



## A New Approach: City-Wide Dialogues on Boston's Ethnic & Racial Diversity

By Jeff Stone, as told to Neil Berman

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Many people were caught by surprise when U.S. Census figures from 2000 showed that Boston had become a "majority-minority" city, with about 51% residents of color. That surprise has turned into growing political clout as evidenced by the election of Felix Arroyo, the first Latino member of the Boston City Council, in 2003; Sam Yoon's recent election as the first Asian-American member of the Council; Linda Dorcena Forry, a Haitian-American, winning Tom Finneran's old House seat; and Andrea Cabral's dominating electoral victory over City Councilor Stephen Murphy in the Suffolk County Sheriff's race last year. However, this doesn't change the reality of Boston as a city long marred by racial strife and a lack of minority representation in leadership positions. The Boston Foundation's "Boston Indicators Report of 2002," for example, highlighted the significance of these concerns for Boston. Leadership in business, electoral politics and the nonprofit sector does not reflect the region's growing racial/ethnic diversity.

The good news is, that's slowly changing. Jeff Stone is involved in various projects to improve the racial situation in Greater Boston. One of these projects is the City-Wide Dialogues on Boston's Ethnic & Racial Diversity. "Boston had long been tagged as a city with racial problems and, unfortunately racial discrimination does exist here. It's a challenge for our entire country and it's up to us to tackle it where we live. I had been thinking about the social segregation and conflicts here in Boston for some time and was wondering how the problem could be addressed" Stone said, looking back at the genesis of the project. "As we began thinking along these lines in discussion groups I was involved in, it became apparent that what was being done to address these differences up to now was lacking a key element: a serious in-person dialogues bringing racially diverse Boston residents together. Face-to-face discussions, we were convinced, is a better way to go about initiating change and creating understanding. So several of us got together in late 2002 to form a planning committee and we began to recruit other residents and organizations to help design a proactive program that would benefit participants and their communities and take place not just Downtown, but in all twenty of Boston's neighborhoods."

They saw inter-racial acceptance, respect, inclusion and friendship as an unresolved, and often unaddressed, challenge. Lack of trust among racial and ethnic groups holds us back as a society and inhibits the flourishing of local communities and workplaces. At the heart of the City-Wide Dialogues is the belief that there is no substitute for engaging each other on a personal level to increase understanding, decrease stereotyping and begin to build trust and relationships.

Racial and ethnic issues are something everybody talks about, but rarely in a focused way in mixed groups where it can make a difference. Moreover, the organizers recognized that a key to achieving all our civic goals is the quality of our human relationships. The result has been to establish in Boston a series of multi-session discussions about race and ethnicity with each group assigned a two-person team of volunteer facilitators, one a person of color and the other white. At the beginning of Session 1 of every City-Wide Dialogues series, the two facilitators first ask participants to agree to a list of suggested ground rules for respectful dialogue. This helps to create the needed "safe space" for participants to honestly discuss the past and present and share visions of a Boston that is respectful, fair and inclusive of everyone.

Over 350 people packed historic Faneuil Hall for a rousing Kickoff Event on November 12, 2003, featuring Mayor Menino and a diverse group of speakers. Two and a half years later, almost 700 Bostonians have participated in over 40 neighborhood-based dialogue series in a total of over 210 dialogue meetings. With curiosity and courage, residents are having candid, respectful and productive conversations on a difficult topic – often for the first time in their lives. They are finding

that it's possible to chip away at the stereotyping that has kept us apart and that productive dialogue is indeed possible on sensitive issues. Participants also emerge with a new tool – the tool of dialogue – knowing they can use that tool in the future to discuss and work out sensitive issues productively but respectfully with neighbors, co-corkers, etc.

Dialogues have been organized in various neighborhoods and in collaboration with other organizations such as the MassEquality (a GLBT organization focused on marriage issues) Education Fund. Arnold Sapenter, an African-American gay man who has facilitated three City-Wide Dialogues, including two in his South End neighborhood, says that there is much to be learned in the dialogues. “I think all too often people in the GLBT community do not have an opportunity to talk about race and ethnicity in an open manner that is not either contentious or difficult and uncomfortable for people. I think that the dialogues in general provide an opportunity for people to discuss race and ethnicity in a more comfortable and less stressful and less antagonistic kind of environment.”

Recently the City of Boston called upon City-Wide Dialogues to design and facilitate a specialized Youth-Police Dialogue in collaboration with the B-SMARTs (Boston Strategic Multi-Agency Response Teams) in Jamaica Plain and South End / Lower Roxbury to help improve difficult relations among police and young people in those neighborhoods. Dialogues Steering Committee members Roscoe Thomas of City Year and Michelle Ekanem of the Boston Housing Authority worked with Jeff Stone to come up with a new, intensive three-session dialogue model that opened the lines of communication and enabled police officers and young people to realize that they can talk respectfully with each other and begin to build understanding and trust. Youth and police jointly brainstormed action ideas for improving relations and then prioritized them for follow-up action.

Positive feedback has been received from participants via post-dialogue surveys and many groups continue to meet on their own. 84% of surveyed participants said the experience increased understanding of other's attitudes and beliefs; 59% said their comfort and ability to discuss race/ethnic issues has increased; 97% said they would recommend this dialogue program to others; 83% said is it now very likely they would participate in other race-related community activities in their neighborhood.

More information can be found at the website [www.bostondialogues.org](http://www.bostondialogues.org)