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Time comes to speak out

I'm so mad I'm shaking.

I'm so mad I have big tears in my eyes.

I was just hung up on by a caller.

I only got the chance to say "I'm sorry you feel that way, ma'am" before she slammed down the phone.

She didn't give her name. She didn't have the courage to stand by her hateful comments.

She complained about Connections, the Leader-Telegram's monthly section for teen-age readers, of which I am the editor. She said she didn't like it, didn't like it one bit.

I braced myself for a tirade on the irresponsibility of the media for instilling monetary, commercial attitudes in young people today.

(Connections' main story for August, which I wrote, was about a dream shopping spree in which five local teens spent \$300 of "imaginary" money picking out their ultimate back-to-school wardrobe.)

I could have understood those concerns. I questioned that myself when I wrote the story. I know that \$300 is beyond many families' reach. But we wanted to, just for a little while, anyway, let them have some fun and dream.

But it wasn't that which drew her ire.

It was racism, out and out racism.

She attacked the fact that Connections had spoken to three southeast Asian students and two non-Asian students in its monthly question-and-answer section.

She said we should have had "four of our own and one Hmong" student.

She said, "Hmong are being pushed in our faces."

This month, Connections went to Upward Bound, a federally funded program at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire for promising high school students who, for many reasons, face barriers to completing high school and going on to college.

Those reasons might be parental – mom and dad never went to college and they don't understand its importance in the job market today.

It might be financial – there's not enough money to meet the rent much less afford tuition.

It might be sexist or racist – women and minorities face a tough time in higher education.

So, Upward Bound gives these kids an edge. Students work on their grades and self-confidence through tutoring, counseling and study skills training during the academic year and at a six-week summer residency program at



Between the Lines

Susan Barber

UW-Eau Claire. They make new friends, attend concerts and plays.

They grow, like May Vang, a 17-year-old senior at Memorial High School.

"This summer helped me a lot," May said. "I'm an assistant teacher. It's taught me to work with people and about working with biology. I've learned a lot of things that will help me in the future because I want to be a nurse."

May wants to be a nurse. She wants to heal people.

Oh, what a lot of healing there is to be done – of the bodies and of the souls.

I just wanted to let you know – whoever you were who called – that I can't stomach your attitude.

Is it skin color that bothers you? Is it because you don't understand that the Hmong people fought with the United States in the Vietnam War and they and their families have sought refuge here from a hostile government?

Unless you are an American Indian, aren't you and your ancestors refugees as well, making a home in a country that is made up of immigrants from across the globe?

I know a few words from me aren't going to change your mind.

In fact, I've never written a Between the Lines column for the Leader-Telegram before, and, in some ways, I didn't want to write this one. I didn't want those kids, who innocently told of their hard work and hopes and dreams, to hear of the hatred directed at them.

But I couldn't keep quiet.

Not this time.

Leader-Telegram staff

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10 months ago

OCR Text

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