

Needham Human Rights Committee Meeting Minutes
January 21, 2016

Marlene Schultz, co-chair, called the meeting to order at 7:35pm in the conference room of the Broadmeadow School.

Committee members in attendance: Marlene Schultz (co-chair), Ashok Mehta, Jennifer Howard, Abdul Cader Asmal, Barry Ehrlich, Jeremy Sutherland (Recorder), Cynthia Ganung, John Schlitter, NPD liaison.

Committee members absent: Amelia Klein (co-chair), Jo-Anne Coffey-McCormick, Bud Shram

Guests in attendance: Amy Yok-Ming Wong, Patrick Burns

1. Minutes of the December 17, 2015 NHRC meeting were unanimously approved.

2. Public Comment

- a. Community Members Amy Yok-Ming Wong and Patrick Burns attended the meeting to discuss a pattern of worrisome and racially charged incidents in Needham Elementary Schools. They described experiences meeting with town officials which passed without meaningful change, and encouraged the NHRC to take action to help the district to take action. They especially advocated reexamining early education curriculum to address these issues of tolerance and acceptance. The committee discussed possible plans of action, including building relationships with teachers and guidance counselors and approaching the school board. NHRC members agreed that this is an issue of culture in the schools and that it should be addressed first through the lens of general student behavior as well as through improved diversity training for students and teachers. The committee returned to discussion of this item at the close of the meeting, and expressed an interest in approaching school officials about what occurred in order to better understand the scope of the problem and how the support of the NHRC may best be applied to this scenario. NHRC members concluded that the best course of action would be to reach out to these community members to offer support and counseling as they address this issue with the schools. Barry also mentioned the possibility of the NHRC beginning to work with schools on gathering data (potentially through survey methods) about classroom culture in Needham schools to aid the district in addressing these issues.

3. Old Business

- a. Committee Members: Tragically, NHRC member Zahra Haghghatijoo passed away this past month. We appreciate and honor her passion for this work. A card was sent to her family from the committee expressing our sincere condolences. We have an opening for two additional members, and are especially interested in recruiting students. Please be on the lookout for others interested in joining with us to do our work.

4. Reports

- a. NHRC Statement (Barry): There has been discussion among committee members about releasing a statement to address recent issues of prejudice in public discourse in the US. Barry and Abdul both created drafts with varying perspectives on how best to address these issues. Marlene began the process of combining the two into one cohesive statement, which the committee adjusted and approved. Barry has accepted the responsibility of submitting this statement, titled “To Bigotry No Sanction” to local newspapers and including it on the NHRC website.
- b. Community Conversation February 4: Flyers have gone up for our upcoming event “A Conversation with our Muslim Neighbors About Islam. A very active subcommittee has been working hard to quickly organize and promote this important event. The event will include time for a showing of the short film “American Muslims: Facts or Fiction”, a panel discussion moderated by Rabbi Jay Perlman, and a question and answer session as well as some informal conversation among guests. Marlene has been interviewed by the Needham Times for a promotional article, and Abdul sent a letter to the Editor. The event will also be publicized through a display at the Needham Public Library and an ad in the Needham Times paid for by a generous anonymous donor, and promoted by Needham Clergy. The Needham Channel is also planning to record the event for later broadcast. The committee engaged in lively debate over refreshments for guests. Marlene and Jon briefly discussed police and fire forms for the event, which Jon agreed to handle. Committee members emphasized the importance of time for personal dialogue and the possibility of future events to address these issues.
- c. Educational Forum with AGSA: Amelia and Marlene are continuing the process of organizing this event with AGSA students and have a meeting scheduled for the coming weeks.
- d. MLK follow up: Marlene offered thanks to everyone involved, and especially to Cynthia who was instrumental in organizing the NHRC’s contributions. The Committee was excited that many people are referring to it as “the best one yet!”
- e. Photography Exhibit: Still in progress
- f. Needham Schools: Jeremy briefly described an active petition to the high school administration to create a gender-neutral bathroom. This petition is being discussed among school department officials and the school is looking at possible courses of action.

5. New Business

6. Other

Upcoming Recorders:

February 25 (4th Thursday) - Jennifer

March 17 - Amelia

April 28 (4th Thursday) - Ashok
May 19 - Bud
June 16- Barry Ehrlich

Meeting adjourned at 9:04 pm.

NEXT MEETING THURSDAY, February 25, 2016 7:30PM.