

NAACP Berkshires  
Social Justice Action Committee

**Open to All Project**  
**Progress Report**  
**February 2020**

**Background**

The impetus for this project came from several incidents in Berkshire County reported in the press in which persons of color had legitimate complaints of being treated disrespectfully in Berkshire establishments, as well as from personal conversations with branch members on the same topic.

After some discussion at a branch meeting about various strategies for addressing the issue, the Social Justice Action Committee, at its planning meeting in fall 2018, decided to make this an action item. From the four current members of the SJAC, Pittsfield residents Drew Herzig and Rebecca Thompson agreed to take on the project.

From the outset, we saw that the work that needs to be done to improve the experience of people of color in local establishments needs to be owned and taken on primarily by White people. This work needs to be done in collaboration with and guided by people of color.

We also had no clear set of desired outcomes nor a specific plan for how to move forward. Our initial steps were mostly exploratory - feeling our way.

**Initial Steps**

We looked first for what others were doing. Through the internet, we identified two national organizations promoting local campaigns to address the issue - the American Independent Business Association's "Business Against Bigotry" initiative, and "Open to All", a coalition of business and government organizations. Both of these organizations have web sites and make resources available for local initiatives.

After reviewing the information, we decided that it made sense to begin small, rather than county-wide. We met with Cheryl Mirer, Executive Director of Downtown Pittsfield, in early March 2019 to explore the feasibility of collaborating with Downtown Pittsfield and to assess the level of potential interest in the issue among downtown businesses. Cheryl was supportive and interested and offered to speak with members of her board about their interest in exploring the issue. After several more discussions with Cheryl, it became clear that while there was support from Downtown Pittsfield, her situation as a one-person operation made it impossible for her to add this to an already full agenda.

Consequently, we decided to set up our own meetings with some downtown business owners to convey our concerns and assess the degree of interest in taking some action. Our intent and hope was that we would find both an interest in addressing the issue and a willingness among members of the downtown business community to use their existing resources and networks to take some ameliorating action.

Our initial meetings evoked concern about the issue and enthusiasm for taking some action. What emerged from those discussions was that we needed a dialogue between White business owners and persons of color to develop a common understanding of what it means to be “open to all.” Subsequent meetings with additional members of the downtown business community confirmed the desirability of this approach and helped us flesh out the details for a community conversation.

### **Planning for “What Does It Mean to ‘Be Open to All?’ - A Community Conversation”**

The program was scheduled for January 8, 2020 as part of the regular Branch meeting. We felt that was the best way to attract an audience. The auditorium of the Berkshire Athenaeum (public library) was reserved for this event.

All of the downtown business members we talked with were asked to have representatives attend as a panel of “listeners.”

We wanted the conversation to be focused and constructive, so we developed the following “Guiding Questions.”

- What makes you feel welcome or unwelcome when you enter a business establishment? When you interact with staff?
- What signs or cues (verbal or non-verbal) give you a feel for whether or not you are welcome in a particular business?
- What words or phrases describe a welcoming place where you would want to take your business?
- What words or phrases describe a place in which you feel unwelcome?
- Without naming a particular place, can you describe a situation in which you felt welcome?
- Without naming a particular place, can you describe a situation in which you felt unwelcome?

Success was contingent on having an audience that included a significant number of people of color who would be willing to share their views – either speaking at a microphone or putting their comments in writing for a moderator to read.

In mid-December we sent e-mails describing the program and including the “guiding questions” to as many organizational contacts we could identify, asking them to promote the program. After an enthusiastic response from Pittsfield Superintendent of Schools Jake McCandless, we enlisted special help from him to ensure some students would attend.

On January 2, 2020, we sent reminder e-mails to the same group of contacts and posted fliers in the library, at Habitat for Humanity, The Christian Center and in some laundromats. We also arranged for a Facebook event to be created and posted on the Branch website for sharing.

We asked Will Singleton, past President of the Branch, to moderate, as he is an experienced moderator and we wanted a person of color for that role. He worked with us to finalize the logistics.

We had the “guiding questions” printed on cards to distribute to every attendee. We hoped this would help keep the audience focused on the information we wished to elicit and also provide opportunity for anyone who did not wish to speak to respond in writing.

## **Holding the Conversation**

Our audience exceeded all our expectations in terms of size and diversity. We had printed 60 “guiding questions” cards and we ran out, as there were more than 70 people in attendance.

After a brief introduction of the purpose and format, the business guest panelists introduced themselves. There were seven in attendance – three from Greylock Federal Credit Union, two from Jan Perry Realty, one from Hotel on North, and Cheryl Mirer from Downtown Pittsfield. Two other potential guests, from Circa and Otto’s, had to cancel at the last minute because of unanticipated business obligations.

After this, the audience comment portion of the evening began. Taconic High School teacher Jamal Ahamad had arrived with written responses to the “guiding questions” from the students in his African-American Studies class. Moderator Will Singleton invited him to the podium to share those responses as the lead-off speaker. Before Jamal finished, a line had formed at the audience microphone.

The microphone line was steady for a full hour – probably between 25 and 40 speakers in all. Three White people spoke, two of whom described unpleasant experiences they felt were due to their age. The other speakers were persons of color, ranging in age from high school students to senior citizens. All the speakers did exactly as we had asked; they described situations without naming any specific businesses. They kept their remarks brief and spoke to the point. The moderator gave the business panelists opportunity to comment after every three or four speakers.

The speakers all had individual stories to tell, but there were identifiable patterns:

- being ignored;
- being followed or hovered over;
- false assumptions about financial capability, relationship status, criminal intent.

Two women spoke about the conflict they felt when they were treated badly in front of their children; how should they respond to provide the most constructive lesson for their children.

The speakers made a strong impression on the business panelists. One of the panelists apologized on behalf of the business community, and all of the panelists spoke about the need to make changes.

We had planned to end with asking the audience for ideas for next steps, but we ran out of time.

The event was covered by the media. Initially we were concerned this would keep people from speaking, but it did not. No one submitted anything in writing, they all came to the microphone to comment.

## **Follow-up**

*The Berkshire Eagle* had a lead story about the conversation in the next day’s paper in which several of the speakers were named and quoted. The coverage was even-handed.

The next day we received e-mail follow-up from Cheryl Mirer of Downtown Pittsfield to say she was going to seek some funding for training from the City of Pittsfield.

Billy Keane and Waterfall Perry of Jan Perry Realty have offered to support an event at Frameworks that would provide opportunity for members of the businesses community to have an introduction to cultural competency training regarding being welcoming to both people of color and to LGBTQ individuals.

The Black Economic Consortium plans to include this issue as one of its topics in an upcoming “idea jam.”

### **Desired Outcomes Going Forward**

We need to take steps to engage with the business community beyond the five businesses with which we began (Circa, Greylock Federal Credit Union, Hotel on North, Jan Perry Realty, Otto’s)

We would like to see the business community take ownership and leadership of this issue to plan and implement the steps they need to take, individually and collectively, to ensure that Pittsfield is truly Open to All.

We would like to see 1Berkshire incorporate this issue into their economic development planning – as something that if committed to county-wide could be a selling point to attract new businesses and a recruitment tool for employers.

NAACP Berkshires will continue to be part of this effort.

### **Long Term Goal**

Ultimately, we want to root out the pervasive xenophobia that is holding back moral and economic progress in the Berkshires. African Americans, other people of color, and all minorities can and must truly be part of this community.