

## Abington Human Relations Commission

Community Dialogue: Aug. 5, 2020

Joanne Kleiner, AHRC Chairperson, introduced the program and members of the HRC and moderated the program.

In response to an opinion piece written by AHRC member Jeffrey Browne, which was in response to the murder of George Floyd by members of the Minneapolis police department earlier in the summer and the following months of national unrest, the AHRC held its first community dialogue. The HRC members hope and intend that this will be the first of many such programs, as well as other formats, depending on what community members indicate they would like.

Jeffrey began the meeting with an opening statement: This is our first community dialogue about race. It's a platform to express experiences and a forum to present ideas on how to fight racism, both structurally and individually. Jeffrey invites you to read his statement about his experiences which were learned at a very early age, wherein he recounts navigating within a culture that has criminalized a Black person's appearance and culture. He recognizes that there are a wide range of emotions possible during this discussion and invites you to speak your truth. We are starting, however, from the position of recognizing the existence of systemic racism; there is no debate about that fact. If someone would like to debate that, Jeffrey will be willing to speak to that person privately. Finally, he hopes that we will be able to work together to fight racism in all its forms.

Following this statement, there were a series of questions by members of the audience and responses by both Jeffrey and other members of the HRC panel. What follows here is an effort to capture as much of the discussion as possible. A recording of the dialogue is available.

John Carne (AHRC member): In a discussion with a Black friend on race, John recounted the friend asking him when was the last time he thought about being white. John realized that he never had while his friend said that he thought about being Black daily. John asked Jeffrey if that was common.

Jeffrey, while not speaking for the entire Black community, responded that Black people are reminded constantly in many facets of their experience of their Blackness and of their "otherness." He said that it's a constant reminder that "you aren't as valued as white people."

Shameeka Browne added a description of allowing a white friend to take her (and Jeffrey's) son on a weekend trip and explained that they needed to have a conversation about race with the other parent as well as with her son. She said that there is a need to be aware of unjust treatment, a need to know how to respond respectfully even if someone says something inappropriate, a need to give her son the appropriate language to use, and a need to tell him the things that he should not do if he's the only Black person with a group of white friends or if, on the other hand, he's with a group of Black friends. She also spoke about the disproportionality of discipline in the Abington School District of students of color and said how disheartening it is when people discount such experiences, as if Black people are inventing such events.

John Spiegelman (Township Commissioner): John commented about realizing he'd been lied to about American history throughout school and asked Jeffrey if and when he'd realized that he was being taught someone else's history.

Jeffrey responded that he'd realized it in college. He said that the history, as taught, glossed over brutality and "defanged" the work of people like MLK. However, this approach perpetuates white supremacy.

Razinn Lewis (AHRC member): Razinn spoke about the appalling lack of knowledge about American history and said that, in not learning much about the contributions of Black people, she asked herself,

“What did my people do?” However, she said, her parents always taught her to see her Blackness as positive.

Jeffrey added that Black people were “knocked down as soon as they were starting to do well,” and that it’s important for America to “own that and do something about it.” He added that crime is a byproduct of poverty so it’s necessary to fight poverty first.

Bill Bole (Township Commissioner): Bill commented that we need to accelerate our education and talked about “confrontation versus invitation [to dialogue].”

Jeffrey responded that someone who wants to be an ally needs to speak up when seeing or hearing something that is racist and pointed out that doing so is probably “going to cost that person something.”

Kristin Chapin (AHRC member) pointed out a way that she has learned to find common ground with someone. She says: “I used to feel....; I learned..... and “Now I know....”

Tamar Klaiman: Tamar said that she discusses race with her children all the time and has taught them to use their privilege [as white people] to “protect their friends of color.”

Because too many dialogues on sensitive topics end without any concrete steps, the AHRC structured the program so that the last half hour would be a Call to Action. The question was: Where do we go from here.

Cakky Evans: Cakky commented that it’s helpful and important to learn from the best practices of other cities and that it should be a challenge to our Commissioners to put policies in place throughout all aspects and programs of Abington Township that build on these practices. She offered to help. She also said that she’d like to see a conversation with the Abington Police Department.

Jeffrey wondered if there are reports about equity in all Township departments and commissioners and if members of the community can see such reports. Also, since an Equity Officer is being appointed in the School District, he wondered if such a position exists/will exist in the Township.

Kristin asked if the 2030 Vision Plan for the Township will be written with “an equity lens” in mind.

Razinn wondered if economic development plans for the Township will have money put aside for this.

Shameeka commented that there are many good books that discuss racism and that people “need to do their homework” on the topic.

Michele Cooper (Co-founder of Abington for Peace): Michele said that Abington for Peace has made a list of calls for action that she will provide us and that they would be happy to partner with other groups in the community such as the school district and the police department.

Shelley Rosenberg (AHRC member): Shelley commented that the HRC is hopeful that other groups will want to work with the HRC and that the HRC’s plan includes hosting additional community dialogues, inviting other groups/organizations to the HRC’s monthly meetings, and going to other groups and offering to facilitate dialogues for their members.

Amy Martin (Co-founder of Abington for Peace): Amy added that Abington for Peace wants to expand the audience for this conversation by reaching into the community. She hopes that the police department can be included in another dialogue.

Anne Dampf: Anne also spoke of wanting to broaden the conversation to a greater number of people. She suggested involving the library in a book study project that would promote additional dialogue.

Dave Bell: Dave asked if there are sensitivity programs in the schools and if it's possible to document problems.

Shameeka responded that youth are telling their stories, that the school district has de-escalation training starting, and that there is anti-bias training as well as book groups.

As the evening drew to a close, the AHRC promised to post minutes of the meeting, to schedule another open community dialogue, and to start to schedule times for other groups and organizations to present and dialogue in specific programs during the AHRC's regularly scheduled monthly meetings. An invitation was issued for anyone with additional ideas to contact the HRC to express their feelings and suggestions.

**The HRC meets the first Wednesday of every month (except August) from 7:00 to 9:00 pm. As special meetings are scheduled (with groups and/or for community dialogue), those meetings will be listed on the HRC's website.**