

City of Worcester Advisory Committee on the Status of Women Meeting Minutes

VIRTUAL MEETING MINUTES– Tuesday, August 3, 2021, 5:45 pm

Video available online: <https://play.champds.com/worcesterma/event/914>

Spanish: <https://play.champds.com/worcesterma/event/915>

Members Present: Kayanna James, Samantha Sendrowski, Heather Borelli, Rubby Wuabu, and Tracey Whitney

Members Absent: Casey Thomas

Staff: Jayna Turchek

Guests: Lindiana Semidei, Erin Williams, and Joy Murrieta

1. Call to order and Introductions

A quorum was established, and Chairperson James called the meeting to order at 5:46 pm. The Chairperson welcomed members of the commission and those present and a roll call was taken that established quorum.

Chairperson James announced that the new agenda has been distributed and asked if anything needs to be revised, the agenda was accepted as distributed. She noted that the meeting will also be available in Spanish.

2. Approval of June 1, 2021, meeting minutes

Heather Borelli motioned to accept the minutes as written. Tracey Whitney seconded. Minutes unanimously passed on a roll call vote 5-0-0.

3. New Business

A. Recognizing and discussing Worcester Women’s Art and Culture.

Chairperson James introduced Erin Williams, Cultural Development Officer for the City of Worcester and Worcester Cultural Coalition (WCC). The WCC’s mission is to draw on Worcester’s rich and diverse cultural assets to foster economic revitalization, support active, creative engagement for all and promote a strong cultural identity for Greater Worcester. She next introduced Joy Murrieta, artist, musician, and dancer who is co-founder and executive director for Main Idea Youth in Arts, a Worcester nonprofit organization. Chairperson James introduced Lindiana Semidei, Program Associate at Greater Worcester Community Foundation,

lead on the creative intersections program, as well as owner and co-director of Raices Latin Dance in Worcester.

Q: How did you start working with children?

Lindiana Semidei:

I feel like I've always had a young spirit and after I went to school for performing arts and after returning from college I knew that I wanted to get back to the community of Worcester and get back to children like me who grew up and was raised in programs like the boys and girls club. I went to Friendly House and I went to the YWCA program. Growing up there weren't that many people that taught dance.

As an adult, I researched dance instruction for kids in Worcester and found Ritmos Academy who taught Latin dance and culture to the Worcester kids in the community. I walked through the door and I introduce myself to Hilda Ramirez, who was the director at the time, and I said I am a new graduate with skills and I would love to work with your students. She hired me on the spot and from there I started working with not only Ritmos Academy but I worked at the Worcester Youth Center. I opened up my own studio working with children and youth.

Erin Williams:

I am probably the oldest person on this zoom today and back in the day -as they would say-, during the Vietnam War I joined a street theatre company that was protesting the war and was also advocating for women's rights, it was when the ERA was up for being voted on by the states and still has not been ratified till this day. From there I went to school for theatre for social change and using arts for social change and I ended up touring around the country for a number of years in a street theatre company doing pieces about people's everyday lives, women, men, and stories about social justice. I then became an outreach coordinator for safe streets which was a prevention program in North Philadelphia. There I worked for a number of years working with children as well as parolees from the prison system using theater and meditation and yoga to tell our stories and to create something more positive as a group. Finally, I started a group called From Our Eyes which was young people who worked with professional artists from all walks of life to create their own videos, write them, produce them, direct them, and have their own talk show on community television where they'd have a specific theme and they'd have a conversation just like we're doing now. Youth has always been a focal point in my life, I grew up with sisters and that has made a big impact on me and I know the importance of arts and giving voice to people, that's how I love young people.

Joy Murrieta:

I started working with youth when I was in college a little over 10 years ago and it was kind of by accident. I didn't think I was a kid person at the time but I needed a summer job so I started working at summer camps which gave me room and board which was more convenient more than anything. Through doing that and trying something new I found it was something I really enjoyed and came alive in that sector and working with kids. When I graduated from college and moved to Worcester I started teaching private music lessons for additional income and was also working at a music store at the time. I found that that was something I really enjoyed and got a lot of life from and so I started to do that more and more. Eventually I co-founded Main IDEA shortly after moving to Worcester as a social volunteer project with other artists living in the area that kind of morphed into a nonprofit organization over time. Working with youth was something I kind of did by accident and ended up really loving and is now my full-time career and something I am really glad I pushed myself to do so many years ago.

Main IDEA is a nonprofit youth and arts organization based out of Main South Worcester, we offer free arts programs all year round to youth in Worcester, predominantly in the Main South Neighborhood, free of cost for participants. We work directly on-site at Worcester Public Schools, pre-Covid, and also at the Worcester public parks to offer free programming so it includes visual arts certainly but also, music, dance, culinary arts, drama, creative writing, really anything and everything the kids are interested in.

Q. How important is it for us, specifically in the City of Worcester, to have these programs for mentoring girls and women in the arts because many people shy away from working in the arts?

Lindiana Semidei:

I can speak from my personal experience it's so very important. I was born and raised in Worcester. Something I speak about and people don't necessarily know is that I was diagnosed with ADHD when I was young and actually I struggled a lot in school. Because of that my parents didn't think that I was the college type and so they said you're going to go to Worcester Voke and learn a trade and that was my plan. I developed a love for dance and for music and that was just through things that I saw on TV and music videos. I didn't come from a family that could afford expensive dance lessons. I begged my parents to put me in dance classes, it broke their hearts that they couldn't but they really couldn't. It wasn't till later in life in high school when my mother went back to school at Quinsigamond College to become a nurse and once she got that nursing job she could put me in dance classes. A few years into my dance classes, I told my parents I wanted to be a dancer and that's what I wanted to do for a living. Coming from a Latino household, that's just something we don't do, you don't become an artist, a dancer, you go and make a living. Everyone I told that I wanted to become a dancer they looked at me like I had 10 heads. I had to pave my own way, as soon as I graduated from high school I hopped on a

bus to New York City and started auditioning for jobs. My first job at 18 was working for Carnival cruise lines as a dancer and that was my way of saying by the way I can do this, I had to bring my grandmother with me and I auditioned and I did this on my own. My point is that we need to see more women in the arts doing that and we need to see that you can do it and that there is a pathway for it. I try to tell my story for little Latina girls like me who have a passion for the arts and want to pursue it as a career.

Joy Murrieta:

Main IDEA is not only just for access to the arts but also for the use of positive youth development and its essential in the lives of the youth. This type of agency not only allows for a career but it works as a tool for the youth in Worcester.

Erin Williams:

I believe it is important that everyone has access to the arts, I am grateful the city has people like Lindiana and Joy who are giving the community the option and accessibility to the arts. I hope Worcester will embrace the arts even more and that the commission gives agency to even more children to tell their stories and that they know that we are here to help with that.

Q. Are there any other programs in Worcester that are for mentoring young girls in the arts?

Lindiana Semidei:

Yes, there is one called Teen Circle, it is a collaboration with the LEI, Worcester Youth Center Plumley Village, it is for young girls ages 9-18 years old. This program promotes healthy relationships, self-esteem, and confidence through self-expression and creativity.

Brief Update on the Abbey Kelly Statue-

Erin Williams:

Three years ago an initiative was started by the Worcester Women History Project to make a statue to honor a woman of note from Worcester and selected Abbey Kelly Foster. Abbey Kelly Foster was a representative of the social justice movement. When women were allowed to vote for the first time, the only women allowed to vote were white women, this is when Foster became an abolitionist and fought for voting rights for all women. A lectern has been designed that will be on Main Street coming later this Fall. The lectern can be used for people to gather together and give voice to their objectives.

Q. What is the goal for the Abbey Kelly Foster Statue?

Erin Williams:

A subtext for it would be to speak out spoken word, a lectern is there to give voice. We all have a public voice and we have a place for the voice to be spoken and heard.

Q. How does Worcester celebrate Historical Women?

Lindiana Semidei:

The majority of statues and art in Worcester are white men and I believe there should be more representation of significant women in Worcester, there should be some change in the city. I recommend having a festival honoring the women of Worcester including those in the arts.

Q. May you address the issue of access and how your organizations are addressing or providing that access to diverse and socioeconomic backgrounds?

Joy Murrieta:

For Main IDEA that is the community we are working with and have been working with for the past 10 years. We prioritize youth in the Worcester Public Schools especially those with need and have such diversity in their background and socioeconomic status. Our mission at Main IDEA is to remove that barrier and have all youth be able to participate in the arts.

Lindiana Semidei:

In my organization, the Creative Worcester Initiative, the goal is to provide funding and grants for programs that are allowing accessibility for arts in the community. We are paying close attention to racial equity and community voice, we are not only establishing projects in neighborhoods but we are also including community members from that neighborhood to participate.

Erin Williams:

The Worcester Arts Council has funds to allocate out for projects from individual artists as well as nonprofit cultural organizations or affiliates. Every year there is a community input survey, allowing programs for the youth to become possible.

In prior years one had to pay out the expenses before you got the money for the project. Now when one applies and is approved, the check is cut and can be used for the project.

The Worcester Cultural Coalition created the Hearts for Arts, it was created by and for teens in Worcester and they will have a festival in the Worcester Common on August 20th.

Q. Is there a list of Women that can be submitted for Honorary street names? [This is in reference to the new city ordinance]

Samantha Sendrowski

The proposal would be a process in which one would have to petition city council to add the honorary street names below the existing street name. The cost would be covered by whoever is petitioning.

Deborah Hall

There are not any Black women represented in Worcester and there needs to be some added in Historical representation. I will send biographies and recommend Bethany Venney and Martha Brown.

Q. Resources that will help students and parents get into the arts?

Erin Williams

Most programs will have scholarships that can be available and I can also help direct them to other resources that may be able to help them.

Q. Word of Advice for youth and women who want to work with the arts?

Joy Murrieta:

Networking and partnerships are very important, you are able to work with like minded people who will help you go further in your career.

Lindiana Semidei:

If you have an interest in the arts but are unsure of how you will do, do it anyway and do not judge yourself. The arts heal and shift energies and spirits. Take the initiative and find a mentor that you can relate to and connect with them.

Erin Williams:

Many times you will be told you can't but yes you can and do not let anyone tell you any different. Give back to others and shine a spotlight. Often women are told they are not good enough or your ideas are not strong enough but lo and behold many times it is the ideas and expressions that women come up with are the ones we circle back around with that make people come together, share and learn how to celebrate. If you have a talent or emerge into a talent go for it. Encourage those around you.

Comments from the Public-

Deborah Hall:

As we talked about representation I wish there was more diversity in today's arts panel. There are also no poetry/spoken word artists in this conversation.

Kayanna James: are there poetry workshops, programs in the city?

Erin Williams:

The city has a Worcester Youth Poet Laureate, Amina Mohammed, and Worcester Poet Laureate Juan Matos. RecWorcester and a number of summer programs are working with the Worcester Youth Poet and Poet Laureate to provide workshops for the children/youth.

Also, Al Salon just completed a project at the JMAC which represented black and brown poets and artists. She recommended the Committee reach out to Al Salon.

Q. How can we get this information out to more people in our community?

Erin Williams:

We are trying to figure out better ways to reach out to specifically the youth and we are attempting to gather more information and suggestions to do so. But we do have a newsletter that goes out every two weeks that discusses the cultural experiences that are taking place in the community.

Upcoming Programs coming to Worcester-

Lindiana Semidei:

We are piloting an artist entrepreneurial program, to provide 15 artists the skill to start a business, have business coaching, filing taxes, and how to do marketing. We are looking to

include artists who are not usually able to get funding and once they have gone through the program they will nominate another artist.

Tracey Whitney:

The committee is having a Call for Art from Children, and would love to have you ladies consult with us and give us input. We are having the children tell us their Wonder Women of Worcester. It will be a beautiful representation of the Women of Worcester.

Darcy Schwartz from ArtReach was recognized as a participant tonight. She volunteered to assist with the project.

Motion to recommend biographies for the honorary street names be posted on the city website by Heather Borelli, seconded by Samantha Sendrowski. Unanimously approved on a roll call vote 5-0-0.

Updates on project proposals and timelines for 2022-

Rubby Wuabu:

The plan is that we have a cohort of women of consequence who won these in the past to match the young women of consequence and have them help the youth and mentor them. And updated proposal will be sent out in an email soon.

4. Public Comment (See above)

5. Adjournment at 7:04 pm (motioned by Samantha Sendrowski, seconded by Rubby Wuabu, unanimous on a roll call 5-0-0.)