

The city of Kent continues to lay the preventative groundwork that mitigates a Ferguson type incident

Although the images of council members and the mayor taken from the city's website several years ago tend to be a little blurred by the transfer, their images and the image just below the elected leaders still emphasize a reality that persists in many communities of South King County in Washington State and in the nation.

So what does this have to do with Ferguson, Missouri's recent protests and riots that caught the attention of the nation?

Some would view the picture here and spin it as white folks dominating people of color. Others might say Synrgy is trying to make us look bad. Yet more would say white folks won't let us in. There were many responses when this issue Synrgy was first published. Perhaps all of those responses have some validity. However, another response or reaction might view the picture as a lack of involvement by black people and other people of color in the institutions that are supposed to serve them.

We have seen similar demographics in Ferguson, and many people have said, if there were more black people on the police force, in city government, and actively engaged in the community at large, the situation that arose whereby a white police officer shot and killed a young black man might have been handled in ways that may have mitigated the kind of racial crisis that happened in Ferguson. Furthermore, such involvement might have mitigated the

potential for an unarmed black man being shot period, some say.

What follows is not a data and pictures comparison in a tale of two cities—Ferguson and Kent. It's rather a description of a few activities that helped to move Kent from a city with public officials like the demographics in April 2010 picture below, to the demographics of it's current elected officials at the bottom of the page. Equally as important this issue describes other black



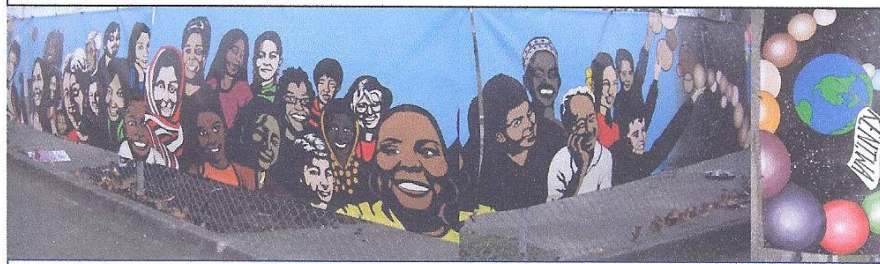
Are Your Leaders Culturally Competent? Who Cares Enough to Lead in a Very Diverse City?

City of Kent Council Members and Mayor are City Leaders



Elizabeth Albertson 12/31/13	Jamie Perry 12/31/13	Dennis Higgins 12/13/13	Deborah Ranniger 12/31/11	Debbie Raplee 11/2/31/11	Les Thomas 12/31/11	Ron Harmon 12/31/11	Suzette Cooke, Mayor 12/31/13
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Above: People Governing the City. Below: People Being Governed. [more p3](#)
Anything Wrong with this Picture? Prepare Now for Leadership in 2011



The picture above is a collage taken from a single, flexible canvas like material, offering a rendition of Kent's diversity. The rendition is wrapped around a fence on the Southeast corner of 104th and James Street.

Although the images of council members and the mayor taken from the city's website (for an April 2010 issue of Synrgy) are a little blurred from transfer, their image still emphasize a reality that persists in many communities of South King County in Washington State and is prevalent in the nation as we speak. Hence the continued use of the image.

community activities and events around caring for the black community and all communities. And, this issue should indicate how building relationships with elected officials and the police should have a mitigating effect on any potential racial crisis similar to the one taking place in Ferguson.



Dennis Higgins Debbie Ranniger Bill Boyce Dana Ralph Jim Berrios Les Thomas Brenda Fincher Mayor Cooke

Peace takes synergy between black and white people; including white police officers and other concerned citizens working for the common good of all communities.

Sometimes success requires staying in their faces with your issues and demands. At other times it's collaboration with and supporting politicians, police, and other public servants. In the US every community has the power to influence policies, procedures, and practices that affect their lives, if they just get involved and get organized.

Communicating with City Council Members

Around 2007-08 members of People Advocating Involvement in Democracy (PAID), a diverse group of mostly black community leaders (Barbara Phillips, Apostle Jimmie James, Bess Walker, and Myself) met with Kent City Council members individually (Ron Harmon, Debbie Ranniger, Debbie Rathly, and Les Thomas). The meetings were initiated and facilitated by Brad Bell, a white community leader interested in Diversity and equity issues.

Suffice it to say the discussions went well, reaching a level of understanding on several topics. Topics included what the words "Color Blind" really mean; support for people of color running for office; having the employee demographics of the city reflect the demographics of the city's current population; supporting council members who address our issues; and more. Brad Bell continues to be a major resource in the community relative to educating and supporting people around diversity and equity issues, and, fostering synergy for the common good. What he started PAID took and ran with it in the city government.



Brad Bell

Working with the Police Chief

Using Brad Bell's model of having key people from both sides of issues sit down and begin to communicate, PAID members then took the initiative with city hall and met separately with Mayor Cooke and Kent Police Chief Steve Strachan on a variety of diversity, equity, and justice issues. We asked the chief to meet with us quarterly until many of the issues we were concerned about were resolved or satisfactorily addressed. Some concerns included, reports of police detaining and cuffing up to 7 or 8 young black men at a time, putting them on dis-

Former Police Chief Steve Strachan



play stretched out on the concrete face down; police creating incidents in the community because of their approach to people; police attitudes; who the police identified as gang members and what the police deemed as gang related activity; and more.

The chief met with PAID quarterly as requested, but he also chose to meet with us intermittently when issues arose where he needed feedback and/or support. We also established a lead contact person within the group for the chief to communicate with at times when the group wasn't meeting. The chief also shared some of our advice and input at the regional chiefs' meetings. With the council and the police department we began laying the preventative groundwork to a Ferguson type reaction long ago in the city. But, PAID didn't stop there.

Mayor Cooke has been exceptional

Mayor Cooke began responding to our requests by looking at employee demographics in the city, hiring practices, training of city staff, and more. Subsequently the complexion of the city's employees and of the police department has continued to include more people of color.

The Mayor also appointed Barbara Phillips, a black community leader and member of PAID, to the city's Land Use Committee. Among Phillips' concerns in that area is the potential displacement of certain socioeconomic groups and providing adequate access to affordable housing as the regional transportation system develops along Pacific Highway South (Highway 99).

Mayor Cooke has been seen in black churches and at black events, she has publicly recognized black achievements in the community and black holidays. She makes herself accessible and includes all communities in her outreach. When employees know that the seat of leadership in the city communicates with and responds to diverse populations, that alone sends a strong message to employees about expectations, including to the police.



Mayor Suzette Cooke



Barbara Phillips

Community members must get involved in the institutions designed to serve community needs. The Elected officials, bureaucrats, and managers need input and support from those they are supposed to serve. “...Government belongs to the people...How do I know what you want unless you tell me...” Mayor Cooke

Getting More Involved

Neither the mayor nor the police chief had to come to us in PAID. We went to them because of events we saw in the community. We also saw the lack of people of color in the police department, among the employees, and among elected officials. Instead of staying at home watching TV or otherwise not getting involved, we stayed in their faces with data demanding change as long as we needed to, as though we cared about what happens to

Communities must Initiate and Sustain communications that influence not only Public Servants but also influence Policies, Practices, and procedures in every institution affecting their lives; it's your right. Exercise that right.

our young people in the community. We insisted on fair employment practices. We made it absolutely

clear that we wanted to be a part of any decision making processes that affected lives in our community and part of decision making processes for the common good of all communities.

City officials responded to our concerns and we recognized and supported their efforts against any challengers. Having this kind of active, engaged black community leadership, and knowing the historical tension between blacks and police departments nationwide, Mayor Cooke, a leader who understands the demands of the changing times, was insightful in hiring the next police chief—Chief Ken Thomas.



Brenda Fincher
Kent City Council

Kent's New Police Chief

The mayor put Brenda Fincher, a member of PAID, (subsequently appointed to the city council by a unanimous vote) on the hiring committee which effectively helped thwart hiring practices that relied mostly on nepotism and cronyism for at least 50 years. We all know that the use of nepotism and Cronyism in a system originating and developing with only white employees will not lead to the employee demographics

reflecting the population being served in 21st century Kent. Cooke also had a black school board member serve on the hiring committee. Keep in mind that PAID had been dealing with the school district for many years before turning to the other major local institution affecting lives: city government.

Apostle James, a member of PAID and among the most publically active black pastors in Kent around equity and justice issues, wrote a letter of recommendation for Ken Thomas. Like many of us Thomas may not exemplify Cultural Competence but he had been working with people of color to address issues and he is sensitive to diversity, equity, and justice issues; otherwise



Apostle Jimmie James

listening to their issues and sharing what the department is doing. If an incident does occur he and his team already has a relationship with leaders in the community and a “level” of trust is developed. I say “level of trust” because the police carry guns, other weapons, and sometimes they kill people in the line of duty. Therefore, the police must always be scrutinized by the people they serve and protect. The police are public servants, accountable to the people they serve., as are all other public employees, but, an involved community must help make it so.



Debbie Ranniger
Kent City Council

Council members like Debbie Ranniger has dared to step up consistently, leading, speaking to and supporting diversity, equity and justice measures in city government. Dennis Higgins is another council member who demonstrates a sense of justice around diversity and equity issues, as are Bill Boyce, Jim Berrios and Brenda Fincher. And, there are plenty more people from a variety of groups in Kent who have been adapting to the demands of changing times. Many are embracing diverse populations and cultures. This, enabling the mayor to say that Kent is a long ways from Ferguson not only in miles but in mindset as well.

Even so there are many who sometimes feel like this myriad of diversity, including diversity of thought, feels more like an invasion into what was once a mono-cultural community sharing similar values and social mores. Sometimes they and their leaders push pack. And, they also vote. Therein lies one of the next tests around diversity and equity for Kent and perhaps for “Your town, USA.” This writer knows; we all can get along.

Apostle James is probably the last person he would want to speak to, unless he was looking for instruction.

Chief Ken Thomas continues to diversify the police force with not just blacks but women and other ethnic groups that reflect the diversity in the community. Thomas and his team doesn't sit around and wait for an incident to occur in communities. They actively go to communities and engage people in their neighborhoods with regular meetings,



Kent Police Chief Ken Thomas

**If you see something wrong in the community do something to change it.” Jim Berrios
“Don’t remain uninvolved for years then cry racism when decisions are made having a
negative impact on you, your family and community. Engage now” Melvin L. Tate,**

What If?

If there is an incident where a person is shot and killed, especially under dubious circumstances, among the first things Chief Thomas will do is contact the leaders in that community, share what details he can, ask for patience, and promise to reconvene with more information if necessary. This is not speculation about Chief Thomas, I speak from experience on this point. This approach demonstrates intelligent, transparent and preventive service, not arrogant, unaccountable dominion over a community. But it takes more than Chief Thomas to keep the peace. Hard work from the community is required as well.

Black folks and white folks (including white police officers) can get along. Experience teaches that whether or not they can get along is not the question. The real question is, who in the community is going to step up to the plate and hold their public servants, e.g., mayors, police chiefs, police officers, principals, schools, teachers, and others, accountable for delivering a real service to their communities? That’s the bottom line on one side of the issue. The other question: what is that community going to do to work with the public servants, supporting them to achieve the common good of not only their own families and communities but for the common good of all communities?

Everything is not perfect in Kent and may never be, but paraphrasing Mayor Cook’s words at the council meeting August 19 when addressing the issue of Ferguson; the city of Kent is now much different than Ferguson, but we still have a ways to go. We are no longer a mono-cultural community but very diverse in terms of religion, race, and other characteristics. The times call for us to learn to live together. One way to do that is by learning about the diversity in our community and embracing it, she said.

This writer certainly concurs with the Mayor’s remarks. She knows it took active community members willing to make personal sacrifices of time and commitment for the good of the community to arrive where Kent is presently in terms of race relations. It also took public servants willing to listen and transparently act in the interest of equity and justice to move the city toward serving all of its citizens. Among other things she also called for training to continue. For the moment suffice it say several council members spoke to the Ferguson—Kent scenario as well at the August 19 meeting.

In a democratic society public servants get their power and authority from the people they serve. Once communities realize their power, determine what they want, take concerted action, and work collaboratively in the community with others, public servants will cooperate or be encouraged to move on to a better fit. The people have that power in a “... Government of the people, by the people, and for the people...” It works best for people who actively get involved and make the system work for them.

It’s not that a Ferguson can’t happen in Kent, but rather many of the preventive structures are in place to deal with racial tensions as well as for other issues that might arise.

Kent Black Action Commission (KBAC)

Having accomplished some of its major goals and continued to be active on a number of issues PAID members facilitated the creation of Kent Black Action Commission (KBAC) because as PAID grew the black agenda was getting less attention. A member of PAID conceived the name KBAC and a member of PAID created KBAC’s mission statement. Of course both had to be supported by other founding members of KBAC at the time.



Gwen Allen-Carston

Those early beginnings of KBAC are well documented in emails, letters, and other documents indicating how the organization went through its storming and forming period and how some of us promoted Gwen Allen-Carston as the leader of KBAC after having experimented with a different leadership style. Speaking for myself and certainly for several other PAID members, Gwen Allen-Carston and the team she gathered has done an outstanding job of serving not only the black community but the greater community as well.

This writer was a strong advocate for Gwen Allen-Carston’s leadership because she had already demonstrated that she could not only advocate for black people but could also work with white people and other ethnic groups as evidenced by her role on the Kent Chamber Board. She was also an active member of the Kent Lions Club and rose to be president of that organization. Like many of us Gwen Allen-Carston knows that black people cannot live in a vacuum and expect to prosper in this country. She is among the strongest advocates among us for a healthy and vibrant black community that interacts with the larger array of communities for the common good of all. Other than this, clearly she works hard and accomplishes a lot, which was the reason for our advocacy for her to lead the group.

Gwen Allen-Carston has demonstrated herself to be a person who is willing to learn, she can take a setback and come again after making adaptations; she takes the initiative on issues; she knows and/or learns how to use all the communications resources to carry the message of the organization as well as carry her own voice; she doesn’t hesitate to engage institutional leadership on any level to address issues and accomplish goals; she is an inspirational speaker on a variety of topics; under her leadership KBAC has staged many events and recognitions where the entire Kent community and region has been invited, and again, she gets the job done. And, she is a member of the PAID network.

Gwen Allen-Carston and her team has what it takes to help keep the peace in the black community. That is, with any individual, organization, or institution who demonstrates the desire for peace.

The last words; you are free. You are the master of the house now. Take control of what happens in your home and in your community. Use the democratic system of government and the capitalist economic system to create a better life. Get involved.

Conclusions

It is difficult to see a Ferguson type incident in Kent relative to the black community because Chief Ken Thomas would be communicating shortly after the shooting occurred. I confirmed that with him a few days ago. Also, even as we speak a race related incident has occurred whereby both black and white as well as other leaders are talking about the incident and how best to resolve the issue for the common good of all.

The major points of observation about these conversations taking place is they transcend racial lines and they are taking place with people in the community who already know each other fairly well and/or have already established relationships. When people across racial and cultural lines have been working together for years to resolve cross-cultural and racial tensions, the groundwork is set for successfully dealing with such future events.

Before PAID, the school district and the city would go to one or two black people in the community who they trusted to help resolve racial issues related to black people. PAID brought more committed black community members into the discussions and pointed to other issues that need to be discussed. It is far better for elected officials, policy makers, and managers to see the support they will have for making decisions rather than acting on decisions based on input from one ego.

PAID also helped to get more black people and other people of color appointed to key positions in city hall and in the school district where decisions were being made that affected all lives. We also supported women. Imagine a room full of only male administrators at a school or district sitting around making decisions that affect the lives of a population that is 51% female. There's something wrong with that picture. Suffice it to say, such rooms ought to be more integrated not only in terms of gender but they should reflect the demographics of the populations being served presently. The city of Seattle and King County Governments accomplishments exemplify this point.

Having diverse groups at the decision making tables help to mitigate potential conflict because they bring a perspective of how a decision will affect their culture and/or their population in the community. Diverse populations also bring diverse perspectives to problem solving. Having diverse input allows for adjustments to be made to potential non-inclusive decisions before they are passed into policy only to be perceived as gender biased, culturally biased, or racially biased.

Some say things would be a lot simpler and easier if everyone were just "color blind" and blind to the other differences. Simpler and easier for who? What would it be like if men and women didn't have separate bathrooms? What's it like when a vegetarian goes to a restaurant and can't find a full vegetarian meal on the menu? And what's it like when black children go into a history class and the only part of history being taught about them is slav-

ery? And, are any children taught that Africans enslaved whites as well?

PAID members had been making substantial progress with the school district relative to color blind and other cultural competence, diversity, and equity issues long before taking up the issues with city hall. There were very tense moments and a couple battles raged for years with city hall, but people began to understand one another and find common ground for moving forward in spite of some differences in opinion. This, especially after the United States Department of Justice lent weight to PAID's position. We should be able to coexist, even with different perspectives. And, many of us are friends now. Good fight though.

Living in isolation away from one another and not communicating lays the foundation for a Ferguson, whereas communicating with one another early, working through issues, and working with synergy for the common good of all lays the foundation for resolving conflicts without riots. The work of PAID with citizens in the Kent community, with the Kent School district and the city of Kent, and with its work in the region, illustrate this latter point.

Going back to the front page of this issue of Synrgy. How do you change the picture in "Your Town USA?" Just consider this small sample of what PAID members did as described in the foregoing pages. PAID members are ordinary people concerned about their community enough to commit time and energy working for the common good of not only the black community but for the common good of all communities. It meant getting involved and engaged right now.

Now that more people of color are interacting with whites in decision making processes, relationships continue to be established, and people are communicating across racial lines, PAID members are more of a network. People don't have to rely only on one person for the school district and another individual for the city as they seek discussion around diversity and equity issues for policy input anymore. Using the city of Kent and the Kent School District as the model, PAID has been very instrumental in arranging it so that many among diverse (The word diverse includes whites) groups of people are talking to each other about the issues on committees, on councils, on boards, in meetings, in emails, etc.

Two decades ago one superintendent observed, if we could just get more of you guys (talking about black folks at the time) to work together, that would be really helpful and probably very powerful. Hence PAID originally. Though PAID has become more diverse several public officials, community members, and others are calling for PAID to move beyond the network phase it retracted to a couple years ago and to start regular meeting again. And we have decided to do so, almost immediately.