

Arts Groups Band Together to Advance Diversity and Inclusiveness - Evanston RoundTable

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Arts Groups Band Together to Advance Diversity and Inclusiveness

By Les Jacobson

Some 125 people, including representatives of more than a dozen local arts groups, met Oct. 19 to discuss how to improve diversity and inclusiveness in Evanston arts organizations.

The meeting, which took place at Fleetwood-Jourdain Community Center, was the first of what organizers hope will be an ongoing series of discussions, training sessions, and, eventually, action plans for the four founding members of Enrich Evanston. They are the Evanston Symphony, Evanston Dance Ensemble, Actors Gymnasium, and North Shore Choral Society.

“We were very happy with the number and diversity of people who attended,” said Penelope Sachs, past Board Chair of Evanston Community Foundation and currently a director of YWCA–Evanston/North Shore. Arts groups represented at the meeting included Mudlark Theater, Light Opera Works, Northwestern University’s Block Museum, Open Studio, Dance Center Evanston, Old Town School of Folk Music, Raven Theater, Oak Park Art League, Wheaton College, Oakton Community College, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

“And there were many visual artists attending and a good smattering of people from foundations,” she added. “We thought people did discuss and did get engaged.”

Ms. Sachs said the workshop was the opening initiative “of a year-long commitment on behalf of the four founding organizations” in Enrich Evanston to work on inclusion and diversity. “We are basically all-white organizations, with the Dance Ensemble and Actors Gymnasium being further along the path to integration. But we did want to



Dr. Gilo Kwesi Logan addresses participants at the Enrich Evanston workshop.
RoundTable photo

hear from a wider group and have people of color contribute to our discussion.”

To that end, Ms. Sachs invited Dino Robinson, Founder and Director of Shorefront Legacy, to speak about local African American cultural history, and diversity consultant Gilo Kwesi Logan to lead table breakout sessions.

“Dr. Logan, who is our racial equity trainer for the year, thought that a session on the racial history and make-up of Evanston would be useful to us. Hence the workshop,” Ms. Sachs explained.

After a brief introduction by Ms. Sachs, Dr. Logan kicked off the meeting by encouraging people to “reflect, introspect, connect, project, and accept” ideas and work toward facilitating “sensitivity, awareness, and action.”

He showed a ward map of Evanston and asked people to assess the racial and ethnic makeup of the City. Some of the surprising takeaways included:

- More than 80% of Evanston whites live in just two Wards – the sixth and seventh.
- The fifth Ward has the largest concentration of blacks, but they comprise less than half (41.5%) of the ward.
- 21% of Evanston families have a combined annual income of less than \$50,000.
- 80% of black public school students (more than 3,000) and 10% of white students live in low-income households.
- Whites make up 66% and blacks 18% of the City’s population. Hispanics comprise 9% and Asians 8.5% (with rounding), according to the latest census.

Participants were then asked to discuss a number of pointed questions posed by Dr. Logan, such as “What assumptions [about race and ethnicity] can serve as barriers to diversity?” and “How can art...help break down some of the barriers between us?”

Dr. Logan concluded by encouraging people to “get out of your comfort zone. Your being here says you’re willing to do that. That’s essential, because art is so important an expression of who we are as individuals and as a community.”

Participants at the meeting generally liked what they heard, while cautioning against excessive optimism.

Vince Flood, president of the Evanston Symphony, said, “The arts are a great way to encourage diversity, but especially in classical music, it’s going to take time.”

For local activist Gail Schechter, who ran the Open Communities non-profit fair housing group for many years and is one of the founders of the Addie Wyatt Center for Nonviolence Training, the meeting was suggestive of the “social seams” promoted by urban community expert Jane Jacobs. “A lot of museums don’t interact with their own neighborhoods,” she added. “Art should be the fabric of the community.”

The next step, said Ms. Sachs, is “to continue with our racial equity training sessions, which are restricted to the four organizations. I am putting out a survey to participants asking what they would like to see us do next.”

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