

TESTIMONY ON PR 2 – clarifying the prohibition on slavery and indentured servitude in Vermont’s Constitution.

My name is Sylvia Knight. I live in north Burlington.

My first encounter with PR 2 left me unclear about the need for this legislation. I had not examined the language closely. It didn’t touch me. It seemed clear enough that slavery was not legal in Vermont.

I have come to see this issue differently. That’s why I am speaking tonight.

As a Vermont citizen I am urging you to approve and pass Proposal 2 out of your committee as soon as possible. I urge you also to advocate for its passage in the Legislature.

Why?

National and local evidence of white racism recently and in earlier years as well as deep reading have told me that our state and country are still capable of deep exploitation, injustice and cruelty. We have seen continuing oppression and painful experiences of people of color in this state and country. (Read Ibram X. Kendi’s book Stamped from the Beginning, 2016.)

Regarding PR 2, I recommend Professor Harvey Amani Whitfield’s book, The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont, 1777-1810.

His work lays bare the need for PR 2. Vermont’s Constitution was unclear about the status of slaves, their children or their ability to live a free life in Vermont. Prominent Vermonters bought and sold Black people after 1777 without consequence. The mechanisms of enforcing ambiguous provisions do not exist, and the tendency to exploit others in this or any state is too prevalent. We cannot leave the issue of slavery at all ambiguous in the Vermont Constitution.

Thank you for this time.