

A White African-American?

Westside High School in Omaha, Nebraska, grants a “Distinguished African-American Student” award each Martin Luther King Jr. Day. In 2004, two students distributed 150 posters around the school promoting junior Trevor Richards to receive the annual award. Their posters provoked controversy, however, because Trevor Richards is white.

Richards is a South Africa native who moved from Johannesburg to Nebraska in 1997. The posters featured Richards giving a thumbs-up, with text reading “Next Year Support Trevor Richards for Highest Achieving African American* Student Award”, and a footnote stating “*He’s from South Africa”.

In 2002-2003, there were 56 black students in Westside’s 1,632 student body. The first two recipients of the award were white students, but in 2001 the award was specified for black recipients by school officials who believed the spirit of the award was meant to honor black students.

Richards claims to not have been involved in creating or distributing the posters, and says, “I had no intent of hurting anyone or offending anyone. I wasn’t trying to make a statement. I was just running for the award...” He feels he is as “African” as any other Westside student. One of his classmates who hung the posters told the local news that “the posters were intended to be satire on the term African-American”.

School administrators, including the principle, called the posters disruptive. The posters were removed quickly, deemed inappropriate and insensitive to black students. The principle commented, “It was offensive to the individual being honored [Martin Luther King Jr.], to people who work here and to some students. My role is to make sure we have a safe environment, physically and psychologically. We can’t allow that kind of thing to be hung up on our walls.”

Richards was suspended for two days. Three other students were suspended as well for distributing the posters and circulating a petition in support of Richards.

Discussion

What do you think about the actions or decisions of Richards, his classmates, and the administration? Do you agree or disagree with their behavior? Why?

Does understanding the history of race and African Americans’ historical experience affect how this situation is interpreted?

What does this case illustrate about race relations in the U.S.? What does it illustrate about race as a social construction?