

John Duggan: Welcome. This is a special podcast for the American Counseling Association. I'm John Duggan. ACA realizes our communities today face unique challenges, challenges unknown to past generations. Kids for example in school face aggression and pressures to succeed, at home relationships break apart and there may be violence in neighborhoods and local communities.

In media, media sometimes can bring global unrest into our homes and right in o the lives of our children. And let's face it our kids are exposed to issues related to multicultural, racial, ethnic and diversity issues all the time. It could be confusing and they need help and guidance to understand how to relate to other people.

The American Counseling Association also recognizes that good things happen in families, and our homes, our schools and our communities. We know that focusing on strengths, resiliency and good healthy relationships, makes a difference in the lives of our youth.

And that's why we've prepared a special series of podcasts for volunteers and stuff who worked directly with youth in community centers. We're here to provide some support and information that can help you do your jobs and volunteer and make a difference in the lives of our kids.

Today I'm pleased to welcome Dr. Courtland Lee to our program. Dr. Lee is a professor in the counseling education program at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology at the DC campus. He's the author, editor & co-editor of six books on multicultural counseling and two books on counseling and social justice.

Dr. Lee is the past president of the International Association for Counseling and he's also a past president of the American Counseling Association. Courtland welcome to the program. I'd like to begin by defining the terms multicultural and diversity.

Dr. Courtland Lee: These two terms can sometimes be used synonymously even though we try not to. Multiculturalism really is about sensitivity, awareness and being able to work effectively with people who come from different cultural backgrounds, and primarily when we say cultural backgrounds we mean racial ethnic backgrounds.

Primarily culture, when we think about it primarily relates to race and ethnicity. Diversity goes a little bit broader than that to look at some of the other kinds of differences that we can see among people. It might be sexual orientation, gender, religious preference, socio-economic status, all of those kinds of things that make people unique and different, but at the same time they're bound together as human beings, but these are some of the things that tend to make us different.

John: That's a helpful definition. Now in our podcast today we're trying to give information to staff and volunteers who work with youth and children. Can you explain some of the issues that kids struggle with when they're growing up in our culture?

Dr. Lee: Certainly one of the big issues that every child in this country has to grapple with in one way or another is who they are as a racial ethnic being. Largely because historically the United States has always been a racialized context, we've always grappled with issues of race and ethnicity. So coming to some understanding about who you are as a racial ethnic being is pretty basic.

If you grow up as a child in the United States, then along with that comes some of the other things that would be related to living in a diverse society. Grappling with what it means to be a boy, what it means to be a girl, certainly grappling along those lines of gender or grappling with sexuality, what are my sexual feelings, and how am I processing them towards members of the opposite sex, members of the same sex.

Then we also have issues of social class with are often, unfortunately I think when we think about social class many times that can become a real struggle for kids particularly if they grow up in situations where their families are less fortunate socio-economically than others.

That can also be a real challenge in terms of coming to grips with being poor or less well-off than some of your peers. So I think at every level when we think about the dimensions of diversity, kids through their childhood and adolescence either overtly or subtly are grappling with these issues.

John: Can you talk a little bit about self-awareness and how important it might be for staff and volunteers to become aware of their own cultural identity?

Dr. Lee: I think that's where it starts, understanding cultural differences and really understanding diversity, and a diversity in kids bring into any kind of a program starts with one's own self-awareness, and I think answering a very, very fundamental question; who am I as a cultural being and understanding that the answer that question is multifaceted.

Who am I in terms of my racial ethnic background, my gender, my sexuality, my religion and spiritual orientation, my socio-economic status. How have these things-- Who I am now and how I have grown up, how have these things shaped the person I am and how have these things shaped my view of the world?

John: So this is a really important step for volunteers and staff?

Dr. Lee: If you can't do that if you don't have an understanding of who you are it's going to be very, very difficult for you to be able to work effectively with kids who come from diverse backgrounds.

John: This process of becoming more aware of my own personal identity and cultural understanding will allow a volunteer, will allow me to become more helpful when working with kids, is that correct?

Dr. Lee: Exactly. I think what's really important is that-- If people are really self-reflective in thinking about who they are and how they've come to be who they are, certainly along the line they have been-- You can call them role models, you can call them mentors. I like the term anchor.

These people who help ground you, who help you through those developmental challenges that come with trying answer that question for yourself. I think people, particularly if you're working with kids you need to, sort of think about in 20/30 years when this kid becomes an adult, do I want to be one of those people that they can look back on and say, "This person really made the difference in my life, this person was a mentor or role model or anchor," whatever you want to call it. "This person made an indelible imprint on me."

And I think if people can answer that question for themselves and say, "That's the kind of person I would like to be in working with the kids." I think that's really important.

John: Sure, that makes sense, and when I think back to mentors or those anchors and role models in my life, I've always found the skill of listening has played a very big role in that relationship. What are your thoughts about that?

Dr. Lee: I think what's really important is not only to listen but to hear what kids are saying. So often adult's discount what kids are saying, they discount their reality because they think they're just kids. But I think it's really important to be a person who invites kids to tell you their story, and as they're telling you their story to listen to it in a very, very non-judgmental way, basically not putting yourself into that story because you're much older and you grew up in a different time and cultural context. But to really be able to listen and hear kids' stories and appreciate them for what they are without any preconceived notions or biases on your part.

John: Now changing gears, just a little bit, often times when people are asking me questions they'll say, "When you're working with multicultural and diversity issues, it's really better to be color-blind, to treat all the kids, to treat everybody as though they're the same, that there are no differences." What are your thoughts on this?

Dr. Lee: That's the question that I get a lot when I do consulting work in schools and you get teachers or counselors, administrator say, "I don't see color when I work with kids," and it's like well, "What are you blind, it's very obvious?" And many times the differences are very, very obvious and by you're not acknowledging them at some level you are discounting them.

I don't think you necessarily have to just put them right there out there on the table but you can't hide them, you can't ignore them, at some level they have to be acknowledged in a very, very, as much as possible not judgmental value free if that's possible. It's always a challenge way possible just accept these kids who they are and where they're coming from.

John: How can volunteers help kids ask the question of themselves, and it's hard, but ask that question who am I and who am I in relationship to others? Because this seems like it is a foundational part of promoting multicultural and diversity awareness.

Dr. Lee: Well I think that's of course one of the major developmental tasks of adolescence is trying to be able to answer that question, who am I in relationship to myself in relationship to the other people.

Certainly, one of the things that we see so often is just how cruel kids can be to kids who are perceived as different on whatever dimension we're talking about, and how these kids basically are tormented. You hear adults when they begin to tell their stories about their childhood traumas and challenges around being different, they were shorter, they were the only kid of color, they were a boy who didn't like sports and how that was perceived and all those kinds of things.

I think it's really important as kids are beginning to figure out who they are and answer the question who am I in relationship to myself, to ensure that kids have a safe space and have safe people who will let them explore that question along the lines of diversity, whatever that happens to be.

But at the same time as they're exploring that for themselves, who am I in relationship to myself the other part of that is who am I in relationship to others, to help them to become as much as possible accepting of differences.

I think that's something that adolescents don't naturally come by, if you're different you stick out and you're the subject of derision. Getting kids to understand that a culture of acceptance, you accept yourself and you feel good about who you are but while accepting yourself, you have to also be willing to be accepting of differences in other people.

John: So, volunteers really need to learn how to empathize with youth.

Dr. Lee: I think those of us who are adults, particularly again as part of that self-awareness piece, if we know, if we can somewhere find, make a connection again with being a 13/14-year-old kid who is feeling bad because he or she has been the subject of ridicule because of the color of their skin or sexual orientation or whatever it happens to be, that we know how that feels.

That we are in a position to be able to intervene and say, "Let's sit down, let's think this through, talk this through, that this notion of different is okay." Difference is what enriches life and see if we can help kids to develop that kind of mindset that will make that happen. If that mindset is developed then hopefully that culture will emerge among a group of kids.

John: Staff and volunteers working in community centers and working directly with kids and youth, they're really modeling important behaviors and they're creating future citizens.

Dr. Lee: Correct. Yes. And I think one of the things about things like Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, those groups that are basically -- their mission is to help develop young men and young women with an eye on the future, these are our future adults, are future citizens.

I think part of that is helping to develop the kind of environment where the notion of different becomes the norm, that basically difference is really what makes the world go round, that we celebrate diversity, that diversity is a good thing, that you're different than me I'm different than you is not a bad thing, it's a good thing.

Certainly if we come from different socio-economic backgrounds it's not our fault, it's just that's the way it is but we're still human beings, and we can find a common ground and I'm not going to put you down because my sneakers are better than yours, it's just this is the way it is but let's go out and have some fun.

I guess what we're talking about is a culture of acceptance and figure out how we as adults can manipulate the environment if I can use that phrase, to make that kind of environment possible.

John: So, when staff and volunteers are creating a culture of acceptance for multiculturalism and diversity, what type of activities should they consider offering kids?

Dr. Lee: That's a good question. I'm actually singing back to my experience as a kid. I spent any number of summers probably from the time I was eight until well into my teens at summer camp where basically we were all just thrown together into these tents, these cabins in the woods, and basically we had to learn to do things together, build campfires, go on hikes, learn to swim, all the kinds of things that kids should be able to do.

And it was with a group of adults, young adults, they were college kids as I remember at the time who basically didn't care who you were. It was we had stuff to do, most it was fun stuff more or less, and we didn't care who you are or where you came from. It was basically we all have work to do, let's do it together and let's have some fun together.

And I think that's really what childhood is supposed to be all about, it's about fun and let's do fun stuff together, and it was fun to learn about kids who came from different backgrounds, "Your skins different in mine." "That's interesting let's talk about that." "You're in a wheelchair, let's see what that's like."

And basically all of those things really aren't important at one level because we're all here to have fun, we're all here to work on a project. So, I think that if we can develop that kind of an atmosphere in whatever we're doing in our program I think that would be great.

John: Okay, so let's flip the script Courtland. Let's look at those kids who are very well versed. They are steeped in multiculturalism and diversity and they're the ones who are talking about the issues, and it leaves the staff and the volunteers feeling uncomfortable. What should folks do then?

Dr. Lee: I think often times we as adults have forgotten how to play, and we're so caught up in being adults that we forgot how to just be human beings. And I think this goes back to the self-awareness piece that I'm talking about. If you as a youth volunteer are feeling uncomfortable at the kinds of things you see kids doing or things that kids are saying, then you probably have to do some more reflection on who you are in your biases, your hang-ups, and if need be you might need to go talk to some folks to talk it through, get the kind of supervision that's going to help you become comfortable with the stuff that the kids are already comfortable with.

John: And I guess that means being extra careful and sensitive and listening to those kids that would come along and try to push our buttons, right?

Dr. Lee: Absolutely. Let's see what we can do to really make Courtland really crazy because he can't deal with this whatever it happens to be.

John: Yes, those are pretty common things when any of us are working with kids and adolescents. To look at a more serious or sensitive issue, how can we deal from a multicultural and diversity perspective with kids who are being bullied or teased?

Dr. Lee: Yes. First of all you certainly do some individual processing with the kid himself or herself, but at the same time this is when you make this a teachable moment and you bring everybody together. And you basically look at the basis of what's happening here and let's talk this out, and really to help establish the norm that-- Again difference is a good thing, difference is something that we do not make fun of, difference is something that we accept and go beyond just accepting, we celebrate.

But I think really making sure of it everybody really has the opportunity to hear this notion that we do, this behavior will not be tolerated, so zero tolerance for it, and the reason why is because we are-- And you used the word earlier, we are a community and this is what community means. Community means an acceptance in celebration, appreciation of difference.



John: And so how do we help a child or an adolescent who is from out of town and moves into a tight-knit community, particularly if they come from a different racial or diversity background?

Dr. Lee: That's a real challenge. I think that kid is going to need an awful lot of support from the youth volunteers, and I think at the same time it's incumbent upon those volunteers to do some intervention at a systems level, as we like to say really working with the parents, the families, the communities about this whole notion of acceptance, and this is the way the world is today and diversity-- And I think part of it is getting them to really understand that diversity is a good thing, diversity is not to be feared, diversity enriches, enhances, it doesn't take away.

I think many times that may be more important than working with the kids because we know that many times the kids bring into a social setting the baggage from their families, and a lot of stuff that they're saying, they parroting from what they hear the adults say that they basically heard this stuff at the dinner table or what not. So, I think that becomes really important for the organization, the workers within that organization to do some family outreach.

John: I like how you're incorporating families into the mix. Often times for families, language is such an important multicultural and diversity issue. How do we help those kids that are bilingual or trilingual?

Dr. Lee: Yes. Part of that that's really interesting is to get the kids and their families, particularly when we have so many kids in families who speak English and that's it, to understand just how remarkable it is to have kids in their families who can speak more than one language and who can code switch, which very easily go from English to the other language and get them to think about just the skill that that takes, and many times they don't necessarily have to work at it.

They become so good at this perhaps as even a survival mechanism that the code switching is just second nature, and getting the families to think about what a tremendous skill this is, and what a tremendous attribute that this kid and his or her family have. That kind of educative piece I think would be really important for a community to understand.

John: So it's important for staff and volunteers to help kids understand that this is a real gift, this is a tremendous skill. It's not a problem that has to be fixed.

Dr. Lee: Exactly, and I think far too often kids who are bilingual and many times trilingual are led to believe that this is a deficit when it's remarkable. Particularly when you come from a country like the United States where all we learn is English.

John: Okay, so this can be a tough one. How do we help the kids that are migrants or refugees? Those kids that could be coming into a community program where do they fit in?

Dr. Lee: One of the remarkable things when we think about what kids who go through any kind of migration experience, how resilient they are and I think this is the message that needs to come across. Again, both to the kids themselves many times because they've internalized so much negative stuff about being a migrant.

But they need to understand this, and certainly the host community needs to understand this, that first of all think about the amazing amount of courage it takes to basically pack up as much as you possibly can, really put it on your back and move from country A to country B.

Imagine the courage that it takes to do that, the resolve it takes to do that, the resilience it takes to do that. And many times people are doing it, yes, because they are trying to escape negativity. But the reason they're doing it is because they want a better life and they will put themselves into harm's way many times, basically to have a better life.

So think of the courage, the resiliency that goes along with that. So, I think that is a message that needs to be heard by the kids themselves as well as the host community, this notion of courage and resiliency that goes with the migration experience.

John: And I'd imagine that these types of children and adolescents would bring in significant grief and loss. How can staff and volunteers address these issues from a multicultural perspective?

Dr. Lee: Yes. I think this again is where it's really important for that the self-awareness in just a sense of what I would call global literacy on the part of the volunteer or the youth worker. What he or she knows just sort of basic knowledge about the world they live in which I think is really important.

The more knowledge about the world you live in, the more you understand how people go through grief, express grief is different across cultures. And again the kind of things that Johnny comes in and has just lost a parent and is grieving whatever it happens to be. Janie comes in from culture X and seems to be very stoic.

What is wrong with Janie? There's nothing wrong with Janie. Janie is expressing grief within her cultural context and to be sensitive to that. And part of the learning process for kids, what needs to be a part of the kids again in celebrating diversity is the notion of grief and loss is different.

Let's give Janie and John their space respectfully for them to grieve in the way that is most comfortable for them. Let's not force either one of them to do something that would be totally uncomfortable to them in terms of their cultural realities.

John: Okay, and last question. Is working with kids from military families a multicultural experience?

Dr. Lee: It absolutely is, and I think it's really good now that we are beginning to talk about military culture, because it is a culture unto itself and there's so many aspects. We know, there's a whole sort of combat aspect of what the military is really all about. But you've got these families that are caught up in this culture, and you've got now not only dad but many times mom who is called away into active duty.

Again you've got these families who have a remarkable degree of resiliency, because first of all they've got to live month after month after month many times, not knowing about a parent's well-being and knowing that a parent could be in harm's way. And at the same time this whole notion of being agile enough to be able to pick up at a moment's notice and move, and not just one time but multiple times through one's childhood.

And the resiliency that it takes to do that and that the remarkable sense of strength that it takes to be able to again put yourself to be the new kid in school again and again and again. And to really appreciate and understand that, and the resiliency again that goes into that, and again making sure that the kids themselves hear that as well as the outside community.

John: We're coming to the end of our time. Is there anything that we've missed or that you would like to add?

Dr. Lee: No. I think what the most important pieces of this as I think about it are the self-awareness piece. I don't think that's something that I can stress enough that going in as a youth worker, going in to work with kids who come from diverse backgrounds is really, really important for you to have been able to process as much as possible and continue to process that question who am I as a cultural being. What are the things that are important to me given how I view the world given my race, my sexual orientation, my religion, my socio-economic status, ability status, et cetera, et cetera.

And to understand as much as possible that the way you react to kids basically is a function of the cultural context and world view that you have, and to be comfortable in that, but at the same time realize that if there are what I will call gaps, there are blind spots in that, to constantly be able to or will be willing to work on those.

John: You're asking us to be humble when we're working with kids?

Dr. Lee: Yes. Be prepared to have your assumptions challenged. Because what you assume about kids, in general what you assume about kids regardless of any these other things is going to be challenged. But then when we layer on top of this, the multiple dimensions of culture and diversity, prepare to have your assumptions challenged.



John: Wonderful. Thank you Dr. Courtland Lee, Past-President of the American Counseling Association, and that's our program for today. If you have any questions please email them to podcast@counseling.org. I'm your host John Duggan for the American Counseling Association. This program is Copyright 2016 by the American Counseling Association, all rights reserved. Thanks for joining us and have a great day.