

Human Rights Commission and Advisory Council minutes

Wednesday – October 5, 2011

7:30 pm – Newton City Hall – veterans conference room

Present:

Jane Brown, Peter Brown, Marianne Ferguson, Sheila Mondshein, Lillian Backman, Samuel Glass, Frank Wolpe, Judy Fischbach, Carol Kelley, Brenda Krasnow, Sona Petrossian, Officer Eric Rosenbaum
student representatives; Jordi Batler, Abby Coleman

Absent:

Dianne Chilingirian, Ann Capoccia, Carleton Merrill, Norman Lazarus, Joan Rubin, Nazik Kazimi Bruce Apotheker, Viviana Planine, Susan Thomas,

Meeting called to order at 7:30pm

Introductions

School updates

Students from NSHS gave a report on the panel discussion held on September 23, 2011. The novel 'Zeitoun' by Dave Eggers had been assigned as summer reading. The students thought the panel and small group discussions were worthwhile. They would like someone from the foundation to attend the next time. They also thought the program should be brought down to the middle school level.

Rachel's challenge is an upcoming program based in the story of a student victim of the Columbine tragedy. There are 100 students participating. Marianne announced that HRC will be cosponsoring Rachel's challenge.

Hate Crime/Incident Reports

Officer Eric Rosenbaum attended the meeting for Lt. Bruce Apotheker. He reported 2 hate incidents this past month that involved graffiti written on benches. The same penmanship was used. Both incidents are under investigation.

Approval of Minutes

Minutes from September 2011 were approved with 2 corrections the reports from Fair Housing section.

HRC organization

Marianne read an email from Mayor Warren to the commissioners dated 10-2-11. It read *“The Human Rights Commission was established to ensure equal access to city services, employment, education, and public accommodations for all Newton residents regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sex, age, disability, or sexual orientation. At the end of the charge in the city code, it states “to encourage and bring about mutual respect.” When I took office, I pledged to improve the nature of discourse and the way we handle disagreement in Newton – in other words, to renew the social compact, which has been under attack in this country as a whole. We can work on this for Newton.*

While discrimination still exists and we must be vigilant in fighting against all forms of discrimination, it strikes me that a more subtle form of attack against the social compact has surfaced in this country. In a time of economic hardship and uncertainty, many of our citizens have turned inward to “protect their own”.

I would like the Human Rights Commission to consider how we continue to fight against discrimination and model a phrase our Governor uses “to see our own stake in one another” through your goals for the year and your plans for programming. I will expect to discuss this with each person applying to be a commissioner when I conduct my one-on-one meetings this fall. While we are working through the membership of the Commission, I hope you all will articulate goals and continue to work. “

Marianne spoke about the organization and the structure. She made a list of past committees on an easel so that the group could discuss them and decide if this structure would be the best way to proceed. The committees listed were; communication, education, outreach, hate/crime grievance, program, ad hoc and membership. The discussion was centered on the question about what the work would be if the committees continued. Frank suggested having a liaison person instead of committee as this structure works well on his crime commission. Many members expressed their opinions about having committees.

The group then began to talk about the goals and mission of the HRC. Peter said he viewed the commission has a couple of charges; programs, response to complaints (by ordinance) and conducting meetings. Brenda talked about the successful programs held over the years and said many topics have been done in a series. Carol said we should be looking at current issues and what is of interest to the people of Newton now. Sheila read a paragraph from the HRC brochure that seemed to capture the mission of the commission. Marianne suggested taking a vote on whether or not to have committees. Linda said she has observed that programming gets accomplished by various members who take the lead with a particular program. Marianne refocused the discussion on the goals and mission. She wrote on the easel *“the commission is empowered to assist victims of civil rights violations within the City and to enlist the cooperation of organizations to help eliminate discrimination and achieve harmonious inter group relationships. Encourage and bring about mutual understanding and respect among all persons in the city and by the elimination of unlawful discrimination.”*

Programs for 2011-2012

Marianne said there are a few upcoming programs.

'Beyond Belief' and 'Warmth of Other Suns' at the Newton Free Library
Rachel's challenge in October, MLK celebration in January, Days of Remembrance in April and the Mayor's Prayer breakfast in May.

Sheila suggested a program of panelists focusing on prejudice. This was done in the past and entitled "Challenging Prejudice in Newton and Beyond". Peter talked about the secure communities issue. This covers law enforcement, immigration and discrimination. Brenda spoke about various topics covered in past programs and Marianne wrote them on the easel. Marianne asked members of the group to volunteer for each topic.

Challenging Discrimination and Prejudice (covers racism, gay rights, religion) - Brenda, Sheila, Judy and Sona

Immigration – Peter and Jane

Domestic Violence – Marianne and Jane

Gay Rights – Marianne and Brenda

Judy asked about the philosophy of the group and asked if every person should volunteer to be on a committee. Linda asked if there would be committees. Marianne said there would not be formal committees but members could volunteer to lead a program.

Other Business:

Peter asked if there were any additional interested people to join the commission. Linda said she understood from Sarah Ecker that 2 people had expressed interest so far. Linda said the process to address the reappointment of commissioners (whose terms have expired) is underway and that the Mayor expected to decide by the end of December.

Jane said she read "Zeitoun". Marianne suggested that all members read it. Discussion groups can be set up if anyone is interested.

Brenda asked about a vote for chairperson. Marianne said this usually takes place in October but in all fairness will be scheduled after the new year. Linda said the ordinance calls for an annual vote. This will take place in January once the complement of members is settled. Marianne said she intends to work until she is told not to. Peter said he was told that expired commissioners can serve until such time as a successor is named.

Linda announced that advisory council member Susan Rosenthal resigned. She moved to Needham.

Meeting adjourned 9:20pm

