

# The Community Equity Collaborative

## A Brief History

In the Spring of 2008 egregious public displays of racial hatred by high school students calling themselves the Nigger Hanging Redneck Association (NHRA) challenged the greater Brattleboro area's notions of equity and inclusiveness. In previous cases of racially inspired hate in Brattleboro, the community looked to Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity (formerly ALANA) to respond and to often respond alone. When the NHRA critical incident emerged Vermont Partnership vowed to break the pattern of sole respondent.

Within 24 hours of the first NHRA public incident Vermont Partnership convened a meeting of town officials, community members, law enforcement, clergy, and educators at the town offices. Ten days later an ad hoc group of nonprofit, religious, and local government leaders convened by United Way and the Alliance for Building Community formed the Racial Issues Steering Committee. This group held a series of forums over the summer and fall, each attended by over 100 people. Community members demanded a multi-faceted, multi-layered response to prevent the emergence of another NHRA-type hate group. In response the schools and town conducted anti-racism trainings for their staff; faith communities began addressing the challenges of isolated rural youth; and three towns and many nonprofits signed "No Bystander" pledges to keep their constituents safe.

In February of 2009, the Racial Issues Steering Committee organized a Future Search conference under the theme envisioning a community free of prejudice and discrimination. Future Search is an internationally recognized community strategic planning tool. Sixty-five participants from a broad cross section of our community deliberated over a three day period. We re-visited the past, acknowledged current trends, and named what made us both proud and regretful. Finally, we focused on strengthening assets to create ideal future scenarios for our community.

The Racial Issues Steering Committee, now renamed the Community Equity Collaborative, continues as an ad hoc leaderless group to monitor progress towards our collective vision and mission:

**Our Vision: The greater Brattleboro area is recognized as an open and welcoming epicenter celebrating diversity free of prejudice and discrimination of all kinds.**

**Our Mission: Our mission is to sustain existing and support new initiatives, activities and programs that unify and galvanize our community to achieve our vision.**

This vision is shared by educators, faith communities, law enforcement agents, civil servants, town officials, social service professionals and civic groups. It is a vision where the greater Brattleboro area is recognized as an open and welcoming epicenter celebrating diversity free of prejudice and discrimination of all kinds.

Our work deepens the connections between cultural diversity, innovation and a thriving, prosperous community. Members of our Collaborative leverage human, material and financial resources to support four primary actions deemed critical by Future Search Conference participants. These four actions include finding ways to regularly celebrate diversity; implementing a social competency development curriculum in our schools; promoting change management promising practices; and training local law enforcement in bias free policing.

## **Celebrate Diversity!**

A school and community celebration of diversity taking place the first Friday in May with related events occurring throughout the winter and spring months.

## **WSESU Social Competency Development Curriculum**

Leadership and dialogue skills, critical thinking, respecting difference, displaying empathy and resolving conflicts are all abilities that lead to success in college and the workforce. The promotion of a positive school community is a “laboratory” for developing these life skills. Emphasis is placed on high school students mentoring middle school students and in turn middle school students mentoring elementary school students. The curriculum has influenced 1700 students and engaged the collaboration of the SIT Graduate Institute, Windham Regional Collegiate High School and the Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition.

*Annual cycle includes:*

Middle School Leadership Training at SIT for 85 students and 20 school staff in August 2018

School leadership teams in 8 middle and elementary schools in support of a positive school environment

26 Collegiate High School Courses emphasizing the social competencies

## **VERMONT VISION for a Multicultural Future**

Sponsored by the Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity this participant-driven conference for visionary leaders and practitioners outlines the economic imperative for responding to demographic shifts in the marketplace. The sixth annual conference took place November 2-3, 2017, at The Putney School and features southeastern Vermont as an epicenter of multicultural thought and practice. The theme embraces diversity as an advantage – economically, socially and culturally.

Participants are Vermont leaders from business, government, education and nonprofit organizations who strive to create environments free of prejudice and discrimination. The hope is to establish an ongoing Vermont-centered network for sharing and supporting policies, structures and programs aligned with evolving state demographics. In the long run, we see this network promoting permanent positive change in human attitudes and behavior in all settings – personal, educational, political and business.

## **Law Enforcement Training**

How does law enforcement interact effectively with a diverse community?

This work is an example of the Collaborative’s willingness to address issues of cultural conflict openly and creatively. In past years, members of the Collaborative have worked with the Brattleboro Police Department to develop training for bias free policing. The training offers police officers the opportunity to further develop their cultural awareness and interpersonal competence in working with community members of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. The training results in an understanding of difference and increased sensitivity and empathy skills on the beat. In addition, The Windham County Sheriff’s staff, the Vermont Police Academy, the Vermont State Police and other town police departments around the State have received this training.

## **Community Equity Collaborative Membership**

Julie Cunningham, Families First Executive Director

Carmen Derby, Executive Director, United Way of Windham County

Peter Elwell, Brattleboro Town Manager

Mike Fitzgerald, Chief, Brattleboro Police Department

Mary Gannon, Social Justice Consultant & Trainer

Lyle Holiday, WSESU School Superintendent

Emilie Kornheiser, Community member

Starr Latronica, Head Librarian, Brooks Memorial Library

Donna Macomber, Women's Freedom Center Legal Justice Project Coordinator

Manny Mansbach, Vermont Insight Meditation Center, Brattleboro Area Interfaith Clergy

Judith Palmeri, Academy School Counselor

Curtiss Reed, Jr., Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity Executive Director

Mikaela Simms, WSESU Diversity Coordinator

Rev. Lise Sparrow, Pastor, Guilford Community Church, Brattleboro Area Interfaith Clergy Assoc.

Diana Wahle, WSESU Asset Development Coordinator

### **For further information, please contact:**

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