

Boxes and Walls: Breaking Down Stereotypes

By Adam Reger

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A restaurant patron with visual impairment, struggling to get through a narrow opening between two chairs, reaches out to find her way between tables.

Looking on impatiently, a waiter says, "Ma'am, you're disturbing the other guests."

For the diner navigating her path, the embarrassment and frustration are palpable.

The scene unfolds not in the dining room of a fancy restaurant, but in the second-floor ballroom of the University of Pittsburgh's O'Hara Student Center, where tables and chairs have been set up in an interactive exhibit called the Disability Diner. The restaurant patron, senior Sarah Scalercio, is wearing goggles that block her vision. Other fellow diners wear noise-cancelling headpieces that simulate deafness. Another tries to reach the table in a wheelchair.



In the Hindu Student Council exhibit, students discussed balancing expectations in American and Indian cultures. (Photo by Emily O'Donnell)

Conceived and designed by members of Students for Disability Advocacy, the Disability Diner is one of eight interactive exhibits that student participants explored as part of "Boxes and Walls," a two-day event sponsored by Pitt's Division of Student Affairs as part of the University's Year of the Humanities.

The interactive exhibit's purpose was to present students with situations and circumstances they may not encounter in their everyday lives, encouraging them to think about—and even feel for themselves—others' experiences.

Following each exhibit, students met with staff members who led discussions about what the students encountered and how those experiences met, or perhaps changed, their preconceptions of a certain group or culture.

For Scalercio, simulating visual impairment was a disorienting experience, but one that hit home.

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[Introduction](#)

"My mom has been visually impaired since I was very young," she said. "It was a jarring experience to feel it for myself. I was walking into tables and chairs. I can only imagine what it's like for my mom."

She added, "It makes me want to try to be a little more patient in the future."

Other rooms focused on issues ranging from food insecurity and the dangers of social media to kidnapping and slavery in Burma, the resurgence of anti-Semitism on college campuses, and awareness of sexual assault.

The rooms, conceived and implemented by student groups, took a range of approaches. The Women Lead Living Learning Community, which presented an exhibit on power-based violence, invited visitors to answer the question "How does objectification make you feel?" by writing one-word answers on a white T-shirt displayed at the center of the space. Students who passed through wrote words like "inferior" and "angry" on the shirt.

Pitt's Hillel student group designed booklets telling the stories of real Holocaust victims and survivors, and asked participants to make choices that would determine whether they survived. "If you choose to help collect information to plan the revolt," read one prompt, "turn to page 4." The booklet's final page invited those who survived to "flash forward to see the life of your grandson," a Jewish college student who finds a swastika spray-painted on his door.

"We learned about the Holocaust in school," said sophomore Vaishnavi Gopalakrishnan, "but you don't think of anti-Semitism as something that's happening today. But being in that moment, making those decisions, made it so real."

"Students have said the exhibit was very impactful," said Jazzmine Hudson, a resident director in Pitt's Office of Residence Life, who worked with student groups on the Boxes and Walls exhibit. "These are things they never knew about or would never have run into in their lifetimes, and they had a great emotional response in recognizing what others could be experiencing."

Hudson credited the student organizations with leading the way.

"Ultimately we're getting people to understand other people's viewpoints," said Steve Anderson, associate dean and director of Residence Life. "Our hope is that this event helps create more understanding and a more constructive and caring world."

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Pitt Chronicle
Office of University Communications
200 South Craig Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

ucomm@pitt.edu
412-624-1033

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