Esera Tuaolo, a former Green Bay Packer and Minnesota Viking, gathers with students after speaking at the Keep it Real diversity conference at UW-Stout.

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Diversity conference at UW-Stout covers a variety of student issues

By UW-Stout News Bureau

MENOMONIE — Carlea Jo Lauer may have summed it up best when asked how she benefited by attending a recent diversity conference at UW-Stout.

“We all have something different, and I think different is beautiful,” said Lauer, a UW-Stout student from Chippewa Falls.

Lauer was one of nearly 100 students at the recent Keep it Real: Stout United innovative diversity conference. They interacted with each other on topics such as ethnicity, gender identity, ability, class and sexual orientation. They also heard from several speakers, including Esera Tuaolo, a former NFL player with the Green Bay Packers and Minnesota Vikings.

“Keeping it real means keeping true to yourself,” Lauer said. “We all can be a little less judgmental, and after (the conference) I was thinking about ways I could change my daily living.”

Lauer said her favorite part of the day was a student panel discussion.
“It was nice to hear from our peers,” she said. “We all have our own insecurities, and I think knowing about them brings us closer and makes us a stronger community.”

The panel discussion leader was Julie Miller, UW-Stout LGBTQ program office coordinator.

Like Lauer, Jose Palacios, a UW-Stout student from Waukesha, was glad he attended the conference. “Keep it Real was an opportunity for students to truly be free and speak for themselves. It was a reason to celebrate different people and learn about others in a positive environment,” Palacios said.

A Keep it Real board game also helped students break down barriers and interact. “This was when I really got to know my peers and hear their stories,” said student Zoe Foster, of River Falls.

One of the event’s speakers was crosscultural leader Phyllis Braxton, who presented “Cultural Differences: Staying Anchored,” and “How are You Experiencing Cultural Differences: How are Others Experiencing You?” Braxton, president of Pink Consulting of Minneapolis, discussed ways in which people react to differences. They often spend much time fearing or avoiding the issue before they consider embracing those differences.

**Hope for tolerance**

The final presentation at the day-long event in the Memorial Student Center was “Creating a World of Acceptance” by Tuao, a defensive lineman who made the 1991 NFL All Rookie team for the Packers. He went on to play for the Vikings and three more NFL teams in a nine-year career. After his career ended, Tuao announced in 2003 that he is gay. The announcement was made on national TV on HBO’s “Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel.”

In 2006 Tuao published a biography, “Alone in the Trenches,” which in part recounted his struggles with his identity. His story also was featured in the 2006 book “After They Were Packers.” “Esera showed everyone not to hate and not to be judgmental but accepting and kind to others,” Palacios said.

Also presenting were Sir Aaron Mason, an associate counselor in UW-Stout’s Multicultural Student Services and the Counseling Service Center, and Antoinette Lyte-Evans, a sophomore from Milwaukee, vice president of the Black Student Union and a member of the Honors College. Mason and Lyte-Evans presented “Microaggression: The Little Things that Matter.” Microaggressions are common verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile or negative slights to individuals who represent various cultural groups. The speakers offered advice on how to deal with microaggressions.

Barb Miller, director of UW-Stout Multicultural Student Services, said the event allowed students an opportunity to connect and to explore cultural differences in a relevant way. “It was powerful,” Miller said. “One of the keynote speakers was so inspired by our students’ interest, thoughtful questions, commitment to diversity and learning that she volunteered to return to spend more time with our students at no cost.”

Keep it Real was sponsored by ASPIRE, Dean of Students Office, Disability Services, LGBTQ Program Office and Multicultural Student Services.