

Franklin County CDC online tool helps businesses reflect on, address racism



The Performance Project performs at the Racial Justice Reflective Journey event held at Greenfield Community College on Tuesday. STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ [» Buy this Image](#)

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GREENFIELD — In a condensed version of a 90-minute show, five teenagers shared a series of deeply personal stories from their lives in America, experiences in which they were forced to confront the reality of race and racism in a white-dominant culture.

In a way, the performance, “Mother Tongue” by First Generation Ensemble — a group of young people who may identify as the first generation of their family in the United States, the first to speak English or to graduate high school, or the first to be openly LGBTQ, for example — mirrored the conversation the audience had gathered to have at Greenfield Community College on Tuesday evening.

“I want to encourage you to self-reflect,” said Traci Talbert, racial justice and community engagement leader with the Franklin County Community Development Corporation. “It is work.”

Talbert’s encouragement came as part of the long-awaited reveal of the Racial Justice Reflective Journey, an online tool designed to allow users to reflect not only on their personal experiences but their workplace experiences, too, in an attempt to help businesses better understand how to address structural racism within their organizations. The page is expected to launch on the Franklin County CDC’s website by Sept. 1.

“One of the ideas of the reflective journey is to get you to reflect immediately,” she said. “As soon as you open up this RJRJ ... begin to look back. Think about the experiences you’ve been in; think about some of the situations or activities you’ve participated in; think about the time you stood by, heard something and didn’t say something, and wished you could. ... Think in depth.”

Franklin County CDC Executive Director John Waite explained that years ago, staff and board members at the Franklin County CDC began having discussions about how to make their services available to a more diverse population, and how to diversify both the staff and board.

“We started asking harder questions and doing more learning,” he said. “Some of that learning showed us there is such structural and institutional racism entrenched in our society for so long, and we ... certainly recognized we were part of it. Many of us white people benefit from it at the expense of non-white people. Once you see it, you can’t unsee it.”

Policies and procedures, he said, “were put in place to help people like me and exclude people of color.” In an effort to begin addressing this, the organization created an informal group called Welcoming and Belonging in Franklin County. The group has met twice a month regularly for years, Waite said.

Some learning that came out of the process included understanding the characteristics of white supremacy culture, such as “worship of the written language” and linguistic bias, or words used that carry cultural bias. In particular, Waite said the CDC looked at its job descriptions for both current employees and new positions to ensure it set the tone for encouraging diversity. For new job postings, he said, the note about striving for diversity and inclusion is no longer at the bottom of the job description, but at the top.

“We want people to add to our culture, not fit into it,” Waite said.

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Waite added he was excited to know that through the Racial Justice Reflective Journey, others will also have the opportunity to begin their own reflective journey.

“Real change has to come within each of us,” he said. “As we take this journey, we have to do it personally, but I also encourage us to do it in our workplace to make our workplaces better. By all of this doing it individually and in our workplace, knowing that we’re doing this work as a community, I think we can really make Franklin County a better place.”

Talbert explained that the online reflective journey grew from a place of wanting to create a space to talk about race, inclusiveness and diversity. Prior to being named the Racial Justice Reflective Journey, it was to be an “audit tool,” though she found that to be too rigid and structured of a concept. After all, she didn’t want the experience to be one where folks completed surveys to “check a box.”

She credited an extensive interview process to Greenfield Community College graduate Mari Champagne, who spoke with 80 individuals about their experiences with race, diversity and inclusion. Those interviews, Talbert said, will be part of the narrative that weaves through the reflective journey.

“When I started on this team, I had no idea what to expect,” Champagne recounted. “But soon after I started, Traci made it very clear we were going to do nothing like what anybody else has done. We were going to take DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion] and racial justice, turn it on its head and magnify it. We were going to make space for people to notice the different parts of their experiences, biases and workplace culture. ... We were going to create a system for workplace accountability that supports race and racial diversity.”

Talbert said that in addition to the narrative provided by Champagne, the reflective journey will ask users a series of yes/no questions and true/false questions. With each of these, however, there will be a resource or more information provided based on how a person responded, allowing for further self-reflection. There will be areas to reflect on concepts such as body language, linguistic bias and various workplace barriers.

“We’re trying to get people to feel OK with being uncomfortable,” Talbert said. “Let’s get on, and stay on, this cramped and narrow space because it will be uncomfortable. But guess what? That’s where real change lives.”

The link will be available under the “Racial Justice” tab on the Franklin County CDC’s website at fccdc.org/food_process_center/racial-justice.

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