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NEW YORK

Rethinking Racism Through Film and the Eyes of Students

'I'm Not Racist...Am I?' Follows Students at Calhoun School



A still from the documentary film, 'I'm Not Racist...Am I?,' made in collaboration with the Calhoun School. *POINT MADE FILMS*

By **SOPHIA HOLLANDER**

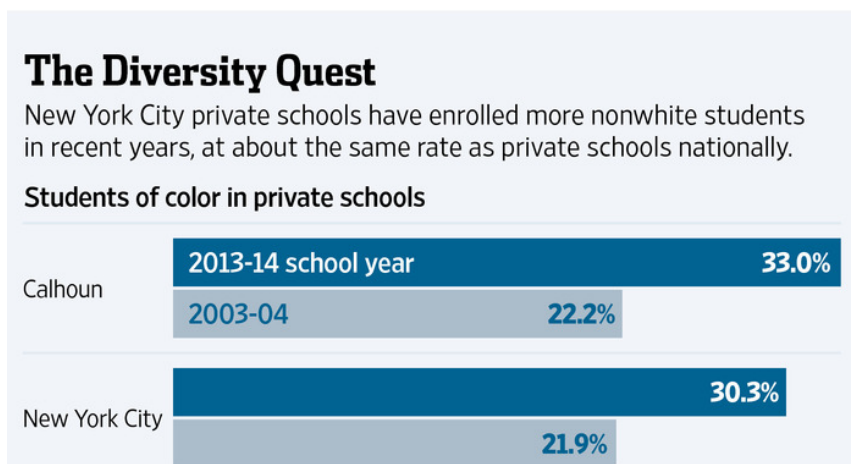
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Emma Vallo's larger-than-life face reddened, her voice rose and she began to cry. In a darkened auditorium at Calhoun, a progressive Upper West Side private school, Ms. Vallo watched herself on the screen and covered her head with her hands.

The emotional occasion was the first Calhoun parents' screening of "I'm Not Racist... Am I?" a documentary conceived as part of a larger project by a teacher at Calhoun to address racism in America.

The film charts the evolution of 12 teenagers from public and private schools across New York City—including Ms. Vallo—as they attend race workshops for one year. It was featured last week as part of the St. Louis film festival and has been shown at schools and institutions across the country, including at least one Google campus.

Ms. Vallo, a 17-year-old senior who is half Caucasian and half Hispanic—though she said she is generally perceived as white—attended the Calhoun screening earlier this month. Parts of the film were still painful to watch, she said. In the scene where her face went red, shot during a workshop on the “n-word,” she said she felt as though the facilitator was calling her a member of the Ku Klux Klan.



It took months to realize “I took that completely the wrong way,” she said, calling the experience of making the film among the most transformative of her life.

“I’m Not Racist...Am I?” is the most recent of three films about race either set at or created by New York City private schools, long seen as bastions of white, wealthy privilege. The films involving the Dalton School, Trinity School and Calhoun School each grapple with different dimensions of an issue that can be subtle to detect and awkward to discuss, filmmakers and others said.

Too often, diversity at private schools is treated like a “touchy-feely ‘heroes and holidays’ approach,” said Hilary North, director of diversity and equity initiatives at Calhoun. That could include celebrating Black History month or cooking corn dishes to honor Native Americans. “We’re not going to talk about power, we’re not going to talk about privilege—a lot of schools, that’s kind of where they’re at.”

“We live in a society where people tend to think about racism in terms of personal acts of meanness,” Ms. North said, but “oppression is experienced on the structural level.”

Calhoun takes these issues more seriously, she said, but isn't immune. "This is a private school, so we are absolutely dealing with issues of class and access all the time," she said.

"I'm Not Racist...Am I?" follows on the heels of "American Promise," a \$1.3 million film created by two Dalton parents that traced their African-American son's journey through the school, along with his closest friend. The 13-year-project, which made its debut at the Sundance Film Festival in 2013 and aired on PBS, tracks the two boys from kindergarten through high school.

At Trinity, "Allowed to Attend" was a project conceived by Trinity's communications director, Kevin Ramsey, after a lengthy conversation with a student about race at the school.



Another scene from 'I'm Not Racist...Am I?' *POINT MADE FILMS*

It touches on hot-button issues like the cost of prom and spring trips, the way students self-segregate and moments when teachers have trouble distinguishing one minority student from another. The film hasn't been screened publicly but sparked debates within the school after showings in 2012 and 2013, Mr. Ramsey said.

All three schools have improved their diversity numbers in recent years. This year, students of color made up 39% of Trinity's student body, up from 24% a decade ago. At Dalton, the school's 2011 kindergarten class was 48% children of color—a stark change from 2005-06 when it was 6%.

Calhoun has also increased its diversity: Today students of color make up about a third of the school, up from 22.2% a decade ago.

Calhoun's film was the brainchild of then-teacher David Alpert, after he attended a diversity workshop that tried to steer people away from a definition of racism that

depended on individual prejudice and instead highlighted systemic issues.

The workshop was “quite jarring—appropriately so,” said Mr. Alpert, who now splits his time between leading the school’s performing-arts department and the Deconstructing Race project, which includes “I’m Not Racist...Am I?”

He envisions the film as part of a broader curriculum that can reach students from kindergarten through high school across the country. Calhoun is currently trying to raise \$750,000 to develop the curriculum.

The film, which cost \$240,000, tracks 12 students through a year of workshops on race, including family interviews and sometimes heated disputes.

In perhaps the film’s most controversial workshop, students are presented with the idea that all whites are racist, because they participate in—and perpetuate—an institutionalized racist system.

Ms. Vallo said she ultimately came to agree with that position, prompting difficult conversations with her two adoptive dads.

It was part of a broader awakening, she said. Ms. Vallo said she used to think that whites should strive to be colorblind. Now she believes it is the opposite. Race is an issue in society, whether whites ignore it or not, she said, so “it should be talked about.”

Write to Sophia Hollander at sophia.hollander@wsj.com

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