

Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative to host conversation on Critical Race Theory

By Steve Smith
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Glastonbury — The Glastonbury MLK Community Initiative (GMLKCI) will be presenting a timely and topical community conversation on Critical Race Theory, on May 9.

“Our mission is to inform people about social justice issues, and then inspire them to take action,” said GMLKCI President Leslie Ohta. “This has been a divisive issue in Glastonbury. It’s an issue nationwide.”

Critical race theory is a way of thinking about America’s history through the lens of racism. Scholars developed it during the 1970s and 1980s in response to what they viewed as a lack of racial progress following the civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

It centers on the idea that racism is systemic in the nation’s institutions and that they function to maintain the dominance of white people in society.

The architects of the theory argue that the United States was founded on the theft of land and labor and that federal law has preserved the unequal treatment of people on the basis of race. Proponents also believe race is culturally invented, not biological.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, executive director of the African American Policy Forum, a social justice think tank based in New York City, was one of the early proponents. Initially, she says, it was “simply about telling a more complete story of who we are.”

Moderator for this conversation is Dean Alfred Carter, an educator, sociologist, and humanist, who has hosted several of the GMLKCI’s conversations.

Panelists include John Brittain, J.D., who is a tenured professor of law at the University of the District of Columbia, and served there as acting dean from 2018 to 2019. He also previously served as a tenured law professor at the University of Connecticut School of Law for 22 years.

Brittain was one of the original counsel team in *Sheff v. O’Neill*, the landmark school desegregation case decided by the Connecticut Supreme Court in 1996, and is presently a part of a legal team representing private plaintiffs in a federal lawsuit against the State of Maryland for denying Maryland’s historically black institutions of higher learning comparable and competitive opportunities with traditional white universities.

Brittain may discuss the positions of critics of CRT, such as whether Critical Race Theory is factually incorrect and ignores important historical facts, such as the abolitionist movement among white

Christians in the pre-Civil War period, and ignores the ideological underpinnings of CRT which insinuates that America was founded on racism alone and therefore all institutions have been tainted by it.

Another panelist is Paquita Jarman-Smith, consultant, State Education Resource Center (SERC).

Jarman-Smith has a MA degree in education from New York's Bank Street College of Education and is an adjunct instructor of Special Education and Interventions at Central Connecticut State University. She has been a consultant at SERC since 2006, specializing in Early Childhood leadership, administration, and supervision.

Jarman-Smith will contribute to the discussion around CRT and education, and the importance of adding the African-American, Black, Puerto Rican, and Latino studies to the public school curriculum.

Journalist Mark Pazniokas rounds out the panel. A 1979 graduate of Boston University, Pazniokas was a staff writer at the Hartford Courant from 1984 to 2009. He is a co-founder of the CT Mirror, an online news site owned by the Connecticut News Project, where he has been the Capitol Bureau Chief since September 2009.

Pazniokas will discuss his research about CRT, much of which has been published in an article titled "Critical race theory roils school board race in Guilford, a town long open to a study of slavery."

According to Pazniokas, "Voters in other scattered suburban towns - Glastonbury among them - also said they were drawn to the polls this year to register concern about critical race theory or opposition to conservatives intent on putting it ahead of traditional concerns about school spending and quality."

Pazniokas will discuss how Critical Race Theory was used in the 2021 municipal races, especially Guilford, and how it might be employed in 2022.

There is little to no evidence that critical race theory itself is being taught to K-12 public school students, though some ideas central to it, such as lingering consequences of slavery, have been.

Ohta said that she views CRT as a collection of facts.

"It's a construct. It's a theory. I analogize it to science or medicine," she said. "You make a lot of observations, and those are facts. Then, the theorists come in and say 'all of these facts, this is a theory.' CRT is very similar to that. You have historical facts, including zoning and slavery, and all kinds of facts showing systemic racism. Those facts are what are being taught and should be taught."

Having converted to virtual meetings since the start of the pandemic, Ohta said this will be the last virtual-only conversation, with the anticipated return of in-person (but hybrid) forums, beginning with the next one in June, about juvenile justice.

This is a free event open to all. For additional information, please contact Ohta at 202-538-1161 or at leslieohta@gmail.com, or visit www.glastonburymlkci.org.

To register, please log onto the Glastonbury MLK Community Initiative website, at www.glastonburymlkci.org and click on "Register."