

HUMAN RIGHTS *Today*

Promoting Dignity and Respect by Advancing Justice and Equality

Human Rights Today
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Westchester County
Human Rights Commission
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Racism Expert Helps Educate Community

Jane Elliott, the internationally acclaimed teacher, educator and lecturer who speaks openly and candidly about racism, bigotry, prejudice, homophobia and the class system in America, was in Westchester County on October 18 to do an all-day educational forum. County Executive Andy Spano was on hand to welcome her to New York and to the county.

The forum, "*Courageous Conversations with Jane Elliott*," organized by the Westchester County Human Rights Commission,

was held in two sessions and was in response to a complaint filed with the Commission by a Black woman who lives in Pleasantville and was the target of discriminatory harassment. Three teenagers spray painted the "N" word on her steps and she was able to identify them. The woman, Searsann Gray, herself a mother,

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County Executive Andy Spano speaking with Jane Elliott at the forum.

Human Rights Commission Gains More Clout

Westchester County recently took another step toward promoting justice and equality by expanding its human rights law.

The seven-year-old Human Rights Commission protects individuals from discrimination based on race, color, religion, ethnicity, creed, age, national origin, alienage or citizenship status, familial status, gender, marital status, sexual orientation and disability. In 2005, the law was expanded to protect victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse or stalking from discrimination in employment and housing.



The new amendments, unanimously approved by the Board of Legislators and signed into law by County Executive Andy Spano on June 7, 2007, authorizes the executive director of the Human Rights Commission to seek an award of monetary damages where there has been a pattern and practice of discrimination. The amendments add the possible award of punitive damages and civil fines and penalties in all cases. In addition the amended

law now provides for reasonable attorney's fees to be awarded to a successful complainant.

In cases of "pattern and practice," the discriminatory conduct affects several individuals. Previously, in such cases, the law only provided the remedy of a cease and desist order and slap on the wrist. However, in many instances where there has been a pattern and practice of discrimination, not all of the individuals affected by the discriminatory conduct are willing to come forward because they fear repercussions. If the executive director of the commission

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Message from the Executive Director

Once again, we are pleased to publish our newsletter and bring you up to date on what has been happening with the commission. We certainly have had a very busy year, but it has been also been a productive one.

In this edition of the newsletter, you will see that with the support of the County Executive and the Board of Legislators, significant changes were made to our Human Rights Law— changes that we

believed were important and beneficial to our community.

Our caseload continues to increase as we have already exceeded an intake of 300 cases this year as of this writing. We have also achieved a very significant amount of settlements and monetary awards with our cases.

We continue our education and outreach into the community as you will see from the articles on the visit of Jane Elliot, our Moot Court Competition and our involvement in various programs in Westchester County.

Our signature event continues to be our Annual Human Rights Breakfast which took place on December 11 at the Crowne Plaza in White Plains. We were pleased to pay tribute to our esteemed honorees and to especially welcome Michelle Paige-Paterson, wife of our state lieutenant governor, David Paterson, and a successful businesswoman in her own right, as our mistress of ceremonies for the breakfast.

We hope you enjoy this edition and we wish all of you a very happy holiday season and a joyous New Year.

Delores Scott Brathwaite

Predatory Lending: Don't Let it Happen to You

True story: an immigrant family moved to the U.S. to live the American dream. Husband works as a cab driver, wife is a babysitter. They have four beautiful children.

When they went shopping for a mortgage, they met a very nice man who told them that they could get financing to live in whatever house they wanted. So they bought a \$500,000 house and they lived the dream until one day, just a few months after they moved in, when their reasonable mortgage suddenly turned into an \$8000-a-month impossibility.

And that is when this family realized that this man wasn't their friend at all. Now they were on the hook for a monthly bill that they couldn't pay. Then they received another letter: they were in foreclosure.

How is it that a family of such modest means found themselves in such a predicament? Who was lending that kind of money to a cab driver and a babysitter, allowing them to live so far beyond their means and financial capabilities?

Predatory lending doesn't simply find victims in the immigrant community— although they are prime targets for unscrupulous mortgage lenders. Predatory lenders notoriously target the elderly and the African-American and Hispanic communities. They also look for uneducated consumers, anxious to own a home.

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Local High Schools Compete in Moot Court Competition

Encouraging youngsters to develop skills in writing and oral presentation, the First Moot Court Competition brought local high school students together on November 14 to put on their legal advocacy hats and make arguments in a real courtroom.

The competition, established by the Human Rights Commission in honor of the late Honorable Donald N. Silverman, took place at the State Supreme Court, Westchester County. County Executive Andy Spano welcomed the students and congratulated them on participating in the program. Joined by Board of Legislators Chairman Bill Ryan and State Senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins they each emphasized to the students that this was an exercise that allows them to use skills that will be beneficial to them for many years.

“We expect to see many more of our schools participating in this competition next year” Spano said.

Robin Bikkal, Esq., Silverman’s widow, opened the competition and said her husband would be so proud of this event. She joined the Commission in the afternoon for the announcement of the competition winners.

The high schools that participated were: Ardsley, Bronxville, Gorton, Harrison, Pleasantville, Rye Neck and Sleepy Hollow. They argued against each other in four rounds of argument before real judges, administrative law judges and attorneys. Ardsley High School received the Champion Team Award and Rye Neck High School was the first runner up. Gorton High

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Moot Court Highlights

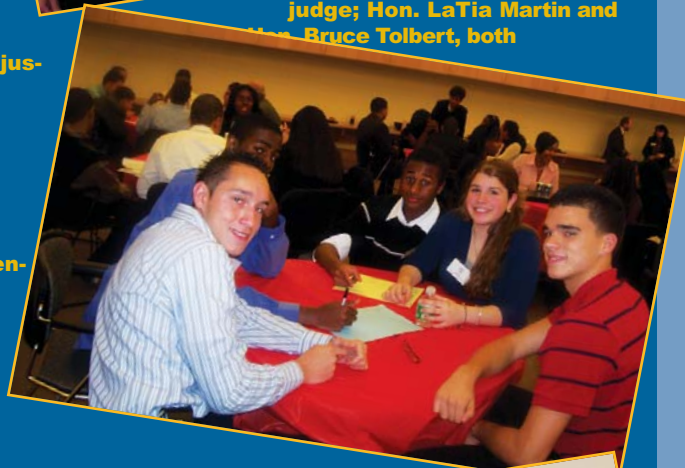
Judges for the final round of the Moot Court Competition congratulate the winner of the Outstanding Oral Advocate Award, Mrinmayee Patil of Rye Neck High School. Pictured: Hon. Jack Alemany, village justice and administrative law



county Supreme Court justices.

judge; Hon. LaTia Martin and Hon. Bruce Tolbert, both

Participating students from Woodlands High School, Greenburgh Central 7 School District during the luncheon break in the juror’s lounge, Supreme Court, Westchester County.



Robin Bikkal, Esq., wife of the late Hon. Donald N. Silverman, and Delores Scott Brathwaite, Esq., executive director of the Commission,



Discrimination in the Workplace

Approximately 64% of the claims filed with the Westchester County Human Rights Commission are employment related. The Commission prohibits discrimination in the workplace based on race, color, religion, ethnicity, creed, age, national origin, alienage or citizenship status, familial status, gender, marital status, sexual orientation and disability as well as protects victims of domestic violence or stalking. Individuals who possess certain attributes are often referred to as members of a “protected class.”

Under the law it is illegal for an employer to refuse to hire, fail to promote, discharge, pay less, or otherwise treat an employee differently in the terms and conditions of employment because of an employee’s membership in a protected class. Rude or nasty statements and conduct do not alone constitute discrimination. However, if the conduct or statement is directed toward or denies a specific benefit to an individual because he or she is a member of a protected class, discrimination may have occurred.

Many victims of discrimination fear that filing a complaint will result in retaliation. Retaliation occurs when an employee is fired

or has his or her terms and conditions of work changed as a result of a complaint of discrimination.

The Westchester County Human Rights Law protects an individual from retaliation provided you reasonably believe in good faith that the employer’s conduct is unlawful. Although retaliation is unlawful, that does not mean that it does not occur. If an employee is subjected to retaliation, that individual will have a claim of retaliation in addition to a claim of employment discrimination. If you believe that you are the victim of employment discrimination or retaliation please call the Commission at (914) 995-7710.

WHY

I really do not understand
Although I'd like to know,
Why my parents want me
To dislike my neighbors so.

These neighbors seemed real friendly
From the first day they moved here
They'd wave and smile and say hello
And even called me dear.

One day their daddy bought me
A great big ice cream cone
But Mom said I couldn't have it
And made me go back home.

I can see them from my window
With their lawn that's really neat
And the flowers that they planted
Are the nicest on this street.

What did this family really do
That must have been so wrong
Cause my dad just keeps on saying
“These people don't belong.”

I'll never know the answer
It's just not fair or right
I hope it's not their color
You see they're black not white.

That really shouldn't matter
Aren't people all the same
The only thing that's different
Is we each have our own name.

Maybe I'll ask my parents
To do me a big favor
And walk across the street with me
Just to meet this neighbor.

Ann Muro July 12, 2007 Copyrighted 2007

Racism Expert *cont. from p.1*

wanted to find a way to educate the children and the community about the pains of prejudice and the importance of diversity and humanity. The Commission reached out to Dr. Donald Antonecchia, the Pleasantville school’s superintendent, who was appalled at the behavior and wanted to work with the Commission to develop an educational program for the community. He agreed Elliott would be the perfect individual to help carry out this mission and encouraged Briarcliff Manor and Pocantico Hills School Districts to join in this venture, which they did.

Elliott gained notoriety as a teacher over 30 years ago when she engaged her class in the controversial exercise of “*Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes*.” This exercise focused on exploring and exposing the basis of inferior and superior attitudes and became the subject of the Peabody Award-winning

film, “The Eye of the Storm.” Although she and her family were ostracized and lived under constant harassment, threats and animosity, she continued her teachings about the ills of racism and bigotry. And she continues that work today.

As a former educator, County Executive Spano, in greeting the audience, stated that “education extends beyond just books and computers. Today must be a learning process that reinforces the importance of human dignity.” More than 650 educators, teachers and school administrators attended the first session at Pleasantville High School and about 300 members of the general public including community leaders, activists and clergy attended the second session at Briarcliff Manor School. State, county and local officials were on hand for both sessions. The event was a huge success and accomplished its goal of bringing education to the community.

Humanitarian Program Goes Countywide

What is most important as an adult is the type of person you have become. Do you treat others with understanding,



acceptance and respect? Do you treat others fairly and justly? Do you give back to your community?

These are qualities that must be learned, and school is the perfect place for this kind of learning. According to Beth Quinn, the opportunity for this kind of learn-

ing is inherent in the established curriculum. Quinn, who has taught for more than 30 years in the Yonkers Public Schools, has developed and implemented “Meeting Hate with Humanity (MHWH),” a program that creates an inclusive environment that decreases the number of biased-based behaviors in the community. Although the program originated in Yonkers, it was so successful that neighboring school districts throughout Westchester County now seek her advice to duplicate the program within their districts.

The program, which is made part of the school curriculum, addresses the impact of bias and stereotypes on our community. Teachers use curriculum materials to address intolerance

through the examination of historical examples of literature and outside sources. It brings learning literature to a more personal level by bringing history to life and works to effect change in the school and community.

“Meeting Hate with Humanity” teaches the skills to bring about change, encourages social activism and leads proactive initiatives to address issues of diversity. It helps teachers lead service learning projects in the community where students build academic skills as they learn about charity, service, and leadership.

To learn how to make your school a “Meeting Hate with Humanity” school, contact Quinn at mhwh@optonline.net

Predatory Lending *cont. from page 2*

But you can take steps to protect yourself against predatory lenders. Here’s how:

Recognize the signs

- Aggressive and deceptive marketing
- Financing excessive fees in loans
- High interest rates
- Refinancing a loan within a short period of time and charging higher points and fees with each finance
- Charging excessive high rates and fees to a borrower who qualifies for lower rates and/or fees offered by the lender

Educate yourself.

Knowing what to look for is only part of the battle. Get educated.

- Go online, pull your credit report and find out your credit score
- Remember- if a loan sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
- Talk to several lenders to find the best loan and terms for you.
- Know what you’re signing! Understand the loan terms. If you don’t understand, ASK! The embarrassment you may feel in asking them to explain the terms to you is far better than the embarrassment you’ll experience later in losing your home.
- Make sure all documents are correct and complete. Never sign a document that has blank fields, or incorrect information even if the lender says that they’ll make the corrections.
- Ask about additional costs and penalties.

- When in doubt, don’t sign! Ask questions, ask questions, ask questions. Get advice from other lenders or find a community-based consumer credit counseling agency.

Be realistic

We all want to live in the best house possible, but we have to live within our means. Be patient, be wise. Use common sense. If you’re making \$40,000 a year, you can’t afford to buy a million-dollar mansion. For more information please call the Westchester County Human Rights Commission at (914) 995-7710.

HUMAN RIGHTS *Today*



Moot Court

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of Yonkers received the award for the Best Written Brief for complainant and Ardsley High School was the runner up in this category. Rye Neck High School received the award for Best Written Brief for respondent and Sleepy Hollow was the runner up in this category. Mrinmayee Patil of Rye Neck received the trophy for Outstanding Oral Advocate for demonstrating excellence in oral advocacy. All winners were honored at the Commission's

Annual Human Rights Day Breakfast on December 11 at the Crowne Plaza in White Plains.

The Commission thanks Robin Bikkal, Esq., for entrusting the Commission with the use of Don Silverman's name; as well as the Pace Law School Moot Court Board and the leadership of Professor Louis Fasulo and Professor Audrey Rogers, who provided for their guidance and direction in helping to develop the competition. We also thank the Westchester County Bar Association, the Westchester Black Bar Association and the Westchester Women's Bar

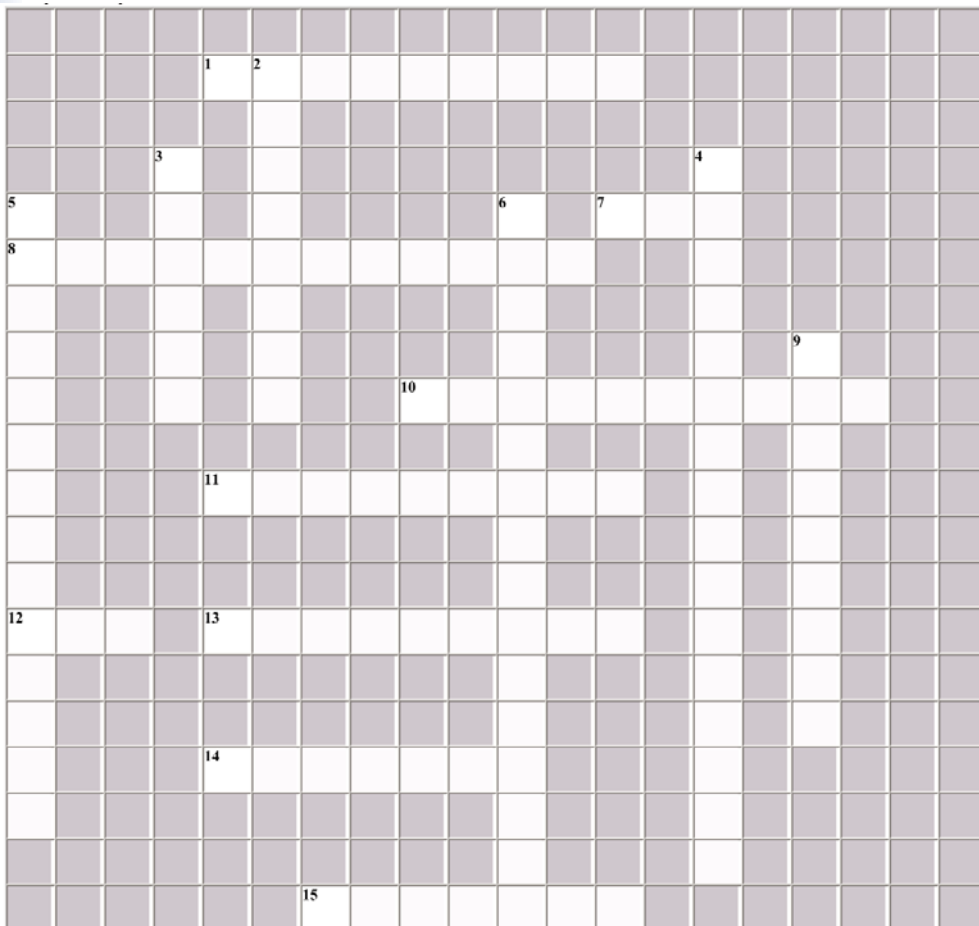
Association for their sponsorship; and the legal community of judges and attorneys who, without hesitation, volunteered their day to serve as judges of the competition.

Human Rights

cont. from page 1

files the complaint, the action will encompass all individuals affected and protect the names of the complainants. To now have the ability to award monetary damages in pattern and practice complaints is a significant accomplishment for the Commission.

Human Rights Today Crossword Puzzle



Down

2. must adhere to Human Rights Law regarding sales/rentals
3. unlawful to deny because of discrimination
4. often occurs in the workplace (2 words)
5. an illegal act
6. these victims protected in newly expanded law in Westchester (2 words)
9. protected class

Across

1. women often treated unfairly because of this
7. common basis for discrimination
8. acts on complaints
10. deserves reasonable accommodation
11. key to understanding individual differences
12. administrative law judge - presides at hearings
13. usually based on race
14. Westchester's population
15. all are entitled to this

Find the answers under our "crossword puzzle answer" link at www.westchestergov.com/humanrightscmission