

Restorative Community Conversation on the Concept of Race



Aliʻiolani Hale, Hawaiʻi Supreme Court

May 30, 2017



“The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race.”

~ Sonia Sotomayor, United States Supreme Court Justice, *Schuetz v. BAMN*, dissent 2014

Background on organizer and the event

Hawai'i Friends of Restorative Justice (HFRJ) was incorporated in 1980 to develop alternatives for youth on probation with the Hawai'i state family court in Honolulu. Since then it has evolved to develop, provide, study, and publish research findings on public health, restorative justice, and solution-focused approaches to promote healing and peace to broad audiences. HFRJ has collaborated with many individuals and organizations including courts, prisons, law enforcement, schools, public housing communities, and a variety of non-profits and government agencies. Its work is referenced nationally and internationally, and it has both a global and local reach. Over 60 papers have been published about its projects and several film productions also feature HFRJ's work.

In 2016, HFRJ began providing community conversations concerning justice issues affecting O'ahu residents. In an effort to generate more community understanding and address racism, HFRJ collaborated with two state judicial organizations, the Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution, and the Judiciary History Center to provide a conversation held May 30, 2017 at Ali'iolani Hale, the state Supreme Court. Thirty-nine people participated in large and small conversations concerning the “concept of race.” Individuals who participated ranged from judges, people who provide social programs, graduate students, lawyers, community advocates, feminists, and people on parole and formerly incarcerated. A list of the participants is attached.

Invitation to participate

People were individually emailed an invitation describing the event as:

This will be an engaging experience with you sharing in small groups your experiences concerning the concept of race, what it means, and how it has affected your life and community. You will also have the opportunity to consider and express how you would like the concept of race to be addressed by others.

People were invited to share the invitation with others who might be interested in attending. Those who said they could attend the event, were emailed the following information and instructions beforehand:

The dialogue will begin in a large circle with Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald opening it, and each of us quickly introducing ourselves. Then we will re-form into assigned groups of five. In each small group, one person will act as facilitator/timekeeper to ensure everyone has equal opportunity to express themselves.



The small groups will address: 1. How has the concept of race affected you? and time permitting: 2. How would you like people to view the concept of race?

To prepare for the dialogue please take a free Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT) concerning race, skin-tone or an ethnic

group <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html> to learn something about any implicit racial biases you may have. Your survey results are confidential and will only be discussed at the dialogue if you want to. Here is a short New York Time 2016 article on implicit biases: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/07/upshot/were-all-a-little-biased-even-if-we-dont-know-it.html?_r=0

Basically, we all have implicit biases. These are biases that we learn from our culture, which we may not be aware of and which may not concern race—we may be biased about age, religious beliefs/disbeliefs, people's weight, sexual preferences, political parties, etc. Implicit biases exist regardless of our ethnic backgrounds, education, or economic status. Besides taking the survey on racial biases, you may also take additional surveys concerning many other areas as the Harvard IAT website provides.

The two hour dialogue is scheduled as:

25-30 minutes Chief Justice Recktenwald's opening & introductions in large circle

60 minutes small groups

30 minutes large circle again with any concluding comments from each person (if 46 people attend as currently listed that would give each person about 40 seconds equal speaking time).

Large opening circle

Rich Turbin, Esq., HFRJ president, introduced Hawai'i Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald, who opened the large circle with all participants. Justice Recktenwald provided a short inspiring talk about the importance of racial equality in our country and community. The 39 participants then provided their names along with a brief description of their activities. The large circle took about 30 minutes total time.

Small-facilitated circles

Eight people coming to the event, agreed to act as "informal facilitators" of one of the small circles. They were told: "You are mainly tasked with making sure everyone gets time to speak and no one takes up all the time (including you)." After the large circle, the 39 participants went to a pre-assigned small group with one of the facilitators. The small groups were chosen earlier to reflect participant diversity in sex, age and ethnic identification.

Sharing personal stories and generating more community cohesion

In the eight small groups, individuals shared their personal stories about race. Most of the small group facilitators prepared a short report on participants' comments and many participants expressed how the event was for them during the large circle.



“Hawai’i is the best place to address racism. We are multicultural.”

~ small group participant

Comments of several groups indicated that growing up, some felt like “the other” because they appeared different from the majority, which could also be light skinned in Hawai’i. How one’s race is viewed has the potential to create difficult feelings including alienation, not belonging, and being *outside* of the community.

One person noted that protection from racism could come from “safety in numbers” for those with a similar appearance. Some appreciated their resiliency: “Facing obstacles (discrimination, racism, judgment, oppression) based on race have made us stronger!”

Insufficient *melting pot* and the need to assist Micronesian people

Several participants noted that there is a tendency to view Hawai’i as a *melting pot*, with a successful multicultural population living in harmony. This concept is challenged by experiences including the over representation of Native Hawaiians in the justice and prison system. Many participants noted that currently Micronesian people are especially prone to suffer bias and discrimination in Hawai’i. The observation was made that in Hawai’i, people are aware of bias hardships that Micronesian people currently face because all ethnic groups have experienced prejudice at some point in Hawai’i. Several people voiced the hope that more people from Micronesia could attend future community conversations like this one.

Recognition of the importance of values

Appreciation of values was a consistent theme in the facilitator’s reports and expressed in the large group.

The value of cooperation, which was described as “fundamental in Hawaiian culture,” rather than competition, was discussed in a small group, and also mentioned in the large circle. Some noted a preference for living in Hawai’i because there is more acceptance for ethnic diversity in the community.

Hopeful messages

Despite the covert, overt, internal and external discrimination and bias, and problems of the racial, economic, and social class intersections, the circles and conversations provided the opportunity to express and to hear about hope and optimism.

In one small group a participant discussed a cooking program that its agency offers. The participants cook food from different cultures, which helps them recognize and value their differences.



“We had a very good discussion on race that was meaningful and hopeful.”

~ small group participant

The potential of *bridge kids* was discussed in the large circle: “There is value in recognizing that children of multiple ethnicities are bridge kids and can work toward closing the gaps that separate us based on race.”

Participants indicated that finding ways to expose individuals, especially children and youth, to experiences with people of different backgrounds and appearance is important. Diversity helps eliminate bias and discrimination.

After one hour of the small groups discussing race, about 25 minutes remained for a large circle to close the event. Participants in the large circle shared quickly how the conversation was for them. Comments were all positive.

Large closing circle and concluding comments

It was noted that people in conversations both “laughed and cried” about the subject of race and the stories shared during the conversations.

A suggestion that a participant made, which others noted they too would like to see happen, is that each individual in our community take “personal responsibility” for developing insight, healing and love for themselves, to help others.

One person stated:

I think the exercise went extremely well, better than planned or expected. This was deeply personal to each one in the room and their stories were powerful and empowering. Most importantly the discussion motivated each one to move forward in action. The sharing at the end was a great culminating activity so that the idea of fighting racism was a shared value among the participants and they left with many ideas from a diverse group, including white participants.

Future conversations

It is recognized that more time is needed to discuss this topic, including explore solutions, and that the May 30th conversations only “scratched the surface.”

Another dialogue is planned for early November, which participants will be invited to attend.

Lorenn Walker, JD, MPH
Director, Hawai'i Friends of Restorative Justice

Revised June 8, 2017



Participants of the conversations about race at Ali‘iolani Hale May 30, 2017

1. Leslie Kobayashi - Federal Judge
2. William Domingo - Hawai‘i State District Court Judge
3. Jackie Young - Chair Judicial Selection Commission
4. Rich Turbin, Esq, President Hawai‘i Friends of Restorative Justice
5. Tanya Ng - Advocate for Imprisoned Women
6. William Harris, Esq.
7. Tim Ho, State Public Defender
8. Sandra Simms, Retired Circuit Court Judge
9. Kat Brady, Director Community Alliance on Prisons
10. Henry Curtis, Director Life of the Land
11. Cheri Tarutani, UH Social Work Professor
12. Nanci Kreidman, CEO Domestic Violence Action Center
13. Nancy Aleck, Retired Director Hawai‘i People’s Fund
14. Lea Jimenez, PhD., Counseling Psychology, Co-Founder CompassBlu
15. Tammy Martin, UH Social Work Phd Student
16. Talia Cardines, Manager Fernhurst YWCA
17. Toni Bisson, Director Pu‘a Foundation
18. Erendira Aldana, UH Doctoral student Community and Cultural Psychology Program
19. Sanna King, UH Doctoral Student in Sociology
20. Robyn Pthal, Esq.
21. Lisa Jensen - Treasurer Hawai‘i Friends of Restorative Justice
22. De Mont Conner, Legal Assistant & Community Activist
23. Momi Conner, Community Activist
24. Ana Kaleopaa, MBT MSW Candidate 2017
25. Michael Knott, State Parole Officer
26. Madonna Perez, Legal Assistant Legal Aid Society of Hawai‘i
27. Matt Taufetee, Director First Lap
28. Merton Chinen, Director Office of Youth Services
29. Keahe Davis, Judiciary History Center
30. Chas Williams, Director WorkNet Hawai‘i
31. Cecilia Chang, Director Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution
32. Innocenta Sound-Kikku, Chuukese Community Advocate
33. Sophia Henager, AmeriCorps, Asset Protection Unit, Legal Aid Society of Hawai‘i (LASH)
34. Kara Doles, LASH
35. Jacklyne Moses, LASH
36. Marissa Okazaki, LASH
37. Allison Jacobs, JD, Legislative Assistant & Community Advocate
38. John Martin, Reverend
39. Lorenn Walker, Director HFRJ