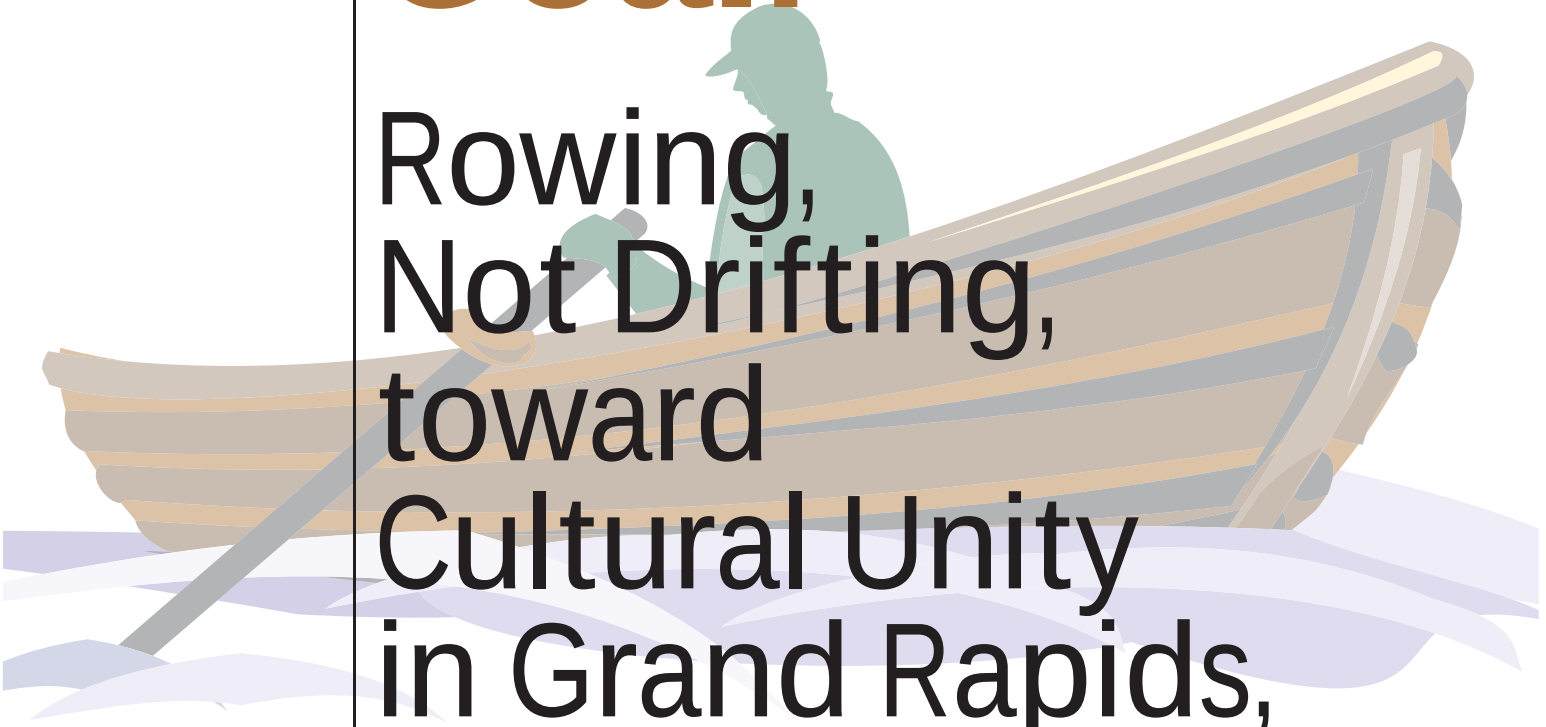
The (Im)Possible Goal:



Rowing, Not Drifting, toward Cultural Unity in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Greater Grand Rapids National Issues Forums

Acknowledgements

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Summit on Racism

We also want to thank all of our participants and volunteers for their time, honesty and commitment to continuing this important conversation.

The (Im)Possible Goal

Rowing, Not Drifting, toward Cultural Unity in Grand Rapids, Michigan

The mayor of an American city proclaims March 18, 2005, a day to officially recognize community leaders who have worked to eradicate racism. A police department in a wealthy, predominately white suburb invites people of color to advise them on the subtle ways that law enforcement still profiles by race. Each year, hundreds of city residents gather to learn more about racism and to recommit to doing their part to end it. Throughout the year, there are no fewer than three organizations holding regular "Institutes for Healing Racism;" programs that have been completed by nearly 2500 individuals. There is a research center, a study center, and a faith-based center all focused on providing information and assistance about the issues surrounding race and ethnicity. There is a documented plan of work, approved by leaders of the "movement," and disseminated to every business, congregation, healthcare and educational institution, and nonprofit organization in the community. And, in 2006, when producers and writers of the Academy Award best picture winner, "Crash," visit the city, they come away saying that more cities ought to be doing the same things as this city.

In this city, people have been talking — and doing — about racism for nearly two decades. In this city, residents are consciously seeking the "tipping point," where stickiness of message, leadership, and context will merge to create an "epidemic" of anti-racism. This city's people set the bar high. Their goal — to become racism-free by 2016.

In this city, leadership, opportunity, deep commitments to volunteerism, a plan of work, and a long history of ongoing civic dialogue, combine to make anything — even the most seemingly impossible of goals — possible.

Today, this city — Grand Rapids, Michigan — teeters on the cusp of real systemic and cultural change.

But it wasn't always this way.

City of Strangers

In many ways, Grand Rapids is similar to most other mid-sized Midwestern cities in the U.S. Like many others, it copes today with a history that includes post-World War II redlining, white flight, and both urban decay and urban revitalization. Like many others, its population growth today results from increased immigration rather than a return to the city by suburbanites. Between the 1990 and 2000 Censuses, the city's population grew 4.6 percent overall to just under 200,000 residents. Also according to the Censuses, growth among white residents declined by 12.8 percent to 62.5 percent of the city's population, while growth among African American resi-

dents grew 14.8 percent (now slightly less than 20 percent of total population); among Asian and Pacific Islanders, 56.8 percent (to 1.6 percent of total), and among Hispanic/Latino populations, 174.8 percent (to 13.1 percent of the city's total population).

Grand Rapids residents, however, don't exactly "live together." Rather, the racial/ethnic segregation within the city is profound and measurable: According to the U.S. Census, Michigan is the most segregated state in the nation. "Five of the 25 most racially segregated metropolitan regions in America — Detroit, Saginaw, Flint, Benton Harbor, and Muskegon — are in Michigan. The next closest state is New York, with four. Two more Michigan metropolitan regions — Grand Rapids and Jackson — almost made the top 25." ("Michigan Apartheid," Keith Schneider, Michigan Land Use Institute, April, 2003). Within Grand Rapids, almost 70 percent of Caucasians live in blocks with less than ten percent minority population. Over 25 percent of African-Americans live in blocks that are more than 90 percent minority population.

Grand Rapids is like hundreds of other U.S. cities in many ways, but, in several other ways, it is unique — set apart from the others for its leadership, its commitment, and particularly, for its residents' willingness to discuss openly — and ultimately resolve — the difficult issues facing this and many other communities in the nation.

Despite the fact that it is among the most segregated of all communities in the nation, Grand Rapids residents, under the leadership of the local Greater Grand Rapids National Issues Forums and several local organizations, have maintained a two-decade-long commitment to dialoguing around the issue of race relations, and to achieving the seemingly impossible quest of becoming a racism-free community.

History

In the summer of 1967, race riots broke out in 40 U.S. cities. Surprising to many, perhaps especially to those who lived in a place that often bills itself as a "city of churches," on July 25th that year, tensions exploded on the streets of Grand Rapids. Quiet, "little" Grand Rapids joined the ranks of Newark, Detroit, Los Angeles, and 36 other cities that were forever changed by a race riot.

The violence began when the police stopped several black teens riding in a stolen car. Neighbors gathered to watch the police. Perhaps the police, in their fear, used excessive force, or perhaps the neighbors needed no such excuse.

It ended two days later. The main city thoroughfare, Division Avenue, which

held many of the nightclubs and best restaurants, and many long-time businesses and shops, had been virtually destroyed. Store owners erected metal gates to protect their wares and conceal broken windows from passersby, but for most of the businesses future attempts to rebuild proved futile. The restaurants along Division Avenue moved, closed, or changed hands and fare. The stores and outlets followed suit — emptying out and leaving behind shells that sometimes became fast-food outlets or pawn shops, but often, simply went dark and slowly decayed.

The interstate highway, US-131, made denial easy for white suburbanites. Commuters avoided Division and its surrounding neighborhoods and drove directly to and from their downtown jobs with only billboards to mar their peace. White residents and city leaders had a long history of denial and of denying the rights of others and denying their part in racial tensions. They could trace their exclusionary actions back to the city's settlement, when fur traders extorted treaty annuities from the tribes they found living on the banks of the Grand River, then used the treaties to drive the American-Indians away.

For decades, exclusion was the "natural" way of doing business. It was about color. In 1925 an African-American dentist and his wife went to the Theatre with a white couple. The white couple was shown to their seats on the main floor; the African-American couple was directed to sit in the balcony. Though the dentist was courageous enough to challenge the Theatre's way of doing business all the way to the Michigan Supreme Court, where he won the judgment, little else changed. When it came to equality, it would be "business as usual" for decades to come.
In World Wars I and II soldiers were recruited to different fighting units based on color. When G.I.'s returned after World War II suburban employment, new highways and streets, GI-bill housing, and affordable cars attracted white city residents to new suburban developments; redlining restricted mortgage lending in "less-desirable" areas of the city, and block-busting realtors encouraged white families to sell their homes before African-Americans moved in and they found their own neighborhoods cut off by the red line too.

These tactics — both deliberate and historical — further segregated races from one another, and geographically — if not legally and practically — prohibited cultural exchange and understanding.

National Issues Forums

Throughout the decades following World War II and well into the 1970s,, most residents of the Grand Rapids and

its suburbs lived with, worked with, played with, went to school with, and talked with only those who looked like they did, and more importantly, thought as they did. If anything, the 1967 race riots further segregated people into homogenous social groups and neighborhoods.

There were few opportunities to interact. "Great American Talk Fests," sponsored by Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) during the 1970s, brought people into the city to hear nationally known speakers, but they were lectures that engaged the audience only briefly and at no higher level than the cable television programs that soon replaced them.

In 1981, Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, invited several community college staff members and leaders to discuss shared concerns at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. Leaders from the Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) came away with a new approach to sharing learning and engaging the public: at the time, the "Domestic Policy Association" model for public discussion.

On their return, Cedric Ward, a staff member of GRCC, began the fundraising, marketing, coordinating and public relations necessary to convene three public forums. Each of the forums was centered on the issues books produced by the Kettering Foundation, and each drew an increasing number of interested individuals.

From left to right:
Dr. Joseph Daniels,
Dr. Patricia Pulliam,
Anita Watson Phillips,
Judge Benjamin Logan.

Carl Eschels, a retired businessman and former city commissioner, attended many of the early forums and was intrigued by a process that encouraged citizens to speak their piece on issues of interest locally and nationally. In the mid-1980s, from Wingspread facilitator,

Front Row:
Shirley Daniels, L. Helen Johnson and Dolly Burleson
Back Row:
Birthale Archie, Liz Keegan, Bessie Ward, Jacob Robinson, Delores Robinson and Yvonne Sims

Len Oliver, Eschels learned about study circles and encouraged others in Grand Rapids to offer both the more formal forums and the "living room" centered

Carl Eschels, Francisco Vega, City Commissioner James White, Carol Rienstra, Shannon Harris

study circles as a means not merely to reach out to residents of the community, but to engage them. By 1986, the group held three forums at the community college and 13 study circles in places as diverse as public school districts and local colleges, Senior Neighbors, Grand Rapids Study Club, YWCA, Catholic Diocese, Salvation Army, and the Urban League. The Grand Rapids Study Club, an organization founded by African-American women in the late 1800s when all of the members were housekeepers, held more forums than any other organization in the city and has continued to this day to offer regular opportunities for dialogue. By 1989, 18 community organizations were committed to offering 37 issue dialogues each year, and the local "Domestic Policy Association," had changed its name to "National Issues Forums."

Meanwhile, in 1988, Carl Eschels became a founding board member in another organization established to convene local citizens to study and deliberate on local issues before those issues became politicized. That group became the Citizens League of Greater Grand Rapids. In 1988 two task forces of expert and generalist citizens studied public transportation and child care in the workplace and issued reports containing recommendations for action by government, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and other citizens. In 1990, the League studied workplace literacy and affordable housing and again issued reports calling on key community members to prevent or address emerging problems. And, in 1991, the League collaborated with the Grand Rapids Community Foundation to study child abuse and neglect. The resulting report from the child abuse study formed a framework for the foundation's grantmaking for child abuse prevention over the next decade.

The League selected its issues from those submitted by the general public according to several criteria: Did the issue have local implications and

control? Did a number of people propose the same issue; in other words, was there an existing level of interest? Was there sufficient data and information to help the task force understand all sides of the issue? And was there potential for solutions or courses of action?

When the League's Board of Directors convened in late 1993 to choose its next issue, many argued that the frequently submitted issue of racism did not fit other criteria. Others argued that such a study was long past due and that the sheer number of submissions citing racism as the topic should be held paramount over the other criteria. In a compromise, the Board selected racism as its issue discussion for the year, but encouraged its members to seek an alternative to the task force methodology it had used previously. After all, they reasoned, where would they get the "expert" testimony and the rational basis for deliberation on an issue so rife with emotion, opinion, and misunderstanding?

Eschels and chairperson of the local chapter of NIF, Yvonne Sims, hit on a solution when they merged the Citizens League local focus with the study circle model used successfully by the NIF. The NIF had issued materials on race relations approximately two years before and had additional material on related topics such as affirmative action and poverty that the newly named "citizens circles" could use to round out news articles and data supplied by local sources. Primarily, however, the citizen circles were tapped because they provided a safe environment for discussing divergent points of view. In a citizen circle, participants could learn more about a topic for which everyone had an opinion but few had any real knowledge; a problem that no one "owned."

1994-1996 – Sowing Seeds

It is quite probable that the existence and experience of study circles for deliberative dialogue prepared and encouraged residents of Grand Rapids to suggest a study/dialogue issue topic like racism. It is equally probable that the results of the NIF/Citizens League collaboration set the stage for what would, these ten years later, become a wholehearted, sustained, and multi-faceted approach to ending racism in this community.

The citizen circles dialogued about racism in greater Grand Rapids for more than two years. While more than 2,000 citizen participants deliberated in 47 circles, one respected business owner in the community began a full-fledged, personal campaign to get more people talking about and acting on racism.

Yvonne Sims, Chairperson of Greater Grand Rapids National Issues Forums

Grocery chain owner, Bob Woodrick, brought up racism at every meeting of

Rev. David Baak, Summit on Racism Organizer

civic leaders; he gave a speech to the Economics Club about the business sense of diversity in hiring and customer service. A Catholic, he approached the Bishop and asked the Church to do more. He asked Rev. David Baak of the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism (GRACE) to lead a movement among congregations throughout the city. Woodrick handed out books by Studs Turkel and Nathan Rutstein, and he brought Rutstein to Grand Rapids to encourage religious and business organizations to learn about and launch Rutstein's "Institutes for Healing Racism," for the public. Woodrick wrote letters and essays to the local media, gave interviews, and insisted that every one of his hundreds of employees receive training in appreciating ethnic and racial diversity as part of their workplace orientation.

As a result of his urging and investment, the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce piloted Institutes for Healing Racism for area business people. Woodrick collaborated with Aquinas College to house the Woodrick Institute for the Study of Racism and Diversity, which offers ongoing programming around racism and regular Institutes for Healing Racism. Later, GRACE would found the Racial Justice Institute and offer faith-based Institutes for Healing Racism, and the Heart of West Michigan United Way would offer to assist nonprofit organization staff with fees so people could attend the Institute of their choice regardless of their ability to pay.

Woodrick, Baak, and many others "tilled the soil," so that the Citizens League report, "Listen, Learn, Act…Promoting Racial Harmony in Greater Grand Rapids," would fall on fertile ground, take root quickly, and blossom into something sustainable and nourishing to the community. When the Citizens League issued the citizen circle report in May, 1996, the community was, thus, prepared to implement its three priority recommendations:

1. Establish a 5- to 10-year plan for promoting racial harmony, which will include annual goals and objectives for governmental units and services, schools, religious institutions, healthcare institutions, businesses, philanthropies, nonprofit organizations, and the media.

2. Annually hold a public forum at which citizens can testify about personal experiences that promoted racial justice, and organizations can describe their work and successes from the previous year. Within a week of the forum, they will issue a public statement concerning the status of annual goals

and objectives and outlining next steps for the community.

3. Encourage development of a "Grander Vision" office (either as a separate entity, or within an existing organization that has racial harmony as its mission), which area citizens may contact for additional information or to request speakers. This office should also be responsible for training facilitators and developing discussion groups, modeled after Citizen Circles, throughout the county.

In response, GRACE fulfilled the third recommendation when, that same year, it established the Racial Justice Institute (RJI) and hired Reverend David May as RJI director. Together the Reverends Baak and May planned an annual Summit on Racism, and devised a work plan that would enable those who attended the Summits to work year-round to address racism from within their own area of expertise or work. These "action teams" carried out the intent of the first recommendation when they organized to work within their sectors to address racism and injustice.

Divided into business, community, education, government, health, media, and religious sectors, each action team developed its own vision and goals and implemented a number of efforts. They created policies and procedures for their sectors; launched film programs and advocacy efforts. They engaged youth, enlisted support from sector leaders, and encouraged cooperation and change from within.

Throughout the eight years between the release of the Citizens League report and 2005, the Racial Justice Institute followed the recommendations set forth by the citizen circles that had dialogued for two years. Also within the ensuing decade, more than 2000 individuals attended and completed a several-week Institute for Healing Racism. A dozen or more businesses established champions for diversity, and an increasing number of individual citizens, if they did not necessarily believe differently, began to act and speak differently — with more respect for differences and less open hostility for misunderstandings.

Rev. David May, Summit on Racism Organizer

Unchanging Times

One might assume that all of these efforts combined — a Racial Justice Institute, seven sector teams working on actions within their areas of expertise, youth programs, three providers of Institutes for Healing Racism, and an increasingly "polite" interchange among citizens — would change a community.

By late 2004, however, there was no evidence of real change. People put on

Debra Muller, National Issues Forums Participant

"pretty faces" to mask an undercurrent of misunderstandings and, sometimes, outright animosity. They had the language — diversity, acknowledging differences, growing, celebrating, embracing — all the terms that became cosmetics to cover over the fact that, fundamentally, the community was no nearer its goal of becoming racism free than it had been a century before when it claimed the American Indian's land along the Grand River and grew it into Michigan's second largest city.

On the contrary, a scan of news articles indicated that relationships between ethnicities seemed to be deteriorating. In 2004, a several years-long effort to rename Franklin Street for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. failed repeatedly to pass the city commission. A teen wore a KKK hood to a local high school Halloween party, without reproach from school chaperones. In that year, there had been a dozen murders — all by people of color against other people of color — and there was more controversy over who was or was not making noise about the murders than over the murders themselves. When the Chief of Police asked in the media why the community wasn't outraged by the murders, he was accused of ignoring the fact of urban gangs or blaming the victims. Within the month, he saw the outrage when , hundreds of citizens turned out to tell stories of racial profiling by the city police department.

When the City Commission balked at the idea of changing the name of Franklin to Martin Luther King, Jr. Street, the Grand Rapids National Issues Forums was asked to call the community together to discuss the sides of the issue. Seventy-six individuals worked in seven study circles to deliberate and to issue a statement to the Commission prior to its next vote. They had acknowledged all the different feelings surrounding the issue and concluded that the majority of citizens were in favor of the change, and since the money for street signage and other efforts had already been donated, the Commission should reconsider its stance. Instead, the city compromised and added an honorary designation on Division Street, the city thoroughfare that divides east from west.

That action was not the end of the matter. State Representative Michael Sac had participated in the study circles and brought the matter to the State legislature with a request that the State add an honorary designation to US-131. The southern half is now named for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; the northern half for Poland-born American Revolutionary hero, Casimir Pulaski. Today, the highway that once divided the city and facilitated "white flight" is a symbol of unity and heroism.

Data told their own story about the City. The Delta Strategy, a community entity dedicated to bringing together cross-sector problem solving teams and launching initiatives to address poverty-related issues, annually publishes a Community Report Card with the Community Research Institute at Grand Valley State University. Each year, they ask hundreds of randomly selected residents a series of questions including, "do you believe you and your family experience equal opportunity and treatment," and gather data from a number of sources to mark any disparities among segments of the population.

While the number of "no" responses to the question of equitable treatment among Caucasians remained very low across years, they declined among people of color. In 2002, 25 percent of people of color suggested they were not treated fairly; in 2003, 18 percent indicated unfair treatment. And notably, complaints about racial discrimination in housing dropped from 50 percent of all complaints (where it had been for the previous decade) to 35 percent in 2003.

While there were some improvements, they were not enough to offset the picture painted from the entire Report Card. In most areas of typical disparity, such as infant mortality, poverty, deaths from cancer and heart disease, crime victimization, and incarceration, the numbers either did not budge or they indicated a slightly worse status than years previous.

Each year, the Report Card includes a "grade" on the livability of the city, based on composite data and survey responses. Individually, the grade inevitably varies by the survey respondents' age, income and race. In 2004, asked to rank life in greater Grand Rapids as excellent, good or fair, 85 percent of Caucasian respondents called the community excellent or good. In contrast, three in ten people of color — nearly one third — ranked life here in the "city of churches," at the lowest level. It is somewhat ironic that the term for this lowest rank was "fair."

While headlines and data might cause other cities' residents to give up, many in Grand Rapids used the events of 2004 to renew their energy for and commitment to dialogue and action around racism. Though the City Commission voted against a name change to honor Dr. King, the community found compromise; and though communities of color bristled at the police chief, in Grand Rapids, dissenters are heard. The City Commission allowed hours of testimony and a written statement from the NIF before making its decision; the police department opened its doors

Levi Rickert,
National Issues Forums and Summit on Racism
Participant

to charges of profiling. The outcomes may not have been what the people asked, but each person who spoke came away feeling acknowledged and heard, and, in that — as many had experienced in dialogues — valued.

Throughout the decade following the citizen circles' discussion of race, there had been dozens of new dialogues around new and emerging issues such as HIV/AIDS, prescription drug availability and costs, healthcare prevention and healthcare worker accountability, elder care, youth violence, and many others. Each drew new people to the process: pharmacists, physicians, teenagers, elders, and others, many of whom have continued to engage with NIF and to return to discuss issues that may not be as close to their profession or life as the one that first drew them. In each dialogue on every other topic, race and parity, or disparity, are integral to the issue and the discussion. As individuals continue their involvement, they quite naturally have gravitated to the annual Summits or to anti-racism efforts in their congregation, school, or workplace.

There has also been a shift of thought since the citizens' circles issued their 1996 report. In "Listen, Learn, Act…" the participants urged a focus on race as a black-white issue in their belief that prejudice toward other ethnicities was a matter of language barriers or cultural misunderstandings. They reported that the history of slavery set black-white relationships apart and required a higher level of action and a greater measure of healing. Since then, many have clarified in their NIF issue dialogues, a new point of view. Following discussions, particularly among people of color, community members now focus more on building a successful diverse community. They believe that it is important to learn more about others, to set aside *all* differences — in color, in religion or beliefs, in politics, or culture — and to truly appreciate their interactions with those people they may otherwise have judged.

This shift in thinking, coupled with the lack of measurable change and the ten-year anniversary of the citizen circle dialogues, illustrated the need for a new course of action. In the first Summit on Racism, participants had set a goal of becoming a racism-free community, but they were beginning to lose their way. There were some obvious flaws with the action team approach. First, interest and membership in the teams would peak in the months following a Summit and gradually decrease over the course of a year or after one accomplishment. Second, membership was comprised

primarily of those from the same sector, creating de facto "self policing," rather than a vehicle for new and fresh ideas or criticisms. The teams also struggled, over time, with maintaining racial diversity.

For instance, media was one sector that rested after a few "showcase" changes. Many of the local media now do annual programs on the state of race in the community or on specific race-based issues; however, in their day-to-day operations little has changed. Local media "watchdog" organization, Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy, (GRIID) has recorded and analyzed years of local television news programs and has found no change over seven years in their attempts to interview people of color or women unless it is a topic specific to people of color or women. GRIID Director, Jeff Smith said, "minority voices are rarely heard in local news coverage and tend to be race specific, meaning they are heard by TV viewers if the story is about racism, diversity or a cultural event. However, when it comes to economic, education, public health, the environment or public policy, minority voices are almost non-existent."

Smith believes that some media coverage is exploitive. He said, "For example, recently, in covering a downtown Cinco de Mayo celebration, media approached it like 'voyeurs.' The broadcasters told the viewers there was a celebration and showed video footage of a Mexican man in a sombrero singing, and people eating, but no one from the Mexican-American community was heard talking about the significance of the celebration. One of the anchors followed the segment with comments about how much he liked Mariachi music, as though people's culture is something to be consumed."

2005 – A New Approach

The GRACE Racial Justice Institute and several community members, including representatives from the Greater Grand Rapids National Issues Forums and Delta Strategy, determined that for Summit 2005, they would return to the roots of the effort begun ten years previous with citizen circles — facilitated dialogue.

On the day of the Summit, March 18, 2005, nearly 500 participants broke into 22 groups, each with a facilitator and a recorder, to discuss how race had affected each person's life experiences in the Grand Rapids area. The members of the groups agreed to meet again twice in the next three months to discuss, in the second meeting, how race matters, and, in the third, to share their vision for a racism free community.

Faye Richardson, Summit on Racism Organizer

Peter Gallagher, Director of the East Grand Rapids Department of Public Safety

During the three dialogue sessions, two police officers from East Grand Rapids were surprised to learn that their city, which is viewed as being primarily white and wealthy, was also viewed by people of color as being unwelcoming. In fact, many people of color believe that they will be followed in East Grand Rapids stores or pulled over by its police force for nothing more than "looking as though they don't belong."

The officers reported back to the Police Chief and Deputy Police Chief, who determined together to hold their own sort of forum.

In August, 2005, they offered the first "nothing to hide" community-wide forum and invited Summit participants and local NIF leaders. "Nothing to Hide" had little participation by East Grand Rapids residents; nearly all participants came from the nearby City of Grand Rapids. It wasn't about "looking good" to constituents, but about building relationships and dispelling misperceptions. Community members learned that, in fact, East Grand Rapids has one of the most integrated police forces in the county.

Today, a second suburban police department, Wyoming, is planning its own "nothing to hide" and a third, Kentwood, is considering the option.

In June, 2005, the recorders turned over their notes from the three dialogue sessions to GRACE-RJI and challenged the organization to report the participants' findings and craft from those findings a new plan for the coming decade. During the process, Baak told the freelance writer assigned to the project (the same person who wrote "Listen, Learn, Act…" in 1996), that he envisioned working toward a "tipping point." The idea germinated and formed the basis for a new decade of effort based on Malcolm Gladwell's hypothesis that social movements come about organically in much the same manner that an epidemic sweeps through a population. The new work plan, published in early 2006, is prefaced with an explanation:

> What the greater Grand Rapids community needs in order to develop a racism-free community, one in which *every person feels safe in every neighborhood*, is to combine all the previous efforts, the new ideas, the knowledge, and the goals and visions to reach that 'magic moment when an idea, trend or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips and spreads like wildfire,' or what author Malcolm Gladwell called the 'Tipping Point.'

Liz Keegan, National Issues Forums Volunteer Facilitator

The three ingredients needed to create such a tipping point are explained by Gladwell as 'The law of the few, the stickiness factor, and the power of context.'

The law of the few says that just a few key people can begin an epidemic of change**.** The individuals must be those to whom others will listen, or those who seem to build connections between people and ideas, and/or those who have particular charisma…

The stickiness factor…means simply that there is a way to package information that makes 'getting the message' nearly irresistible. The message gets to the critical mass of people necessary to create a movement; they, in turn, bring others along and, as a mass, are able to create systemic or institutional change.

The final ingredient to building to a tipping point is the power of context. Gladwell says that epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur…

The report lays out a plan for starting a "racism-free epidemic" that corre-

sponds with Gladwell's three criteria. It says, in part:

> Summit participants share a common goal: *The intentional creation of a tipping point at which our community becomes racism free.* To create that tipping point, the Summit participants recommend that Summit 2006 participants should lead individuals, businesses, congregations, institutions and organizations — everyone— in all the sectors of our community, on the following course, individualized to each one's own context as appropriate, in the coming ten years:
>
> ***Leadership:*** Every nonprofit organization, every religious institution, every business, and every other site where people gather in greater Grand Rapids should identify at least one 'champion' who makes ending racism an integral part of the work/worship-place dialog. For a base of shared experience, those champions should attend an Institute for Healing Racism, or similar educational experience, and become the passionate daily advocate for racial justice and equality. In those companies and institutions that are fully committed to ending racism, the 'champion' role could be alternated regularly among several staff members.
>
> ***Stickiness:*** The community should develop messages about racism that are memorable and irresistible. 'When every person feels safe in every neighborhood' is a powerful statement that conjures images and ideas and may become one of those messages. The media should repeat the messages; billboards and lapel pins should be created that encourage other people to ask questions and want to belong. Further, a universal symbol similar to that used for recycled products should be developed that will take on meaning for everyone.
>
> ***Context:*** To create an environment conducive to change, individuals should become hyper-aware of the role that racism can play in every incident they read about, hear about, and experience. They should continually question what they know and what they don't know and should seek answers to their questions. To create this state of collective consciousness, thousands more individuals in greater Grand Rapids should participate in educational, action oriented experiences such as the Institutes for Healing Racism.

Further, GRACE-RJI have committed to working with the Community Research Institute to develop benchmarks for activities and to devise indicators to

Lisa Mitchell, Summit on Racism Organizer

measure change resulting from implementation of its goals. What is not measured, after all, is not accomplished.

Summit on Racism 2006 — Initiating the Plan

In mid-2005, Reverend David May and his wife went to see the movie, "Crash," and came away hoping that more people would see the film and get together to discuss its themes. May contacted the agent for the writers and producers of the film and secured a commitment to send one of the principles to the March 24, 2006 Summit on Racism. "Crash" won the Academy Award for best picture in February, which made the speaker all the more exciting an attraction for area residents.

Participants in small group discussion at the Summit on Racism 2006

May arranged for local theatres to offer four inexpensive ($5) showings of the film in February and early March and provided panelists to lead discussions about the film afterward. On Summit day, "Crash" scriptwriter, Robert Moresco, fielded audience questions by closed-circuit television beamed into the theatre at Calvin College, while one of the film's producers, Mark R. Harris, attended in person. Harris told the media afterward that "more communities should be doing this. It's remarkable." Using the report "Toward a Tipping Point," issued on the day of the 2006 Summit, the RJI broke the more than 600 participants into small groups to discuss "who" would be the leaders we would call on in the coming decade, "what" will be the design and message that will stick, and "how" the community would understand and assimilate the message into their personal beliefs and actions.

Responses from the discussions were gathered and recorded and shared with 80 individuals who gathered in late April to design implementation plans. Summit 2006 participants have generated more than 200 names of individuals whom they believe should lead the anti-racism movement; bringing the issue to every meeting and a plan for diversity to every workplace. The smaller follow-up group is combing through Summit suggestions for engaging these leaders that range from cross-sector educational meetings to individual meetings to providing a special Institute for Healing Racism just for leaders, in which they can discuss issues and plans with their peers.

The smaller group also reviewed the many suggestions for a logo and tagline and determined that, either through a call for submissions or a con-

test, GRACE RJI should have the logo created by a professional graphic artist who is both interested and committed to the cause and who can take the suggestions of the community and translate them into a "sticky" message.

There are pages of suggestions from the Summit on what to do with that message once completed. There is one group of individuals who believes it's important that the logo has meaning — that if a person places it on her business stationery or in the window of his home or office, it signals not only the person's interest, but his or her commitment and actions to ending racism. In other words, wearing, displaying, or using the logo should be an earned "honor."

A second group of Summit participants has generated a list of places where the logo should be seen and shared, in their belief that this goes beyond honor into outreach, grabbing the interest of diverse community members and encouraging them to become a part of the movement. Their ideas range from placing the logo on t-shirts, busses, billboards and city street signs, to adding the logo to on plastic order dividers in grocers' checkout lanes, milk cartons, and high school gymnasium walls. The smaller group from the Summit plans to meet again throughout the summer of 2006 to finalize their plans and begin implementing them as soon as possible. By Summit on Racism 2007, there should be progress to report, next steps, and an urgent call to action for those who want to realize the vision set forth for 2016 in "Toward a Tipping Point….Creating a Racism-Free Community"

The Grand Rapids Difference

While Grand Rapids has not achieved its goals for becoming racism free, many residents persist, and will continue to persist despite setbacks and discouraging news headlines and data. It is not that racism is worse in greater Grand Rapids than anywhere else in the U.S., nor is it because Grand Rapids' history or demographics are unique.

It is, rather, a combination of traits that come together to create a community of individuals who are willing to set the bar beyond their reach and try to reach it anyway; individuals who, in the words of one Summit 2005 participant are "willing to come again, to bleed, so that you folks can grow."

Grand Rapids and Affirmative Action

In November of 2006, Michigan voters adopted a controversial ban, the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, by a 58 to 42 percent margin. The vote amends the state constitution to ban affirmative action programs in government contracting and university admissions. However, in the City of Grand Rapids, the initiative failed by a margin of 54 to 46 percent; outside of Detroit, Grand Rapids is the only community in West Michigan that did not approve the ban. In late November, Mayor George Heartwell urged the City Commission to explore suing in federal court to overturn the amendment; he believes that the state constitutional amendment violates federal civil rights law. Two local law firms have offered to help the city at no cost; another option is for the city to join an existing lawsuit versus filing its own. Opponents of trying to overturn the decision say the voters have spoken and that the city, already having financial difficulty, cannot afford the lawsuit. In the end, the lawsuit was tabled but Mayor Heartwell, in his annual State of the City address, championed diversity, saying he will campaign for affirmative action and civil rights despite the constitutional ban. He stated that the City will focus on increasing the diversity of the workforce "because that's what we valued in Grand Rapids." Mayor Heartwell also announced the first annual "Mayor's Champion of Diversity Award" and that the City Commission is planning to adopt a program that will favor "Disadvantaged Business Enterprise" which will include many minority- and woman-owned companies. "My own heartfelt belief is that none of us have opportunity unless all of us do," said Heartwell.

For three years running, from 2002-2004, the students of the Mayor's Youth Council identified racial tension as a critical issue for the community to address. The Greater Grand Rapids National Issues Forums (NIF) partnered with the City of Grand Rapids' Mayor's Youth Council members to talk about issues of race and ethnicity with the 9th and 10th grade students and community members. The forums used the NIF issue book, Racial and Ethnic Tensions: What Should We Do? as a discussion guide. The collaboration between the Mayor's Youth Council and the NIF provided a unique opportunity for interaction between students and adults that are addressing racial and ethnic tensions in their schools, neighborhoods and workplaces. Participants took part in a deliberative dialogue, sharing personal stories, past experiences and ideas for change. The Mayor's Youth Council is a program of the Office of Children, Youth & Families, a partnership between the City of Grand Rapids and the Grand Rapids Public Schools.

One of those traits that is critical both to the past and the future of the community is its leadership. Throughout the decades of dialogue and action, there has been at least one person to oversee and keep alive the study circles and the model for facilitated discussion of important topics. And, because of NIF and the Delta Strategy, the community has resources in more than 40 trained facilitators to lead discussions or problem solving efforts. Other leaders have shaped the community's response to specific issues such as racism in the case of Woodrick, Baak, and May; sustainability in the case of Mayor George Heartwell, or "green" building in the case of several local developers.

These leaders have ensured a second trait that is critical to addressing racism — a wealth of opportunities to participate. The community has not one, but three, vital and continuing sources for Institutes for Healing Racism and it has a funding mechanism to ensure support for those who would otherwise be unable to attend. It has an annual Summit on Racism attended each year by an increasing number of individuals and supported by several local businesses, nonprofit organizations and philanthropies.

Its third trait is that it has a written plan for action, and that community members have not been afraid to revisit the plan, evaluate its outcomes, and change course as needed. It has an ongoing resource, as well, in the Community Research Institute at Grand Valley State University, which gathers data and makes them available to any person in the community on its website and in the annual Community Report Cards it co-publishes with Delta Strategy.

Fourth, is the depth and breadth of commitment to volunteerism in greater Grand Rapids. National Issues Forums have continued for more than two decades on the strength on volunteers who have received facilitator training and who give freely of their time and expertise to ensure that the dialogues will continue. The local NIF coordinator is not paid and must ensure through negotiation with her employers the time and space needed to ensure that the NIF has an identity and "door" in the community. Though the Summits on Racism are supported

Mayor's Youth Council's National Issues Forum on "Racial & Ethnic Tensions: What Should We Do?" at Ottawa Hills High School

annually by area businesses and non-profit organizations, the ongoing work of the many organizations committed to promoting diversity and ending racism continue only through the efforts of committed unpaid volunteers.

Last, but most importantly, Grand Rapids is a community that, because of the National Issues Forums, has developed a strong foundation of civic dialogue. It is one of only a few communities in the U.S. that has sustained the NIF, even during difficult economic times, because people have learned to value the safe forum provided in facilitated discussion, to listen and hear the other, and to modify sometimes strong opinions when they are provided additional information. Greater Grand Rapids is, in many ways, a learning community and its relationship with NIF is both the result and the cause of much of its learning.

These traits — a foundation for open discussion, leadership, opportunity, volunteerism, and a plan — are those that are necessary for any community that seeks to address and resolve an important issue. They are in abundance in Grand Rapids, as is the hope that, one day, all these resources will be brought to bear to achieve the seemingly unattainable goal: a racism-free community.

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