



Appointments approved for Social Equity, Racial Justice Commission

By Allayana Darrow, Ashland Tidings, June 02, 2021

ASHLAND — Ashland City Council unanimously approved appointments to the Social Equity and Racial Justice Commission Tuesday, bringing together 10 individuals to sit on the newly formed commission focused on identifying issues and supplying remedies related to systemic inequity.

As allowed by Ashland Municipal Code, Mayor Julie Akins appointed Amit Choudhary, Cheri Elson, Julie Gillis, Keith Jenkins, Irene Kai, Anyania Muse, Nataki Garrett, Emily Simon, Tamara Williams and Precious Yamaguchi. Councilor Gina DuQuenne will serve as council liaison.

“We have a nice representation of different interests and different levels of skill with regard to this,” said Councilor Stefani Seffinger in a motion to approve the appointments during the Tuesday council business meeting.

The SERJ Commission is tasked with providing council recommendations and community education on “policies, measures and practices to foster racial and social equity and respectful intergroup relations,” according to council documents.

The commission must be composed of nine to 11 Ashland residents representing an array of interests, perspectives, experience with race and social equity work and/or background as members of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups.

“Commission members shall serve as individuals exercising their own best judgments and not as delegates or spokespersons for their respective organizations or groups,” according to the city.

Choudhary is a software engineer and farmer and has organized vigils and marches for racial equity and offered free community meditation for three years, according to his commission application.

Elson, a retired estate planning attorney, brings her background as the child of a Holocaust survivor and Jew who has experienced discrimination.

"I know that, as a white person, I don't get to say what racism is — my job is to listen, learn and support," Elson said. "Just as, as a Jew, I do get to say what anti-Semitism is and non-Jews have a role to listen, learn and support."

Gillis is director of development for Southern Oregon PBS and joins the commission with formal cultural agility training, Social Justice Training Institute immersion and professional experience with deescalation and human rights-focused activism.

Jenkins, vice president of Southern Oregon Black Leaders, Activists and Community Coalition, seeks to bring accountability to local government through better representation.

"We know there are Black folks in Ashland, but I can go days without seeing someone who looks like me," Jenkins said. "I want people to look at who's on this commission and see faces that they can identify with and feel comfortable bringing us their issues and having open, honest dialogue with the goal of creating a better, more equitable Ashland."

Art instructor at Rogue Community College and co-founder of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, Kai brings her background as a Chinese immigrant, race awareness educator and 24-year member of the Ashland community.

Muse is the newly appointed Director of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, selected for her robust career in equity, public policy and organizational change. Muse founded S.A.V.A. Rising Inc., a "national nonprofit focused on educational pathways for underrepresented families and communities," according to her application.

OSF Artistic Director Garrett will also hold a seat on the commission, backed by 15 years in leadership roles with accompanying equity, diversity and inclusion training.

Simon's legal career brings experience with the juvenile justice, foster care and public school systems and her recent efforts include action on the Black Alliance & Social Empowerment police liaison initiative and "Every Student Belongs" policy in the Medford School District.

Precious Yamaguchi, associate professor of communications at Southern Oregon University, has published literature about communication and culture and teaches courses about international, intercultural, gender and digital communication topics.

As an advisory body, commission duties include celebrating diversity, promoting economic opportunities for people of color, LGBTQ+ community members and people with disabilities, and offering space to address incidents of prejudice. The commission does not have investigatory or enforcement authority beyond the arrangement of "impartial, nonbinding, collaborative conciliatory services."