

JOHNSON RACIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL EQUITY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
JOHNSON MUNICIPAL BUILDING
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2022

Present:

Committee Members: Sophia Berard, Jeff Bickford, Raven Pfaff, Offie Wortham, Adelle MacDowell, Shayne Spence, Offie Wortham

Others: Jackie Stanton, Jasmine Yuris, Diane Lehouiller, Kyle Nuse

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Sophia called the meeting to order at 6:34.

2. Black History Month

Sophia said she put Black History Month on the agenda in case anyone wanted to share anything they have heard about or are learning or planning on. Jackie asked if Jeff knows what is going on at the college. Jeff said he knows the theme is celebrating Black excellence. He can look up activities that are planned and send the information around. Sophia said she put up a Black History Month display at Ebenezer books. Jeff said he likes to try to learn about Black contributors from areas we don't think of as Black spaces and mention them to friends. Last year he found a couple of orchestral music composers. He hasn't decided on a theme for this year yet. Jasmine thanked Kyle for the informative slide she sent out about the origins of Black History Month. Kyle said she is impressed at how diverse the children's section is now at the public library. Jackie asked if there is anything going on at Lamoille Union for Black History Month. Adelle said this year there hasn't been much. She has been trying to read more by Black authors, especially news. She tries to follow Black creators on social media and share their content. Kyle said the woman who created the slides Jackie shared suggests paying her with Venmo if you learn something. At first that made her uncomfortable but she realized everyone deserve to be compensated for their work, especially people doing this hard work. She thinks it is important to give compensation when and if you can. Adele said algorithms typically don't push content by creators of color as much so they don't get as much advertising money.

3. HRC Workshops

Sophia asked Adelle, Shayne and Raven how their efforts to publicize the HRC workshops are going. Adelle said she reached out to a number of people and has heard back from Liz Kauffman at the Studio Center and Rich Westman. Shayne said he has only heard back from the people at Jenna's Promise. The email he sent to the Church of the Nazarene bounced back but he knows a few people who go there so he asked them to pass it on. Raven said she hasn't heard back from anyone except the REAL outreach person she works with who asked if she could send the information out to around 400 people. Raven said yes. Sophia said she sent the information to the trustees and the selectboard and hasn't heard back from any of them.

Sophia heard from Amanda a few days ago that 13 people are registered for the implicit bias workshop and 11 for the bystander intervention workshop. Jackie asked if that number includes all the people at this meeting. Several people said they have not yet registered.

Jasmine asked if we could get someone to put the information on the front page of the town website for a week. Kyle suggested we could ask Brian Story to post it on Facebook. Jackie said it already is posted there. She liked the post about it on the town page. There are four likes. She suggested that other people go and like it and comment on it.

Kyle asked if there is a poster. Sophia said so far there is just text. Jackie said she thought there was going to be a poster. Sophie said in the fall we talked about maybe reusing the one Kyle had created previously but there wasn't follow-up. She asked how Jasmine created the skate and bake poster. Jasmine said she used Canva. It was very easy.

Jackie asked how many people came to the first Human Rights Commission workshop. Kyle said a good amount, she would say 50 or 60. (*Offie arrived at 6:54.*) Kyle said she found her old poster and she will send it to Sophia. Sophia said she will print out some posters and send them around town, but what should she do about the registration link? Should she put her email address on the poster and say that people can contact her for the link? Jeff suggested we may be able to put a QR code on the poster. Sophie asked if he knows how to do that. Jeff said yes. Sophia suggested that maybe she and Jeff can collaborate on that.

Jeff said he forwarded the information on the workshops to the chair of the faculty Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Planning Group and the chair of the student group and he will send it to all residential students. At the college they are finding that people are exhausted by the remote format. He would be surprised if more than 25 or 30 people show up. It is hard to get energy for remote activities. Jackie said she is seeing something similar. And maybe half or fewer of the people who register actually show up.

4. *Seeding Power Vermont*

Sophia said Mindy Blank, who is involved with Every Town project, the Neighbors network and Seeding Power Vermont, wants to come to one of our meetings. There is a talk hosted by REAL on February 8 at 5:30 with Kenya Lazuli and Mindy Blank, who are part of the group behind the Vermont BIPOC Land Access And Opportunity Act.

Jackie asked, under this bill some money would go to marginalized people directly and some would go to organizations like Mindy's? Sophia said she is not sure. She is going to the meeting to find out. She thinks there will be a grant application process.

Offie asked if other committee members are aware of the guaranteed family income concept where people receive something like \$1,000 every month for 3 years. It is being done in 35 cities across the US, but it is not being done in Vermont. A representative from Montpelier tried to introduce it in the state legislature but there was no interest. Jackie said there have been a number of pilot programs and the results show that it works. Raven said the BIPOC Land Access And Opportunity bill is really well written and the beginning part of it has good information about wealth disparity in Vermont. Offie said he submitted something to Seven Days about guaranteed family income but they wouldn't publish it. They thought his facts were incorrect. So he put it on his Facebook page.

5. *Committee Responsibilities to Social Equity*

Sophia said some community members have been curious about what it means for us that social equity is now in our committee name. How does it change our charge or mission?

Jeff said he thinks it makes sense to think about other areas where we can see observable impacts based on identity. One question at the selectboard meeting was whether this means the committee is not focused on race. No, not at all. Racial justice is the minimal acceptable outcome we are pushing for and equity is the goal.

Jasmine said this scope allows the committee to tackle any injustice. We all know these issues are interrelated.

Kyle said a more intersectional approach to equity is the direction we all need to be moving towards. She was just reading in VT Digger that Xusana Davis was saying the pandemic is making disparities for Vermonters of color and other demographic minorities enormous. She talks about how the intersectional approach is more important than ever.

Sophia said being focused on all types of diversity, equity and inclusion can broaden the scope of the educational opportunities we offer. She noted that the selectboard was supportive of the name change. Beth's point was just that we should not let racial justice fall to the wayside.

Raven said she thinks the new name provides an opportunity to better link with other town committees and establish deeper connections with our community.

Kyle said the Beautification Committee is going to try to offer mini grants for people who want to do beautification in front of their properties and otherwise wouldn't be able to afford it. The committee talked about how the town likes to have people buy things and then reimburse them later but it can be hard for people to front the money. So the Beautification Committee is going to try to offer to do the buying for people.

Offie said he has been thinking of doing a study in Vermont. The father of his grandchildren has been stopped eight times by police in the past 10 years. Offie asked him why he has been stopped so many times and Offie never has. He said he thinks it is because he looks like poor white trash – a day laborer driving an old vehicle. How do police make judgments about who to stop and who to give a hard time to? There is discrimination along socioeconomic class lines, Offie thinks more than on race. He would like to study that. He thinks there is more discrimination against poor whites than Blacks in Vermont. Jackie said there are data showing that Black people are stopped more often. Jeff agreed. Offie said sometimes it has nothing to do with race but with class.

6. *Core Values / Effective Communication*

Sophia said a couple of meetings ago we talked about core values. She doesn't know if we want something in writing that we all agree upon as a committee about the ways we conduct ourselves while discussing difficult topics.

Jeff said after the heated conversations at the end of the last meeting he was thinking about Raven bringing up core values as something to go back to when things get hairy. At the NVU campus when students and many staff and faculty all read the same book, they have values about how to keep conversations about the reading grounded. For example, “When things get

difficult turn to wonder.” (Wondering why the other person feels the way they do.) Another one is “No fixing.”

Jeff said he remembers Raven talking about how at her work when things get tough they look at how the issue relates to core values. Raven said one of their values is inclusive communication. When some other managers made a decision that affected her group without including her manager, her manager said that was not inclusive communication and held them accountable. Some of the core values from her work don't really apply to this committee but some such as integrity, respect, accessibility and support are things that could apply to us.

Shayne said he thinks assuming good intentions when working with and listening to others is important. He thinks we need to approach difficult conversations from a place of good faith.

Adelle said listening to understand, not just to respond is another good principle. It is important to try to understand people rather than just trying to refute them.

Jeff said another value is trusting people's experience.

Offie said he is thinking about people he is going to work with on the research project he wants to do. If a high number of blacks are stopped, he would like to look at where they are from, what they were stopped for, what kind of cars they were driving, etc. His basic core value is that he treats everyone equally. We are all human beings. He can't generalize about different people. The golden rule is his core value.

Kyle said at the workshop on how to talk about racism a slide she took a screenshot of was an infographic of how white fragility perpetuates racism. She was recently rereading it and thinking about how it translates to any kind of -ism. The cycle is that white people are taught that racism is identifiable individual acts, not part of our culture. Then they feel blamed and bad and feel like victims rather than perpetrators and they limit when and how race is discussed, so racism is perpetuated by white fragility. She thinks people on this committee need to check ourselves with this cycle in any conversation. When conversations get tough we have to be mindful of who we are centering in these conversations. Do we go right to feeling blamed or bad and making ourselves be the victim and not centering who the victim really is? We need to not take comments as personal insults, which shuts down the conversation. She is not sure if that is a core value but she thinks it should be a focal point. We can ask each other, who are we centering in this moment – ourselves and our victimhood or the people we should be centering?

Sophia said something she has heard is impact versus intent. What is the intent and what is the potential impact? We should listen to both and trust people's experience and turn to wonder – wondering about where something is coming from, as Jeff suggested

Offie said 20 or 30 years ago all he did for a living was workshops bringing Blacks and whites and Jews together in discussions like this. The concept of white guilt was not part of the conversation then. That is something new that has been introduced. Often Blacks are

putting that on whites. We are going backwards in terms of race relations. Jackie said white fragility is part of contemporary scholarship. Offie said he thinks the relationship between whites and Blacks in this country is worse than it used to be. Jeff said he thinks the idea of white people wanting to control when and how racism is discussed and defined is not new. He can't agree with Offie. There is some vocabulary that is new. That has changed, but the idea of white people not wanting to accept racism as a systemic problem is not new. He asked what Offie's data is on relationships between white and Black people getting worse. Offie said that is based on his relationships with white people.

Sophia said she will type up some ideas about core values based on this discussion and send it to everyone to review. People can get back to her or Jeff with feedback or other ideas and we can revisit the idea of core values at the next meeting and see if it is something we want to formally adopt.

Jasmine said these conversations are hard but she agrees with Kyle that when we check ourselves it needs to be both within and externally. We should all take the opportunity more to hit the pause button in conversations and when it is hard, name it – say that it is hard. She thinks we are all good people with similar values. The narrative of these meetings being divisive needs to stop being perpetuated. Maybe at the last meeting when there was a hard conversation, instead of stopping it everyone could have hit the pause button and then reassessed how they could start the conversation again.

Jeff agreed. He said the time of night was a factor and he had not taken the time to wonder himself why he was experiencing the conversation the way he was. Given it to do over again he probably would handle it differently. Jackie said she and Jeff got together with Kyle and talked about everyone's experience. Although Jeff said at that meeting that what Kyle brought up was not appropriate, he later said it was appropriate. Jackie asked him afterward about how he experienced the conversation and he said “two people yelling at each other,” but that did not happen. She listened to the recording. It was a very decent conversation with no yelling and no talking over each other. The subject was intense and filled with emotion. When we are in these moments we bring a lot to them and sometimes reality is different from what we personally experience. Sophia said yes, listening to the recording is different from being in the room experiencing it. Even so, if someone feels it is hard, that is their experience and we have to honor that. She loves the idea of pausing as a group and reflecting and then moving forward. Maybe we can have words we agree on to call for a pause, like “oops” and “ouch,” which were mentioned in the talking about racism workshop

Offie said he would like to invite other committee members to have a one-on-one lunch or dinner or conversation with him for at least an hour so he can get to know them better. He would like to meet one on one with everyone in the group.

Kyle said .if there is a tough conversation she thinks it is important to get into the question of why it is tough. Is it because of racism in me or fragility? Sophia said she thinks that is part of the intention of the pause.

Kyle said she felt the “oops” and “ouch” discussed in the workshop were not to be used centering around our own fragility but more if we said something offensive. It wasn't to be used as a way to coddle your own victimhood. Sophia said she was just citing those as examples of words to use. She feels that anyone can ask for a pause if the conversation is getting hard for them for any reason. She doesn't think it is fair to say you can't pause if you are feeling white fragility.

Jasmine said she doesn't feel the committee needs a core values document because the members all agree on values. Instead she thinks it would be sufficient to have guidelines about pausing and everyone taking a step back and looking inward and then outward and resuming the discussion.

7. *Other Business*

Raven said tomorrow the Vermont House of Representatives will debate and vote on PR.2, on prohibiting slavery. Some states have abolished constitutionalized slavery. We are hoping to be another state that says that is not okay

8. *Approve Meeting Minutes from 1/6/22*

Shayne moved to approve the minutes of January 6, 2022 and the motion was passed.

9. *Public Comment*

No members of the public wished to comment.

10. *Adjourn*

Shayne moved to adjourn at 8:31 and the motion was passed.

Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths