

Citizen Engagement Corner

MLK Day and the Network of Mutuality

League of Women Voters of Brookline

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” ... Martin Luther King in his April 16, 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

Every year we are reminded of King’s wisdom and leadership as we celebrate Martin Luther King Day. On Monday, Jan. 21, Brookline’s MLK Day Celebration Committee is presenting “On Race: Brookline Then and Now” at the Coolidge Corner Theater from 3-4:30 p.m. (free admission). Featuring “Brookline, Facing Civil Rights,” a documentary film conceptualized by the Committee and produced by R. Harvey Bravman, it highlights recollections of civil rights in the 50s, 60s and 70s by six Brookline residents. After the film there will be a discussion with Boston Globe Spotlight Editor Patricia Wen, who in 2018 oversaw a seven-part series on race issues in Boston.

The program also includes poetry, music and inspirational words of MLK and features poet/performer Regie Gibson and Brookline Poet Laureate Zvi Sesling.

The documentary shows how black and interracial families dealt with actual or perceived racism and discrimination in Brookline, and how residents responded — sometimes with animosity and other times with a gradual opening of their arms. As Bravman reflects on the production, “it’s hard to hate people that you like!”

The documentary will make many of us wonder how far Brookline has come, and yet ponder how far it has to go.

Clearly the high cost of housing, and the income to afford it (just over \$100,000 in 2016, about a 40 percent increase from 2000 — city-data.com), eliminates many people from Brookline residency. So, how likely is it that the breakdown of Brookline’s population of around 59,000 will change much? Currently around 70-75 percent is white, 15 percent Asian, 5 percent Hispanic, just over 3 percent black and 3 percent more than two races.

Even though Brookline is near its 10 percent target to provide affordable housing under the state's 40B requirements, in reality prices are still too high for many, and more affordable units are needed. Strides have been made by the Brookline Housing Authority to diversify its population, and programs such as Steps to Success have helped 90 percent of its student participants be accepted at institutions of higher education.

In addition, programs to help all children succeed include the Brookline Early Childhood Education program, Office of English Learner Education, and the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, a voluntary integration program providing K-12 education for approximately 300 students from Boston. Brookline was a charter member in 1966.

Strides have also been made in recruitment and hiring of a more diverse workforce across town departments, although there is always room for improvement.

As Brookline adopts, enforces and expands policies and practices of inclusion, and as we as individuals not only call out discrimination when we see it, but also reach out to our neighbors, talk with those we don't know, and try to bridge racial, cultural or language barriers to create a deeper connection, we can with real honesty boast that Brookline is a highly desirable place to live for all. Only when Brookline becomes known as a place welcoming to people of all races can we say that we have met MLK's dream.

Prepared and submitted by a member of the League of Women Voters of Brookline (LWVB). The League is a nonpartisan organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy.