

Groden: Taking on human rights concerns

By Suzy Q. Groden / Sitting In

Melrose Free Press, Tue Jun 17, 2008, 05:57 PM EDT

Melrose - On the evening of Wednesday, May 14, close to 50 Melrosians gathered in the cafetorium of the Melrose Veterans Memorial Middle School to participate in a discussion about how our city has been changing in recent years. The specific focus of the conversation was the dramatic increase in the diversity of its residents, and our responses to that increase as a community.

Labeled "Let's Talk, Melrose: a citywide conversation about our changing community," the event was sponsored jointly by the Melrose Human Rights Commission and Mayor Robert J. Dolan. It was designed to promote civic engagement among the city's citizens by providing them with the first of what is hoped to be a series of exchanges about how the city can be made more welcoming to all people.

The starting place for the event was the realization by the Human Rights Commission that, despite our community's long-standing commitment to being "open to all" (as proclaimed by the familiar red-and-white bumper stickers on many Melrose cars since the mid-1990s), people who are different from the groups who settled the city originally — racially, ethnically, culturally, socially, or linguistically — have sometimes been made to feel unwelcome.

In addition, some of the city's long-time residents, who grew up surrounded by people like themselves (at least on the surface), have expressed fear and dislike of newcomers who appear to be different. In order to help the community address these issues productively, the mayor and the commissioners decided to create an opportunity for Melrose citizens to join in a discussion about how we can work together to more fully satisfy our own standards for civility and openness.

Jeff Stone and Matt Thompson, who are members of an organization called City-Wide Dialogues on Ethnic and Racial Diversity, facilitated the May 14 gathering. Both are experienced at helping Boston-area communities to cope with change and foster civic engagement.

The participants represented a broad range of Melrose life. There were people in their 70s and 80s, young parents, and individuals from every age group in between. The Police and School Departments were represented, as were the League of Women Voters, the Melrose Alliance Against Violence, the Chamber of Commerce, the local Democratic and Republican Committees, the Board of Aldermen, and the School Committee. Some of the city's retailers and professionals were present, as well as members of the clergy, real estate people, and attorneys. The early human rights commissions were also represented.

Some people came out of simple curiosity, drawn by announcements that appeared in the newspapers; some came with hope for an authentic exchange of ideas; some, admittedly, came despite residual cynicism. The participants ate together and spent most of the evening talking in small groups. They described their hopes for the evening, what they love about living in Melrose, and what they imagine could lead to an improvement of life in the city. They confronted some of the discomforts and fears of people who are new to Melrose and contribute to its increasing diversity, and also some of the concerns and fears of long-time residents.

In the end, they generated close to 100 ideas for specific activities that might improve life in Melrose for all of its residents. They then “voted” for those projects that seemed most feasible and likely to produce results, marking them with colored dots.

The human rights commissioners have now analyzed these “votes,” and have identified more than a dozen proposals that received five or more endorsements, distributed across five general areas of concern. These areas are: the need to create community gathering places, community events and activities, public information and awareness, school-related issues, and public safety. They have scheduled a follow-up meeting so that members of the public can consider the proposed projects and — they hope — commit themselves to work on at least one of them. This follow-up meeting will be on Wednesday, July 9, from 7:30 to 9:00 p.m. at the Unitarian Universalist Church, 70 West Emerson St.

Mayor Dolan and the Human Rights Commission were extremely gratified by the large turnout on May 14 and by the warmth, honesty, and energy of the exchanges that evening. They are hoping that the momentum generated that evening will continue to grow and that we will see some of the proposed projects brought to life in the coming year.

Suzy Q. Groden is a member of the Melrose Human Rights Commission.