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CITY SOJOURN: Tolerance is no substitute for empathy

Laura D'Alisera believes in tolerance. She just doesn't like it when it trumps understanding.

She experienced that disconnect during her childhood in Argentina.

"I grew up Unitarian, and my father was in the port business, and he had contracts there [in Argentina]," said D'Alisera, 52, who formerly was executive director for the Jacksonville region of the National Conference for Community and Justice.

"Well, Argentina is a Catholic country, and here we were, Unitarians, in this Catholic school ... They'd [the nuns] introduce us around, but some would say, 'Here come the little atheists.'"

Still D'Alisera, who now serves as associate director of the Florida Center for Public and International Policy at the University of North Florida, says being in that country as a child taught her a lot about how to live with and appreciate differences. But she didn't get a chance to apply her childhood experiences until much later.

D'Alisera's father moved the family to Houston in 1964, during the midst of the civil rights movement.

"It was a shock coming back, because I was coming back to our cultural revolution," she recalled.

Yet even though D'Alisera was largely insulated from the action that revolved around the movement, she still wanted to find a way to make society better. So after she graduated from high school, she went to the University of Texas and majored in journalism.

"I was out of that era when everyone was inspired by Watergate, and I wanted to make a difference," D'Alisera said.

But instead of pursuing a journalism career, D'Alisera decided to pursue a master's degree in public administration -- and to make a difference in people's lives by working for the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act program, or CETA, in Dallas. CETA was a federal jobs program geared toward low-income people.

"That was my first experience in beginning to understand broad differences, and broad swaths of unfairness," she said.

Tonyaa Weathersbee

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Tonyaa Weathersbee is a columnist for The Times-Union. Her column usually appears on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays.

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That empathy served D'Alisera well when she and her husband moved to Jacksonville in 1983. In 1984, D'Alisera began working for the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

"It was an era when federal money was plentiful for parks," she said. "But as the dollars got tighter, it became harder and harder to make improvements."

D'Alisera left that job in 1995, and in 1997 she began her job with the NCCJ. It was a job that allowed her to bring the past -- and the personal -- to work.

By doing things such as commemorating Ax Handle Saturday, D'Alisera said, the NCCJ caused many people to not simply revisit the past but to understand it.

Such things, she said, bring people closer than mere tolerance.

"I hear people talk about tolerance, and that's such an empty gesture," D'Alisera said.

Especially when empathy leaves one feeling much fuller.

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