



KIRKWOOD HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION 2015 ANNUAL REPORT

The Kirkwood Human Rights Commission enjoyed another active and productive year in 2015. Old members left us, and new ones have joined us, as usual, but throughout the year we have kept our focus on action. We are proud of the work we have done, especially because we have been able to collaborate with other groups and agencies, widening public awareness of the issues we address and working together to create a more equitable and just culture in Kirkwood and beyond.

We acknowledge with regret that commissioners Romona Miller, Tere Owens, and Margaret Duwe came to the end of their terms during the year, and member Jacob Fiene resigned to move away to a new job. They are greatly missed. New members William Winter, Morris Fletcher, and Amanda Sher joined us, and as of year's end we are anticipating the appointment of one more member to bring us to full strength.

New officers were elected at the September meeting, as follows:

Darnel Frost — Chair
Denis Hart — Vice Chair
Robert Boyd — Secretary.

1. ESSAY CONTEST AND ART SHOW

One of the most effective activities of the past few years has been our collaboration with the Kirkwood School District in promoting an essay contest for students in grade 11. The essay contest topic chosen was "What Are the Practical Steps to Improve Racial Justice?" The announcement of the contest was distributed with the help of Ursuline Academy, St. John Vianney High School, and Kirkwood High School. More than 100 students took part. At the City Council meeting on April 16, 2015, Mayor McDonnell, Human Rights Commission Chair Darnel Frost, and members of the Human Rights Commission presented certificates to the winners, who were:

First Place: Elia Taffa
Second Place: Daniel Stobbe
Third Place: Annabel Dolan
Honorable Mention: Kendrick Lovin

Copies of the winning essays are available on the HRC website.

Early Spring of 2015 also saw our first Art Fair, in collaboration with the new Kirkwood Arts Commission and the Kirkwood School District, for students in the elementary grades. Paintings were hung at Robinson School on March 7. The Kirkwood Arts Commission kindly served as jurors, and awards were given for each grade level.

2. DISABILITY SURVEY

In conjunction with Kirkwood Neighbors United (KNU), and following an appearance at the November, 2014 meeting by Brandie Martin and John Hoffman, the HRC originated, distributed, and collected a survey to gather information about the situation of disabled persons in Kirkwood.

Denis Hart, working with the Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council, the St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council, and St. Louis Arc, led the drafting of the survey, which, with the help of city Public Information Officer Beth von Behren and Chief Administrative Officer Russ Hawes, was posted on the city's web site, distributed in the city's e-news letter, and published in the Eye on Kirkwood section of the *Webster-Kirkwood Times*.

The survey gathered information on the living situations of disabled individuals, services they receive, services that they need but do not receive, physical and social barriers that interfere with the delivery of services to them, and ways the city might address those barriers in its strategic planning process.

By the deadline for turning in the survey, more than 130 responses had been received both through the city webpage and by hard copy. The KNU subcommittee on disabilities, with St. Louis Arc, an organization that supports the developmentally disabled, compiled and analyzed the results of the survey, which will be presented to KNU, the HRC and the City Council early in 2016.

3. LGBT ORDINANCE

On September 3, the Kirkwood City Council approved by a near-unanimous vote Bill 10433, the "Enforcement Procedures" addendum to the already existing Kirkwood ordinance which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This new ordinance clarifies the procedure by which complaints of discrimination will be handled. It describes the steps to be taken by the city government and law enforcement to identify, clarify, and mediate claims where possible, and to prosecute those guilty of discrimination if mediation fails.

Several other Human Rights Commissions have expressed interest in our LGBT ordinance, including the St. Louis area Regional Human Rights Coalition, made up of representatives from six local Human Rights Commissions. The final passage of this enforcement ordinance is the capstone of a long process, and represents a significant achievement for the Human Rights Commission. Former commissioner Maggie Duwe, City Attorney John Hessel, and Councilman Bob Sears deserve great credit for this work.

4. NEIGHBORHOOD CARETAKER ALERT FORMS

The HRC led in creating and promoting a simple, accessible, and anonymous method for citizens to bring instances of discrimination or other problems to the attention of city government. Called the "Neighborhood Caretaker Alert," this form is available at the Kirkwood Public Library, at Turner School, at City Hall, and in the Kirkwood Community Center. The form is anonymous, and those who file them can track their progress through the administrative process on the city's "Kirkwood Konnect" web site by using a code number supplied when the form is turned in.

We are grateful to Kirkwood Neighbors United and to Chief Administrative Officer Russ Hawes for their contributions and cooperation in this process. By the end of the year, Mr. Hawes was able to report to the commission that several citizens had made use of this channel of communication, and that the issues raised had been addressed appropriately.

5. ASSISTANCE FOR MEACHAM PARK STUDENTS AT NIPHER

In February, 2015, Tom Gaither-Ganim, Counselor at Kirkwood High School, and members of the Kirkwood High School Social Justice Committee attended HRC meeting and proposed that a bridge be built over the railroad tracks at Fillmore and Rose Hill, which would allow for a safer and more convenient thoroughfare between the Meacham Park Neighborhood and Kirkwood. Commission member Bill Winter had been researching the issue of the safety of Meacham Park students at Nipher Middle School who were forced to walk on a congested stretch of Kirkwood Road where there were no sidewalks, or as an alternative to cross the railroad tracks at the end of Fillmore Street. Darnel Frost and William Winter talked with Thomas Williams, Superintendent of Schools. Our concerns, supporting input from the KHS Social Justice Committee and other stakeholders, resulted in an investigation of the problem by the school district. Following this investigation, an additional bus route was added to bring Meacham Park students safely to Nipher.

6. INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC

In an effort to expand public awareness of the Human Rights Commission, an outline of the our mission and a brief summary of some of our recent projects was prepared for inclusion in the monthly Kirkwood utility bill mailing in October. The insert encouraged public attendance at our meetings and included information about our meeting times and about ways to contact us, especially the Neighborhood Caretaker Alert forms.

7. TRAINING AND OUTREACH

Rev. David Bennet was invited to lead our training sessions, which took place during the regularly scheduled meetings in November and December. Rev. Bennet helped us consider a list of qualities needed to serve on the HRC. As a part of this process, it was suggested that we ask the City Council to amend the ordinance establishing the HRC by adding a student representative as an *ex officio* member. We were also encouraged to assist the Mayor by recommending new members for the commission as vacancies arise.

We have made extensive cooperative contacts with other Human Rights organizations, including having members attending meetings of the St. Louis-area Regional Human Rights Coalition, the Meacham Park Neighborhood Improvement Association, Kirkwood Neighbors United, and the Human Rights Roundtable in Jefferson City. Members also participated in the 4th annual Missouri Human Rights Conference, the UMSL Center for Public Life Conference on the Ethics of Ferguson, and a Fair Housing Forum sponsored by the Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council.

8. FOR THE FUTURE

We continue to be guided by our Strategic Plan, even as we revise that document to reflect changes in membership and changes in focus dictated by the completion of tasks and the emergence of new areas of concern. We are convinced of the importance of goals we have chosen to work toward and in the efficacy of the methods we have adopted for that work. We are proud of our accomplishments in 2015, and we look forward to the challenges of 2016 with confidence and enthusiasm.