitchen table conversations of late have focused on racial issues: whose life matters more, whose life is being devalued. Author Deepa Iyer said she wants local residents to continue having those tough talks about equality, discrimination and racism in hopes of encouraging a positive change in local communities.

On July 12, the Waldorf West Library hosted a discussion for adults to share different perspectives about racism in the United States. Local residents gathered to hear guest speaker Iyer discuss social inclusion with an emphasis on how to have a dialogue about racial equality in an individual’s own community.

“I love speaking at public libraries because they are critical spaces for bringing diverse communities together to have frank and honest conversations,” Iyer said. “The events that have happened in our nation this month have taught us that we need to have more conversations about social injustice in the United States. Talking about these issues gives me hope, and I want this to be a toolkit or guide post for us to take action.”

“We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future” by Iyer, a nationally-renowned racial justice advocate, was published in November 2015. The book shines a light on an unexplored consequence of modern-day terrorism and the ongoing, state-sanctioned persecution of American minorities.

“The book focuses on young people who are dealing with racial issues in their daily lives,” Iyer said. “I wrote this book to remind everyone that these kinds of racial issues are happening time and again. It is a daily phenomenon for many of the characters in the book.”

Iyer is originally from India and moved to Kentucky when she was 12. She currently lives in Silver Spring and is the chairwoman of the board of directors of Race Forward, as well as senior fellow at the Center for Social Inclusion. She is also a professor at University of Maryland College Park, and an attorney who has worked on civil and immigrant rights issues in the nonprofit and government sectors for 15 years.

Most recently, Iyer served as executive director of South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) for a decade, and served as chairwoman of the National Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA).

Iyer filled the gaps on what it means to live in a post-9/11 America where backlash on immigration reform and anti-black racism have appeared in communities and the media. After providing analysis and commentary on ways to build racial equity and solidarity in America, Iyer read an excerpt from her book and gave the audience examples about how to use dialogue, action and compassion to address the issues happening in areas such as Orlando, Minneapolis, Dallas and Baltimore.

Sarah Guy, Charles County Public Library program coordinator, and Janet Salazar, director of the Charles County Public Library, expressed appreciation for Iyer traveling from Silver Spring just to share her insight with Charles County residents.

“I started planning a program similar to this a year ago, during a time when we had some really awful events happening in Maryland and across the country,” Guy said. “We still have issues that are bringing more attention to the racial division and bigotry within the country. I felt that this was a very timely topic for us, but it’s difficult to find someone who is a leader and can present a topic without stirring up emotions and making people feel like they’re being ostracized. But Iyer has a local perspective as far as what’s happening in our community and could present a really competent well-formed argument about why we need dialogue on racial equality.”



Iyer conveyed to the audience how South Asian communities have demonstrated their solidarity with black communities by standing with them in addressing the anti-black racism. She said the Black Lives Matter movement is not only focused on law enforcement violence but also in areas across the board, such as housing, education, job access and life.

Sikh, Muslims, Arabic and South Asian immigrants have supported those issues and movements for the last 15 years and as the movement builds, it is breaking down class and cultural division in communities everywhere, Iyer said.

Charles County Board of Commissioners’ President Peter F. Murphy (D) attended the discussion and said he was inspired by Iyer’s passion and devotion to raising awareness about racial equality.

“I was very pleased to see a young person invested in broadening the discussion on racial equality and although much of her message has already been out there for decades, it was really refreshing to get it from her perspective,” Murphy said. “I think this discussion is a nice start and as Charles County grows and the demographics change and it does get more diverse, then we need to have more of these discussions. I hope that the local residents in attendance will take this back to their individual communities and at some point take this from conversation to real solid action.”

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