

Racial Justice Summit looks for bridges

By Jan Kurth

It was the 21st anniversary for the Pittsburgh Racial Justice Summit this year, an event founded by Black & White Reunion after the killing of Jonny Gammage by the police in 1995.

The summit, which was held Saturday, Jan. 26 at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, got an updated name this year. Formerly called the Summit Against Racism, the name was changed to make a more "declarative statement" on achieving racial justice, not just talking about it. The format was also updated, with three key panels allowing attendees to "listen, engage, and learn in the same space together" followed by a variety of breakout sessions.

"Reclaiming and Reconnecting with Our Communities" was a breakout session devoted to finding "points of commonality and ways to bridge communities and neighborhoods that look different" after the mass shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in October.

Session moderator Winford Craig, the Chair Emeritus for the City of Pittsburgh Commission on Human Rights and IT Director for the Urban League of Pittsburgh, observed that "racism and violence are often localized to the point of being ignored." He also noted that while it may not be possible to eliminate racism, it is possible to



At the end of a long day, this panel, part of the Summit for Racial Justice, focuses on housing equity. From left: Michelle King, Carl Redwood, Joshua Malloy, Marcia Bandes, and Randall Taylor.

Jan Kurth photo

minimize it: "Yes, we are our brother's keeper."

Paraphrasing W.E.B. Du Bois, Chad Dion Lassiter, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, suggested that the struggle has not changed: "The 'problem of the 21st Century is the color line.'"

He also talked about the resurgence of Ku Klux Klan activity across the state, and how it could be fought.

"We need to expose America, but do it with

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Racial Justice Summit talks about equity

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love. We need to create a beloved community to fight white nationalism," he said.

Marian Lien, Executive Director of the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition and a Commissioner on the Governor's Advisory Commission on Asian and Pacific Affairs, discussed the fear that the Tree of Life shootings has left with many immigrants and marginalized groups, the sense that "goodness, we're next."

After what turned out to be a false alarm regarding an incident at Colfax School, Lien described an "Asian-American mother calling me saying, 'I knew it, I knew it. We're next.'" Lien also pointed out that fears have been fueled by the fact that U.S. citizenship is no longer the "gold standard" it once was in terms of protecting people from deportation. As a result, building trust has become a critical concern.

Rabbi Ron Symons, Senior Director of Jewish Life at the Jewish Community Center, emphasized that "our goal is to redefine 'neighbor' from a geographic term to a moral concept." He also noted that after the shootings, it became clear that white supremacists believe that, "Jews are too Black," while in some communities of color, "Jews are too white." Within this context it's important to make a choice as to who are your allies. "I don't want to sit at the table with the white supremacists."

Another breakout session was "Building an

Intersectional Movement for Housing Justice in our Region," which examined how housing might be reframed as a human right.

Carl Redwood, a member of the Hill District Consensus Group, suggested several strategies for making housing more accessible and affordable, including rent control, a just-cause eviction process, more public resources invested in housing cooperatives, and mutual housing associations.

"The only solution to the housing problem is public housing, or social housing," he concluded. "The problem is that we don't have the political will. We've been brought up in a greedy society. We have to learn to get along in a new way."

He also observed that "the concept of 'the most livable city' is a marketing concept. It's not for us. It's for rich people from somewhere else."

Michelle King, a member of Teacher-Powered Pittsburgh, agreed. "We're told that Pittsburgh is the most livable of all, the most affordable city, yet all the compounded narratives say otherwise."

Joshua Malloy, of Pittsburghers for Public Transit, agreed, "We talk to people here, and they don't say this is the most livable indicator." He also pointed out that pushing low-income people outside the city, especially when they are asked to pay more for public transit, further traps people in poverty. "The No.1 indicator of poverty is whether they spend more than half-an-hour getting to work."

Marcia Bades, with the Pittsburgh for Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women Coalition, highlighted how "housing plays a major role in gender equity. Women with children are often the most painfully impacted. The majority of affordable housing I see are studios and one-bedrooms."

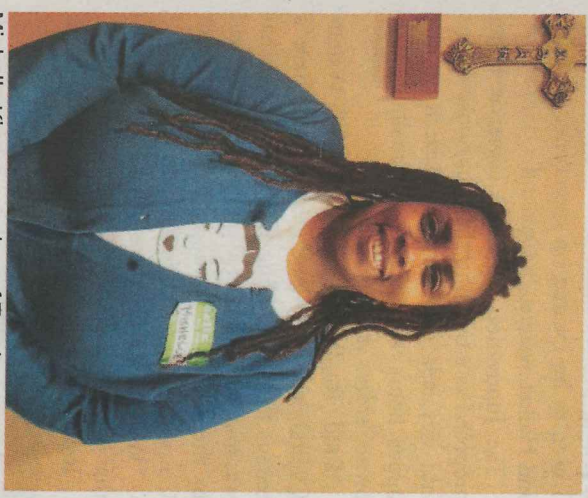
She also pointed out that women of color are typically the most affected, and how it was important to push for a "meaningful minimum wage."

Randal Taylor, a member of Penn Plaza Support and Action Coalition, spoke about the lessons learned after the Penn Plaza demolition.

"You can't make housing into a commodity. When you do, it's a disaster. The issue is real and happening in a lot of places and it's not just poor Black people. The city should be ashamed that people are paying more 50 percent of their income for rent. This is not a normal situation," he said.

He also pointed out the political obstacles that stand in the way of housing as a human right. "Developers control this city, it's pay-to play," he said. Through campaign contributions and influence over local community development corporations, residents are left with little say on new housing and gentrification. "Locally, we need to democratize this city."

The summit did not escape controversy. After the third panel discussion on "Rewriting the Narrative, Imagining the Future," an



Michelle King, a member of Teacher Powered Pittsburgh addressed housing during the summit.

audience member objected when panelist Susan Abulhawa, a Palestinian novelist and the founder of Playgrounds for Palestine, framed Zionism as something that was initially promoted in the 19th Century by wealthy European Jews.

The audience member noted the panelist was promoting anti-Jewish stereotypes that have been used to justify the oppression of the Jewish people, which was dismissed by Abulhawa and the moderator, Bekzeza Mguni, who said the Jews are the oppressors of the Palestinians.