

Saying hello to a stranger has its risks

This newspaper column has changed my life. It has made me a celebrity of sorts. Folks wave hello or see me on the street and say, "Aren't you the author that's in the paper?" While I enjoy the extra attention, I am not ego-tripping. I am still just a regular guy with regular problems just like everybody else. I make a point to say hello to people on the street.

But sometimes when I initiate a friendly greeting to a fellow passerby I get a cold dead stare. The unresponsiveness is universal. It doesn't matter if the person is young or old, white or black. A small, but significant, percentage will avoid eye contact and ignore me.

A few months ago several community leaders were interviewed about issues concerning race relations in Williamsport. It was suggested that the first step in bridging the gap between the races is to recognize each other's humanity by being civil and courteous.

I am pleased to announce that Williamsport is a very friendly place (or at least, friendlier than I



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expected). Over the last two months 6 out of 10 people reciprocated with "Hi!" "Hello, sir!" or "What's up, brother man?"

But, what about the other 40%? There is no way to know for sure but I suspect these people are fearful. The frail elderly White woman that I passed as I went into the rear entrance of the J. V. Brown Library seemed frightened of me. The 10-year old boy that was rushing to catch up to his mom when he "bumped" into me in the supermarket aisle was terrified. His face became pale and his pupils widened. He clearly became afraid of me.

But fear doesn't explain everything. Others ignore my acknowledgements due to hate or anger. I passed a white couple near Annunciation Church one evening.

I said hello and got the cold shoulder. As we passed each other, the woman's eyes were filled with hate. Her stare was intimidating. It implied that I had violated some unwritten rule of conduct for black men. On the other hand, I occasionally get the cold shoulder from young black people, too. But I understand. The urban street code requires one to be hardened, tough and uncaring. It is a matter of survival.

Raised in the ghetto of North Philadelphia, I know that common and drug pushers will approach me with a "friendly" smile. This is a technique that is used to gain a victim's trust. A simple hello can be a test for vulnerabilities.

My friend, Willie McCoy, walked the streets of the Raymond Rosen Projects in North Philly like a brooding bear. He held a countenance of stern resoluteness. His body language said to any interested predator, "Don't mess with me!" I told him that, comparatively, his private image was completely different to his street persona. He was a gentle, giant of a man who cared

for his young daughter, "Babycakes". This highly intelligent single parent advised me, "The world is a high threat, low survivability environment. Walk the streets with an angry facial expression to keep people away."

In Willie's world, civility was seen as a weakness and the weak don't survive in the ghetto. Conversely, violence or the threat of violence demands respect.

The behavior patterns of the ghetto mindset has been painstakingly recorded and analyzed in Code of the Street, a groundbreaking book by Yale Professor Elijah Anderson, one of the nation's most influential scholars in the field of urban inequality. Professor Anderson explains why urban Blacks do the things they do. It explains the black community's growing feeling of isolation and alienation from mainstream society. And it explains the rise of the oppositional culture of the street.

The book also gives the reader insights to Williamsport's "influx" problem. (Merely adding more cops to the police roster will not solve

gang violence and the illegal drug trade.)

However, there is good news! Professor Anderson is coming to Williamsport in the fall!

His Lycoming College lecture will be open to the public. Dr. Betty McCall of Lycoming College is organizing reading/discussion groups in preparation for Anderson's visit. There will also be a dinner honoring Professor Anderson but it will be limited to only 100 invited guests. To get invited you'll have to participate in the discussion groups.

For more information contact Dr. McCall at 321-4203 or email her at mccall@lycoming.edu. Anybody interested in our community should read Code of the Street. Meanwhile, let's be civil to each other.

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