

Unity in the Community: Erasing Racism in San Leandro

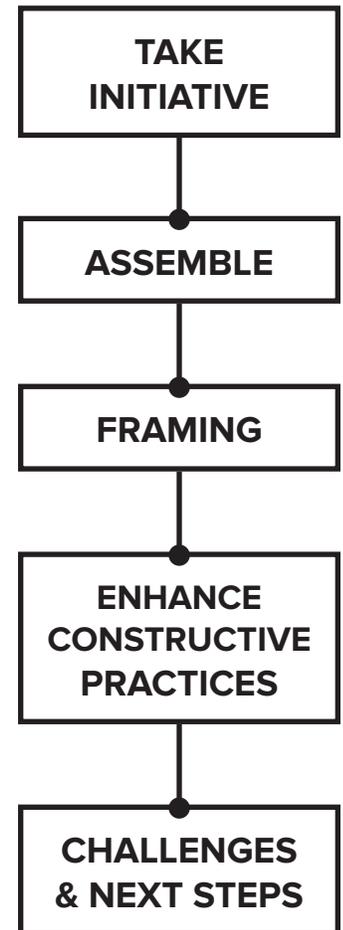
This case study tracks the volunteer-based Unity in the Community – San Leandro, as it convenes, evolves, develops, and works to implement a structure to end racism in San Leandro, California. The effort, which began in March 2016, is convened by a core group of volunteer-leaders from San Leandro’s civic community.

INITIATIVE

Residents found racist graffiti targeting minority communities in San Leandro’s Marina Park. A local school was found tagged with hate-laced graffiti. A decades-old African-American owned barbershop was defaced with racist, defamatory language.

It was winter 2016 in San Leandro, California. Because of these events, former City Council Member Surlene Grant’s “sensitivities were hurt,” her “spirit was crushed.” She thought San Leandro evolved from its past and was “not that town anymore.” Initially elected to City Council in 1998 as San Leandro’s first African-American Council member, Grant is an aberration of San Leandro’s longstanding history of structural racism and visual racial disparities. According to Grant, in the 1990’s San Leandro “had an identity of being a segregated place... when black people dr[o]ve into town they got stopped.” While driving on her own street in the 1990’s, a police officer pulled Grant over for alleged “erratic” driving. The officer was surprised when Grant pointed to her house and offered to walk home. Likewise, when she broke City Council’s color barrier in 1998, some civic leaders refused to speak with her, “not even a hello,” she said, emphasizing their contempt.

In contrast, modern San Leandro is a diverse community comprised of African-American, Pacific Islander, Asian, white, and other populations. In the wake of this string of hate incidents, it was as if San Leandro turned the clock back two decades. On March 28, 2016, Grant called Bernard Ashcraft, a mentor and the founder and chief executive of the Bay Area Business Roundtable, a longstanding organization that works to bridge societal gaps between business and communities. Long involved in San Leandro institutions and non-profits, Ashcraft is well known in the community for dedicating his career to community-race relations. According to Grant, Ashcraft announced, “we will have an emergency meeting – I’m telling everyone to come to my office at two o’clock.” Grant responded, “People are not going to come to your office at two o’clock – it’s ten o’clock now!”



ASSEMBLE a planning group

Ashcraft outlined his initial goals for the emergency meeting: “to get the council, mayor, others to respond forcefully and send a message that [hate] will not be tolerated in this new San Leandro,” and for “white folks to speak out” against hate.

With a few hours to prepare, Ashcraft called the press, and Grant and Ashcraft reached out to community stakeholders. Twelve stakeholders attended the emergency meeting including representatives from the African-American Chamber of Commerce, the Police Chief, a school board representative, the executive director for the Davis Street Family Resource Center (a social service orientated nonprofit), and a couple of current and former City Council members.

San Leandro Police Chief Jeff Tudor described his participation at the emergency meeting as “the right thing to do.” City Council Member Benny Lee described the initial gathering of community leaders as an “opportunity to make change . . . to identify what the issues are . . . to make policy change to dispel” issues related to hate and race relations in the community. Former City Council Member Diana Souza explained, “People didn’t hesitate to engage.”

The newly formed group considered how to respond to recent hate incidents collectively. They discussed programmatic material, considered how to reach out and work with schools and parents, suggested ideas for facing hate, looking to neighboring communities for ideas (e.g., the City of Hayward posts street signs which state “no room for racism”), and identified opportunities for collaboration with existing non-profits (e.g., with Not In Our Town¹). Souza recalled, “Everyone had the same end game, but different paths were proposed.” The group quickly realized “we had the same priorities from different perspectives.”

At subsequent meetings, the group settled on a definition for Unity in the Community: “Community stakeholders with a deep history in San Leandro committed to erasing racism, with short and long term strategies.” UITC articulated its mission to “erase racism in San Leandro,” and identified a vision for “a community free of racism where we embrace and celebrate our differences.” UITC identified history as the catalyst for coming together: “what has brought us together are the recent local incidents in San Leandro and the nation, in regards to hate crimes.” UITC identified four concrete actions steps: organizing a community rally; developing stronger ordinances on hate crimes; hosting community town hall events with open and honest discussions; and, developing a speaker series through the City of San Leandro.

Perhaps because they convened the March 2016 emergency meeting, Grant and Ashcraft are the de facto leaders of the group, with Grant facilitating meetings and reaching out to regular UITC participants to develop and vet meeting agendas and ideas. Grant recalls one of her UITC colleagues confirming her leadership role: “We made you the leader – we didn’t ask you to be the leader.” UITC regularly invites guest speakers to its meetings to provide inspiration, guidance, and direction to the group ranging from the Alameda County District Attorney’s office, and World Trust² founder and director Dr. Shakti Butler, to Divided Community Project Director Grande Lum.

UITC meetings focus on event planning, developing strategy to develop stronger ordinances on hate crimes, and discussion of recent hate incidents in the community and nationally. Grant notes “whenever we get ready to meet, something happens” which feeds UITC’s work and conversations. In 2016, the group discussed local hate incidents, tragic deaths of African-American men across the country, the tragedy at Pulse Nightclub, and the tone of the Presidential election. In 2017, UITC discussed the effect of the Presidential election and subsequent executive orders on local immigrant populations. At one early meeting, the group discussed the young man who was arrested for tagging the San Leandro school building with hate-laced graffiti. Grant recalled the police reporting the young man was “full of hate”—he did not realize he was tagging the school; he thought he was tagging a church. As UITC convenes in fall 2018, Grant anticipates discussing how recent violence at neighboring Oakland’s BART stations affects the San Leandro’s unity and inclusiveness.

After two years of work, UITC continues to host meetings on a monthly basis – open to any member of the San Leandro Community. Since March 2016, there have been few public hate incidents in San Leandro, but Grant explains there are still racist incidents at some level that “require a space” for the average community member to say something. UITC continues to be a vehicle for speaking out against hate in the community.

FRAMING to unify a community against hate

“When community leaders unify, they stay unified, rather than divide in tumultuous times.”

– Jeff Tudor, Chief, San Leandro Police Department

Responding to the string of hate incidents in San Leandro, the national political climate in advance of the 2016 Presidential election, and national tragedies like the Pulse Nightclub shooting and the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, UITC began organizing a rally to speak out against racism in the community. Some UITC coalition members were concerned that use of the phrase “rally” might invite an array of protestors from across the Bay Area. According to Chief Tudor, UITC agreed to shift the framing of the event from a “rally” against racism to a “Unity Walk,” aimed at bringing the San Leandro community together in the face of hate.

On September 24, 2016, UITC hosted their Unity Walk to support the diversity of the community and San Leandro’s “evolution into a multi-race, diverse, and progressive city.” More than a hundred diverse community members walked from San Leandro High School to City Hall. Ashcraft recalled children carrying signs opposed to racism walking next to Black Lives Matter advocates. An eight-year-old white girl spoke out against racism, carrying a sign proclaiming, “she would not be silent.”

Chief Tudor views his role as an opportunity to make peace and improve relationships. The Unity Walk enabled San Leandro law enforcement to begin breaking down stereotypes and divisions between community members and law enforcement suggesting the Unity March was an opportunity to form relationships that may not otherwise exist. Councilmember Lee agreed that the Unity Walk was a “first effort to work together with the police.” Not only did San Leandro residents need to vent about the police-community relations and racism in the community; the community needed to begin working collaboratively with public safety officials.



ENHANCE CONSTRUCTIVE PRACTICES

With intention, UITC strives to enhance ordinances targeting hate speech. UITC members considered how to affect change, listening to experts from the legal and law enforcement community, and identifying how government regulates hate speech at local, regional, statewide, and national levels.

Grant admits UITC is still working to enhance hate crime penalties, but the group keeps hitting roadblocks: “People keep telling us we cannot do this.” Souza identified jurisdictional challenges in strengthening ordinances targeting hate speech, noting the San Leandro often does not have jurisdiction to charge individuals for hate incidents – instead, the burden falls with the county, state or federal government.

Recognizing the lack of action to strengthen laws targeting hate speech, Ashcraft admits UITC needs to refocus its energy. “We have an atmosphere in the country . . . which emboldens people,” so the group must continue to advocate. Souza agreed, “Now people are more opinionated and boisterous.”

While UITC has hit a series of roadblocks regarding enhanced hate speech legislation, UITC members have observed increased trust and collaboration in the community. Chief Tudor described a recent rally in Root Park, which is only a few blocks from City Hall, as a peaceful gathering of the San Leandro community in response to several tragic national events.

UITC members attend many of these events as advocates for the community. When Chief Tudor attends, he explains that most community members see him as “Jeff” rather than Chief Tudor. In part, because of UITC, Chief Tudor believes police-community relations are enhanced. Community members view Chief Tudor and his staff as more “approachable”.

UITC has also developed a record of supporting educational and dialogue-focused community events. Annually, UITC hosts MLK events focused on race, privilege and racism. Standing out among other collaborative events, in December, 2016 UITC partnered with the City of San Leandro to host Tim Wise, a nationally prominent anti-racism and white privilege speaker. UITC leaders view these events as opportunities to educate the community about race and privilege.

CHALLENGES & NEXT STEPS

Formed as a group of community volunteers responding to divisive hate incidents, during its first few months UITC built energy and momentum for its Unity Walk. However, the engagement of UITC members ebbs and flows. UITC members appear energized to plan for and organize events like the Unity Walk and the annual MLK Events, but according to Councilmember Lee, participation often shrinks “back down to the core group” following a UITC event.

UITC’s work has shifted – from reacting to a series of hate incidents to developing proactive initiatives to face hate and community division. Proactive work is more challenging. “People don’t think we need” proactive work because, according to Souza, “They don’t want to admit there are issues.” Chief Tudor recognizes the challenge of proactively organizing and directing the focus towards a mission, especially when you are dealing with community professionals and volunteers.

Nonetheless, core UITC leaders have ideas for future work. Ashcraft suggests UITC should “bring in a lot more people,” “do a better job of outreach to avoid complacency,” and “go after funding.” Several UITC members suggested expanding the group’s work to address all community divisions, to address concerns related to minority hiring practices and the selection of minority contracts, and to take measured steps for enhance legislation against hate incidents. Ashcraft further proposed going after grant funding to staff UITC.

William “Bill” Froehlich developed this case study. Bill is the Deputy Director of the Divided Community Project and the Langdon Fellow in Dispute Resolution at The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law. Bill is grateful to Surlene Grant, Bernard Ashcraft, Jeff Tudor, Benny Lee, and Diane Souza for giving up their valuable time to sit for an interview about the project. Bill sincerely appreciates the support and guidance of the Divided Community Project’s steering committee, particularly Craig McEwen, Nancy Rogers, Josh Stulberg, and former project director Grande Lum. Bill can be reached at Froehlich.28@osu.edu.

Endnotes

- 1 For more information about Not In Our Town: <https://www.niot.org/>.
- 2 For more information about Dr. Butler and the World Trust: <https://world-trust.org/dr-shakti-butler/>.

The Divided Community Project's **Community Resiliency Initiative** is a coalition of organizations and volunteers who support communities seeking to transform community division into forward-looking action. As of July 2018, the Divided Community Project anticipates publishing case studies from five partner communities: Rochester, New York; Orlando, Florida; San Mateo County, California; Columbus, Ohio; and, San Leandro, California.

For more information about the Divided Community Project, take a look at our website, <http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/dividedcommunityproject>, or email Deputy Director William "Bill" Froehlich at Froehlich.28@osu.edu.

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Additional publications from the Divided Community Project are available as follows:

- Facing Hate (forthcoming, 2018)
- The Midland Simulation: A Tabletop Exercise on Community Division During Civil Unrest (regularly updated), email Froehlich.28@osu.edu for more information
- Divided Communities and Social Media: Strategies for Community Leaders (2017), go.osu.edu/DCPsm
- Planning in Advance of Civil Unrest (2016), go.osu.edu/DCPpia
- Key Considerations for Community Leaders Facing Civil Unrest: Effective Problems-Solving Strategies that have been used in Other Communities (2016), go.osu.edu/DCPk

In addition to the AAA-ICDR Foundation, The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, the JAMS Foundation, the Kettering Foundation, the Jacques M. Littlefield Foundation, Nextdoor, the Ohio State University Emeritus Academy, and the Ohio State University Democracy Studies Program also support the Divided Community Project.



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