

Talking about race, he steps outside comfort zone

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newwave@tulane.edu

Tulane alumnus Tim Wise, among the nation's most notable anti-racist speakers, returned to campus to speak at the annual Tulane Diversity Convocation. Intertwining pride with scorn and subtle condemnation with candid understanding, he pointed to uncomfortable truths of America's racial landscape and entreated listeners to create "a just, equitable world."



Tim Wise, left, a noted author, signs books and converses with students after his talk at Tulane on Oct. 19. (Photos by Cheryl Gerber)

Wise commented wryly, "People are always uncomfortable talking about race, but if we don't ... all that does is pass that problem down to another generation."



Audience members listen intently as Wise entreats listeners to rise to the challenge to create a “just, equitable world.”

He summarized New Orleans' history of dysfunctional race relations, zeroing in on police brutality, subtly oppressive economic and political institutions and crippling poverty rates, citing statistics that 1 percent of white children live in poverty, but nearly 40 percent of black children do so.

Noting Tulane's commitment to public service since Hurricane Katrina, Wise discussed both the sober realities and potential of the university's role in the local community. In particular, Wise zeroed in on the problematic nature of framing public service as a one-way street.

“You need to go in there not only prepared to give something, but to take something away,” he said, counseling students to become “attuned to the wisdom that was in that community before you ever even knew it was on the map, and the struggles that community faced before Katrina ever happened.”

Wise encouraged students to adopt the mind-set of “organizer,” helping communities recognize their own strength instead of simply providing a service.

“You need to forget any notions of these communities as faulty or defective, and understand the systemic reasons behind the problems they face,” said Wise.

The Diversity Convocation, held on Oct. 19, was sponsored by the Tulane Offices of Multicultural Affairs and Housing and Residence Life.

Cody Wild is a sophomore studying English and political economy.