

TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes
December 2, 2014, 8 AM
Room 201, Westport Town Hall, Westport, CT

Attendees: Catherine Onyemelukwe, Brett Aronow, Maggie Mudd, Judy Hamer, Harold Bailey (Presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, Susan Ellis, and Barbara Butler

Guests: Zoe Tarrant, Kelle Ruden, Alison Patton, State Senator Toni Boucher

The meeting was called to order at 8:10AM.

Approval of Minutes: Catherine moved that the minutes from November 4, 2014, be approved. Maggie seconded. The minutes were approved.

NEW BUSINESS

What's Up?

1. Ferguson, Missouri – There was a gathering at the Unitarian Church last Tuesday (November 23, 2014) to acknowledge the controversy as a result of the Grand Jury report that waived indictment of the police officer involved in the killing of Michael Brown in August. This gathering was mentioned on the Rachel Maddow show along with a number of meetings/sessions that took place around the country. The question arose as to how we can have our Westport students and youth population made aware of and become sensitized to what is going on in the world especially during times of activism such as this. Several methods could be investigated: publications, political organizations, talking to student groups, or adding student names to a mailing list to let them know when events are being held.

President Obama has now gotten involved, so we hope that nationally we can go from “conversation” to action.

Harold mentioned the book **The Half has Never Been Told**, by Ed Baptist, Cornell University, as a good book to read. It rewrites the narrative about the contribution of slavery especially to economics.

2. “Project Implicit” is an online tool from Harvard that is used to test biases: (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>). We continue to talk about getting people in the community to go in to do a baseline test and then measure their own personal attitudes. Programming is set up so that we can cover a number of different areas. Questions: since Harvard has been doing this for a while, what results do they show from people who have taken this over time? What are the interventions? What are the questions? Catherine and Judy will investigate after December. The object of having the community take the test is to make this community more welcoming. We should be able to impact community-wide programming by examining the issue of bias from the individual point of view first to get each of us to identify our own biases in a broader context.

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OLD BUSINESS

Programming

1. “The New Jim Crow” Initiative:

TEAM Westport in partnership with the Unitarian Church read and discussed the book **The New Jim Crow** by Michelle Alexander in 2013. Rev. Alison Patton acknowledged that the book is currently reaching a broader market and has been selected as an important work lifting up social and racial justice. It was listed by the Financial Times as a “best book of the year”. One case in point is Rev. Marilyn Kendricks – Associate Pastor at the Church of the Redeemer in New Haven, who was inspired by **The New Jim Crow** and has now created “the Justice Imperative” about prisons in CT.

An outgrowth reaction to the situation in Ferguson is to look at how we criminalize and punish. The New Jim Crow looks at historical trends, versus immediacy. The disparity in treatment of minorities is there and is blatant in terms of rates of incarceration throughout the nation. We want to think that things have changed, but they haven’t. In the media, we don’t see much discussion about the backdrop of bad relations in St. Louis. It is very segregated. A graph published in the NY Times shows that there are an average of 1.5 warrants per person occurring because of the procedure of the police force to issue warrants for things such as not cutting the grass correctly. It’s not about individuals but that attitudes are deep-seated.

“Amistad” and “12 Years a Slave” are powerful because they tell what we’ve inherited. The challenge is to pull these accounts into today. Individual stories are gripping whether fictionalized or true, but the challenge is to balance the general histories that we have been given (and to give context to the individual stories). Ferguson is not separate. The more imminent concern is people’s reaction to Ferguson.

What can we do today within our context of Westport? We have made some progress, however we need to be open that there is still much to do. While trying to dismantle racism, there is so much work involved in working through resistance about whether racism exists. What is it that makes people so angry on both sides?

Action:

- a. Look at the website and identify the people we might know on the “Justice Imperative”.
- b. Meet with Rev. Kendricks (Catherine, Alison, Kelle, Zoe, and Harold).
- c. We have a time slot scheduled at the Library, but should consider resurrecting community conversations again (4 a year).
- d. The film “Selma” is being released on Christmas Day. We can set a date at the Library for a discussion about the movie or determine a workable format.

2. MLK Celebration – Interfaith Council:

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The Interfaith Council is planning something in observance of MLK Day on February 8th so it will take place during African American Heritage month. Harold will follow up with Rev. Ed Horne.

3. Westport Library Update – Kelle Ruden:

Joseph Califano is scheduled to speak at the Library on February 5 about Lyndon Johnson.

Dno Memgestu, author of **All Our Names** about coming of age in Africa, is scheduled for Feb 24 @ 7.

4. Essay Contest:

The contest announcement and contribution forms are being prepared. They are scheduled to be on the website January 2nd. The poster will be updated and our press release will go out.

5. Islam Perspectives:

Statement Introducing ‘Islam Perspectives’ Agenda Item

As the Committee officially focused on diversity for the Town of Westport, TEAM Westport’s mission is to make our town a welcoming one for all people with a particular focus on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion. As such, if at any time we perceive emerging potential that any members of those groups might become marginalized within our nation or state, it is incumbent upon us to consider programming and initiatives which might preclude that happening in Westport. That is specifically what we intend to discuss under the agenda item ‘Islam Perspectives’ at our meeting this morning.

Meeting Discussion

We now have over 6 million people nationwide who are Muslim and are beginning to see situations where people are being called to join ISIS. A few are leaving western countries including our own to answer that call but the media use of the terms “islamists” and “islamist fighters” for them is having impact on attitudes toward all followers of Islam (eg, Muslims). This is starting to show up in off-handed negative comments about Muslims from people (including students) who don’t even know any Muslims. Our concern is that we have a growing number of Westport citizens who could potentially be on the receiving end of these comments. We should address this as part of our programming including Project Implicit. All in attendance including State Senator Toni Boucher were in agreement that this is a very timely and important action to be taken.

Note:

State Senator Toni Boucher attended because several of her constituents were concerned that TEAM Westport was taking a position in support of new CT social studies initiatives which required the teaching of the Five Pillars of Islam. Harold made it clear that this was not our discussion topic. In addition, while this topic is not about Five Pillars, it is also not about Israel vs Palestine.

Harold gave Senator Boucher a copy of the Introductory Statement. She offered to support these and other initiatives discussed at the meeting.

Education:

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Books featuring 'Kids of Color'

Zoe and Brett and Susan are meeting today.

#WeNeedDiverseBooks was in the news. The author of Lemony Snickett (Benedict Cumberbatch) made a comment about Jacqueline Woodson (Brown Girl Dreaming) and winner of the National Book Award for children's books, being allergic to watermelon. She wrote an op-ed piece about what that meant to her. He issued an apology. He pledged \$10K outright and a \$150K match to compensate for his comments. Three of the 5 books nominated had some focus on "color". Momentum is happening. The timing is right.

Governance:

An Advisory Council list is to be worked on.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:40AM.

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, January 6, 2015, at 8 AM in Room 201 at Westport Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary