

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
THURSDAY, AUGUST 5, 2021

Present:

Committee Members: Eric Hutchins, Raven Pfaff, Sophia Berard

Others: Jackie Stanton, Jeff Bickford, Shayne Spence, Diane Lehouiller, Elijah Alexander, Olga Mardach

Committee Members Absent: Portia Foss

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Sophia called the meeting to order at 6:14.

2. Review Agenda and Any Adjustments, Changes, Additions

Sophia added an update on the written expression contest and an executive session to discuss recommendations for appointments to the committee.

3. Review and Approve Minutes

Eric moved to approve the minutes of July 1, 2021 and the motion was passed.

4. Update on Written Expression Contest

Eric said zero entries were received for the written expression contest. He thinks it that has a lot to do with the school year we had and his choice to put the contest in the summer program. He imagined there would be hundreds of students in the summer program but there were far fewer. He thinks the deadline should be moved to fall so we can push the contest during the school year. He suggested waiting to pick a deadline until he talks to other teachers at school. **Eric moved to extend the deadline for the written expression contest to a day to be determined at the September Racial Justice Committee meeting.**

Jackie Stanton suggested that when the contest is relaunched notices on Front Porch Forum should mention that the contest is put on by the Racial Justice Committee.

The motion was passed.

5. Review Selectboard Suggestions

Sophia said Racial Justice Committee members had dialogue with selectboard members at a selectboard meeting. It seemed that they were mostly on board with the committee's ideas. They suggested fundraising. Eric Osgood suggested getting artists of color to put pieces around Johnson on the existing podiums. Eben Patch encouraged fundraising. Beth Foy talked about Confederate flag education. Mike Dunham talked about focusing on what we all have in common. It seems like the committee is on the right path with what it is coming up with.

Eric said he had been pretty adamant about his stand against fundraising. But selectboard members gave some context. They have a lot of committees and all the committees fundraise. Fundraising publicizes the committee. It is not just about money. It is also about community engagement. He has changed his mind about fundraising.

Jackie said she liked Beth's idea about education around the Confederate flag and what it means. Eric Osgood talked about the founder of the Stone House in Brownington, Alexander Twilight. She thinks telling people about him is a great idea. His is a complex story. In his time he was not recognized as Black.

Eric said he thought the selectboard meeting was interesting. We are starting more conversations. More people are getting involved. Maybe people are starting to feel more comfortable expressing their views and listening to what others have to say. Sophia said any conversation we are part of, even if it is tense or with varying opinions, still leads to racial justice issues being talked about. Eric said he tried to contact all the people who spoke about the RJC at the selectboard meeting. He talked to a couple of them and got more feedback and explanations.

6. Brainstorm Fundraising Efforts

Sophia said Brian Story set out an email to all committee chairs saying that T-Mobile is offering \$25 million in small town grants. She will send the link out to committee members. Jeff Bickford read the description from their web page of what kind of projects they will support:

The T-Mobile Hometown Grants program will help fund projects to build, rebuild, or refresh community spaces that help foster local connections in your town. For example, this might include the town square pavilion, a historic building, an outdoor park, a ball field, or a library-- every town has places where friends and neighbors connect.

Shayne Spence suggested maybe multiple committees could work together to apply.

Jackie said one way the Historical Society raises money is simply by asking for it. The Racial Justice Committee could do as they do and put up a Front Porch Forum post telling about what projects the committee is doing and asking people to make a donation to support the work.

Sophia said she has been in touch with Amanda Garces of the Human Rights Commission and got trainings scheduled for September 30 at 5:30 (implicit bias training by Zoom) and a October 2 (bystander training in person at 10:00 a.m.) The cost for the two trainings will probably be around \$500.

Sophia said unfortunately it doesn't seem that it will work to join with the library to put on an anti-racism story time with Laura Smith. The library requires credentials for anyone presenting through the library – proof of training, experience, etc. Laura has experience but no official trainings. Jeanne Engel and Kristen MacDowell said it would be fine with them if the Racial Justice Committee hosted an anti-racism story time. The cost for that would be \$150. Jackie suggested that the RJC could also promote Laura Smith's anti-racism story times at The Alchemist.

Sophia said we already have \$40 toward the Progress Pride flag so we only need \$20 more. We have permission to hang the flag on the village green during the week of August 28.

Jackie said The Alchemist Foundation is starting to focus on racial justice and equity. That might be a place to ask for funding.

Sophia said she emailed Xusana Davis and REAL and asked both of them what they have done for grants and fundraising. She has yet to hear back. Jackie said REAL recently gave out Black Lives Matter signs in hopes people would make a donation for a sign. Raven said she thinks at one point REAL also had a GoFundMe.

Eric asked if he could make a Front Porch Forum post telling about the planned workshops, the written expression contest and the Progress Pride flag and soliciting donations. It was agreed that he should write something up and send it to the group before it is posted. It was also agreed to send information to be posted on the Town of Johnson Facebook page. Diane Lehouiller suggested asking Sue Lovering to put the information in her column.

7. *Purchase Progress Pride Flag from Daniel Quasar*

Sophia said she is willing to help pay for the Progress Pride flag and Jasmine Yuris has also expressed willingness to chip in. With the \$40 we already have she thinks we should purchase it. The committee agreed. Sophia will buy it.

8. *Review Poster for JCC Kiosks*

Sophia showed the poster that we will ask the Johnson Conservation Commission to put up on kiosks. They are not meeting next week. The poster has the inclusivity and anti-racism statements adopted by the town and village. At their last meeting we did not have this final version for them to review so they were hesitant to approve it and only approved hanging the inclusivity statement. She will ask them to hang this.

Raven asked for a copy to take to the next Johnson Works meeting. Shayne asked if this is the same thing the committee has talked about getting to Johnson Works for businesses to put up. Sophia said yes. Shayne said he will take one for his store.

9. *Hear from / Converse with Community Members Interested in Serving on the RJC*

Sophia invited each of the interested community members who were present to introduce themselves, explain how they are committed to this work and what they would bring to the committee.

Jeff Bickford said he has lived in Johnson since 2007. His interest in racial justice has been lifelong, starting from his love of baseball and reading about Jackie Robinson. He was an inaugural member of the diversity and inclusion task force at Johnson State College. He has been actively involved with that as co-chair for several years, then stepped back this year to allow rotation of chairs. He is still part of the team. His work with that group included modification of policies that had disproportionate effects on students of color. He tends to favor data-informed approaches to all problems. He thinks there is plenty of data to support the work of this committee. He has some grant writing experience. He is good at working within those kinds of parameters. He has no difficulty having challenging or potentially contentious conversations. He is good at hearing people but is not afraid to be direct about what he sees going on. He loves the Town of Johnson. He came here for a job and his family chose to stay long-term and buy a home. But loving a place does mean assuming it is perfect. We have information about ways it is not perfect with regard to racial justice. How can we

move against that and achieve results for neighbors who are not as systematically privileged as he is? That is what he is about.

Jackie Stanton said she has been with the Racial Justice Committee since it started. She is feeling good about the committee now. She has lived in Johnson for a long time. She has been on many committees. She has volunteered, been a library trustee, been on the Conservation Commission and volunteered with Tuesday Night Live. She is new to racial justice work. She has gotten involved with that in the last 5 years. She is trying to learn by talking to all kinds of people, reading a lot, and going to trainings, community reads – whatever is available. A few years back she was instrumental in creating Johnson's inclusivity statement. She helped to write it, promote it and get it passed at town and village meetings. She was instrumental in getting the Black Lives Matter flag up at the village green. She was instrumental in getting the first training for the town from the Human Rights Commission two years ago. She was working on a second one a year ago, then this committee came up. She is committed to this work. She is feeling good about where this committee is starting to go. Seeing two new people at tonight's meeting gives her hope. She has co-written grants with her development director. This past year she was on the diversity and inclusion task force at the college. Over the past year she is also been part of a sheriff's advisory group working with Sheriff Marcoux and some of his staff to address issues of policing, traffic stop data, policy, etc.

Shayne Spence said he has lived in Johnson for about a decade. His interest in racial justice is probably a lifelong thing, like Jeff's. He played hockey and he wondered why there were few athletes of color. Statistically people of color are less likely to have access to the financial resources needed to play hockey. For a long time he bought into the idea that we live in a post-racial society and that all these issues were in the past. Then he started to see more of the world and do more research and saw disparities that couldn't be explained away without looking at systemic causes. A few years ago, in the wake of some of the police shootings, he started to focus on that more. He started to see that issues he has had with the police and authority were a small fraction of what a lot of other people have to deal with just because they have different skin. He did more research into education and healthcare disparities. People of color get a different American experience than those of us who are white. We don't live in a post racial society. There are things we can do today – policy changes, new programs or just bringing attention to these issues – that can move the dial in a positive direction. Over the last few years he has been working with the Republican Party to try to get them to realize that they have strayed from some of their founding principles. Last year he was one of a few people who worked to pass an anti-racism statement in the Republican Party. It was weaker than he initially intended and some of the people who worked with him have since left the party because they felt like they were bashing their heads against the wall, but he felt like it was real progress and an important conversation to have. It got a lot of people who previously hadn't engaged with these issues to think about them in a more critical way. He also worked to get the Juneteenth resolution passed last year to have Juneteenth officially recognized by the Town of Johnson. He thinks there is more education that can be done around that. More recently he has been looking into a former Black Johnson resident who was brought to his attention by Rick Aupperlee. He created a precursor to the Fresh Air program and had a lot of success with getting young kids of color placed in different rural

towns in Vermont and starting to break down some stigmas and barriers. As far as what he can bring to the committee, he listens to everyone, including some people who might be diametrically opposed to what we are doing. He doesn't necessarily think all of them are racist or actually diametrically opposed to what we are doing. He thinks a lot of people have been fed a certain narrative and it can be a convincing narrative if you don't look any further. Once we engage with those people personally, which is something he has worked to do, he thinks we can get past that narrative and past some of the barriers that people have built up around themselves on this issue and a lot of others. He would try to listen to and engage all people and try to get people who have never been to these meetings to start coming and try to get people who have never been to an implicit bias training to show up. He wants to make sure the group at the trainings is larger than it was last time.

10. Executive Session to Discuss Committee Appointment Recommendations

Sophia moved to enter executive session to discuss a recommendation to the selectboard of a racial justice committee member from the community under the provisions of Title 1 Section 313(a)(3). The motion was passed and the committee entered executive session at 6:53. The Committee came out of executive session at 7:22.

11. Committee Appointment Recommendations

Sophia said the committee will be recommending two appointments to the selectboard. They are just recommendations. The selectboard will make the appointments. She encouraged all the candidates to keep showing up and contributing at meetings. Eric said the committee is just the voting members. Most votes have been unanimous. The work of the committee is really done by all those who show up and contribute. Many people who are not formal members of the committee have had helpful contributions.

Sophia moved to recommend that the selectboard appoint Jeff Bickford and Jackie Stanton to the Racial Justice Committee. The motion was passed in a roll call vote with Eric and Sophia in favor and Raven opposed. Eric said he will give the recommendation to the selectboard at their next meeting on August 16.

12. Other Business

Raven said she has had quite a few conversations recently with residents. They all went really well. She got a lot of insight into how people were thinking. The media content people have taken in is important in affecting their views.

13. Public Comment

Olga Mardach said she is a new resident of Johnson. She saw the notice of about this meeting on Front Porch Forum and came to see what it is about. Is this group private or under the town? Sophia explained that it is a town committee that was previously a joint village/town committee. Eric said these are public meetings. The minutes are online. Anyone can come and contribute.

14. Adjourn

Eric moved to adjourn, the motion was passed and the meeting was adjourned at 7:33.