

**NAACP Branch Meeting May 3, 2023**  
**Berkshire County Branch**

**Dennis Powell** (DP henceforth): Well good evening everyone. Ask that we can take a moment of silence and figure out what's going on with these mass shootings. We just had another one in Atlanta, Georgia, today even. One dead and four fighting for their lives. If we can just take a moment.

Thank you. I'm going to dispense with the minutes because I don't think that they were sent to our website yet.

An update on our treasurer. Marcus is busy changing all our records over to quickbooks. So by our next meeting we will be in excellent shape and he will be reporting out. He's also going to be doing a presentation along with his firm on investments so we're pretty excited about that. So that will be our presentation for our June meeting.

We found out that not only can the branch have a debit card but branches can invest if they have money to invest. So this is one thing that we are looking into. So a lot of good financial things happening with the branch. We will bring everyone up to speed next month.

This evening we are going to have a presentation from one of our members, Rebecca Thompson. And everyone knows Rebecca for her advocacy and work with the White Learning Circle, which was her brainchild. And has been a very successful program without our organization. So I am going to turn my video camera over to Rebcca and ask her to present to us this evening.

**Rebecca:** Thanks Dennis. Thasia, do I have the ability to share my screen?

**Thasia:** Do you see it Rebecca?

**Rebecca:** Yes. (Rebecca shared screen)

*(Rebecca then shared her screen with a powerpoint presentation and shared the following remarks:)*

Good evening everyone. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about white learning; and I also very appreciative to the Branch and especially members of thee Executive Committee for their support. Our two White Learning Programs are coming to an end for this cycle. They will start up again in October with a new group of white learners. Our initial program, the White Learning Circle has a prescribed syllabus of topics and learning resources with 17 sessions from October through May. Circle members take turns in providing leadership for each session. Our current Circle, the 3rd we have offered, is now in its last month and has 13

members. A total of 34 members of our community have participated in at least one Circle over the last 3 years. The White Learning Partners program is new this year. In this program, participants create personal plans for their white learning with guidance from a comprehensive Resource Packet. They are connected with 1-3 others as learning partners and agree to meet a minimum of once a month to share their individual insights and challenges. The entire group of all participants meets 3 times – a kick off meeting in October, a mid cycle sharing session in January, and a wrap up at the end in early June. There are 21 partners in the program this year, 11 of whom did not previously participate in a Learning Circle. In total, 45 community members, county-wide and a few from outside the county, have engaged in our White Learning experiences. What I most want to share with you is my own experience with white learning and why I believe it needs to be an essential and ongoing part of being an ally, partner, collaborator, or whatever term you use for a white person committed to ending white supremacy.

My remarks are directed towards white people as I have little I can add to what Black and other POC already know; I had heard the exhortation to “do the research” more than once from multiple DEI professionals, and I had the arrogance to believe I had already done it – that the exhortation did not apply to me. My serious journey began in early 2020, when a subset of the Branch Executive Committee began meeting with a consultant to develop a strategic plan. I was part of that group, though quite new to the Executive Committee. The group was fairly evenly divided between Black and white participants. As a result of the facilitator prodding us into frank discussions, there were some tense moments as we wrestled with some different perceptions between our Black and white members about the nature of the work we were doing and understandings we did or did not have in common. As a result, when we finalized the Branch vision for 2025, one of the vision statements included in it was: The level of awareness of equity and inclusiveness within the branch membership has improved significantly.

Personally, those tense discussions were a time of soul-searching and insight for me – when I began to really grasp how little I understood from the Black perspective. I finally realized, I too needed to do the research by seeking out Black voices – available in print and media.

I am an old-fashioned librarian; I LOVE books, so I began – initially in a somewhat haphazard way – to search out books by African-Americans; as memoir and history are favorite genres of mine, that is where I started. A whole new world opened up – and not an easy world for me to inhabit. Despite multiple graduate degrees, I had never learned in any detail about the role enslaved African Americans played in building this country nor the processes by which their enslavement was solidified over centuries. I plain did not understand the system of racism that infects everything in this country like a virus; and I gradually came to the realization that unschooled white people – like me – are the problem. While I was committed to doing the research and each book I read brought new understanding, it also moved me further into sadness, guilt, shame and regret; I wanted a support group. This was the genesis of the White Learning Circle in 2020.

Once I had to think through creating a syllabus for the Circle and chose to focus on the basics and the NAACP “gamechanger” topics, my own reading initially was guided by that syllabus; now I have branched out in many directions.

The process of identifying Black created titles to include in the White Learning programs resource lists has been eye-opening and exciting. There is so much rich, thought provoking, creative, material out there – and when important supported by research and data. It has been a clear lesson to me about why diversity matters. Those shaped by different perspectives ask different questions and reveal different truths. There have been many benefits for me as I continue my learning; I am no longer overwhelmed and incapacitated by guilt. I now approach my learning with curiosity. More importantly, I understand enough to speak up more frequently. And I am much more discriminating about my voting choices and intentional about where we spend and donate our money.

I don't think a White person can every truly understand what it means to be Black in America; we always can escape. But I have begun to experience gut wrenching sadness and anger when I encounter certain situations that would not have previously touched me so physically. In the Learning Circle I often encounter those who want to get past the learning to take action. Learning IS action; without knowledge whatever other form of action one takes may create more harm. Learning and other action must go hand in hand. As the world is not static, learning needs to be ongoing. I want to share with you a few excerpts from titles that have been challenging to me.

Under the skin (*read excerpt*)

The Body is not an apology (*read excerpt*)

No More Police (*read excerpt*)

The half has never been told - CONTENT WARNING (*read excerpt*)

I hope some of you will consider participating in one of our White Learning programs in the Fall. White Learning, however, only takes the choice to Engage. If you read 10 books a year, choose at least one that addresses issues of white supremacy. If you watch TV shows, make every 5th one something created by Black or other marginalized people, even if it doesn't immediately appeal. If you are into podcasts, follow at least one about anti-racism. If you are a news junky, check out a Black news source once a week. If nothing else, please subscribe to and regularly read The Anti-Racism Daily. It arrives in your email 6 days a week with content that is timely, informative, and provocative. You will learn so much. One of the questions that has haunted me over the last several years is how do we teach children about our history of slavery, so white children know, but Black children are not further traumatized.

Recently my partner in the White Learning Partners program told me about a book she had read to her class. I would like to share it with you.

(Rebecca then read this book which can be found via this youtube link: [An American Story](#))

Screen share ended)

**Rebecca:** So that is what I wish to share with you tonight. And I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

**DP:** What an amazing journey you have been on Rebecca. That's words that come to mind. And in reading that I can't help but sit here and think that that book would be banned.

**Rebecca:** /s banned. I'm sure it is banned.

**DP:** In that lies the problem. Of not being able to teach true history and not being able to educate our young white and Black children on true history. Even sadder for me was when I learned that the indigenous books from the great indigenous authors. They don't ban them because they don't read them because they don't exist in the eyes. We're in trouble, there's no other way for me to say it.

**Rebecca:** I guess I feel it's why we white people need to do this work and be out there sharing it with our families and all our networks. It just. . . I think that's a wonderful book for children. Kwami Alexander is a noted children's author. And he wrote that book specifically because learning about his 4th grade daughter was taught in school. And I think it's a book for adults as well. And the illustrations are just amazing:

*(Branch member asked name of book)*

**Rebecca:** An American Story.

**DP:** I think all the books you showed this evening were just powerful books. And I think those books should be put on our website. I think your testimony should go on our website in some way where people can really listen to it, be encouraged to buy the books and to read the books. Its got to be shared out on a big platform.

**Rebecca:** I didn't want to spend time on our website showing people the resources but all these books will be in the bibliography. (And welcomes recommendations). And I think there are many white people taking this journey, some of them are sitting with us today.

**Alisa Costa:** Rebecca I am very grateful for the leadership you have taken on this and I have benefited so much from all the resources that you've shown us and its been integral on my journey so I appreciate it.

**Don and Mary Lothrop:** Thank you Rebecca I think you've done a wonderful job. Just amazing. And it's my understanding that this whole thing was tapped. And if so, I'd love to send it to a bunch of people around the country who will find it useful and meaningful. So Dennis can you forward it to all us, the presentation which was just remarkable.

**DP:** Well because Rebecca did the work, we need her approval.

**Rebecca:** I have no problem with the approval, I don't know where the tape resides, but my only problem is the reading of the excerpts. You know they come from copyrighted works.

**Linda Kelly:** You didn't read much.

**Rebecca:** The only other thing is the slides of the book. That's the whole book. When I did it tonight, having worked in a library and higher education, I'm very sensitive to copyright issues and I knew I could get away with it under fair use because I wasn't going to be kept. . . The slides of every page of that book being sent out I would be uncomfortable with and I think it would be a liability for the branch.

**Linda Kelley:** That part could be cut. I posted in the chat that windsor public library has recorded a reading of An American Story and its on youtube. So that book could be cut out and the youtube could be posted.

**Rebecca:** Or people could get the book from their library. And the pictures are so much better than what you saw on your screen. . . .

**DP:** I think somehow we could cut that out and then insert the youtube telling. . .

**Linda:** Yes its a live reading in a classroom

**DP:** Thank you very much Rebecca and think back to sitting on your porch and look at where you have taken this idea and right from the very beginning made that decision that it was not the responsibility of the Black members of this org to teach the white members. And that was so powerful but you provided a safe place and space to have those discussions and to allow people to process their thoughts openly and feel safe about it. And at the same time ending each of the sessions with a black member of the EC to wrap up the session. I wish I could encourage more people to get involved. How is the other half of your project going?

**Rebecca:** The White Learning Partners. Well I have one partner and it's been very interesting working with her (talked about how they exchange ideas). Maybe

**Diane Wortis:** I can comment. I have two white learning partners and we meet by phone every other week. And share reading lists, share actions, occasionally talk about situations we've encountered. One of them has moved out of the area and has still stayed committed. . . It's been a powerful experience. So thank you Rebecca.

**Alisa Costa:** I've thought about whether the curriculum you put together Rebecca could be of benefit to other organizations in the county. The new DEI officer at the city of Pittsfield is in the process of building ambassadors in each department and it would be a benefit to have that curriculum and have those ambassadors partner. I think it could really benefit the community at large.

**Rebecca:** The first two years when we did the circle it was for members only. But this past year we recruited outside the membership by going directly to nonprofits and we invited - and most of the contacts were directly to the CEO's and we invited them to participate themselves and make the invite open to any one of their employees. We have a number of people from these organizations participating both in the circle and the partner program. At Shirley's behest, she and I did talk to the Pittsfield Public Schools. We had a meeting there. And they have been given the materials and told they can use them in any way they want. So there's nothing to stop anyone from taking the materials. I actually sent them out to a holiday greeting list in January. And told them- use them in your community. I know one woman emailed me back and told me that she is starting a group. I have no problem with anyone using any of the material.

**DP:** Ya know, reach one, teach one. That's all it takes. Reach one, teach one.

**Diane:** I have to say, I've done the circle twice. I echo others, great learning. I'm speechless. I'm especially grateful - there are two people who are younger. And it's been fascinating and also sad that the curriculum hasn't changed. Let alone the banned books. Their perspective has been especially noteworthy this year.

**Rebecca:** Well I didn't make much of this in the remarks I made. But in a certain way I understand why white people set this aside. Um, even well intentioned white people. But mostly white people who aren't here tonight. Because they have to accept things they don't want to accept. It's so easy to ignore, it's so much easier to ignore. One of the books I recently read that I didn't include here about reparations but it's from a Christian perspective and it's from two white ministers writing about why Christians must support and encourage and urge reparations within their churches. A reparations program. And ya know that's one of the most sad things to me about how the white christian church does not engage in this. Anyway, I appreciate that this was useful to all of you. I had an interesting time putting it together.

**DP:** Well, we really ought to put our heads together and come up with a format that enables us to get this out into the community. Then it may encourage individuals to join in October. So it's really about how do we (make it accessible) . . . It's something to work on. But again I can't thank you enough Rebecca, you have absolutely been such an ally to this org. And have brought us all along with your truth and your journey and your willingness to be so truthful. Yea.

*(President's Report)*

I want to report that our evening at the opening night for Haint Blu the Urban Bush Women was just absolutely amazing. Absolutely amazing. I personally have never experienced every emotion that a human being is able to feel or find themselves in, in one evening. It was just absolutely incredible. Yea. For those of you who had an opportunity to attend, if you want to say something. I mean this is the type of thing that - again it was about storytelling. It was about history, it was about truth. About different journeys. And it was about community. And it involved the entire community, all ages. And it was truly a moment where the community really spoke to everybody. I know it spoke to me. But just in talking with everyone else, it was really the same feeling. So it was an event that was worthy of our sponsorship - that gave us more than we gave

IT. And just looking forward to working with this group again sometime. I actually have talked to them and hopefully once we open the DuBois Center for Freedom and Democracy, the urban bush women will perform that opening and will write and choreograph a piece to commemorate that opening. We will raise the funds for that and it will be amazing. And we have Sabrina and Sandra Burton who I will work with because they know the group very well and this is gonna happen and I'm really excited about that.

Our Juneteenth celebration is really coming into its own. We met about the entertainment and the events. We are going to have a parade this year. From Persip park on the corner of Columbus and north, we will march down Columbus avenue to Durant Park. And that will open the celebration. We are also going to honor a beautiful sprout by the name of Emma Kennedy. She is 100 years old from the westside community. She'll be in a vehicle and will be the Grand Marshall. I can't help but think what the children in that park will feel when they will get to talk to someone who is 100 years old. It will be an amazing event for her. She'll be included in our graduation ceremony. Mrs. Kennedy will hand the envelope to the students who are awarded.

More to come on that. Again the committees are listed on our website, so please reach out.

Civil Rights Bus tour is still in the process. The only reason I haven't identified the price is because I'm meeting with 3 funding sources and hopefully will be able to reduce the costs through their sponsorship. I believe we will have 20 - 25 seats available that we will open to the membership. I'll have that info available in the next week or so.

Our affiliation with Greylock- I've mentioned that they started a program where all new members can become NAACP members for one year, via Greylock's sponsorship. So far- this started in January. To date we are up to about 60 new members due to this new program. Each month we receive their names and a check from Greylock. Again, they continue to be a tremendous partner and ally of our work and mission. That's all I have from my report.

Membership- I don't see Daryl here.

Shirley is not here either- unfortunately she is dealing with a death in the family, so our prayers go out to her.

I've been involved with Shirley and Antony- and continue to work through a lot of complaints. The only thing we have to look forward to is come June all kids will be out of school. Sad to see that throughout our county we are still receiving complaints of racism and bullying that is taking place in our public school system.

Helen- would you like to talk about your project coming up?

**Helen:** Sure. so the Political action committee has been very busy. We are planning a nonpartisan candidate training boot camp and its next Saturday on May 13th from 8:30 to 5 pm. We have four amazing speakers, all people of color who work in the political space throughout

Massachusetts. They do grass roots organizing and some of them do political consultants and they are gonna bring a wealth of knowledge i think to berkshire county. It'll be held at bcc- they are sponsoring the location. And we will provide breakfast and lunch and stipends for any students who are wishing to participate. We need lots of help promoting the event. It's gotten a last start in that regard. We have folks coming in for Boston and I really want them to have a full room. The day will end - the topics are overview and campaign structure, fundraising, legislating with equity and volunteers in the field. The legislation with equity idea came to us from Wendy Penner. She mentioned that there are people who are - once they are elected- have no idea how to connect their hopes of equitable policy to how they are voting. So that will be important to our program.

We will end the day with a panel discussion between speakers that I will moderate and we will live stream that portion of it on our facebook page. The rest of it will not be recorded. But that piece will. We are still waiting to hear from PCTV and maybe record and put it on their channels too. The panel discussion is about being a person of color in the political space and those kinds of experiences and the barriers that people of color face in this area- being elected and raising funds. Black women are notoriously underfunded in political campaigns. It will be really special but I'm a little nervous about promotions so if everyone could help promote that would be great. Any questions?

**Rebecca:** Helen I wonder whether there are MCLA, Williams College, whether they have Black student associations or Poli Sci departments could be a way to drum up some students. I'd be happy to look into that unless there's a better, more knowledgeable person to do it.

**Helen:** Yea that's a great point. Dennis is reaching out to Latesha Haynes from Williams but it would be great if you wanted to reach out to the Political Science Departments.

**Rebecca:** Sure I'd be happy to do that

*Sabrina in chat: Black student union at Simon's rock too*

**Helen:** Thanks Sabrina, we would also be glad if anyone at RSYP would like to participate we would love for them too

**Dennis:** We are paying a stipend to the young people because we really want them to come and start thinking about civil engagement. So I think I did hear Latesha and she's putting it up in the Davis center. I like Rebecca's idea cuz they are still in school so if we could just reach out to them cuz Williams does have a van, they could actually drive students here as well as MCLA. They have a van too.

**Helen:** Yea, so the stipend is not huge. It's only \$50. But its something, and they do get breakfast and lunch and an entire curriculum for free. We're really hoping for a lot of student engagement. You don't have to be running to attend. But if you're interested in learning more about how campaigns work, and potentially volunteering for a campaign. It would provide



foundational aspects for that. As well as any voting initiatives - . . . It would help with that as well. . . We have about 250 fliers that need to be put up around the county. So if you're interested in flirting as well as setting up and breaking down. I'm planning to be there at 8 am.

**Rebecca:** how do we get fliers? Maybe we just take a bunch of fliers and have the secretaries say which faculty member needs them

**Helen:** The fliers are in Darcie's hands so you can get them from Darcie. When you are reaching out to folks- utilize our networks - while its non partisan, its really important that the people we are training- believe in the NAACP and what we stand for.

**Sabrina:** Helen, we have 2 interns working with Andrea Campbell. One of them is getting the senior stipend - so it makes me think about this event. But then also - ways that I can just connect you and this group who are really already active. One already has a radio show. Mundo Latina.

**Helen:** That would be great. Kamar is also trying to organize rides. So if you're interested in driving let us know.

**DP:** Yea I did sign up to drive folks. So yea. . . Anyone else? We've been getting a lot of news media saying what a fantastic idea to do this. Cuz it's needed! Excellent

**Diane:** Did anyone have any contact with Simon's Rock? I have one contact there.

**Rebecca:** Sabrina said she would check in with Black student union at Simon's Rock

**DP:** AJ what's new with BBEC?

**AJ:** Hey everyone. So I'm kind of multi-tasking here so excuse me. I've got 3 announcements. The first is 5 North Street: it's the storefront recruitment grant. Please help us get the word out. Number 2 is the Black Arts council grant is now live and active for Black artists who want to pursue their artistry, ages 7 to 22, they can apply for arts infrastructure like camera, lenses, ballet shoes. It's a really great opportunity and we're proud of it. And last but not least. We have the I am afro street fair on Saturday June 17th, a street fair with local black vendors and activities for kids. We're excited about that opportunity because later that evening we'll bring people to Mass Moca for a live concert by Raiche. Help us get the word out and join us. The fourth announcement is the SBT Small Business Technical assistance grant from the mass growth capital cooperation is now live. And its a great RFP that can help support orgs that provide tech assistants to small businesses. So if you know any orgs, spread the word. Any questions?

**DP:** Well we've heard from Rebecca. So anything on website you want to mention Rebecca?

(No)

**DP:** Darcie is not here, our communications person and Kate had to leave but they are busy working on the fliers and everything for Juneteenth. Kate has just done an amazing job with the artwork and promoting all of our events. More to come.

Is there anyone that has anything they would like to bring up that might be happening that we don't know about?

**Sabrina:** Yea I do. I'm also multitasking. So I just wanted to - I don't always talk about the work at Railroad street but this seems pertinent but for the last few years we've been working with monuments on equity and inclusiveness. Railroad street is not a DEI org but we move where the students need and want to move. We've been supporting 6 leaders who have put forth demands for change- asking for things like a bilingual counselor, a language exchange program. 2 of these leaders this week put together a presentation for the entire high school on anti-racism. This is a huge deal for Monument. I have worked with them for 7 years and have never heard an admin talk about anti-racism with this language and they were fully behind this. The students are putting together a panel. (Sabrina spoke more about the details of the presentation) There is push back coming from the teachers. And some students. I will say that this is encouraging for this district to hear the superintendent to actually be behind anti-racism work. Also that they are bringing in Railroad street youth not to do the work but to collaborate with that. I just wanted to name that and uplift that. These are students of color who put themselves out there in such a courageous way. And my protective self is saying that they could be exposed to harm. They are also leading restorative circles for harm that teachers have done. The students are stepping into spaces that adults in the building should be doing. But yea I just wanted to share that.

**DP:** That is amazing. Would they be willing to do a presentation around what they are striving for at a general meeting of the NAACP so that we do the publicity on it- so that we can get people to tune in to listen to youth speak?

**Sabrina:** I like that idea. It makes me think how we can organize that with Shirley and get some cross county representation. I think we can ask. I could give some space and time to the students leading it now because they may not realize all of what its gonna take to process this work that they're doing.

**DP:** I was thinking maybe September that starts the academic year off with everyone coming aware of what's going on.

**Sabrina:** I think that's a great idea. I'll start talking with folks to gain interest.

**DP:** And if there are funds needed we can definitely sponsor it.

**Sabrina:** Great

**Rebecca:** Dennis this may be premature but would it be possible to put that in the pot for thinking about what happens at the Freedom Fund Awards

**DP:** Yea.

**Rebecca:** It seems like highlighting young people being willing to stick their neck out has some value.

**DP:** Oh absolutely. I like that. Definitely. Great. Anyone else?

**Diane:** Pedrito Martinez will be at the Mahaiwe on May 13th and there are codes available for comps and discounts.

**DP:** Ok great thank you. Anything exciting happening with Jacob's Pillow?

**Thasia:** Always exciting. I'm gonna stop there for now. We're gearing up for a big festival season. June 15th is the first third thursday. There will be dance in the commons.

**DP:** Well I can't make the motion but I'll entertain it.

**Rebecca:** Moved to adjourn

**AJ:** Second

**DP:** Thank you very much everyone. Be safe, enjoy the rain which we desperately needed. And appreciate everybody here.

\*As recorded by Marisa Massery via Zoom recording