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**Report on the
Community Conversation on Confronting Racism:
Finding Common Ground
for Building a Stronger Community
November 10, 2001
Berkeley California**

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Photos of the Conversation taken by Mark Coplan, *In Dulce Jubilo*, & the full text of the report can be found on the LWVBAE website : <http://home.pacbell.net/lwvbae>

The Report

More than a hundred local residents, including 80 participants and 22 facilitators, came together at a "Community Conversation on Confronting Racism: Finding Common Ground for Building a Stronger Community." The "Conversation" took place on Saturday, November 10, from 9:30 to 3, at Rosa Parks School in Berkeley. It was sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Berkeley, Albany and Emeryville in cooperation with other organizations and individuals.

Roberto Almanzan and Laureen A. Greene, of Roberto Almanzan Associates, both experienced professional facilitators, served as the lead co-facilitators. The volunteer facilitators were drawn from the Berkeley Dispute Resolution Service, the Conciliation Forum of Oakland, Roberto Almanzan Associates, the League of Women Voters and other groups.

Participants' Response to the Community Conversation

The participants' comments and written evaluations at the end of the five-hour meeting were overwhelmingly positive. The 60 participants who filled in the evaluation form were about equally divided in rating the meeting excellent or good.

Some Comments:

...the meeting far exceeded my expectations...I have a new hopefulness that gatherings to talk about race and racism can work...There is positive value in exploring differences... .. The process was healing...

New understanding

Many participants said that, thanks to the discussions and their efforts to truly listen to each other at the meeting, they now understood more about the painful impact of racism in the community and on their fellow participants and themselves. Several commented that Berkeley thinks of itself as liberal, but turns a blind eye and ear to the continued existence of racism in the community and has not made an adequate commitment to achieving true justice, equity and equality.

Some Comments:

Everyone has had a painful experience with racism...How differently each person has experienced and observed racism...My own stereotypes were active and disproved...I didn't realize that even respectable elderly African-Americans can get stopped by police...Young people with pants hanging down--it's just appearance--doesn't tell you about their characters.. When I walk down the street, I walk with my head down; if I lift my head up, women hold on to their purses, cross to the other side of the street...

Making changes in own lives

At least in part as a result of their new experience and understanding, many said they committed themselves to make changes in their own behavior and to extend their activism to recognize and make changes in the larger community.

Some Comments:

I plan to smile and make eye contact with people, say hello--particularly to black males, Arab men...It was a good reminder for me that many white people are also part of this struggle to fight racism...I need to work on my own prejudices... I've learned that speaking quietly, one on one, and looking for small steps, is very important and satisfying...

New sense of community

One participant observed that she was amazed at how quickly she and the members of her small discussion group became a real community by sharing their personal experiences with racism and how strongly she felt she was losing something when the group dissolved. Others seemed to share this new sense of community, since some said and wrote that their small groups planned to keep in touch, to meet for potluck meals or a book discussion group. Informal reports in the months after the meeting indicate that a few groups have already met or plan future meetings.

Requests for follow-up meetings

Most participants urged some kind of follow-up activity or meeting. Their suggestions for meetings opened up many possibilities, including:

- A reunion for the same people who were at the first meeting
- Neighborhood organizing so that folks from different racial groups can get to know each other
- Mixed age community conversations
- Conversations in schools--bring together parents, children, teachers
- Expand the reach of this meeting to draw in more people...
- New meetings with new participants
- A system for training participants to run such meetings so they in turn would set up and run conversations on racism in ever widening circles of conversations on racism

Participants' ideas about the goals of the meeting differed, for example,

- For personal or social growth and learning
 - ~ to explore personal feelings about racism more deeply
 - ~ to understand the causes and cures of racism better
- To organize specific social actions or reforms
 - ~ in schools
 - ~ in neighborhoods
 - ~ in housing

Personal Commitments

Some planned to follow up on their own initiative, for example:

- in their private lives by
 - ~ challenging stereotypical remarks and racial assumptions of others when they encountered them
 - ~ greeting African-American men with a smile just as they greet other people
 - ~ planning to "do one thing a month to educate myself about racism"
- in work with other community groups or organizations by
 - ~ continuing their current work in the Berkeley schools
 - ~ seeking out an organization to work with in their community
 - ~ arranging that their white church group meet with a black church group
- in further meetings with their partner or small group from the Community Conversation

Some comments:

Diversity talk is very intellectual; but we need to connect emotionally, become friends...Our group plans to meet for a potluck...I plan to check in with my partner, see if we've made some changes...

Where is the impact of racism worst?

Participants saw racism as a particularly strong or damaging force in particular areas of the community. Schools were identified by almost half of the respondents as their area of greatest concern or interest, followed by neighborhoods, particularly changing and gentrifying neighborhoods. Housing, healthcare, law enforcement and welfare were also areas of concern.

Some comments:

Berkeley High School is an example of the racism and class differences in Berkeley... Youth are expected to integrate but adults are not modeling...Everything that is harmful about racism is doubly bad for children... I feel sad that a lot of us feel it's not politically correct to be curious about one another...

Summary

The participants' own heightened awareness of the impact of racism on others and on themselves was a significant outcome of the meeting. Participants arrived with varying degrees of awareness of racism and race-related issues; clearly all who came had a desire to understand and to reduce racism. The participants were not asked to discuss or solve particular problems caused by racism in the community. The focus of the conversations in the small groups and pairs was honest discussion of how racism had personally impacted each person. Participants were asked to listen carefully to each other's experience without trying to advance their own viewpoints. This format seems to help participants form connections with each other and develop a greater sense of community.

The participants' comments suggest that the meeting helped them make or deepen their commitment to reducing racism. Many reported that they committed themselves to pursue the issues and emotions opened up in their own conversations with their partners and their small groups. Their choices ranged widely from the personal and emotional to the public and political. This is a contribution to the long-term goal of "building a foundation for a stronger community."

Individuals have informally reported back on their own activities since the meeting. Some of the small groups have met again; some of the partners have continued their relationship by telephone, e-mail or meetings. Others report that they are continuing or increasing their own work in organizations that directly or indirectly work to reduce the impact of racism in our community.

A reunion of the original participants of the November 10 Conversation is planned to help them take stock of its and to consider future possibilities. And, of course, for the League, for the sponsors and for participants, working to reduce racism and its impact on our community continues to be an important goal.

Background

The purpose of the Community Conversation on Confronting Racism was to give community members of all races and ethnicities the opportunity, one on one and in small groups, to talk about their personal experiences of racism in a safe environment and to have their experiences truly heard by others. The hope was that participants would listen to and profit from each other's experience, so that they could begin to understand the impacts of racism on individuals and the community as a whole. These discussions could build trust across racial and ethnic lines and enable the participants to go on to develop shared solutions to the continuing influence of racism-- in schools, health care, housing, government, neighborhoods and elsewhere.

Marissa Saunders, who served as meeting organizer, brought the Community Conversation proposal to the League of Women Voters and other meeting sponsors. As the chair of the League's Education Committee, she prompted the League to try a new approach to address the League's long-standing commitment to racial equity and justice. In addition, the Community Conversation seemed a promising way to begin work on several of the issues the League had chosen to advocate for in 2001-2002, including: closing the achievement gap in the Berkeley schools, increasing the supply of affordable housing in Albany, Berkeley, and Emeryville and promoting effective citizen participation in voting.

The League of Women Voters organized and funded the meeting in cooperation with many other groups and individuals. *In Dulce Jubilo*, which funds special school and community projects, provided some financial support. Others helped with planning, outreach and publicity. They included: the Berkeley Alliance, a non-profit partnership of the City, the University and the Berkeley Unified School District and the Berkeley community and its Executive Director Toni Tullys; two organizations that work with young people--the City of Berkeley's Young Adult Project [YAP] and East Bay Asian Youth Center; as well as Asians for Job Opportunities in the Bay Area or AJOB, which provides training and help for job seekers. Community leaders and elected officials who supported the project included: Father George Crespín of St. Joseph the Worker Church; Darryl Moore, Trustee, Peralta Community College District; Terry Doran, Member, Berkeley Board of Education; Mayor Shirley Dean, City of Berkeley and Alameda County superintendent of Education, Sheila Jordan, Alameda County Office of Education. Philip Harper-Cotton, Director of the Young Adult Project, provided advice, meeting locations, extensive outreach and encouraged his staff to help in many ways.

From the start, the organizers recognized that many other groups in the community are working on the impacts of racism in particular areas and are addressing the issue in many ways. Yet racism and its ills still persist in the community; it merits widespread attention. Their concern was increased because, in the wake of the September 11 tragedies, some fellow residents who looked Middle Eastern or Muslim experienced racist remarks or actions and many feared racist treatment.

Roberto Almanzan and Lauren A. Greene, of Roberto Almanzan Associates, both experienced professional facilitators, served as the lead co-facilitators of the meeting; they also helped to develop the agenda and spent two evenings training for the volunteer facilitators. Twenty two volunteer facilitators were recruited from the Berkeley Dispute Resolution Service, the Conciliation Forums of Oakland, Roberto Almanzan Associates, the League of Women Voters and other groups and the community. They had a wide range of training and experience.

Agenda of the Meeting

As a result of extensive outreach in the community, the meeting attracted a diverse group of more than 80 participants. The meeting opened with a light breakfast accompanied by the flute music of Soyinka Rahim.

The two lead facilitators convened the meeting and worked with the whole group of participants to develop a safe environment and ground rules based on respect, sensitivity, trust and appreciation of the points of view and feelings of all. Participants then formed small groups, attempting to make the groups as varied in ethnicity and race and other characteristics as possible. Each small group of 6 to 8 was facilitated by two volunteer facilitators.

The central activity of the day was the one on one conversations between pairs of participants. Within each small group, each participant looked for a partner whom he or she did not know and who differed from him or herself as much as possible. In the partners' first conversation they introduced themselves to one another and then, returning to the small group, each person introduced his or her partner to the group.

Next the partners returned to their one on one conversation to talk about racism. Each described to the other an experience in which race or racism had had a significant impact in their lives. When they returned to the small groups, every member reported to the group how they had been affected by what their partner had recounted. These reports stimulated discussion in the small groups about the impact and meaning of racism in their lives. The discussion continued after lunch.

In the last hour, everyone gathered as a large group to look for common threads in their experiences. To close the meeting, the small groups re-formed for summing up and farewell. Participants were given cards on which they could record for their own use their own commitment to some personal or social activity that would advance understanding and trust across racial and ethnic lines.

*Report prepared by Nancy Bickel, Lois Brubeck and Pat Kuhi
For the League of Women Voters of Berkeley, Albany and Emeryville*

Some Books and Articles on Racism and Diversity

The "Diversity Tool Kit Package" provided to participants included:

Selected pages, including the list of print, web and video resources, from **The Diversity Tool Kit** published by the LWVEF, described below.

"White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" by Peggy McIntosh, copyright 1988 by Peggy McIntosh, from a paper presented at the Virginia Women's Studies Association conference in Richmond, VA, April, 1986.

"We Have No Problem"...Again" by Horace Sheldon, Community Change, Inc., 14 Beacon St., Room 709, Boston MA 02108 from a collection of "Anti-Racism Resources" issued by the Black Concerns Working Group, Unitarian Universalist Association, c/o Mel Hoover, Extension Department, 25 Beacon St., Boston Ma 02108-2800, 617-742-2100 x 270.

The following publications were displayed at the Conversation:

From the League of Women Voters

LWV Diversity Toolkit, League of Women Voters Education Fund, 1730 M St. NW, Washington DC 20036-4508, <http://www.lwv.org/elibrary/index.html>

A handbook for Leagues and other groups on diversifying membership, includes a resources guide of publications, websites, videos and organizations.

Order info: 1-888-287-7424, Fax 301-206-9789, lwv@pmds.com; LWV Pub Sales, P.O. Box 540, Annapolis Junction, MD 20701.

Housing Policy and Progress in Albany, Berkeley and Emeryville: Final Report of a Two Year Study, League of Women Voters of Berkeley, Albany and Emeryville, 2001, 1414 University Ave., Suite D, Berkeley CA 94702; 510-843-8824, Fax 843-8828, lwvbae@pacbell.net, <http://home.pacbell.net/lwvbae/>.

Choices for a Vital Community: Which way do we go? A guide for community issues forums on quality of life in California, League of Women Voters of California Education Fund. Address and order info below.

Guide to California Government, 14th edition, 1992, League of Women Voters of California Education Fund, 916 J Street, Suite 515, Sacramento CA 95814, lwv@lwv.org, <http://ca.lwv.org>. Order info: 1-916-442-7215.

From various sources

"**And don't call me a racist!**" A treasury of quotes on the past, present, and future of the color line in America, selected and arranged by Ella Mazel. Argonaut Press, Lexington, MA, 1998. Ordering Info: Argonaut Press, 1 Militia Drive, Lexington MA 02421. Tel 781-674-2056; Fax 781-674-2059.

Class Dismissed: A year in the Life of an American High School, a Glimpse into the Heart of a Nation by Meredith Maran, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2000/2001. St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Ave. New York NY 10010, www.stmartins.com. *The author reports on her observations of racism at Berkeley High School.*

Facing You, Facing Me: Race, Class and Gender Among U.C. Berkeley Student Leaders, edited by David Stark and Jerlene D. Griffin, Introduction by Troy Duster, Stiles Hall, 2001. Ordering Info: Stiles Hall, 2400 Bancroft Way, Berkeley CA 94704, Tel 510-841-6010, Fax 510-841-0132, info@stilesall.org. *Student leaders who participated in an on-going UCB seminar on race and racism starting in 1987 report on their experiences and feelings about the seminar and race and racism at UCB and in our society.*

Finding Common Ground: Racial and Ethnic Attitudes in California, by Zoltran Hajnal and Mark Baldassare. 2001, Public Policy Institute of California, 500 Washington Street, Suite 800, San Francisco, CA 94111, 415-291-4400, Fax 415-291-4401, info@ppic.org; www.ppic.org.

Racial and Ethnic Tensions: What Should We Do? An Issue Book for National Issues Forums by Greg Mitchell, National Issues Forums 2000. Order info: NIF Publications, P.O. Box 41626, Dayton, OH, 45441, Tel 1-800-600-4060.

Facilitators at the Community Conversation

Lead Facilitators: Roberto Almanzán and Laureen A. Greene

Roberto Almanzán Associates
Diversity Programs & Mediation
4741 Wilkie Street, Oakland CA 94619
510-531-6462 Fax 510-531-0780

Volunteer Facilitators

John Abbe
Heidi Binder
Leland Brown
Lisa Carey
Sandra Decker
Patricia Mushim Ikeda-Nash
Pat Kuhi
Wanda Remmers
Brad Smith
Toni Tullys
Harriet Whitman Lee

Sheridan Adams
Amber Blackwell
Erserlener Burris-Gore
Cheryl Cranshaw
Dave Gilkerson
Michael Kalikow
Allison Mei-Hahn Johnson
Susan Rinderle
Sherry Smith
Elana Weiss
Simone Young

The volunteer facilitators were drawn from the Berkeley Dispute Resolution Service, community members and other organizations listed below which provide training and dispute resolution and mediation services to their communities, often for free or at low cost.

Berkeley Dispute Resolution Service

1769 Alcatraz Aveune
Berkeley CA 94703
510 428-1811

Buddist Peace Fellowship

P.O.Box 4650
Berkeley CA 04704
www.bpf.org, 510-655-6169, Fax 510-655-1369

Conciliation Forums of Oakland

1222 Preservation Park Way
Oakland CA 94612
510-763-2117

IRIC Bridges (InterRacial InterCultural Bridges)

1112 Key Route Blvd.
Albany, CA 94706
IRICBridges@aol.com, 510-526-8585

Sponsors and Supporters

In Dulce Jubilo

1255 Allston Way, Berkeley CA 94704, 510-845-3499

Mark Coplan, President of the Board

funds special school and community projects

Berkeley Alliance

Berkeley Adult School, 1222 University Ave., Berkeley Ca 04702, 510-845-7103

Toni Tullys, Executive Director

a non-profit partnership of the City of Berkeley, UC Berkeley, the Berkeley Unified School District and the Berkeley community

City of Berkeley's Young Adult Project or YAP

1730 Oregon St., Berkeley CA 04704, 510-644-0726

Philip Harper-Cotton, Director

runs programs for at risk and neighborhood youth, such as basketball, computer classes

East Bay Asian Youth Center

1432 University Avenue, Berkeley and 2025 E.12th St., Oakland

510-533-1092 x 25, junji@ebayc.org

David Kakishiba, Director

Asians For Job Opportunities in the Bay Area, Inc. (AJOB)

1911 Addison Street, Berkeley, CA 94704

510-548-6700, ajob@ajob.org, <http://www.ajob.org>

Tony Leong, Jr., Ph.D., Executive Director

a nonprofit community-based organization providing free employment training and bilingual social services to the unemployed, underemployed and socio-economically disadvantaged

Father George Crespín

St. Joseph the Worker Church

1640 Addison St., Berkeley CA 94703, 510-843-2244, FRGEC@pacbell.net

Darryl Moore, Trustee

Peralta Community College District, 333 East 8th Street, Oakland CA 94606

510-466-7202, dmoore@peralta.cc.ca.us, www.peralta.cc.ca.us

four campuses serving six cities in the East Bay

Terry S. Doran, Member, Board of Education, Berkeley Unified School District

2134 Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Berkeley CA 94704, 510-644-6550, tdoran@igc.org

Mayor Shirley Dean, City of Berkeley, 2180 Milvia Street, Berkeley CA 94704

510-981-7100, sdean@ci.berkeley.ca.us

County Superintendent of Schools Sheila Jordan, Alameda County Office of Education, 313 W. Winton Ave., Hayward CA 94544, 510-670-4140