

Lakewood Community Relations Advisory Commission Minutes
April 11, 2019; 6:30 p.m., Lakewood City Hall, 12600 Detroit Ave, Lakewood, OH

In attendance: Jessica Sloan (Chair), Rachel Donaldson (Vice-Chair), Chitra Walker (Secretary), Tariq Atta, Barbara Howell, Robin Beavers, Gary Rick, Walter Wright, Gabrielle Jackson and Melissa Garrett (Community Relations Specialist)

Guests: Nahida Farunia, former member of LCRAC; Guest Speaker Erica Merritt, Equius Group.

Not present: Andrew Morris

NEW BUSINESS

Telephone Discussion with Guest Speaker, Erica Merritt, Director, Equius Group: Melissa Garrett connected with Erica Merritt on the speaker phone, and Jessica Sloan introduced Erica to the group and thanked her for consenting to speak to the group. Erica spoke a little about her background growing up in the Cleveland area, and her work with small and large institutions around human resources and organizational culture/development, inclusion and diversity issues. She began her own organization, the Equius Group, concentrating on diversity and racial justice issues and has been working as Director of Equius full-time since 2012. She has organized 5-day seminars with the YWCA Change Seekers group and Prism in 2016 – focusing on racial equity and designing programs for organizations which were internally focusing on equity, organizational culture and leadership development. She went on to explain what equity training looks like – she customizes this to each group with whom she works. She said often people of privilege (white) internalize oppressive messages regarding race and superiority; often policies around racial equity are systemic and structural with the unspoken, internalized oppressive messages repeating themselves over and over and impacting the entire system. The intent is to change this dynamic.

Walter noted that diversity was increasing rapidly in Lakewood, and that Lakewood had a very active refugee program. Despite this, we still have had some racial incidents in the city. He asked what role a group like LCRAC or the Lakewood City could play in improving this situation. Erica said she has been working with City of Shaker Heights for about a year, and has organized full day retreats, and 3-hour discussion sessions with select cohort groups to build a sense of community among members, and start a collective conversation in the city. There have been three such cohort group discussions, and now about 75 people have had this experience. The focus is on relationship building and mobilizing around the different things that are seen as important to the community. These groups have had some tough conversations.

Gary asked how communities can “do it right”. He asked, “Can you address what is a “national pain” in a single community?” Robin Beavers noted that it was commendable that Lakewood was at least willing to tackle the issue. Erica commented that it was a very interesting inflexion point in a very volatile political climate. It takes courage, she added, to begin these types of interactive and collective discussions. Shaker Heights may be one of the few cities that is actually making this type of conscious community effort.

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Nahida Farunia asked if Erica could comment on hate crimes against religious groups (such as Muslim groups); and also how Police departments are trained/deal with hate crimes. Erica noted that she had not worked specifically in the arena of hate crimes against religious/Muslim groups, but that the Greater Cleveland Congregation with other Islamic organizations was working in the city to bring attention to such racial injustice. She also noted that police departments were now giving their officers anti-bias training.

Jessica S. asked what mediums/models (?) are most effective in reaching the community. She commented that Lakewood had tried the “community conversation” model with LakewoodAlive panel discussions, and a few people had attended these in Lakewood. Erica commented that this was a process of building neighborhood connections, and network building. It was slow going; personal phone calls and strategic messaging was helpful in getting people to show up to these community meetings. She added that working with the “willing”, and people who were in the middle ground and showed interest would start the process of building relationships in the community, which, over time, would result in the message spreading to the community as a whole. She added that what we want to do can be customized. She asked that we circle back to her after we (LCRAC) had decided what we wanted to do.

Nahida F. commented on her own experience when she was a member of LCRAC of encouraging communication through the schools about teaching equality. There was also brief discussion on reaching out to targeted groups for events such as Welcome to Lakewood and Diversity Potluck. Personal invitations were also effective, Robin B. suggested, and has worked in the school system. Also providing information in various newsletters put out by other organizations that LCRAC members may participate in; or for other events in the City such as school events.

Since it was 7, and LCRAC had asked Erica to spend just the initial half hour with the group, Jessica thanked Erica for her time and for the productive discussion. LCRAC will be in touch with Erica regarding its next steps.

OLD BUSINESS

Approval of Minutes: The minutes of the March 14 2019 meeting were approved by all.

Lakewood Stands Together Interfaith Program: Tariq A. and Chitra W. spoke to the hour-long program that was organized by Rabbi Enid Lader of the Westshore Jewish (exact name?) at the Lakewood Woman’s Pavilion on _____ to pray for and think about the families of the victims of the tragedy in Christchurch, New Zealand. Although not many people attended, a few congregations and religious groups were represented. Tariq A. was also among the speakers, representing LCRAC, at the event. He urged those assembled not to become “accustomed” and thus unaffected by such terrorist events. Mayor Summers also spoke eloquently on the importance of community and what brings communities together.

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NEW BUSINESS (Cont'd)

Youth Advisory Council:

Melissa noted that the Mayor had chosen his 3 candidates for the Youth Advisory Council Task Force, and had appreciated the recommendations of LCRAC. Letters have been sent to the 9 newly appointed applicants; the other applicants were also sent letters telling them that they would be automatically considered for the positions to form the new Youth Advisory Council. The next step was to set the initial meeting of the Task Force, and that Ron Lewis and Amy Hutchinson (faculty and advisors to the group from Lakewood High School) had been contacted to set an initial meeting for either April 22 or 23 with the Mayor. LCRAC's Subcommittee on the Youth Advisory Council would also attend this meeting. Melissa will be sending out a draft agenda to those who will participate.

LakewoodAlive Community Forum update: Chitra provided a brief update on the Forum committee meeting. Panelists for the Forum on May 14 (*Civil Discourse and Mutual Respect*, 7pm-9pm, Lakewood Public Library) have been finalized, and include the Moderator, Judge Michael Ryan (Juvenile Court). LCRAC will, once again, assist with the arrangements at the meeting including gathering questions from the audience. There is a meeting on May 3 with the panelists to go over the format of the meeting and to answer any questions the panelists may have prior to the Forum.

LCRAC Lakewood Mixer: Jessica reminded everyone of the second LCRAC quarterly Mixer, on April 25 from 6-8 p.m. at Deagan's Kitchen & Bar. Rachel/Jessica will invite Ron Lewis and Amy Hutchinson to the mixer.

Next Meetings: The next meetings of the Commission:

- i. Thursday, May 9, 2019
- ii. Thursday, June 13, 2019

Gabrielle Jackson announced that this would be her last meeting with LCRAC as she has accepted a new job in Boston, MA, and will be moving there soon. Members expressed sadness and surprise at this announcement.

With no further announcements or discussion, the meeting adjourned at 7:50 p.m.