



Needhamites reflect on social justice, race, the election

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Upwards of 150 community members turned up for the Needham Diversity Initiative's fifth annual Diversity Summit on Nov. 19.

A daylong event dedicated to talking about different forms of diversity from race and white privilege to transgender equality, the summit also focused on the METCO programs and the 2016 presidential election.

The 2016 presidential election gave the summit an added sense of necessity.

"This one happened at such an amazing juncture," said Needham resident Clark Taylor, who has attended all but one diversity summit.

The timing of the election is partly what inspired resident Ken Thress to attend the event. Thress was disappointed there weren't more Needhamites at this year's summit.

"I would think a majority of Needham residents might have the same sort of feelings, that might want to be part of a discussion like this," he said.

According to initiative member David Summergrad, attendance at the event has been increasing each year. Last year's summit saw 90 people in attendance.

The summit's attention to multiple topics, not just the election, is what drew Meghan Thress.

"We live in a bit of a bubble, we are people of privilege and we realize that but we think it's incredibly important to get different opinions, understandings," Meghan said.

For Taylor, the summit provided a platform from which people could analyze their own hidden bias.

"We just don't understand at an in-depth level how different the experience is for people of color than whites," he said.

In the quiet space of the Pollard auditorium audience members and panelists engaged in what were often very emotional, very personal discussions.

"It was very much needed, it was a good open space for discussion," said panelist Max Coren, a Needham High School senior.

That open space allowed resident Ellen Fine to share her story of being called a derogatory word for being Jewish while a student in Needham.

"I know there are kids who will go through what I went through and I didn't want that for them," she said.

Though distressed about the outcome of the election, Fine emphasized the need for respectfulness.

"You teach people and you're a national example of hate," Fine said of President-elect Donald Trump. "That said, there is love and compassion that has to go around."

The summit is also where panelist Tracy McKay, Needham resident and mother of three, spoke publicly for the first time about her two transgender children. In an emotional moment at the close of her talk the audience recognized her with a standing ovation.

While the summit allowed the group to engage with each other on difficult topics, it also inspired attendees to consider how to continue addressing those difficult topics.

Both Meghan and Ken said they would take what they had learned at the summit and use it to talk to their kids about diversity and its importance.

Taylor, who is involved in a many social justice groups like the Needham Area Immigration Justice Task Force, said the summit had inspired him to take a new look at his work.

“It will definitely affect my thinking about the racial justice program at the Unitarian Universalist church,” he said.

Coren encouraged those who did not attend the event to attend the next one, stressing the importance of joining in the discussion even if uncomfortable. He noted that he would like to see the event happen more often than once a year and that he would like to see more students involved.

For state Rep. Denise Garlick, D-Needham, the importance of the event was in how it could benefit the Needham community moving forward.

Addressing issues of diversity has to be more than what Garlick described as a “twenty-minute rally.” She urged the audience to continue talking about diversity issues long after the summit ended.

“It has to be a movement, not a moment,” Garlick said.