

Today's meeting was hybrid, with some meeting in person at Kitsap United Way on 4th St. in Bremerton and some attending the meeting via Zoom.

Participating in person: Guests JD Sweet & Elizabeth Blandin; Maureen Cervinsky, John Cervinsky, Connie Marchant, Amanda Rodgers, Janice McLemore

Participating via Zoom: Kathleen Gallagher, Robin Muir, Gail Sackman, Pat Troxell, Denise Justice, Debi Barner, Debbie Klabo, Candy Rankin

Maureen introduced our guests, both long-time educators. JD Sweet has been teaching in Central Kitsap School District since 1977. Elizabeth Blandin has taught in CKSD schools since 1996. She taught English at CKHS for a total of 20 years, earning an MFA in Creative Writing at Louisiana State University.

JD began doing trainings in diversity and equity issues in the 1990s as an independent consultant, then joined with wife Elizabeth 15 years ago to form their consulting firm called New Phase, New Ways in between. They have worked with individual teachers, groups of students, school departments, schools, and some businesses, leading cultural awareness/proficiency training seminars. JD emphasized that the key is what to do after the training is over, how to provide accountability. Under a contract with CKSD, they were "teachers on special assignment", training equity teams in schools and providing support, as well as spearheading the change to delivery of cultural competence training modules for the Washington Education Association. They have now returned to the classroom, JD teaching a broad range of Social Studies courses at Olympic High School, and Elizabeth teaching English and social studies at Fairview Middle School.

In response to a question concerning how their own personal cultural competence took root, Elizabeth said that as a child she noticed inequities, though she didn't have a name at the time for what she saw. She realized that some kids had better opportunities and more attention than others. She grew up in Pennsylvania, where school funding is based on property values and she saw the great disparities between kids put in the lower level and the higher level of the oft-used "tracking" system. At every school students tracked in the lower level did not have access to the same quality of instruction or teaching materials. In less affluent areas, school buildings were substandard, rundown, and windows were broken. Student expectations for achievement were low or nonexistent. When she began teaching, she incorporated her feelings about her observations, reaching out to build relationships with kids who were resistant to being in school and to help them gain some advantages.

JD grew up in Ft. Smith, Arkansas, in the segregated South. His grandmother was a domestic helper for white families, he experienced separate drinking fountains, public restrooms for "coloreds" and for "whites". He saw oppression at an early age, growing up in a system where those advantages that Elizabeth talked about were by design and codified into law. His father was in the Army, and when they moved from the South, JD thought, I'm never going back to the South. He did return once much later and found that those childhood places were seared into his memory. The oppression and the animosity that he experienced are the "fuel in his tank" and are woven into the very fabric of who he is.

When Elizabeth's father passed away in 2001, her family learned for the first time that he was African-American, passing for white his whole adult life with his light-colored skin. Growing up, he had lived in colored-only neighborhoods and attended colored-only schools, but when he joined the Navy in WWII, he signed up as a white male and never went back. Elizabeth did family research when she was at LSU to get some answers. An essential realization for her was the idea that a person in the United States would make such a choice in order to get things that he or she could not get otherwise. That is what put the "fuel in her tank".

When engaged by a school or district to work on cultural competence, JD's and Elizabeth's first step is to do a site visit. Meeting with administration/teachers/students, they ask, what do you want to get out of this training, what are the issues that you are facing? Often a recent racial conflict has triggered the need for training, or in order to "fix" great disparities in success standards, clients have been putting emphasis on curriculum without desired results and they realize they need to look at a different approach. JD and Elizabeth learn about the culture of the school. When they ask staff and administrators what BIPOC feel like in their school, often the answer is, we don't know. If a client says, just give us handouts and is not open to having the ongoing courageous conversations this kind of work requires, JD and Elizabeth tell them, we can't help you because what you're trying to do would all fall apart later. Once JD and Elizabeth have a good sense of what the school is asking for and needs, they spend a good deal of time putting together a plan uniquely designed for that client and ask them to vet it. If a client says something in the plan is too sensitive to include right away, they will take that part out and probably go back to it at a later point in the training.

This work is about building relationships across differences. Nationwide, teaching staff in the United States is 70-80% white middle class female, but their students are much more diverse. When implicit biases are not recognized, kids may become marginalized or excluded, all the way up to a policy level. An example is the yearly long list of supplies put out each year at the elementary level for students to bring with them the first day of class. Many parents can't afford to buy all those supplies. If students have very few or none of those items when they come to school, staff too often put those families and parents into a category of "not caring", without recognizing the inequity. When Elizabeth brought awareness of this policy to CKSD, the initial response was, it's how we've always done it, but the district took the time to look at the policy's impact and did change it. Now students are required to bring only their own backpack and earbuds, and several local nonprofits provide those supplies to kids who would otherwise go without.

An all-important concept JD and Elizabeth emphasized is **intent vs. impact**, which can play out in many different ways. JD gave an example of an incident that occurred in his classroom a couple of days earlier. While he was talking to his students, some kids were talking among themselves. He asked them to be quiet, but the talk continued. He then said, Stop--I want you to be obedient to what I'm saying. The students did stop talking to each other, then one said to JD, when you said, be obedient, it made me feel like you were talking to a dog. Even though JD knew that he didn't mean it that way and that was certainly not his intent, he also knew from his years of training work that none of that matters when someone is feeling demoralized. He chose not to get defensive and instead said to her, how could I have said it differently? She came up with the word, comply, and added, I understand; when you're talking, I need to pay attention. He was able to acknowledge and validate her feelings and they problem solved together--a teachable moment for the whole class.

At the outset of training, JD and Elizabeth have trainees fill out a detailed form, asking questions about what books they read, what TV shows and movies they watch, what music they listen to, among other things. When the participants take a good look at what they've listed, they often realize, wow, my world is all white/all brown/all black. Some schools think they do not have a very diverse student population; therefore, they don't need any training. One could ask, how then do you learn about people who are not like you? Even if we look more alike than not, we are all diverse, and each of us needs to be prepared to work with people who do not see the world through the same lens as we do. An unfortunate strategy of the past was to not talk about race and not to see color, the false idea being that if we bury it and don't talk about it, it won't be an issue. This goes back to **intent vs. impact**: if you say you don't see my color, you don't recognize me as who I am.

The training sessions are very interactive. JD and Elizabeth often role play an angry parent/student and demonstrate varied responses, then invite the participants to practice different scenarios, while they're

in that safe space. Doing the practice work themselves and watching others, with time to share and reflect afterward, gives people more confidence in how to respond in situations that come up. One important goal of the trainings: To take something practical away from the training that they can do the next day.

The training is most successful within a school when staff collectively agree on strategies so that students get the same vibe from all teachers.

Elizabeth said this work never ends. The variables are exponential when working with human beings. When a teacher, for example, has looked at a student a certain way before, possibly due to the way that person looks or presents him/herself, but then learns how to become truly engaged with that student, the teacher can view with a new lens and see that student as capable of success. JD and Elizabeth worked with a local school to help the staff approach their annual open house with that new lens. When asked, what do you want to get out of your open house, they said they wanted to build relationships with the families of their students. JD and Elizabeth encouraged the school to reinvent their standard approach of asking families to come see what they, the teachers, are doing and to instead frame it as a celebration of the students: Come and tell us about your kids. Following JD's and Elizabeth's suggestions, the school set up tables (pre-COVID), provided a meal, staff mingled with students and their families, and came up with interactive activities to do with the students. Some parents are suspicious of schools because of their own past experiences. This format helped set people at ease and made a positive impact. At the same school, parents were later invited to come to school and tell their stories.

A question was asked about how JD and Elizabeth would respond when hearing the n-word spoken. Elizabeth pointed out that use of the n-word, as with any controversial word usage, is very complex. Among African-Americans, there is a lot of disagreement about that word. Some parents may say, I don't want my child reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* because the n-word is used; for others, the word is used all the time at home. JD added, if you hear the n-word spoken in public, don't say anything because you don't know who you're dealing with. He has put together a Power Point presentation about the history of the n-word, cultural differences, and situational appropriateness. He tells his students, we're not here to tell you what you can and cannot say at home, but here in the school building, with the exception of using the word in a literary or historical context, it is not appropriate. This is an academic environment and here we use the language of intellect. It is incumbent upon teachers and the whole staff to be consistent in that regard. Elizabeth talked about a woman who came across a bottle of Bitch Wine in a store, and she pointedly told the store owner, that is a word that is offensive to me. On the other hand, some women readily use that word. Some feel that by taking ownership of an oppressive word, you can't be harmed with it by another person.

Currently no specific race-related curriculum is being taught across CKSD schools. In his high school History classes, JD includes the history of race issues from the founding of our country to the present. Textbooks do not delve deeply into issues. CKHS is beginning a pilot class on Social Justice, in which students will learn about diverse groups of people who have historically had to fight in order to get their due rights. Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been bandied about in the press in recent months to mean all sorts of things to different people. JD said if CRT means to someone that all white people are oppressors, he doesn't teach that. If it means to someone that if you're not actively speaking against racism, then by definition you are a racist, he doesn't teach that. He and Elizabeth are aware that some parents have been making accusations at CKSD school board meetings that CRT is being taught in the schools, but there is no discussion in CKSD of Critical Race Theory. By protesting to the school board, parents are painting the whole school district with a broad brush, without knowing or asking what is actually being taught in each classroom. If a parent has an issue with what a particular teacher is telling his/her students, the parent can go to the school principal and discuss it at that level.

During these first three weeks of school, students are excited about seeing each other again and teachers have been focusing on building community and relationships. JD's first unit in his History classes is entitled *Becoming an American*. Elizabeth never shies away from asking what's on your mind, let's talk about it. She said her students had lots of questions about 9/11. JD assigned his students to go home and watch videos of what happened on 9/11. The next day he gave them some historical context, talked about the history of U.S. policy in the Middle East and the mindset of the 9/11 planners and perpetrators. Then the class was able to discuss the subsequent impact of the 9/11 attacks.

In response to a question about whether an across the board diversity training program for all of CKSD currently exists, JD and Elizabeth talked about the **5 Modules created by the Washington Education Association that deal with cultural competence and equity**, which they were instrumental in bringing to staff:

Module 1: Building hope and resiliency: fostering relationships; helping kids see themselves in the future, visualize possible paths to take

Module 2: Building classroom communities

Module 3: Implicit bias; micro-aggressions; intent vs. impact

Modules 4 & 5: Classroom interventions with behavior; cultural approaches to discipline

Elizabeth stated that teachers are expected to have attained a certain level of proficiency in instructing students of their chosen grade level, but for cultural competence, the level of exposure and understanding is all over the place. That makes it hard for districts with teachers of varied levels of experience and training to get everyone on the same page. Washington state has recognized a need for diversity training for teachers and is now requiring 15 hours of cultural competence training in order for teachers to maintain their certificate. CKSD has been all in with the Module training and it is not clear if this comprehensive training will count or if the state will require different training yet to be decided upon.

Elizabeth shared the titles of several books concerning race-related issues as part of a **Recommended Reading List**:

1. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander. Research-based. The law has been used to sustain systemic racism. Discussion about political campaigns and how they create/exploit divides.
2. *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson. Takes the reader through three systems of social hierarchy: the South Asian caste system, Nazism in Germany and race in the United States. Her first book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, is a historical study of the mass exodus of African-Americans from the South to Northern and Western U.S. cities from approximately 1914-1970.
3. *What If I Say the Wrong Thing? 25 Habits for Culturally Effective People* by Verna Myers. Very specific scenarios, comments and ways to combat saying the wrong thing. Practical. Good for book group study. JD said that while BIPOC talk about race all the time, whites' biggest fear is that they may say the wrong thing and offend someone or get jumped on, so they choose not to say anything.
4. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* by Robin DiAngelo. An academic with experience in diversity training. When asked if DiAngelo, as a white woman of a privileged culture, is appropriating from the non-dominant Black culture with her book and talks, Elizabeth said she thinks DiAngelo is very self-aware and humble about what she contributes to the discussion about race issues. JD added that the truth stands for itself, it doesn't matter who's telling it if it makes people think and reflect. DiAngelo might reach reluctant learners who may not read books written by Black authors.

5. *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* by Layla Saad. A 28-day guide targeted at white readers. Helps to identify the impact of white privilege, systems and cultural differences that set rules for how everyone should behave.
6. *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo. Outlines her opinions on various questions about race in contemporary America and gives advice about how to talk about the issues. Seattle-based author.
7. *The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism & Engage in Collective Healing* by Anneliese A. Singh
8. *How To Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. Discusses concepts of racism and his proposals for antiracist individual and collective actions.

Janice added the following two titles, selected as Kitsap Regional Library's One Book, One Community Reads for 2020 and 2021:

9. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond. Set in Milwaukee, the sociological study follows a number of tenants and landlords to examine how access to housing affects the poor.
10. *The Light of the World: A Memoir* by Elizabeth Alexander. Poet, educator, scholar. The author tells a love story reflecting on the beauty of her married life, the trauma resulting from her husband's sudden death and the solace found in caring for her two sons.

Elizabeth emphasized that everyone is coming from his/her own perspective and individual slant, so it's important to read as widely as possible and watch a wide range of films, both fictional and documentary. JD and Elizabeth gave us a lot to think about. We thank them both so much for sharing their experiences and knowledge with us, for their dedication to teaching and for their leadership in bringing much-needed awareness of equity and diversity issues to schools and staff in our community and beyond.

They say that timing is everything. As it happens, Maureen recently received a call from KRL telling her that the book bag she ordered several weeks ago was now ready. She has 15 copies of *So You Want to Talk About Race*. Contact her if you're interested in reading the book. The books are due back November 1.

Maureen reminded us that 5 of our 10 upcoming **Candidate Forums** are for contests within our unit's geographical area:

- **CK School Board** - October 4 @ 6:30pm
- **Bremerton Mayor** - October 5 @ 5:30pm
- **Bremerton Municipal Judge** - October 6 @ 5:30
- **Bremerton City Council** - October 7 @ 5:30pm
- **Bremerton School Board** - October 14 @ 6:30pm

To submit questions for the candidates and to watch the forums, go to lwv-kitsap.org and click on the Candidate Forum page.

OUR NEXT UNIT MEETING: SATURDAY, OCTOBER 16 @ 10AM

Attend in person at United Way, 645 Fourth St. in Bremerton or via Zoom