

# **WEST HARTFORD HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**

## **Minutes of June 2, 2021 Meeting**

**FOR FUTURE REFERENCE:** Public Comments welcome via phone, by dialing 408-418-9388 Access Code 173 498 0586

Meeting was called to order at 7:05 pm by co-chair Esam Boraey

**Attendance:** All currently serving commissioners were present

Esam Boraey, co-chair

Dawn Ennis, secretary

Ted Mancini

Aurora Melita

Sarah Raskin

Eric Schoenberg

Kristin Sowell

Pramod Pradhan, liaison and facilitator

**Vacancies:** Treasurer Brian Greenleaf (We are awaiting official resignation) and co-chair Adrienne Billings Smith (votes held this meeting to fill those positions)

**Minutes:** EB moved to approve minutes, Eric Schoenberg seconded

**Guest:** Johanna Schubert of West Hartford Pride was our guest; founder Barry White was unavailable. Jo is a social worker in the North End of Hartford and was a supporter of a gun violence initiative that won passage in the State Senate, providing Medicaid reimbursement for certified violence prevention advocates.

Schubert talked about history of WH Pride, starting in 2019, virtual in 2020, been planning events for since last year. Aim is to represent all of WH's different genders, sexual and racial identities.

Events include June 11 Pride Night at the Gastro Pub, from 4 pm to 9 pm, a Children's Art Exhibit from June 22 to July 2 at the Noah Webster Main Public Library, sponsored by Jerry's Art-a-Rama, and Tell Me Another, an LGBTQ storytelling event hosted by WNPR's Chion Wolf, among other in person and virtual events leading up to June 26 in Blue Back Square, with vendors, LGBTQ resources, yoga, drag queens, SAT tutors and more. More info here:

<https://westhartfordpride.org/> and on Facebook at

<https://www.facebook.com/PrideWeHa> and on Instagram at

<https://www.instagram.com/prideweha>

ES suggested Jo and Sarah Raskin might want to consult with Celebrate! West Hartford regarding their unfulfilled vendors and SR noted there were only 16

spots at present but 25 requests. SR to review with the Town about making more spots available.

ES and Kristen Sowell volunteered to manage the WHHRC table with assistance from EB.

Dawn Ennis asked Jo why WHHRC should support WeHa Pride and not only in June but all year-long. Jo's response was "Queer rights are human rights. I think it's so important that we have allies who speak all languages and relate to people on all levels and we want to partner with an agency or commission like yours so that we can work together to make sure everyone in WH feels connected, free to be themselves and not just in June but all year round. It underscores what I hope is a supportive town where it's safe to be whoever you are and whatever your true self is."

Ted Mancini asked "What exactly are queer rights? What is that?"

Jo responded that it's an umbrella term she uses for LGBTQ individuals, including gay straight, bisexual, transgender, asexual. To her, "queer rights means they're not going to get discriminated against because of those identities, whether that's in housing, being treated differently by a police department, that there are safeguards in place to make sure that gender identity is not a roadblock to being treated like every other citizen."

TM asked if it meant to be treated like everybody else is treated, and Jo agreed and then added, "To not have gender identity be the thing that makes you get treated differently."

EB thanked Jo, who left the virtual meeting.

### **AGENDA ITEMS:**

SR asked to mention Juneteenth event for June 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> on Unity Green. EB mentioned info is available on the website. DE and SR to run the WHHRC table.

SR asked if open positions will be voted upon at this meeting, EB confirmed.

### **Town of Compassion Awards**

Aurora Melita provided an update on the Town of Compassion Awards, still in the discussion phase with Mayor Cantor's office. DE asked if it'll be a December event, the answer is that's still in discussion.

SR expressed surprise that WHPD is now involved in the awards process.

SR to reserve the Town Hall Auditorium for Dec. 10.

### WH Pride

DE had nothing to add to Jo's presentation

### Juneteenth

SR had nothing to add to what was already discussed

### "Men At Work" Construction Signs

EB updated commissioners on Public Works promising to oversee this issue should they reappear, they are still for sale and private company contractors are the ones using them, even though the Town policy does not allow them.

ES suggested the next step be a letter to the Town Manager recommending that when contracts are in the procurement phase that it be stipulated no "Men At Work" signs as a clause in future contracts.

### In-Person Meetings?

EB said town officials we would need a room that provides WebEx connection to hold in-person meetings in the future.

SR noted WHHRC did not traditionally meet in summer and wanted it noted. She also asked that Town Hall provides a hybrid room that allows for in-person guests.

TM asked why and SR's response was to provide a time to vacation, refresh and rejuvenate.

TM noted that if we don't meet until September we won't have to decide about meeting in-person because by then we should be meeting in that fashion anyway.

A vote was held as to whether the WHHRC should meet over the summer, which traditionally the commission has not done previously, and ES was the lone vote for summer meetings. AM abstained and did not vote either for or against the summer meetings, but agreed to go along with the consensus.

WHHRC voted to hold next meeting Sept. 1, 2021; DE to alert town that the website needs to be updated so as to remove the meeting dates in July and August.

WHCI noted in a text message via WebEx that even if WHCI no longer broadcasts commission meetings they will be provided on YouTube.

EB asked if we want to inquire as to whether future guests be fully vaccinated to attend WHHRC meetings. DE offered that current rules ought to apply, which

state that non-vaccinated folks must wear a mask inside Town Hall and be socially distant. EB said he would check with the Town.

#### Facebook Live

EB presented plan he had created with former co-chair ABS to hold Facebook Live meetings in which we connected with other commissions, Town officials and towns people supporting human rights in WH. He has a list of 30 organizations he promised to share with the commissioners. DE volunteered to participate. TM asked for a copy of the list. SR noted it was a chance for us to shine a spotlight on groups doing work for the community.

#### Board Officer Elections

ABS resigned, EB nominated DE. SR seconded the nomination, vote was unanimous for Dawn Ennis to be the new co-chair of the WHHRC.

That created an opening for the position of secretary, EB nominated AM, ES seconded, vote was unanimous and Aurora Melita is the new WHHRC secretary.

Although BG has not yet formally resigned the WHHRC has been without a treasurer for several months and so ES nominated himself, EB also nominated him, seconded by DE. The vote was unanimous and Eric Schoenberg is the new treasurer.

#### Slavery Reparations Investigation Recommendation

SR emailed the commissioners how other municipalities are addressing this issue, with the purpose of WHHRC composing a letter to the Town Council recommending it form a committee to consider this as a possible step for WH. DE emailed details of a measure at the state legislature and articles about how this would work, or not.

TM said he was “curious how this worked with the stated objective on human rights when you are burdening others to benefit a class of people based on their race. Aren’t we supposed to be color-blind, race-blind, treat everybody the same, not look for special treatment of any one individual or class? Isn’t that what human rights is all about? Because once we cross that line doesn’t human rights turn into ‘special rights?’”

SR said she would argue “strenuously that our goal is not to be color-blind.” She noted TM raises an important point: “The idea is to look at how do we level the playing field that’s been not level. If everybody else is disadvantaged and somebody else has an advantage, how do we try to make it equal?”

TM: “Wouldn’t you just make it equal? How is giving someone benefits and re-tilting the field the other way, how is that human rights? How is that treating everybody equally? You can’t say you want equality and you want to be treated the same and then say you want some people to be treated differently. Should

we start talking about giving special treatment to people who are white because they're [descended] from soldiers in the Civil War who died trying to end slavery? Should we have that conversation?"

SR suggested it was not a fair comparison to look at soldiers who died in the Civil War as opposed to those who were slaves.

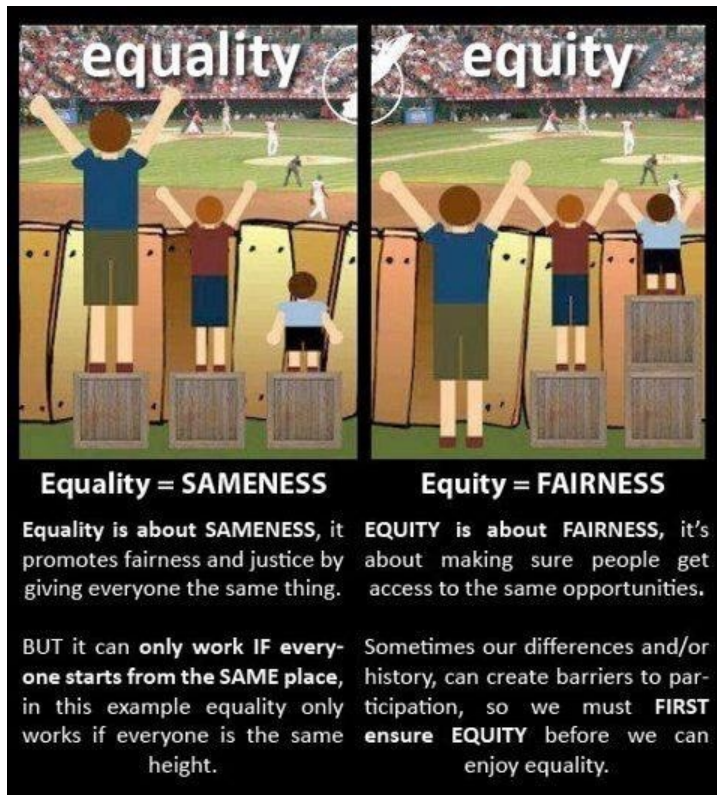
AM noted there is a difference between equality and equity and what's not being mentioned is that some people start off life at a higher level than others.

TM asked for clarification as to what people are starting off at a lower level, "the poorest of the poor, the white people living in the Appalachians. What is it you are talking about?"

SR suggested we could table this conversation for another time, and stated that being "a victim of systemic racism and descended from people who were enslaved is really different from being a poor person in Appalachia." SR mentioned that in her work as a neuroscientist she is familiar with the impact of racial trauma and its lasting effects.

TM noted that the WHHRC's mission is not to give benefits to one class of people over another. "We're all supposed to be treated equally. Maybe I misunderstand that the Human Rights Commission does not stand for the equal treatment of everyone. Maybe that's my misunderstanding, and if not, then maybe we should change our mission statement."

ES offered to explain to TM the difference between equality and equity with help from a popular internet meme:



EB weighed-in to add that ignoring the historic challenges of under-represented members of a community under the title of “equality” is not justice, and is not fair. “Talking about catching up the under-represented parts of the community is at the core of social justice which is what this commission stands for.”

SR noted that “The WHHRC mission statement doesn’t say we treat everybody equally. It says ‘we encourage the equality of treatment.’” She used the example of giving someone who is less abled a wheelchair and someone complaining that we didn’t give an able-bodied person a wheelchair and claiming that it’s not fair. That’s not equality. “Equality would be either everyone gets a wheelchair or no one gets one. Instead we look at what every individual needs to reach the same level of mobility.”

TM returned to his point about reparations, “further burdening the taxpayer of West Hartford again to give benefits, in this case financial benefits, to one class of people based on color. It has nothing to do with being associated with slavery, or being descended from slavery, it has nothing to do with anything. You’re talking about giving financial benefits to someone based on color while at the same time burdening others for that financial benefit that you’re giving based solely on their color.”

ES and SR suggested this conversation should continue at another time. EB agreed to place it on the agenda for the next meeting while Sarah continues her research for a potential vote to recommend the Town Council study the issue.

### Let's Meet Members of Other Committees and Commissions

EB proposed we invite other groups to come to WHHRC meetings for us to learn about their work. DE volunteered to help coordinate.

ES suggested we invite ABS, as a representative of the newly formed WH Civilian Police Review Board, which we had previously discussed. SR suggested the Housing Committee, currently led by Barry Walters.

### Skin Deep

AM promised an update at our next meeting.

### Coaches Dispute

TM said the coaches and league were meeting in hopes of finding a settlement. ES offered to mediate based on his experience in this arena.

### BABY NEWS!

ES and his wife Sam welcomed their daughter Avery! Mom and daughter doing well.

### Commissioner Biographies

DE asked all commissioners to send a biography, headshot and optional video for the website to her by 6/15.

### Next Meeting

EB said 9/1/21 at 7 p.m. at location TBD; Pramod suggested it could be held at the Noah Webster Library.

### **MEETING ADJOURNED**

DE moved to adjourn the meeting, ES seconded. Meeting adjourned at 8:11 p.m. EDT on June 2, 2021.