

Community Conversation focuses on the impact of 'Implicit Bias'



Panelists including Dr. Thomas Craemer, Dr. Johanna Wald, and Dennis Parker, Esq., led the discussion on implicit bias in a Community Conversation at Riverfront Community Center. Photo by Rachel Hill.

By Rachel Hill Reminder News

The Glastonbury MLK Community Initiative (GMLKCI) recently held a Community Conversation called "Implicit Bias: How It Impacts Our Community." Made possible by the Norma & Natale Sestero Fund at Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, this well-attended event was held at the Riverfront Community Center on June 25.

Designed to bring together diverse Glastonbury residents, these conversations were started in 2001 "to create deeper connections through meaningful dialogue." The GMLKCI is an organization "dedicated to utilizing the philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to engage the community in a shared sense of belonging."

The panel included Dr. Thomas Craemer, associate professor in the Department of Public Policy at the University of Connecticut; Dennis Parker, Esq., director of the ACLU Racial Justice Program; Dr. Johanna Wald, director of strategic planning for the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School; and facilitator Janee Woods.

The meaning of "implicit bias," as explained by the panelists, is defined as attitudes and stereotypes that affect understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner, based on race, ethnicity, age or appearance.

Craemer began the discussion on racial divide with a data presentation and explained a study that tests for bias with a series of word associations, measuring reaction time in subjects. The conclusion was that both negative and positive feelings about a person or group could and do co-exist, which was surprising, he said. Based on these findings, people tend to either avoid or approach, and evaluate objects as well as people. This evidence demonstrates a conflict with our conscious attitude.

Parker looked at some everyday examples having to do with hiring practices and bias in the workplace, and student expectations and behavior in the classroom. There are what's called "micro-aggressions," or hidden messages communicated to students that have a negative effect, and a self-fulfilling prophesy in education, explained Parker. "If students are treated differently, it affects their performance... our similarities are greater than our differences."

Wald talked about some strategies and solutions to what she called "shocking research." In one example, Wald showed a video of a Caucasian man trying to pry open a bike lock, as part of a study. In this case, people who noticed this behavior, which looked like an obvious crime, gave the man the benefit of the doubt. In a similar study, an African-American man was put in the same situation, only this time he was met with immediate action. People in this scene confronted him, took photos, and called 911.

"There is an automatic association here that is profound," said Wald. Some solutions to "de-bias" are to acknowledge that a bias exists and pay attention to when it happens, then practice breaking the habit and replacing negative associations with positive. Also, increasing opportunities for contact are helpful in squelching stereotypes, Wald said.

"Acknowledgement is one piece of a larger issue of inequality. Biases are malleable," said Wald. "Get to know people as individuals, and gain perspective on how it would feel if you were that person."

For more information about GMLKCI, visit <http://www.glastonburymkci.org>.