

WEDNESDAY
JOURNAL
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Arts can open the lens on how we see equity

Who gets to tell the story? Not just white men

By **LACEY SIKORA**
 Contributing Reporter

Our public institutions are working to formulate and implement equity policies. But what about equity in cultural institutions? Elizabeth Chadri, program director for the Oak Park River Forest Community Foundation, plainly states, "Arts and cultural organizations have the potential to bring about social change and should therefore reflect the diversity of the community. The arts play a significant role in engaging our community, and they need to reflect our community's diversity."

Camille Wilson White, executive director of the Oak Park Area Arts Council, agrees and sees a two-pronged approach to making this a reality. First, she touts the benefits to all from having a diverse range of arts organizations at work together in the community. She then says that the community needs to broaden access to the arts as a way of creating a more equitable landscape.

Wilson White praises the wealth of arts-related non-profits at work in Oak Park including numerous theater groups, choruses, visual art organizations, dance and musical groups.

"There truly is a diverse group of organizations here that we help carry on the impact of their work." That said, she points out, "Thirty-two organizations applied to OPAAC for funding. How many were organizations headed by people of color? Not many. How many heads of arts institutions here are people of color? Not many?"

Maui Jones, founder and artistic director of Oak Park's Echo Theater Collective, is pushing that narrative and stresses the important role the arts play in conversations about equity. "We've been conditioned to see the world through a singular lens -- that of the straight, white male because that's who was in charge. The arts convey more than words. They convey emotion and allow you to see the world



ALL IN: Children and adults performing during the Echo Theater Collective's production of "Free To Be You and Me." Maui Jones (top right) is the founder and artistic director of Oak Park's Echo Theater Collective. (PHOTO BY PAUL GOYETTE)

through another lens. When done responsibly and with intention, art can show people another world. After they've seen that story you shared, perhaps they can bring that lens into their everyday lives."

Through his productions of "Blues

for Mister Charlie" and "Free to Be You and Me," Jones has worked to provide that lens, and he, like Wilson White, champions the idea that equity in the arts depends upon access to the arts.

Wilson White points to a few local initiatives that are making access to the

arts easier for people of color. She was a founding member of PING! (Providing Instruments for the Next Generation) which helps provide instruments, mentoring and scholarship opportunities to band and orchestra students in Oak Park.

"Two other moms noticed that there were very few students of color participating in District 97's concerts. PING! set out to remove all barriers. A child going into fourth grade can choose

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'Not good white people vs. bad white people'

Race Conscious Dialogues help white people unpack their biases

By **LACEY SIKORA**
Contributing Reporter

Almost two years ago, Dot Lamshead Roche, an Oak Park resident, decided to start talking about racism among her white peers in the community. The former high school social studies teacher, now home with her kids, was among a multi-racial group of residents wondering how to approach the topic. "We landed on the idea of small cohorts as a way to deepen our understanding."

Roche says the groups were intentionally kept small and intentionally limited to white people. "Participants are more likely to be honest with themselves when truths can be shared and people of color should not be put in harm's way as we do the work."

At first, the groups were primarily dialogues between Roche and community members, but she quickly realized that the group needed a facilitator. She turned to friend Brynne Hovde, who three years ago

was among the founding members of NOVA Collective, a woman and black-owned business that offers programs, products and consulting services that build a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce.

Hovde says with NOVA, the desire was to, "change how organizations think, specifically around the tenets of white supremacy." She and Roche formed Race Conscious Dialogues (RCD) as a volunteer and grassroots community effort to challenge those tenets at home.

For them RCD is aimed at white people who want to deepen their

awareness of identity, power and privilege, and then develop tools for anti-racism work.

Each RCD is set up as a series consisting of four sessions, each lasting three hours, held in space donated by Academia in Oak Park. Each session is preceded with light readings to be done at home and is facilitated in partnership with the Nova Collective. The series is framed around unpacking and understanding Whiteness, what Roche and Hovde call: "our own racial identities, the historical and current harm being caused by whiteness and guided discovery of what we can do to disrupt racism and dismantle white supremacy."

Hovde says while the framework of each series is the same, there is an evolution to the program. "The curriculum is definitely

informed by some of our work outside of RCD and our thought partners, but as it evolves, it is also responding to what's going on here in Oak Park and in communities around Oak Park."

She points to changing terms as a bellwether of a changing community focus. "We were talking about diversity and inclusion. Now we're talking about equity and justice."

Roche says that while sessions might address pressing issues playing out locally, they intentionally keep the focus local and not national. "We're not talking about Charlottesville. We keep turning the lens on ourselves, talking about the racism that's happening in progressive, liberal communities like ours."

Roche also sees value in these conversations among parents raising kids in the village. "When we as adults engage in this personal work, we are able

"As a community, we have to say, there's no amount of racial inequity that is acceptable."

— **Brynne Hovde**



ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

REAL TALK: Dot Lamshead Roche and Brynne Hovde lead Race Conscious Dialogues.

to talk more easily with our children about race, and learn and grow together."

For Hovde, RCD brings home the really important question: "How am I, as a white person, perpetuating racism? "We need to realize there's harm to undo in every white person. In our society, calling something racist is like the worst thing in the world."

Roche chimes in, "I think that the important thing people glean from participating [in RCD] is separating things out. You can be a good neighbor and a good friend and still perpetuate racism. It's not bad white people vs. good white people."

Both women stress that the RCD sessions are merely a jumping off point in a long journey. They point to Oak Park's 37 equity efforts currently underway and says there's no need to reinvent the wheel. Hovde says, "If people can leave these sessions and start to support and amplify the voices for equity already out there, that can lead to change."

Most of their participants tend to

How to connect

Find out more about Race Conscious Dialogues or register for an upcoming session by visiting raceconsciousdialogues.org or email RaceConsciousDialogues@gmail.com

be women, but men also attend, and the age of the average RCD participant varies. While many participants are parents of kids currently in Oak Park schools, Hovde says that an older generation, who intentionally moved to the community decades ago because of racial inclusion, is also interested. "All ages are interested in this. This space is conducive to wherever we are on the journey."

As they tackle issues such as white privilege, gifted and talented programs in schools, policing, safety and feminism, RCD can be eye opening. Roche says, "Seeing whiteness for what it is is something that people are doing for the first time here."

She sees a real need for white people to join in. "With this work, neutrality perpetuates the status quo. This requires plugging in, not checking out."

Hovde says it is about making time to make a change. "I'm a working mom in Oak Park, and I know how real it is to be so busy. Every time you make space for this, you see what you can do. Don't be too busy to do this important work. It is an act of self-care. I call on white women to take part in this crucial mission."

"As a community, we have to say, 'there's no amount of racial inequity that is acceptable.'"

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WONDER: Volunteers (above) work on finishing up the aquatic mural on Aug. 2, 2018, at Wonder Works on North Avenue in Oak Park. (Right) From left, Zaria Gilmore, 21, Jenn Eisner, 18, and Julia Cuneen, 19, all of Oak Park, finish up a new mural on Aug. 2, 2017 at the corner of Lake Street and Central in Chicago. (Top right) Judah Morgan, 18, of Bolingbrook, cleans off tile for a new mural. (Photos by ALEXA ROGALS/Staff Photographer)



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any instrument, sign a contract and get a PING! mentor. A lot of kids who participate happen to be children of color whose parents don't have the means to purchase or rent instruments. We are able to level the playing field.

PING! also works to provide scholarships to music camps such as Blue Lake and Interlochen, and Wilson White notes that many former PING! recipi-

ents go on to be PING! mentors. She's also proud of OPACC's Off the Wall program, which provides summer arts employment to youth aged 16 to 24. They create murals in Oak Park and the surrounding communities, are paid and are mentored by professional artists.

Off the Wall has expanded programming into Austin, and youth from Oak Park are working side-by-side with youth from Austin. "We always talk about what bridges can we build between the two communities? The arts

"If we tell the stories through art, maybe people will wake up."

— Maui Jones

Artistic Director of Oak Park's Echo Theater Collective



PHOTO BY PAUL GOYETTE

STORY TELLING: Children performing during the Echo Theater Collective's production of "Free To Be You and Me."

build that bridge," says Wilson White.

Jones knows firsthand that access to the arts is key. As a child growing up in California and the Oak Park area with a mother who struggled with addiction, he was always interested in arts and theater but did not have the means to pursue artistic endeavors. Later in life, he acted in a small production of "Guys and Dolls," which he said reignited his passion for theater and led him to question who was telling the stories. "I came up with three tenets for what I want to do: education, information and empowerment. With the first, you need to use authentic voices. If you're talking about race in America, whoever's telling the story has to understand it. Information means it has to be responsible storytelling. How do we approach the material and cast-

ing so it's not exploitive? Third, we are continuing the story. If people are inspired by what they see on stage, we can plug them into local, grassroots organizations."

To that end, Jones has a dream of creating a cultural center in Oak Park that would serve children in need and provide a different perspective to the community, "If we have the space, my hope is that it can become an engine for social change. Giving people tools to see the world through a multitude of lenses rather than shutting down on certain situations is the answer."

While acknowledging that we might be relatively comfortable in Oak Park, he points out that our neighbors are hurting and there are those in the community who also feel marginalized. "If we believe that there is a clear and present danger; if we believe all of these things are dire, why aren't we sacrificing anything or investing our money in things that will move the needle? Everyday that we don't do something, another black kid gets shot or another immigrant gets detained. If we tell the stories through art, maybe people will wake up."

School supt.'s get frank about race and education

By **MICHAEL ROMAIN**
Staff Reporter

On April 11, Success of All Youth collaborated with Wednesday Journal and the Good Heart Work Smart Foundation to convene a first-of-its-kind videotaped conversation with the superintendents of the three public school districts in Oak Park and River Forest.

The talk focused on race and equity, but those subjects were portals to much deeper, sometimes personal, reflections on the human experience. Below are excerpts from just a few minutes of that more than hour-long conversation, which you can find at: www.oakpark.com

The superintendents' on-camera comments have been edited and slightly modified for print.

Wednesday Journal: Each superintendent shared personal experiences that helped inform their current racial equity work.

District 90 River Forest elementary school Supt. Edward J. Condon: My first experience with racial equity was as a principal in a school district not far from here. It was highly diverse and, admittedly, a very affluent school district with not much income inequality. More importantly, though, students, regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, were showing high performance across the board. That was my first experience seeing that this does not have to be. There was no significant [academic performance] gap. That's the aspiration we're striving toward.

District 200 Oak Park and River Forest High School Supt. Joylynn Pruitt-Adams: College solidified why I got into education in the first place — and that was to remove barriers for black and brown children. I wanted to remove the perception that because of the color of my skin, I can't rise to the same level.

I once had a professor in my master's degree program ask me why I wanted a doctorate. That professor would say things like, 'You have a master's, isn't that good enough?' or 'How did you learn that?' I once had a counselor tell me I should have been a file clerk instead of a teacher. It was my mom telling me that, as a black female, I had to work harder than everyone else.

One of the things that drew me to Oak Park was that race was a key factor in every single meeting that I was in. It was about removing those barriers.

District 97 Oak Park elementary school Supt. Carol Kelley: I'm a product of public schools. I grew up in the inner city of Philadelphia. Public



ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

schools can totally change the trajectory of a student's life. So while neither one of my parents graduated from high school ... I was afforded that opportunity.

I feel like Joylynn and I can be sisters, because we had the same home experience (of living with parents who had high expectations for them). When I was in high school, I wasn't allowed to take home economics or things of that nature, but I was also blessed to have teachers in elementary school who helped my mother.

Philadelphia did a desegregation order when I was in elementary school. Now, *Brown v. Board of Education* was in 1945, so even 25 years later, schools were still very segregated by where you live. I had teachers who would take us to various sites in Philadelphia that we would never get to outside of our neighborhood. I had teachers who did not look like me who helped my mom and really advocated on my behalf. I think all students should have that. Unfortunately, that's not the norm yet, but I definitely feel that it's possible.

Wednesday Journal: Some people see the measures that the districts have taken to deal with



racial inequity and institutional racism and dismiss them as wrongheaded or as attempts to arouse 'white guilt.' How do you respond to those people and their concerns?

Supt. Pruitt-Adams: I don't know if we'll ever persuade them. There are some people who are so set in their ways that, for them, everything we do must be wrong. For me, it's about transparency and having them sit at the table. Every single committee we have, there's community and student voice at the table.

Supt. Edward J. Condon: It is challenging to have conversations in America, certainly in this day and age, around race and ethnicity. It's chal-

DIALOGUE: Superintendents Carol Kelley and Ed Condon join the Journal's Michael Romain and Supt. Joylynn Pruitt-Adams (left) to talk about equity.

lenging, of course, in different ways for different people based on their experiences and how they're walking through this world.

But there's a lot of research that indicates that two concepts in particular are really powerful and need to be acknowledged: stereotype threat and implicit bias. This is heavy stuff probably for all of us, in different ways, and it should be. But I'd encourage people to take solace in the idea that implicit bias exists in all of us. While it's not something we should embrace, we should at least have an awareness that we all carry with us these biases and that should be, in some ways, liberating.

Supt. Carol Kelley: I believe that when a lot of people sometimes hear terms like institutional racism or systemic racism, they take it personally. But it's really not about the people, it's about the system that has historically helped to produce the inequitable results we see. This applies to the adults and the students. It's not about fixing the students (I believe that all students can learn) — it's about fixing the system.

As system leaders, we have to really critically examine the systems we lead.

WATCH THE VIDEO

See the full conversation
at www.oakpark.com