Comfort with the uncomfortable: A UT-Dallas student encourages strangers to talk about race

Nifa Kaniga says a two-way dialogue is the key to learning and growing.



Nifa Kaniga made a cardboard sign and invited people to have a conversation about race in his hometown of Dripping Springs, Texas.(Thao Nguyen / Special Contributor)

In an online world that too often encourages us to talk, rather than listen, 20-year-old Nifa Kaniga wanted to try a different way to spark deeper discussions on race.

Holding a tri-fold display board that read “Ask Me Anything — Make Yourself Uncomfortable,” Kaniga took to the streets of his Dripping Springs hometown, west of Austin, fielding tough questions from passersby about racial injustice, the Black Lives Matter movement, and how he has dealt with hate speech and unconscious bias as a young Black man.

For a week in June, from noon to 7 p.m., the University of Texas at Dallas literature major stood on the same downtown street corner. “Why is everything about race?” and other handwritten question prompts on his sign invited residents of the Hill Country community of fewer than 5,000 people — where less than 1 percent of the population is Black — to step out of their comfort zone, share their opinion and learn.

With the uncomfortable came the unexpected.

“Let’s be honest, I didn’t expect anyone to talk to me,” Kaniga says. “But I was proven wrong — thankfully.”

Every day, more locals came to gather under the shade of trees. At one point, people talked in groups not only to Kaniga but also to each other, sharing different points of view, political ideologies and life stories, says Kaniga, who describes himself as “right down the middle” politically.

“You’re not going to like what I have to say,” Kaniga recalls one woman telling him as she approached. The rising college senior openly listened, and instead of arguing, he asked his own questions, which she also took the time to consider.

“That is the beauty of having an in-person conversation — you can see it in people’s eyes when something you say makes sense to them and something clicks,” Kaniga says. “That is one of those moments I really appreciated.”

Kaniga's candid approach was quickly followed by national news stories, viral social media posts and an appearance on actor and SoulPancake co-founder Rainn Wilson's "Hey There, Human" daily Instagram Live series. With a now global reach, Kaniga turned to social media to educate, enlighten and promote dialogue with a platform where people can listen and also feel heard.

Once a place for Kaniga to post his skateboard videos, Instagram has expanded as a forum for engagement on racism, politics and other social issues of the moment. Followers can privately message him with questions and ideas and find educational resources and tools to help navigate discussions with others.

Kaniga admits he hasn't always practiced patience when it comes to uncomfortable conversations. He says he has lost friends because of an emotional past need to "always be right." Tired of behavior he describes as "egotistical," Kaniga decided to learn from his mistakes to better understand the difference between "talking with somebody and talking at somebody."

"Nobody wants to be lectured," Kaniga says.

Kenneth Brewer, a clinical associate professor of arts and humanities at UT-Dallas, has watched Kaniga think deeply and engage in upper-level literature classes. He calls Kaniga, who is studying to be a teacher and wants to teach high school literature, an "outstanding student."

"He is passionate about studying literature and always brings up thoughtful and challenging issues in class discussions," Brewer says. "It doesn't surprise me to see him take initiative to engage others in such authentic conversations."

We chatted with Kaniga about the art of conversation and how he is using

his own voice to help others do the same — all in the name of change.

Why the sign campaign?

It was a mixture of two things. Going to one of the protests in Austin, it was a surreal, depressing experience. And I saw some of the questions, arguments and misinformation on social media. A lot of it is just misinformation and lack of perspective. I figured I could kill two birds with one stone, and that's when I started the sign campaign. I spoke to a lot of different people, with a lot of different political ideologies. I brought a lot of people to understanding and supporting Black Lives Matter, even when they first came to me to aggressively say what they wanted to say.

Your method was so simple — yet straightforward. What inspired this approach?

I'm a big supporter of empathy. ... I feel like it de-escalates a lot of situations and opens up people's minds, so they don't feel the need to "defend their side." I don't think it is easy to do for a lot of people who may have the misconception that if I understand you, I agree with you. You don't have to agree, but at least try to understand where the other person is coming from so you can have a reasonable discussion. It's all about conversation rather than having yelling matches.

How do you handle uncomfortable conversations?

A big question has been, "How come you are saying Black Lives Matter versus saying All Lives Matter?"... Sometimes it's just as simple as explaining to people that no one said, "Only Black lives matter," or no one said, "Black lives matter more." It means that Black lives matter, too. Just that is enough for some people to understand and get it. When you tell someone that they are ignorant and stupid, it just closes people's minds. So that is the approach

I've been taking this whole time is to be open and hear people's sides and their reasoning, so they don't feel like they have to put their ego first. Ego will ruin a conversation very quickly.

Anything you learned along the way?

One thing that surprised me the most was the number of people and the demographic of those who already supported Black Lives Matter. I had a lot of moments of the stereotypical cowboy, with the big truck and big cowboy hat, who when they parked, I'm like, "Oh boy, this person might say something that I might not want to hear." But they just came to show their support and say, "I'm with you, and I support Black Lives Matter. I hear you, and I'm learning, and I'm listening." I guess it is one of those things where I had my own biases, and that broke down some barriers for me, as well.

You've said conversation is a two-way street. Can you talk about the importance of allowing both sides to be heard?

We have a lot of problems in America, not just race. I feel like the way to move forward with anything is to first acknowledge and talk about the problem. ... If we are comfortable, we are not going to go anywhere because people will stay in their bubbles, in their echo-chambers, and no one is learning other people's perspectives. ... One person's reality is different from another person's reality. I feel like it's productive to have these kinds of civil conversations. It is always going to be uncomfortable, but I think if we are going to move forward, we have to be uncomfortable.

You've now moved your campaign to social media to reach more people. What has that been like?

This is a group effort. One man sent me a DM telling me how he talked to his father — who is completely anti-Black Lives Matter. He used some of the

techniques I talked about and said his father started listening. He gave an inch. According to him, his father is a man who would never change his opinion or give an inch or move his position. I see that as a monumental victory. That is the first step to opening up conversations. It's not just me — it's everybody who is listening and learning and helping other people understand.