

Big G in conversation: Guelph's Anti-Racism Journey May 11, 2021

Transcript

Host: Wendy King

Marva Wisdom, senior equity practitioner and the Community Plan's lead external advisor

Leen Al-Habash, Project Manager for the Guelph Wellington Local Immigration Partnership

Nasra Hussein, Health Equity Advocate, Community Builder, and one of the local leaders of Black Lives Matter Guelph

Sara Sayyed, Director of Community Services with the Muslim Society of Guelph

00:00:00

Upbeat music

Wendy King 0:04

Welcome to Big G in Conversation, a podcast from inside Guelph City Hall. I'm Wendy King. And on today's show, we're talking about Guelph Community Plan, Guelph anti-racism journey by guests or community builders and equity leaders. Such an important topic. So, let's get started.

Wendy King 0:26

Well, it is great to be able to delve into this important topic, wealth, anti-racism journey, and it's a bit different from our other podcast, and that I'm not talking with city staff but rather community leaders. So let me introduce our panel. Marva Wisdom is a senior equity practitioner and the community plans lead external advisor, Nasra Hussein, a health equity advocate, and one of the local leaders of Black Lives Matter Guelph. Leen Al-Habash, project manager for the Guelph Wellington local immigration partnership, a leader in local data related to race and immigration. And we'll meet Sara Sayyed, Director of Community Services with the Muslim society of Guelph.

Wendy King 1:08

So welcome, everybody. I am super excited to hear what you've been working on in this regard such an important and timely issue. Just by way of background, I believe in January of this year, Guelph city council voted unanimously to join the

UNESCO coalition of inclusive communities. And in part of joining that the city will develop an action plan to address the impacts of systemic racism head on, and remove barriers to inclusion in the community. So, to do this, the city is working with and learning from community organizations and leaders, as we're all going to today. So, Marva, let's start with you. Can you tell us specifically what this Community Plan looks like?

Marva Wisdom 1:50

We had that first iteration of a Community Plan back in 2018/2019. We call that plan one. And when George Floyd was killed in the end of May, and we had the Black Lives Matter March locally, it was we need to do more, we need to do what we said the community plan would do. So, we need to open up that plan, and make sure that we are looking at the areas that that we need to tackle the plan was supposed to have been a living, breathing document all along. And so, it was perfect. And the city adopted a goal. And the goal is that we're going to set the community standard for the elimination of systemic racism. That was a lofty goal, I was one that was really quite surprised that the city said yes to this, but they have in a very enthusiastic way. And immediately, we started reaching out to not only the folks from before, in community organization and elsewhere, and all of the leaders, but most importantly, the BIPOC community that is most impacted by systemic racism.

Marva Wisdom 2:58

And so, we are starting the conversation with black and indigenous population. And we had a town hall and Nasra is going to speak to that a little bit later on, that was really very successful, where learning to go deep, and learning to understand how we effectively and properly and respectfully engage indigenous community. We know that in the past, and sometimes the engagement hasn't worked as well, because frankly, we haven't done the work. So, we're building trust across all communities, and then inviting the community to lead their own plan. One of the cool things about this community plan is that the city is supporting, and the community is leading. So, we are centering the community at this plan community members who are most affected. So that's in a nutshell, what the community plan is. And we're really, really excited with the response that we're receiving.

Wendy King 3:54

I'm fascinated that you guys are so on it so soon, like everyone else I was, you know, just struck by the recent trial, and watched every single minute of that. And, and you do you feel like you need to do something, you just feel like I don't know

what I can do but I need to do something and make, you know, make this right. So, I know it's a hard topic, are you finding people willing to talk? Because it's difficult to admit that there is racism? Or that perhaps you're the problem rather than the solution? Where are you with that? Are people willing to get into the discussion?

Marva Wisdom 4:29

Absolutely. And you mentioned earlier Wendy about the kind of community that Guelph is, people want to be a part of the solution. So, we're slowing people down a tiny bit because you have a lot of learning and awareness to happen. Because if you don't learn and you jump in and try to take action, you might cause more harm than not. So, one of the things that we do and one of the things that we say, in developing this plan and working with the plan is we want to do no harm or as little harm as possible. And as soon as you know you need to fix it right away. So, the community broadly has embraced this, and is just saying, what can I do? I am ready. And indeed, many community organizations are already working on their own education, their own awareness of what systemic racism is, because systemic racism digs deep.

Marva Wisdom 5:17

It is really infused in all of our system; it is built on a colonial system. And what we say with the Community Plan, when we talk about that, we say that we inherited what it is now we inherited systemic racism. And so, we have to recognize that and approach people with a sense of grace and approach, people with a sense of understanding that people will be uncomfortable talking about this topic, but ensure that we have open and safe space for all to work toward a solution, but always always ensuring that the voice that are most impacted are primary.

Wendy King 5:53

Absolutely. So Nasra, this may be for you. I understand there was an anti-racism summit held in April, could you give us an idea of what you heard at that event?

Nasra Hussein 6:03

Yeah, so the anti-racism summit was actually being facilitated by the Guelph Black Heritage society. And I just had a small part in that with the we, they had a Guelph, black community Town Hall, and I was one of the facilitators for it. And it was an opportunity for black people in Guelph to congregate and feel like they were in a safe space and could collectively share their experiences and their story.

Nasra Hussein 6:37

Like Marva, indicated the Community Plan is all about eliminating systemic racism. And that includes shared leadership, collaborative decision making and trust building. And I think that the town hall definitely opened the door for that. It involved people who are most impacted by systemic racism, and their ideas and how to make Guelph more welcoming and supportive and make changes that are meaningful to them. So, the format of the town hall, it was broken up into three main areas. So, the wonderful Marva, she facilitated a breakout room on racism, where individuals had an opportunity to discuss if they believe racism exists in Guelph, whether or not they've experienced or witnessed racism.

Nasra Hussein 7:35

I facilitated the breakout room on identity and how we all experience it, our black identity and in what situations we're consciously aware of our black identity, and we, we tend to downplay that blight, black identity. And then there was a breakout room on belonging and community, which really explored our connection and Guelph and how we came and established ourselves in this wonderful city. So, all in all, what really came out of these conversations, we met up all together at the end of these breakout rooms to have a summary discussion of what really stood out to us. And I think that what really highlighted is that we're not alone in our experiences with racism, or lack of belonging and how we express our black identity. To conclude this session, we actually had an exercise where we asked individuals that participated, how they felt after the town hall, what was one word or phrase that mimicked how they were feeling at the moment. And what really stood out was sense of community, not alone. And release.

Nasra Hussein 8:50

That word release really shocked me because I think for a long time, many of us have kept our experiences to ourselves of discrimination and lack of belonging, and to finally have a safe space where we could express ourselves and share our story. We weren't holding our breath anymore. And it was like truly a release. So yeah, it was great.

Wendy King 9:17

That's amazing. Leen, if we could bring you into the conversation. You were a project manager for the Guelph Wellington local immigration partnership. So, could you explain what that is exactly?

Leen Al-Habash 9:28

Yeah, of course, that the question that always come up because we have this fluid identity actually since Guelph Wellington lab started in 2009. We work mostly on developing community-based Barton partnerships and bring together community stakeholders in support of immigrant integration. So, in other words, just we work with community partners at all levels, including service providers, employers, school boards government, to ensure that newcomers are welcome and well supported during the settlement process.

Leen Al-Habash 10:03

So, some of our projects, the recent one, we looked into newcomer Youth Mental Health Services Committee, we had a community inclusion campaign looked into impact of COVID on newcomers. And as part of our efforts to be responsive to emerging needs and priorities, we are recently focusing on issues related to equity, diversity, and inclusion. We're looking into experiences of discrimination in Guelph and Wellington and how to address systemic racism, which is undoubtedly one of the major barriers that affect settlement and integration of your commerce in general.

Wendy King 10:39

Now, I believe you're working on a specific survey to better understand all of the issues, what kinds of questions are you asking in that?

Leen Al-Habash 10:49

Yeah, I will actually that survey, it's, we're asking about experiences of discrimination. In general, in the community in Guelph, and Wellington, this actually emerged when we started working on addressing issues of diversity and inclusion. And we started to feel that what we, we don't know, what are the issues that that immigrants, bipoc, or indigenous residents face in Guelph, and Wellington, and we start to feel that most of our projects are more like a stab the dark. And we felt that we really need to get some more information.

Leen Al-Habash 11:21

So, we're asking mostly about their experiences in the community, and how they that that they are acting on them, how they feel about them, and how they are affecting them. So, we're hoping that this will will inform planning and

programming in the future carries, without without data, it's very hard to say it is more like a stab in the dark. So, we're hoping that by understanding that we can at least have a starting point and a baseline that also will help us measure as we progress because unfortunately, most of the data that's available, it's more like at a national level at a higher level, if we are lucky, it would be at the provincial level, going a bit local is, is where the challenge start when we're looking to the data.

Wendy King 12:10

So then when you get all of that together, what do you do with that?

Leen Al-Habash 12:14

Yeah, that's the biggest question. And that's actually I'm so happy you ask this because I know that everyone says, so what we know we get the data and what happened after that. And there's this fatigue of surveys and being asked, and that's definitely not the intention there. This is a very small step in the process. So, we are having this data, we are complementing it with also community conversations, more interactive discussions with different communities in the in the city. And we're hoping that all this will lead into actual action. So, once we get this knowledge, we will start looking into how this will translate into actual actions, whether at the level of the city as an institution or the city as a city, and have our community person.

Leen Al-Habash 12:59

That's why it's a very, like it's a collective effort. We as like, maybe, like, to some extent pleading in that process. But we are not alone. And just like you have most of our partners around here. So, you have like the Black Heritage society, black life matters, Muslim societies, and many among many other organizations we are working with.

Marva Wisdom 13:19

Wendy, can I add to that, as it's also become a component of the Community Plan. as as as Leen has said, the data is the data is really, really important so that we know what next steps are. So, it will help to also inform how we're moving with the community plan. And that's part of the partnership.

Wendy King 13:37

Yeah, makes sense.

Leen Al-Habash 13:39

It's just building on the listening piece that Marva mentioned. So, this is part of the listening that we're hoping to help with.

Wendy King 13:46

And Sara, could you share from your vantage point, how the Muslim community faces systemic racism in Guelph?

Sara Sayyed 13:53

So, you know, the Muslim community is definitely not a monolithic community but unfortunately, we get boxed into this category of all Muslims with so many assumptions based on our experiences and our lives within the city. We come from so many different diverse experiences as well as ethnicities and cultures but it unfortunately gets into this boxing of who Muslims are. And when we talk about you know, boxing we we really ended up boxing our lives a lot more we have our work box, our school box and our home box and and we have to adapt to what is a very Eurocentric based city and community where our work weeks or our school weeks are based on that Eurocentric work schedule with the Sabbath being on a designated day with you know, holidays and All of those kinds of things very Eurocentric, and but Muslims coming from so many different diverse backgrounds and celebrating different holidays or different religious activities which we incorporate into our daily lives.

Sara Sayyed 15:13

So that whole thing is really a struggle of how to balance that work in life balance is a very different picture for somebody coming from different background or with a different set of religious beliefs that would include, you know, fasting in this month, and possibly having to take off personal days to to go to a Friday prayer service, as opposed to something that's already scheduled on what's considered a weekend. Right now, we're in the month of Ramadan. And so, the last 10 days were in that last week, which is considered such a spiritual week, and people have to take off personal time if they want to engage in that spirituality and those night prayers, which then how do you balance? Well, I have to take my vacation time for this, which means I have less vacation time for actually spending with my friends and family or taking my kids somewhere. So how do I balance that out? And how do I make those concessions?

Sara Sayyed 16:18

So, it's, you know, it's, it's, we've, we've, we end up having to put those different boxes of our life rather than allowing them to overlap and live in a more organic way.

Wendy King 16:33

You know, Sarah, that's something I never even thought of ever. So, thank you for that enlightenment, you know, just so sometimes you have to have somebody say it, you go, well, of course, it would be different. But you know, you're not, you're not there thinking that way. I guess I don't want to lose you before we talk about. I believe it's, is it building bridges? The event? I know, you want to talk about that? So, whoever wants to jump in on that?

Sara Sayyed 16:58

Yeah, so the Muslim society of wealth started organizing event called building bridges across communities. And it really came out of this having to, you know, separate our identities and, and wanting to say, hey, your pharmacists, or your university professors, or your restaurant owners, we are also Muslim. And there's a lot of stigma around racialized communities, and what do they contribute to the fabric of Canadian society, and they need to assimilate more. And so, we wanted to really show that, you know, we are part of the society just because we have, you know, kind of almost hidden away our religious aspects to make sure that everyone else is comfortable in our work school sphere.

Sara Sayyed 17:49

You know, we want to be able to bring that out and show our multi-dimensional sides. And so that was basically the intent behind building bridges and reaching out to all the different community members, services, multifaith groups to say, hey, we are also part of the city, you are part of the city, let's build the city together and see what we can come up with.

Wendy King 18:10

I knew we were gonna run out of time, because you ladies are fabulous, maybe we can do another one and you know, get into more of the meat of it. But before I let you go, maybe we could just do a quick round table of if it's possible, what would be the best benefit, if you could do this, if you could actually eliminate or at least reduce systemic racism?

Marva Wisdom 18:34

I will start and I will do a just a quick quote, as something I learned from Harry Belafonte, when he was talking about the assassination of Martin Luther King, the anniversary 50th anniversary was not too long ago. And he said this, we're all wrapped in a single garment of destiny, if we could listen, if we could learn, if we could listen and learn again, some more, and then act with the realization that we're all wrapped in a single garment of destiny, that's Martin Luther King's words. And I think it will make a huge difference in terms of the community that we will build in eliminating systemic racism.

Wendy King 19:16

Leen?

Leen Al-Habash 19:18

I think by this we would it would be more like we would be like practicing what we preach as as Canadians as just like living our value and and proving that they are possible. So, by reaching that level, where everyone is equal in all like in in right, and they they are accommodated, as as they need, I think that would be amazing, because we would show that this is doable, and we would continue to lead as a country even by example in the world. So that I think important.

Wendy King 19:49

Nasra?

Nasra Hussein 19:50

I'll say it sweet and simple just to reiterate what I said about release and everything that's going on in the world. I think I'm being cognizant of all of that, finally being able to breathe. I think, you know, with having a community that eliminates systemic racism, I think that's what I'd feel.

Wendy King 20:15

Sara?

Sara Sayyed 20:16

Yeah, I think I would follow up with what Nasra had to say that, you know, just not having to choose not having to prioritize my work versus education versus school, or religion that I can. I can do both. I can do all all of those things together, and still be recognized as part of the city part of the country as a Canadian.

Wendy King 20:41

Thank you, ladies. I feel empowered. I've learned something. I hope we can talk again, because I think this is obviously ongoing and something we really need to keep the conversation going. Thank you to Marva, Nasra, Leen and Sara, for all your insights and your dedication to this vital work. Thank you so much for your time.

Marva, Nasra, Leen and Sara 20:57

Thank you.

Upbeat music

Wendy King 21:04

I'm Wendy King with the city of Guelph Big G in Conversation podcast. Thanks for joining me. If you have ideas for a show or comments, you can email bigGpodcast@guelph.ca . Until next time, take care and let's keep the conversation going.

Upbeat music

End