

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC RACIAL JUSTICE & COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE
PUBLIC FORUM
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, November 17, 2020

6:00 PM

Remote Meeting via Zoom

Members Present:

Dr. Dottie Morris, Co-Chair
Richard Van Wickler, Co-Chair
Tia Hockett
Aditi Saleh
Eli Rivera
Pierre Morton

Staff Present:

Rebecca Landry, IT Director
Shane Maxfield, Police Lieutenant

Members Not Present:

Stacey Massiah
Councilor Catherine Workman
Julia Atkins
Gail Somers

Co-Chair Van Wickler read a prepared statement explaining how the Emergency Order #12, pursuant to Executive Order #2020-04 issued by the Governor of New Hampshire, waives certain provisions of RSA 91-A (which regulates the operation of public body meetings) during the declared COVID-19 State of Emergency. He called the meeting to order at 6:09 PM. Roll call was conducted.

Co-Chair Van Wickler introduced himself and the Ad Hoc Racial Justice and Community Safety (AHRJCS) Committee and briefly explained its mission and its work to date. He stated that the committee wants the public to know about a similar initiative completed at the State level by the Commission on Law Enforcement, Accountability, Community, and Transparency (LEACT) that promises to yield changes at the local level. The LEACT Commission's report is online at governor.nh.gov/accountability. He asked for public comment on the topic of Community Education and Schools, specifically:

- Ideas for fairness and opportunity for students, faculty, and staff
- Any sense of opportunity gaps or prevention of achievement for those who want to succeed
- Ideas for programs or curriculum that would prevent implicit bias and promote a culture of fairness
- Ideas for multiracial leadership development

- Any other relevant information you believe will be helpful to the ADRJCS Committee's charge, which is: to develop recommendations to prevent or correct systemic racism and cultural inequities in Keene.

Sandra McDonald, of 43 Carroll St., Apt. 118 thanked the committee for taking on this important task. She continued that she has been listening to their meetings since the very first one the Mayor convened. She spoke at that first meeting, and her comments included the fact that it is so important to reach children when they are young, to educate them regarding the multicultural world they inhabit. She firmly believes that. To backtrack, she is a 62-year-old Black female and has lived in Keene for 5 years. She moved here from Florida. When she moved, she knew Keene was majority white population, but did not give that too much thought. She moved here with her daughter and thought it was a nice place that they would enjoy. That was and is still her impression of Keene. Her daughter was 15 at the time and it was a bit of a different experience for her, culturally, and making that move at that age. It was more difficult for her daughter than for her. They both had adjustments to make. It is one thing to know something in your head, but it is another thing to actually experience it. Also at that first meeting, she said that she has never had a bad experience with a Police Officer in Keene or anywhere else. That is rare.

Ms. McDonald continued that regarding reaching children when they are young, there is no lack of opportunities to do that, be it through books, field trips, or other methods. Something she thought about, more so for older kids, is Embassy Rd. in Washington DC – the embassies are opened to the public once a year so people can experience the different cultures. It is wonderful to experience. She is not talking mainly about the African American experience, but rather the breadth of a multicultural world – white, Black, Asian, Native American, and so on and so forth. We need to be invested in each other. Her experience in school was that she and her schoolmates did not have any formal African American Studies class until about 10th or 11th Grade. That was surprising, certainly, but she loved libraries and got a lot of what she learned through libraries. The subject matter that was taught by the time she got to 10th or 11th grade was sorely lacking for the subject matter as well as the age of the students who were being exposed to that subject matter. Reaching younger children would be great. Exposing middle school children to books is a great way to go. Just Mercy, by Bryan [Stevenson] is a book that should be mandatory reading. The author is a lawyer and the gentleman behind the museum in Birmingham, AL, which is known as “the Lynching Museum.” If he could speak to students that would be such a gift.

Co-Chair Van Wickler asked Ms. McDonald if she could identify any opportunity gaps that existed locally, in her view, based on her teenaged daughter's experience. Ms. McDonald replied that Keene High School (KHS) is a great school and offers students a lot, such as sports, career education, and more. It was a little different for her daughter, because she is on the shy side and does not make friends easily. She continued that in terms of gaps, definitely curriculum-wise.

Co-Chair Van Wickler asked for more specifics. Ms. McDonald replied that during her daughter's time at KHS, she had exposure to different cultures, but African-American culture was lacking a bit. She was in Spanish class and had friends in French class, and there was material about other cultures, but as a whole, the exposure to African-American culture could have been better. That is not a knock on KHS; it is just what it is. This could be better across the country – increased exposure to everything, such as African American writers, books, movies, food; the whole gamut. Moving here was a learning curve for her and her daughter, but they have met wonderful people in Keene. She met Dr. Dottie Morris through her (Ms. McDonald's) former job, and also met Mr. Pierre Morton on her way to Elm St. Market one day. Keene is a wonderful small town with people who are interested in seeing it move forward. That is very encouraging. She also thinks it is important for students in school to have a committee that meets once a month or more often, to talk about what the AHRJCS Committee talks about. That would be empowering and educational for students.

Co-Chair Van Wickler asked: if she had one thing she would want the City Council to know as a result of the AHRJCS Committee's work, what would it be? Ms. McDonald replied that because there is not a large African American population in this area – there is a larger African American population in Manchester or Nashua, yes, but for Keene, she thinks people are willing to be open to investigating other cultures and realizing that people are not so far apart. She thinks what the committee is doing is very important and does not necessarily end with their report.

Rose Kundanis, of 22 Woodbury St., stated that she appreciates the work of the committee – in particular, seeing the article in the Keene Sentinel about body cameras, which came in part from the earlier discussions people have had in this forum. She continued that she seconds Ms. McDonald's comments about curriculum. She is a former teacher herself and has taught in all black schools. While she does not know the curriculum very well she thinks that there are a lot of cultural things that could be physically closer, [such as] the Portsmouth walk, where there are a lot more things to see, and Bryan Stevenson from Montgomery, AL would be a wonderful visitor in person or virtually. There are a lot of great materials. Probably teachers in Keene are already cognizant of that, but she is not sure if there is any requirement that there be any such curriculum in Keene and NH. There is such richness now, in books, and books for young people in particular. Just being physically closer to some of these things [would be good] and she loved Ms. McDonald's idea of having the high school students getting together in a forum like this. She would be willing to work on such a curriculum if there was a need. That is not an area of expertise for her but curriculum is an area of expertise for her and she would be happy to volunteer on that.

Co-Chair Van Wickler asked if she taught in the Keene School District (KSD). Ms. Kundanis replied no, she taught at Keene State College (KSC) for 32 years. She continued that she taught in Chicago public schools for two years, quite a while ago, and introduced books and curricula about African American history. That material was not available at that time. She was pleased to research that and make sure those African American students had the opportunity to look at that material as well.

Co-Chair Van Wickler replied that he thinks it is very important and should be required in the curriculum. He continued that he was not required to learn African American history until college. He read several books by W.E.B. Dubois in college, and of all the words that go into a book, there was one sentence of Dubois's that has stuck with him until this day. Dubois described being the only black boy on a playground, smitten with a little white girl: "I was refused peremptorily without a glance." It magnifies the implicit bias the other kids had and the unfortunate feelings he had to deal with as a young child. Reading these books is very beneficial and there are many great ones.

Sarah Benning, of 183 Court St., stated that something that she took away from the first public forum, back in June, was a number of current and former students of the KSD sharing experiences of racism they experienced while they were a student, from other students, and not getting a lot of support from staff and faculty. She continued that she has emailed with the School Board and the KSD about implementing specific anti-racist policies in the school policies along with the anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies that exist. You cannot address a problem that you cannot name, and right now it feels like it is not being a named problem in the schools, based on what these students and former students shared.

Mary Gannon stated that she appreciates the effort to pull in people from the community. She continued that she lives in Winchester, in the downtown area near the school. She has been thinking a lot about how to talk about these issues in the time of a pandemic. She has a 17-year-old at KHS and recognizes that there are a lot of challenges right now diverting people's attention to a lot of other needs and she respects that. She attended the last AHRJCS Committee meeting that [SAU 29 Superintendent] Dr. Malay spoke at, and she was delighted to hear him, in a position of leadership, actually use the term "systemic racism." They need to speak truth to what is happening. As soon as they are able to face what the truth is about some of the challenges that schools across the state face, around issues of equity and justice, it makes it easier to think about solutions. She appreciates this work.

Ms. Gannon continued that it would be interesting to really get some student voices into the conversation. Her daughter is very smart and she and her peers have a lot to say about what they see happening and often times they do not seem to have the spaces and places to share that. Again, it is very difficult now due to the pandemic and the limited time students are spending in the schools. But students have a lot to say about what they see. Their generation has a lot of concern about what is being handed to them. If there is a forum that could happen for just students, that would be worth everyone's time. Lastly, she was pleased to see Robb Malay on the call tonight because this is really important. She would love to have ways of pulling in the new principal at the high school as well, who has some solid ideas about how to move forward. It is challenging to be a new principal in the middle of a pandemic.

Ms. Landry stated that Ms. Gannon and a lot of others are using the term "systemic racism" and it can mean different things to different people. She asked how Ms. Gannon uses the term, to

help the committee understand the context. Ms. Gannon replied yes, language is tricky, because people have different understandings of even “equity” and “diversity” and “inclusion” and she can only speak from her own perspective. She continued that she does a lot of work in schools and organizations around equity and justice. There are a lot of different working definitions that people she is working with use. She defines “systemic racism” as looking at ways in which the culture, climate, environment, policies, and practices that are deeply imbedded in our education system, in our legal system, and in our criminal justice system deeply impact the experiences of the people who those systems are supposed to be serving. The ways that dominant culture – white culture, male culture, Western European culture, and all of these groups that have dominant privilege – these systems have been built to deliver services and provide what they need at the expense of people of color, women, and so on and so forth. That is a way to make a distinction between individual bias, e.g. implicit bias, unconscious bias, and prejudice, which they hear a lot about lately. Her worry is that when they only talk about individual bias, such as what teachers might have with a student or students might have among themselves, we lose sight of the fact that those biases are what keep the systems of racism, the policies and practices, in place. They need a deep examination of those. They could start anywhere, but the No Child Left Behind Act is an example of how systemic racism continues to marginalize particular communities, such as communities of color and children with disabilities.

George Downing stated that he is the Chair of the Keene Board of Education (KBE) and was here mostly to listen. He continued that he has taken three pages of notes so far. He has been following all of the AHRJCS Committee’s meetings closely. This is an issue he personally feels is very important. It goes back to, as someone said, the personal experiences people have been sharing over the past 6 to 12 months about their experiences with racial discrimination in Keene schools. A lot of those stories have been shared directly with him as well. As [Ms. Benning] said, we cannot address it until we name it. Schools here have worked very hard on responding to bullying, and incidences of discrimination, but have done very little work on addressing the systems that cause that. That, to him is exciting and where they can really make a difference in the community in Keene and as students move out into the broader world hopefully they can spread that difference beyond Keene. Happening simultaneously to this meeting, the KBE’s Education Committee is meeting tonight and the middle and high school principals are both presenting there on work they are doing on these same topics. Rather than reiterating that, he will let those principals report to this committee in their own time. Some of this work has started and he plans to bring the notes he has taken tonight back to those people and to the KBE. There have been some great ideas tonight, especially around curriculum, and yes, students’ voices are vital and they really need to provide that space for them so students can participate in a more organized fashion. The first two speakers tonight spoke about bringing in the curriculum and [having] exposure to the culture. There are no current policies at the State level or here in Keene. They cannot change State policies right here but Keene can address their own policies and that is work that has begun and needs to be formalized. He wants to thank the AHRJCS Committee for their work, and for bringing the community together on this, and he thanks everyone who has spoken tonight. This is a new thing for this region and they really need everyone to be participating and bringing in ideas.

Ms. Landry stated that she has a question for Mr. Downing. Two or three people tonight, including Mr. Downing, talked about having the opportunity for students to participate in a forum like this. She asked if that is something the Keene schools can do, and is that something this committee could potentially get information or feedback from? Mr. Downing replied generically, absolutely. He continued that given that they are going into remote learning in a week and a half, he is not sure what it is going to look like and how excited students would be to participate in a Zoom-type session when they have to do that for schooling. He knows there has been some work at the high school to start a club focused on these issues. Dr. Gallagher has a background in racial justice, anti-discrimination, and anti-bullying and is very excited to start working with that. One of his notes from tonight is the question of whether they can create something similar at the middle school and if they can coordinate the two. There are not many clubs that operate at both schools and work together, but to him this seems like something that could. He would love to see that and he is going to bring back to Superintendent Malay the possibility of some kind of student forum, because he has heard some great student experiences shared here and personally but not in any formal way with the KSD, and these are stories that need to be heard. In his experience, students often have the best ideas on how to address anything that is going on in the schools. When there are problems, students are the ones who have ideas about what will be effective, rather than adults imposing their own ideas of what ought to be effective. He will bring the idea back to the Superintendent and if this is something they can coordinate soon, they will bring the information back to this committee.

Co-Chair Morris stated that she would love it if when schools set up some sort of listening session, they invite some of this committee's members to that. Co-Chair Van Wickler agreed. Mr. Downing replied yes, they would invite the committee.

Ms. McDonald stated that she was thinking about something she recently read in the news, which made her think about complacency, because that is one of the things that has been present throughout all forms of injustice. She continued that people do not speak up or they think "it is what it is," and that sort of thing. Her hometown is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as is the new principal's. The article she was reading said that Pittsburgh is a hub for hate crimes, racial injustice, and white nationalism. Having grown up there, she knows the area, and knows that that sort of thing is a part of the area, although Pittsburg is a wonderful place. Something about that headline saying it is a "hub" made her think about a lot of things, and what it was like growing up there and the people she knew there. Like in many places, there is that subset of people who act in ways that no one would want people to act. She specifically thinks about the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. It was so shocking when that happened. She thinks that what we are fighting, on one hand, is complacency – the things people let go and do not confront. What has brought the country to this point is that the country is so divided, and racism is running rampant. If we give voice to that, and speak out against that, as we are doing here and as others are doing elsewhere, that is a small start to this huge problem. Giving that same power to kids would be great. Kids look around and are scared out of their minds right now, with the pandemic and what they see happening with elected officials of all parties, and

what they see happening in the streets. She would be frightened if she were a younger person these days. It is very important to start having kids have these conversations. It will not be easy; it is not easy even for adults to have conversations about systemic racism. But it will only empower students and lead us all to a better place.

Ms. Gannon stated that she appreciates Ms. McDonald's points. She continued that she appreciates the theme of thinking about complacency. Something she and others who have been doing this work for a long time worry about is: she hears a lot of white people talking about having this "awakening" since the murder of George Floyd, and here we are still having a lot of activity and response to that, but it is so easy for us white people to become complacent, because it is not something that is impacting our daily lives. Some white people do consistently think about it, care about it, and talk to their kids about it. They will not have a solution tonight for how to disrupt this complacency but they can have conversations about what contributes to complacency and the possible ways to address it. As a parent of a student at the high school, she has found it pretty difficult to find community there, as someone who cares about this work. She has tried to connect with teachers and the guidance counselors, and has a few allies there. She and the new principal, Cindy Gallagher, were in graduate school together so she knows Dr. Gallagher is in the right direction and she feels good about that. Dr. Gallagher is dealing with a lot of challenges right now.

Ms. McDonald continued that it is so important to understand how systems of racism and oppression dehumanize all of us. Even white people. We are all dehumanized by these systems. She is seeing it more with her daughter's generation. Her daughter has cross-racial friendships, and as she wrestles through these issues and with her white friends, there is a dehumanizing factor she (Ms. McDonald) feels is happening. Her daughter and her classmates are not relying on the school to help them navigate this, and that is heartbreaking. They are trying to find other avenues for that. We want to think that schools are the place where kids can work through some of these social issues that will be with them through their lives, and that is not a place where that is happening. As important as it is to make sure kids of color are not being harmed and that we are bringing multiple perspectives and representation into curriculum, she does think we are all harmed by it. White kids also suffer, although in a very different way, of course. We all suffer if we are not understanding our history and are not understanding what the long game is here when we talk about this body of work.

Co-Chair Van Wickler asked if there was anyone else wishing to speak. Ms. Landry replied that there are no more callers. She gave her contact information and stated that anyone who has information they want to share with the committee can call or email her with it, and she will share it with the committee.

Co-Chair Van Wickler thanked everyone for participating tonight. He continued that the next forum will be December 2, 2020 from 6:00 to 8:00 PM, on the topic of Social Issues and Community. He adjourned the meeting at 7:02 PM.

AHRJCS Meeting Minutes
November 17, 2020

ADOPTED

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Edits submitted by,
Rebecca Landry, IT Director/ACM