

Union County Human Relations Commission

# UCHRC

# Annual Report

## *Twenty-Five Years*

## 1997 to 2023

**Cultivate Understanding and Respect**

**Intervene to Eradicate the Conditions  
that Ultimately Cause Bias and Hate**

**Promote Cultural Diversity and Inclusion,  
Human Rights, and Human Dignity**

**Celebrate the Richness of Life**

## **AN OPEN LETTER TO HONORABLE WILLIAM A. DANIEL, UNION COUNTY PROSECUTOR**

**FROM:** The UCHRC Commissioners by Co-Chairs Dr. Martin Dickerson, Ed.D.  
and Chanell Johnson, Esq., Chair, UCPO Diversity and Inclusion Committee

**DATE:** March 15, 2023

Honorable William A. Daniel  
Union County Prosecutor  
AKR Justice Building  
32 Rahway Avenue  
Elizabeth, New Jersey 07202

Dear Prosecutor Daniel:

It is with great pleasure and a lot of pride that we, the Commissioners of the Union County Human Relations Commission, submit this Annual Report to you. It is a significant one, as it presents the UCHRC's focus and accomplishments over the past 25 years.

Union County answered the state Attorney General's call in 1991 for counties and cities to create a HRC. The Commission was reorganized and reenergized in 1997 following two-years of inactivity in the wake of the death of then-Prosecutor Andrew Ruotolo. Although many of the original HRCs have fallen by the wayside, the Union County Human Relations Commission is still here, working diligently to fight the good fight.

**We continue to be proud of our statewide reputation  
that we earned early on,  
as being interested, progressive, and proactive.**

In truth, local, national, and global headlines and concerns have not changed all that much since the Commission was initially created. We continue to see an increase in bias incidents, hate crimes, bullycide, and genocide...child abuse and elder abuse...the backlash against certain peoples, with Blacks, Jews, and the LGBT+ communities topping that list...the outcry over perceived police brutality...human trafficking...the immigration controversy...natural disasters and global injustices and tragedies...and, though the buzzwords and terminology continue to evolve, the ever-present cry for diversity, inclusion, equality, and social justice.

We are proud of the long-term service and contributions of our Commissioners, who represent our County's diverse population. Through the years, our focus and accomplishments have attracted new and diverse volunteers to join our ranks.

We are always on the lookout, and plan to continue to expand our membership as we move forward into the next decade, to represent more of Union County's various cultures, ethnicities, and races, and all of our generations, as well as the local, school and business communities, clerical and faith-based organizations, community groups and non-profit organizations, military personnel and veterans, and public servants, including members of the judiciary and law enforcement.

Rather than listing a sampling of our major milestones and accomplishments here, we would rather point out that they share a common denominator:

**To offer Union County residents the chance to learn, grow, share,  
and live their best lives as good people and good neighbors.**

A fundamental change

# par-a-digm shift

in approach or

underlying assumptions

**NOUN**

We understand that in some instances this has required a paradigm shift -- a fundamental change in our approach or underlying assumptions.

***The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a Paradigm Shift as  
“an important change that happens when  
the usual way of thinking about or doing something  
is replaced by a new and different way.”***

As Commissioners, we are proud to present in these pages our successful initiatives that take that on, including our most recent initiative, *Truth-Racial Healing-Transformation*, in which we are first having the vital internal dialogue amongst ourselves with the same goal and envisioned ideal result before exploring how we can best begin to have those self-reflecting and game-changing conversations with the broader County community.

We applaud your stance to visibly launch and support local and county initiatives that speak to our mission -- to eradicate bias, prejudice, and hate, and create a more peaceful, ecumenical, inclusive, and socially just community, and to support bias crime victims who are targets of a crime because of an actual or perceived characteristic or descriptor.

We are proud that two members of your Office's new Diversity and Inclusion Committee have recently signed on to serve as Commissioners.

Thank you too for allowing us to be a partner in the launch of law enforcement's countywide "*Safe Place*" initiative for victims of bias and hate -- which is one of our 2023 Award honorees.

Please accept our sincerest gratitude to you and the Union County Prosecutor's Office for your continued sponsorship and support. Our annual Awards, which continue to stand as a beacon of inspiration and hope, would not be possible without your financial support. In fact, none of what we do or hope to achieve would be possible.

***We believe that the world can be a better place,  
and we can all help it to become that better place.***

Together, we will carry on, and trust that in our next 25-year report, we will have made even more significant strides to help people explore and create better relationships, always working toward a better and kinder, and more inclusive, equitable, and socially just community -- and world.

# Unity Achievement Awards

**Year after year, the inspirational and heartfelt presentation of our Unity Achievement Awards embraces the best that we, individually and collectively, give of ourselves on behalf of others, and touches the spirit of our Award recipients, their guests, and ourselves.**

The Commissioners who volunteer their time and energies to serve on the UCHRC unequivocally agree that the best way to strive to accomplish our mission -- to actively encourage, develop, promote and strengthen respect for human rights and cultural diversity among the people of Union County -- is to publicly honor those who already do it well.



The UCHRC Unity Achievement Awards honor “everyday individuals and organizations -- our role models and heroes -- that have contributed in an extraordinary manner to promote respect for cultural diversity, human rights, and human dignity throughout Union County. These publicly-nominated and Commission-selected individuals, organizations, and businesses are honored at our mid-year Award Presentation event.

May 2002 marked our first UCHRC Unity Achievement Award presentation, which occurred annually until the interruption by the pandemic. We were finally able to present our postponed May 2020 awards in June 2022. Our 2023 awards will mark our twentieth annual presentation. In addition to our Award, recipients are presented with two resolutions -- from the New Jersey legislators, and from the Union County Board of Commissioners.

We are grateful to the Union County Prosecutor’s Office for its continued support and funding of this incredible initiative, and to the county residents for lending “an eye and an ear” to help us identify these heroes among us.



- Awards are presented in the following categories:**
- Corporation/Business Establishment**
  - Nonprofit Organization**
  - Community Organization**
  - Individual**
  - Student**
  - Educator**
  - Media**
  - Law Enforcement**
  - Public Service**
  - Clergy**
  - Faith-Based Organization**
  - Military/Veteran**
  - Special Achievement**
  - Special Recognition**

**Visit our website -- [www.ucnj.org/uchrc](http://www.ucnj.org/uchrc) -- for the complete list of Award recipients -- and nomination form!**

*This is a photo of many (but not all) of our 2020 Award recipients at -- finally! -- the June 2023 award presentation.*

# Police & Teens Together (PATT)

## Improving communication and building respect between teens and police

Twenty five years ago, following the NYC shooting of Amadou Diallo, the Commissioners had a frank exchange regarding fears for their teenagers during a police encounter.

One year later, in spring 2000, the PATT program was piloted at Elizabeth High School. Twenty-three years later, it has been delivered countywide, and is a staple in several high schools. New Providence High School has delivered three presentations annually since their first in 2003, which has also provided “proof positive” that the program not only works, but is sincerely appreciated by the entire community.

This four-day interactive program was designed to enable teens and police officers to roll up their sleeves and talk honestly, getting to know one another and exchanging points of view in an effort to bridge the relationship gap, and increase understanding and mutual respect.

By Day 4: students have provided their perspectives on law enforcement and previous encounters; officers have introduced themselves as people, and as professionals; students have seen a graphic video of the murder of an officer during a routine traffic stop; “traded places” in dynamic and unpredictable role plays, and talked about them. Pre- and post-surveys show almost every student, including those who respected officers prior, had much greater respect for officers and the stressful job they do, appreciating their goal is to go home to their family every night. They were more aware of the breadth and depth of the job, and “why the officers come across the way they do,” as one student stated. And donuts are an energy-booster during a 12-hour shift! Officers learned that not every teenager believed that “the cops were just trying to make their lives miserable,” and spoke more with some who looked to pursue this as a profession.

We conduct “before” and “after” surveys. Visit our website for more program details and to read the students’ comments for yourself.

*The local police department brings in the squad car, a civilian car, vests, hats, duty belts, and fake guns and radios, and suit up two students at a time to conduct a motor vehicle stop and, at the end, a crowd dispersement exercise.*

*Every time, the student “Officers” experience firsthand how difficult it is to control a situation with simply your voice, verbal commands, and comportment, and the fears, concerns, and pressures officers face in these unknown situations.*

*The officer “Civilians” laugh when the student “Officers” approach the car with their guns drawn, but also demonstrate how a routine situation can quickly turn bad.*



Fox News 12 showed a 2-minute spot of Governor Livingston High School/ Berkeley Heights 2003 role plays. Left, New Providence High School 2015. Below, Roselle Park High School 2005.



Our partners in the pilot effort were the Union County Prosecutors’ Office (UCPO), Elizabeth Police Department, Elizabeth Human Rights Commission, and National Conference for Community & Justice, and Elizabeth High School. Retired UCPO Lieutenant Guy Steward masterminded the “home run” role play session. THE UCHRC and UCPO partnered with local police departments and school administrators to present the countywide roll-outs.



# Pass The Message On

**Bias/Prejudice Reduction Program -- The messenger is as important as the message**



This bias/prejudice reduction program was born in Spring 2010, when the UCHRC, led by Commissioner Karen E. Positan, partnered with Linden Police Department and Juvenile Unit Supervisor Lieutenant Keith Aslin, and our good friend, sociologist and diversity educator Dr. Paula Rodriguez Rust of Spectrum Diversity LLC (pictured above) to develop this educational program concept.

A meeting with Linden High School's (LHS) then-principal Dr. Danny Robertozzi connected us with LHS history teacher Mrs. Monica Goncalves, which was a stroke of genius.

Add the LHS students, the student presentation to freshmen underclassmen and middle-school students, tweak a bit, then add the drama students, continue to add and tweak, and together we have created a masterpiece, fittingly called *Pass The Message On*.

**What evolved into the *Pass The Message On* educational program started as a multi-day forum with a class of high school juniors and seniors, to speak frankly and openly about these tough issues.**

**We first provide a historical and sociological context to explore the causes and consequences of bias, prejudice, and hate -- both in society at large, and at home. We invite them to reflect, explore and share -- orally, in writing, and in group discussions -- how stereotyping, bias, and prejudice have impacted their personal lives.**

**By the end of the program, the upperclassman had taken our message to heart, and earnestly tried to teach and influence younger students about such simple concepts as being mindful of the effects their words have, to being an upstander in the Bullying Game. They sincerely wanted to *Pass The Message On*.**

I alone cannot change the world,  
but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.

*Mother Theresa*

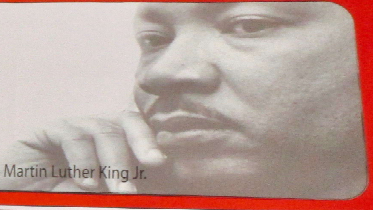
"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences." - Audre Lorde



## Bias & Prejudice Reduction Program:

### PASS THE MESSAGE ON

"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." - Martin Luther King Jr.



By the end of the dialogue, these students are truly moved by the presentation, and are empowered to "pass the message on" to freshman and middle-school students about the hurt and harm that comes from bias and stereotyping, and ways to stop it.

And we have also learned from them along the way.

#### **One of our own Lessons Learned: The messenger is as important as the message.**

Younger students are more inclined to listen and take the message to heart if it is coming from an older sibling or someone closer to their own age.

Individually, in groups, and then as a class, these students design creative presentations including skits, videos, readings, and interactive activities, that will help explain prejudice, bias, and hate and the harm they cause, encourage their audience to think about the subject, and to take the issue seriously. In essence, to "Pass The Message On."

We introduced this program in 2010, and it is still going strong.

At their March 2012 annual conference, the New Jersey Bias Officers Association recognized this program and presented awards to Dr. Rust, Lt. Aslin, and Commissioner Positan. Monica Goncalves received various awards for her participation, including the UCHRC Unity Achievement Award.

The pandemic interrupted the presentation, but plans are underway to present it in Fall 2023. We are also exploring how we can bring this inspirational program to other Union County schools.

#### **One of Dr. Rust's teachings:**

**"Things that might seem trivial to one person can really impact someone else's life."**

In 2017, the TV production crew of the public television NJTV's Classroom Closeup, an Emmy award-winning show that showcases positive things happening in public schools, came to witness and film the presentation to the freshman.

The spotlight first aired on March 17, 2018, and was featured that whole year.

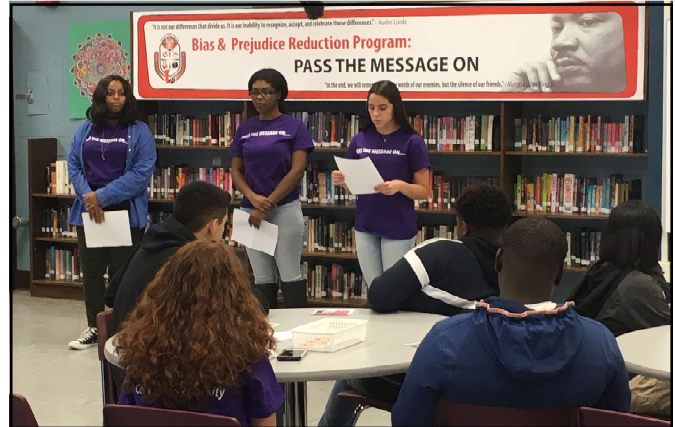
These photos are from that presentation.

**For the first activity, each freshman was given a plain piece of white paper, and was asked to crumple it up into a tight ball. Afterwards, they were asked to unravel them and flatten the paper out again.**

**They all realized the paper stayed crumpled.**

**The student leader told the students that this is really the effect of a person who is bullied:**

**Even if you apologize and try to take back your mean words or actions, the other person is still scarred for life.**



We have amassed a collection of creative writings that many of the students have given us permission to share. "My name is Anthony" was one of the first submissions, about a student whose older brother with Down Syndrome, often taunted and, but for his younger brother, would be left out, has taught him a lot. Every class so far has selected that as one of their readings.



Above, the freshman participate in one of three interactive activities especially created by the upperclassman for the presentation. Below, the drama students present two skits, addressing the fallout of bullying and cyberbullying/sexting.



# **Bullying/Cyberbullying Awareness and Prevention**

**Intervening to improve the quality of our youths' lives  
-- and perhaps even save a few by preventing "Bully-cide"**


**Bullying is an aggressive behavior that is unprovoked and usually occurs over time, and that a reasonable person should know will hurt, embarrass, humiliate or otherwise cause harm to or engender fear in others who are perceived as, or, in fact, are, less powerful physically, intellectually, or socially.**

**The UCHRC Commissioners are extremely proud of our long-standing, proactive, and aggressive stance to deliver Train the Trainer workshops to educators and law enforcement officers, and educational forums to the entire community, to promote widespread awareness on how to prevent and intervene with regard to bullying, cyberbullying, intimidation, and harassment -- including bias-based bullying, and that we embraced this early on before these became common buzzwords and the focus of educators and state legislators.**

Soon after the Columbine High School tragedy on April 20, 1999, the Commissioners met with a representative from the New Jersey State Bar Foundation and a concerned Berkeley Heights resident to discuss whether bullying was a key motivation in that shooting, and more specifically, the role of bias and hate as it relates to bullying and school violence. A heated discussion at a subsequent meeting over whether or not bullying should be considered "a rite of passage" led to the eventual creation of a Sub-Committee to further the education of the Commissioners, and ultimately, the community, on bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and intimidation -- including bias-based bullying.

Our research, of course, strongly indicated that bullying is really a "wrong of passage," and carries with it serious short- and long-term consequences for the victims of bullying, witnesses to acts of bullying, and the bullies themselves.

Because some of the long-term consequences for bullies involve violent and criminal behavior -- in essence, little bullies become big bullies, then-Union County Prosecutor Theodore J. Romankow wholeheartedly supported the intentions and efforts of the UCHRC. [Actually, current research indicates that victims of bullying also go on to have records, and actually higher rates of criminal conviction. (Source: *LiveScience.com, 2023*)]



**W**e can learn a lot from Crayons.  
Some are sharp,  
some are pretty,  
some are dull,  
some have weird names,  
and all are  
different colors...  
but they all  
have to learn  
to live  
in the same box."  
*Unknown*

The Commission was pleased to partner with the Union County Prosecutor's Office and Union County Superintendent of Schools in this initiative, and to take a leadership role in both the county community and in the state.

The UCHRC provided educational forums and print materials to increase awareness and efforts to intervene and prevent the negative short- and long-term consequences caused by bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and intimidation.

Over the next decade, the UCHRC became one of the state's leading players to increase awareness and work to prevent bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and intimidation for the entire school community including school administrators, teachers, counselors, and staff,  
parents, PTA's,  
students;

law enforcement officers, including Juvenile,  
D.A.R.E., and School Resource Officers;  
and the community at large.

The UCHRC was the primary creator and provider of both train-the-trainer and educational workshops for law enforcement and the school community, educating officers and educators on these anti-social, and oftentimes bias-based, behaviors.



Our first presentation, in April 2003, was attended by over 150 educators and a small representation of law enforcement officers. The program featured an interactive Power-Point based theatrical production which was developed by the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office, entitled **"Anti-Bullying and Harassment for Parents and Children of All Ages."**

The presentation defined bullying, examined its repercussions on the three players, explained why it is important to intervene, and offered real suggestions on what must be done by the entire school community to stop it.

The UCHRC provided a "toolkit" workbook containing additional information and educational materials that could be used in schools and classrooms, as well as handouts for students and parents.

This presentation was offered on a regular basis over the next five years, and was attended by school representatives and law enforcement officers from all of Union County's 21 municipalities. We also ultimately offered it as a **Train the Trainers** class for educators and law enforcement.

Another one of the courses we presented allowed school superintendents to take a closer look at how HIBc impact the students, school culture, and school environment, offering specific recommendations on options and opportunity to take a whole-school approach to effectively address and combat them.

We also provided training on the state's two "anti-bullying laws," ***N.J.S.A. 18A:37-13 et seq.***, passed in 2003, requiring every school have a policy in place, and, and, five years later, **"What We Have Learned"** about creating safe and equitable school climate. In 2007, we added training regarding the addition of "electronic communication" to that law.

The exploding use of modern technology and gadgetry by children and youth has resulted in their continued use to abuse and torment each other -- aka Cyber-Bullying. Sexting came soon after. Followed by Sextortion. All are still key concerns.

We expanded our educational presentations and Train-The-Trainers workshops to include **Cyber-Bullying, CyberSafety, and Generational Texting/Sexting**, and subsequently became **certified I-Safe instructors** so that we in turn could certify educators and law enforcement officers to teach our youth how to keep themselves safe from the dangers of the web.

Also in 2007, in partnership with the New Jersey State Bar Foundation and New Jersey State Police, we offered an overview of the hot-off-the-press **Supreme Court decision *L.W. vs. Toms River***, a perceived landmark case regarding school liability.

## Informational Brochures for Adults and Students

*To answer information needs, the UCHRC developed three informational brochures, printed in English and Spanish, which were also available to be downloaded online.*



**Bullying, Harassment & Intimidation**  
Little Bullies Become Big Bullies

Union County Prosecutor's Office  
Union County Superintendent of Schools  
Union County Human Relations Commission

**"Bullying, Harassment & Intimidation: Little Bullies Become Big Bullies"**  
*provides almost everything an adult needs to know about bullying in a compact 8-page brochure, replete with heart-rendering artwork drawn by students worldwide who have been bullied.*



**Who are YOU in the BULLY GAME?**

Union County Prosecutor's Office  
Union County Superintendent of Schools  
Union County Human Relations Commission

**"Who Are You In The Bully Game?"**  
*was written for students through 9th grade. By answering simple questions and examining their own actions, students can identify if they are bullying someone else, being bullied, or just standing by and letting it happen.*



**Cyber-Bullying On The High Tech Playground**

Union County Prosecutor's Office  
Union County Superintendent of Schools  
Union County Human Relations Commission

**"CyberBullying On The High Tech Playground"**  
*was written to discuss bullying via computers and mobile gadgetry such as cell phones and -- yes, you are reading this correctly -- pagers. It takes a look at how you can protect yourself, and what to do if it happens to you.*

The quest for understanding and information by schools, parents, students, and law enforcement continued following the passage of what is still the nation's strongest anti-bullying legislation -- **New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Student Bill of Rights** -- signed into law on January 5, 2011, in the wake of the death of Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi, and the verdict handed down convicting his roommate, Dharun Ravi, of bias intimidation.

**As reported by the New York Times on March 16, 2012, the Dharun Ravi verdict, in particular, was poised to broaden the definition of hate crimes in an era when laws have not kept up with evolving technology.**

The UCHRC was proud to be a member of the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Coalition from its inception, ably led by Stuart Green. We were invited as keynote speakers for such esteemed organizations including the 2007 **FBI/Newark's "Crimes Against Children" Conference**, the **New Jersey Juvenile Officer's Association 2007 Annual in Atlantic City**, and the **American Association of University Women's Conference** in January 2008.

By invitation, the UCHRC was also represented on the **New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice's Special Task Force to Prevent Bullying and CyberBullying**, comprised of the state's "best minds," and played a key contributing role to create a comprehensive document intended to assist school districts statewide to develop a dedicated and targeted approach to intervene and prevent bullying and cyberbullying. Task Force members Dr. Paula Rodriguez Rust and UCHRC Commissioner Karen Positan led the effort to collect and codify the input from each task member and produce the final product -- a book of "best practices" to be distributed to every New Jersey school superintendent.

For fifteen years, the UCHRC took a leadership role in our county community, and in the state, to increase awareness and provide insight, recommendations, and turnkey programs to intervene and prevent the negative short-term and long-term consequences caused by bullying, cyberbullying, intimidation, harassment, bias, and hate.

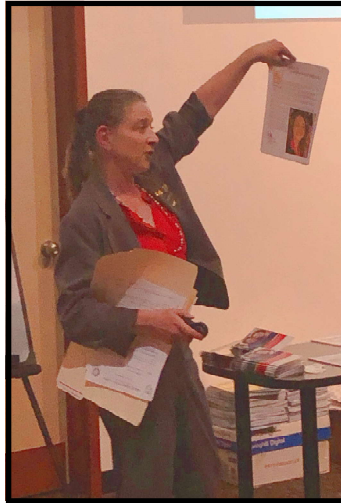
**Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the school to create a school environment and culture that will serve as the best intervention and prevention mechanism for bullying, harassment, intimidation and other forms of school violence and disrespectful activities.**

**A positive school climate that celebrates achievement and inclusivity will be healthier and safer for all.**

The requests for presentations continue to stream in.

We are proud to have trained members of the Union County Prosecutor's Office and in 2015 the UCHRC passed the baton for ongoing training in schools to them.

# Bias Sensitivity Workshops



*The UCHRC is grateful to our long-time esteemed partner, Dr. Paula Rodriguez Rust of Spectrum Diversity LLC for her steadfast commitment to educate the Commissioners and Union County community about bias, prejudice, and stereotyping, as well as issues specifically affecting the LGBTQIA community. A sociologist and diversity educator, she is a renowned state expert on bullying/ harassment/intimidation and LGBT issues.*

Starting in 2012, in partnership with the Union County Superintendent of Schools, the UCHRC presented the first in a series of **Bias Sensitivity Training** workshops specially geared toward parents, educators, and social service providers, later adding juvenile officers and municipal bias officers, to examine the critical role of bias in defining and addressing bullying, and how we can ensure the positive school climate we are creating is positive to all students.

**Each form of bias/diversity poses unique challenges in the school environment.**

"**Bullying, Bias, and Racial Disparities in Discipline**" highlighted the critical importance of proactive efforts to address various forms of bias as part of comprehensive anti-bullying programming, promoting equity in education, and complying with federal and state laws including the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights.

## LGBTQIA

### Encouraging Understanding and Acceptance

One of the key components Dr. Rodriguez Rust addresses is the accurate terminology and conceptual understanding of the lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, questioning, intersex, and allies (LGBTQIA) communities, and distinguishing between sex, gender identity, and gender expression, and the variety in gender identification.

In November 2017, the UCHRC broke ground by offering the first presentation in New Jersey, "**What Parents Need To Know About Transgender Individuals.**" Presented again in 2018 and 2019, this workshop was geared to help attendees better understand gender identity and transgender issues, and how to speak with children and adolescents about these sensitive topics and issues.

In 2018 and again in 2019, we premiered a full-day training workshop for educators entitled "**A Contemporary Challenge: Understanding and Meeting The Needs of Transgender Students in Accordance With the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination, Title IX, and Best Practices,**" co-sponsored by the Union County Prosecutor's Office. This training provided educational professionals at elementary, middle, and high school levels with information, understanding, and strategies for addressing the needs of transgender students, and explored the social, medical, and legal aspects of transitioning to live in accordance with one's gender identity.

**Please try our opening ice-breaker:  
Describe your past weekend  
without using any pronouns.**

# ***InterFaith Community Network***

In the late 1990's, in the grip of the Columbine High School tragedy, police shootings, and other upsetting events that had members of the community on edge and even at odds, the UCHRC, led by Commissioner Reverend Alfred E. Brown, Jr., pastor of Cranford's First Baptist Church, actively set about to create a structure and system to be used quickly to put together crisis-response public forums when necessary.

The result was the UCHRC's **InterFaith Community Network**, comprising multi-denominational houses of worship geographically spread throughout Union County that have volunteered to act as "safe haven" host sites.

The purpose of establishing this network of facilities was to ensure that we can quickly arrange meetings and gatherings as necessary wherein the community can dialogue and express concerns about issues and events affecting our lives and our communities, but it has also provided us the opportunity to present a wide array of free educational programs and public forums. The following is a small sampling of our paradigm-shifting presentations and public forums.

In attempt to respond to the community's needs following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Commission hosted **"Beyond the World Trade Center: An Evening of Understanding, Healing, and Hope,"** at St. Helen's Church in Westfield. It was primarily designed to sensitive attendees to promote and foster harmony with Muslim American citizens, and featured representatives of the Islamic community who explained the tenets of their faith and tried to dispel any misinformation, law enforcement personnel who explained the nature and scope of their response to ensure public safety, a grief counselor who offered insights about grieving and the healing process, and a victim/witness advocate who discussed available resources.

One of our most thought-provoking and well-attended presentations, **"Ethics Matter: A Matter of Life and Death,"** held at Westfield's First United Methodist Church in April 2008, was presented by UCHRC Commissioner Jack Weinshanker (Co-Chair 2002-2004), who had been teaching classes for the past few years on this vital topic through a Rutgers University Program. He explored how ethical values provide guidelines for survival, including how ethics are learned and handed down from generation to generation, and the intrinsic roles of government, religion, extended family, and community.

The inspirational and interactive dialogue of **"Helping Your Child Succeed In School"** provided parents of elementary and middle school students with parental understanding and skills that could help improve their children's overall well-being and help them to achieve academic excellence, and for parents to encourage their children -- our most precious resource -- to reach for the stars. An educator from the Union County Division of Youth Services covered simple basics from the importance of breakfast, to more complex topics including effective communications. It was piloted in Linden in Fall 2017, and then offered in both English and Spanish in Plainfield in Spring 2018.

The UCHRC is indebted to the New Jersey Secretary of State's Office of Dispute Settlement, and especially Caroline Petrilla, Esq., for providing us with **Conflict Intervention and Mediation Training** from 2001 to 2004, commencing with the State's mandatory 18-hour training. A few of the Commissioners furthered their training with the federal court system, while others looked to work with the local court systems. The Commissioner have continued to conduct our own role-play training sessions from time-to-time to increase our experience, hone our skills, and gain a broader exposure to potential solutions devised by those in conflict so that we could serve our citizens if and when called upon. In addition to our outreach to various community groups to alert them to this capability, we also have responded to direct calls from local residents for assistance.

**"If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner." *Nelson Mandela***

Conflict mediation was a key state offering for distressed property owners fearing or facing foreclosure, and in 2010, the number of county residents who needed it was staggering. Again working with Caroline Petrilla, Esq. and the New Jersey Public Defender's Office of Dispute Settlement, this magnificent series, **"Foreclosure: Moving From Fear To Positive Action,"** was born. The presentation was presented in many Union County municipalities from 2010 to 2017, in both English and Spanish, and was attended by distressed property owners in foreclosure, renters in foreclosed buildings, and those trying to avoid it. Panelists from our partner sponsors -- Union County Superior Court, and the Union County Foreclosure Task Force -- joined other knowledgeable experts from state and county agencies to explain the process, identify available free state and county programs, resources, and financial aid available to them, and to warn them about scams. We literally can say we were able to give help -- and hope -- to every individual who attended, whether they ultimately stayed in their home, or moved on to rebuild their lives. While foreclosure is still a current worry for many, future offerings of this forum are on hold pending federal and state government funding decisions.

Elder abuse is a crime. **“Preventing Our Elders From Abuse”** was designed to provide inspirational and interactive dialogue with caregivers, social service agencies, and residents so they could recognize elder abuse and protect our senior citizens from its debilitating results, which range from financial loss to physical and emotional injury, pain, and anguish, and even death. The program identified intervention strategies and resources so these victims do not have to suffer in silence and can get the help they need. The program was presented in 2018 in partnership with UCHRC Commissioner Peter Jacob, a social worker for the Jewish Family Service’s CEASSE: Combatting Elder Abuse Through Service and Education, and Union Public Library, and supported by the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General. The UCHRC is looking to present more of these forums in the future.

Acknowledging the presence and impact the gang culture has had in our communities, an ongoing series of **Gang Awareness Public Forums** was developed so that all sectors of the community could come together to discuss and share ways that we, individually and collectively, could address the presence and impact the gang culture has had in our communities, and work with youth to encourage healthy choices, relationships, and affiliations. At a handful of meetings held in 2011-2012, formal and informal presenters and the audience engaged in a lively and healthy dialogue to explore the best practices to develop and fund gang-prevention measures and outreach. The forum was attended by many sectors of the state and local community -- the clergy, parents, students, citizens, educators, community and social agency staff members, law enforcement, youth advocates, and even a few former gang members -- who came together for a community education and an open and honest dialogue on gang awareness.

## **Understanding Other Cultures & Ourselves**

The UCHRC continues to explore ways to become acquainted with and better understand other cultures, and the visible and invisible behaviors, motivators, and values that comprise Union County’s diverse global communities.

Our guest presenters through the years have represented various segments of these communities, and both guest presentations at our regular meetings and public forums have introduced us to them and allowed us to explore the stereotypical and biased perceptions others may have of them, and glimpse areas of actual and potential conflict.

One of our first guest presentations became an eye-opening and inspirational public forum on the **“History of Latinos/Latinas.”** Other presentations have included the **Haitians, Chinese Americans,** and various **Muslim and Arabic communities,** as well as others that are much less well known to many of us. One such presentation was by the **Marathi Vishwa,** a cultural, educational, and social service organization representing the Marathi-speaking people from India who reside in New Jersey. While preserving their cultural heritage, language, and music, they are also social reform pioneers in the movements to eradicate untouchability and women’s illiteracy.

Officer Alexander Kuga, (ret.) North Plainfield Police Department, presented his **“Welcome to America”** presentation created to train other community policing law enforcement officers to outreach to immigrants in their communities with A to Z information on basics for living in America -- and to guide them to the available resources that can assist them through the arduous and difficulty process and journey to create a life in the USA.

Most recently, in November 2022, Dr. John R. Norwood of the **Nanticoke Leni-Lenape Tribal Nation,** aka Smiling-Thunderbear (“Kelekpethakomaxkw” in the Southern Unami Dialect of Lenape), provided an overview of the continuing history of New Jersey’s local indigenous people and culture, including both historical and current perspectives and challenges.

Moving  
at the  
speed of  
light, we  
are bound  
to collide  
with each  
other.  
**CRASH**  
movie  
tagline

The Union County Human Relations Commission also continues to strive for self-education and discovery. In 2009, the Commissioners watched parts of the challenging and thought-provoking movie **Crash,** the Lions Gate Film which won the 2005 Academy Award for “best picture.”

The movie takes a provocative, unflinching look at the complexities of racial tolerance in contemporary America. Commissioners first watched the film individually, and then as a group. The ensuing discussions reflected a wide spectrum of opinions, viewpoints, perspectives, biases and prejudices, which reinforced both the need to continue these dialogues, and the need for our Commission to actively engage in providing ourselves and the general public with these types of educational experiences and opportunities.

This activity also launched a new agenda item discussed at our meetings, aptly titled **“Popcorn & Soda,”** whereby the Commissioners recommend movies, theatrical productions, school plays, books, and music that explore various aspects of cultural diversity and human rights. The Commissioners continue to explore ways to become acquainted with, and better understand, other cultures, ourselves and each other, always with an eye toward helping to spread that awareness -- and understanding -- to the general public.

# Cultural Cafe



The UCHRC Commissioners are a diverse group of volunteers, both personally and professionally. We meet five times a year, and at each meeting, we break bread together.

While we have tried various cuisines through the years, we hit a “Eureka” at our November 2019 meeting when we suspended our regular meeting agenda to launch our very own **Cultural Cafe** smorgasbord. Each Commissioner brought in a (mostly) home-cooked meal that reflected their heritage and traditions. Everyone explained what the particular dish was and why it was special. It was such a success on every level, we decided to adopt it and make it an annual tradition at our Commission gathering(s)!

Unfortunately, due to the interruption caused by the Covid pandemic, we have had to wait until this year -- 2023 -- for our next feast! We are already anticipating these Commissioners’ cultural staples:

Unstuffed Cabbage and Rye Bread (Polish/Slovak);  
Sicilian Pizza with Anchovies, and  
Guyanese Cheese Straws, a rarity that is served on very special occasions.

In the meantime, these are a sampling from our first round! Many are specialties served at holidays and special occasions. Others are regular fare.

## Irish Soda Bread

### Irish

The name comes from baking soda, which the Irish call “bread soda.”)

## Corn Bread

### African American

Part of this cultural tradition forever, served regularly at mealtimes, and always holidays and celebrations!

## Samosas

### Indian

A very popular vegetarian appetizer served when company visits, as well as holidays and other special celebrations.

## Spanikopita (Spinach Pie)

### Tiropita (Cheese Pie)

### Greek

Very versatile -- appetizer/meal, warm/cold -- but hard to make so usually served only on holidays and special occasions. Or buy them at the bakery year-round!

## African/Southern USA

### Bean Pie

A tasty holiday treat that everyone enjoys year-round.

## Haluschki (Noodles)

### Slovakian

This Lenten “must” is enjoyed so much it’s eaten year-round!

Food is a central activity of mankind and one of the single most significant trademarks of a culture.

*Mark Kurlansky*

*'Choice Cuts' (2002)*  
*(American journalist/author)*

## Pierogis

### Polish

Can be filled, or topped, with all sorts of wonderful things! Eaten anytime alone or as part of a larger spread.

## Diri ak Djon Djon

### (Black Mushroom Rice with Shrimp and Lima Beans)

### Haitian

A common Haitian dish shared especially during festive occasions.

## Empanadas!!!

Colombians and Ecuadorians make beef empanadas, while Puerto Rican empanadas are made with pork.

They are eaten all the time, either alone or with something, but always for the holidays. The Peruvian appetizer is made with chicken or beef, and whether you serve them every day or only on holidays depends upon where in Peru you live!

## Baked Ziti

### Italian

This Italian staple has been adopted by the whole world. At home it is always served, in huge quantities! Sometimes baked with lots of meat.

## Matzo Ball Soup

### Jewish

A long-time Jewish tradition, as is homemade chicken soup. In the 12th century, they both were prescribed for all sorts of maladies -- even leprosy!

## Polachinti (Blintz)

### Slovakian

Dessert blintzes that are so good, they are usually eaten as a meal!

## Serradura

### Portuguese

There is no wonder that this delicious, favorite traditional Portuguese dessert became our favorite, too!

## Biscotti

### Italian

Millenia-old twice-cooked treats can be stored for long periods of time. But they don’t last that long!

## Snickerdoodles

### German

A Christmas “must” cookie, usually topped with cinnamon-sugar but other sprinkles work too. Good any time of year!

# Truth & Reconciliation

## Truth, Racial Healing, Transformation

Launched by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) effort is a comprehensive community-based ongoing process to bring about transformational and sustainable change.

The UCHRC Commissioners first heard the term **Truth and Reconciliation**

at a meeting in March 2005, when our guest presenter, Union County Assistant Prosecutor John Esmerado (now retired), shared his experience with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Greensboro, North Carolina, which was dealing with 100 years of racial violence involving the KKK.

The TRC's first step is to find the TRUTH -- to establish what happened, and the second step is RECONCILIATION -- when the perpetrator meets with the victim.

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have been formed around the world to create a shared historical narrative about something in the community's past that is difficult to talk about. If the wrongs that have been done have not been discussed, and the community reality is not dealt with, the high level of emotion, hurt, and anger fester and translate into future violence. The TRC seeks to help communities embrace racial healing and eliminate conscious and unconscious beliefs in a hierarchy of human value. The Commission helps people come together and understand each other better.

The benefits of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions are wide ranging, and can offer a process for people of diverse groups throughout Union County to come together and talk together.

John was also invited to be the "Standing Together Against Hate" keynote speaker in April 2005, an annual event held for over a decade that was presented by the Union County Committee Against Hate in cooperation with the Union County Prosecutor's Office and UCHRC.

**Healing takes courage,  
and we all have courage,  
even if we have to dig a little to find it.**  
**Tori Amos (American singer/songwriter)**

In May 2019, representatives from Social Justice Matters, a Scotch Plains/Fanwood organization founded in 2012 to advance discussions on race, addressed the UCHRC Commissioners seeking to enlist our participation in rolling out a countywide **Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT)** initiative.

The TRHT effort promotes inclusive and community-based healing activities and policy designs that seek to change community narratives and broaden the understanding of diverse experiences among people.

Through TRHT, partners address the historic and contemporary effects of racism in their communities and institutions. They work to replace the deeply-held belief system that fuels racism with one that sees the inherent value of all people.

After additional research and some discussion, the Commissioners agreed that before we could take this on countywide, we would greatly benefit by experiencing this initiative personally and collectively by ourselves.

We reached out to a recommended resource to assist in our training and facilitate our dialogue, but never heard back. Fully recognizing the need to, and benefits of, engaging in this dialogue quickly, the Commissioners identified online resources that we might be able to use to engage in this process, including a group of short videos entitled **"A conversation about race with (Latinos, black, whites, Native Americans, LGBT+, police officers, etc.)."**

The New Jersey Division on Civil Rights also presented their workshop, **"Having Effective Anti-Bias Discussions."**

Realizing the critical importance of an external facilitator, we engaged Beyond Diversity Resource Center to facilitate two workshops just held in February 2023, **"Conversations on Racial Healing."**

The Commissioners will continue to dialogue amongst ourselves and with other trained professionals with an eye toward expanding these vital conversations to the broader community at some point in the future.

**Our vision is for Union County to be a just and truthful community that acknowledges and seeks to heal from the racial wounds of the past.**

# Provide Support to Bias Crime Victims

## Our Mission

The Union County Human Relations Commission serves to promote and encourage a more peaceful and ecumenical society in Union County, by providing support to bias crime victims who are targets of a crime because of their actual or perceived race or color; religion or creed; national origin, nationality, or ancestry; age; gender, pregnancy, or breastfeeding; sexual orientation; gender identity or expression; physical or mental challenges (disability); marital status or domestic partnership/civil union status; liability for military service; or familial status or socio-economic status.\*

\*These are the protected classes under the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination (LAD).

Anyone who believes their rights under the LAD have been violated may file a complaint with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights within 180 days of the incident.

## What IS a Bias or Hate Crime?

Under New Jersey law, (2C, 16-1), a person is guilty of a bias intimidation crime if s/he commits, attempts to commit, conspires with another to commit, or threatens the immediate commission of an offense with the purpose to intimidate an individual or group of individuals because of any of our 18 protected classes. \* (see above.)

Such an offense also constitutes a bias intimidation crime if the manner in which the offense is committed **causes the victim to reasonably believe that the offense was committed with a purpose to intimidate the victim because of --or that the victim or his property was selected to be the target because of --race, color, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, national origin, or ethnicity.**

These offenses are a distinctive category and are more likely to involve a heightened assault and injury level or serial attacks of escalating severity. There are often multiple assailants and the victims generally do not know their offenders.

As a result of these offenses, there is often a spiral of community violence and extended psychological trauma for victims.

**It is important to note that all hate crimes are bias incidents, but not all bias incidents are hate crimes.**

**"New Jersey sees spike in reports of hate crimes, bias incidents for third year in a row, AG says"**

*1,871 incidents were reported in 2021,  
the highest annual number  
since the state began tracking it in 1994"*

Philly Voice -- April 3, 2022

We continue our close relationship with the municipal, county, and state bias crime officers, including the Union County Prosecutor's Office Bias Unit and municipal bias officers, the New Jersey Bias Officers Association, the New Jersey Human Relations Council, and the New Jersey Office of Civil Rights, which manages the New Jersey Bias Investigation Access System for filing complaints.

Commissioners are regularly updated on the types of bias incidents and hate crimes that have been investigated in Union County by the Bias Detectives that serve on our Commission.

We are committed to uphold the law and sponsor efforts encouraging the abandonment of negative words or actions motivated by prejudice, bias, or hate, or protected characteristics.

We are committed to increase public awareness of the importance of reporting any bias/hate incident, how to report an incident, and providing resources to encourage and/or assist in reporting. Our last Public Forum (before the pandemic) was **"Bias Crime Investigations in Union County,"** was held in February 2019 at Union County College, in partnership with the Union County Prosecutor's Office and the State of New Jersey's Office of the Attorney General as part of its 21st Century/21 Counties educational outreach program. The program featured speakers from the Attorney General's Office, the Union County Prosecutor's Special Prosecutions/Bias Units, and the NY/NJ Anti-Defamation League.

We are also committed to find and/or develop support mechanisms for those who are victimized.

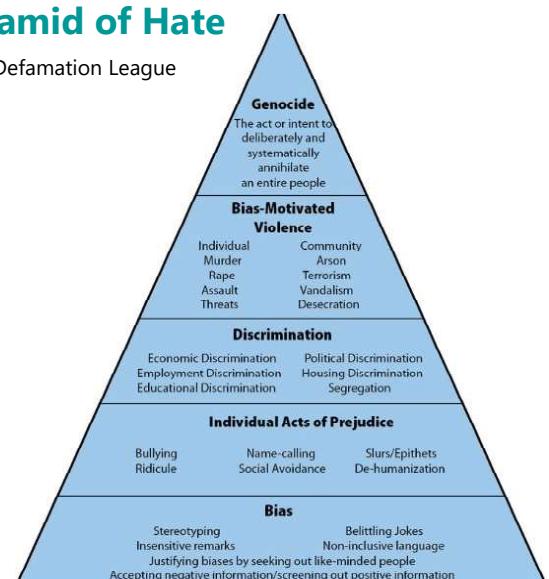
In addition to information about the Commission and our programs and activities, our dedicated website --

[www.ucnj.org/uchrc](http://www.ucnj.org/uchrc)

includes detailed instructions on how to report a bias/hate crime in English and eight other languages.

## The Pyramid of Hate

© 2005 Anti-Defamation League



The world can be a better place and each one of us -- alone and together -- can all help it to become that better place.

## Continuing Education, Training, Participation, and Collaboration

We are proud of our long-term relationships with the Union County Prosecutor's Office, Union County Police Chiefs Association, Office of the Union County Superintendent of Schools, and Union County Commissioners. We will continue our longstanding representation of the UCHRC on the New Jersey Human Relations Council, and, by association, our affiliation with the New Jersey Attorney General's Community Coalition Task Force.

In the days and years ahead, the Union County Human Relations Commissioners intend to...

**expand our knowledge** of the many human relations issues that exist in our shrinking world;  
**participate** in educational forums and webinars presented by state and local organizations that share our mission;  
**collaborate** with other like-minded organizations; **educate** ourselves about local dynamics; and  
**encourage dialogue** in the community at large concerning these issues; for the purpose of  
**finding creative and constructive approaches and solutions.**

Recognizing stereotypes, prejudice, bias, and hate on a personal level and understanding their implications in our daily lives and relationships is the first step in the long process to realize true inclusion, equality, and social justice. Open and honest dialogue will be required of each of us to recognize and overcome obstacles and to right injustices. Helping people see themselves and others differently -- through a different lens -- creates paradigm shifts. This is the journey the UCHRC will continue to make on our own and in our communities.

We are a group of like-minded volunteers outreaching to other like-minded individuals and organizations. All of our initiatives and programs are aimed to help us better understand, learn, and grow...to create those paradigm shifts that are simple yet whose ripples are far-reaching. Despite our sparse resources, we continue to use our leverage to gain the broadest exposure and impact for our initiatives and programs.

You, too, can join us and help us along that journey. We look forward to meeting and greeting you along the way!

**Attend  
our  
Public  
Forums**

**Nominate  
someone for  
a UCHRC  
Award**

**Introduce us  
to your  
culture and  
customs**

**Join  
our  
email  
list**

**Support/  
serve  
on the  
Commission**

**Cultivate  
Understanding  
and  
Respect**

**Intervene to  
Eradicate the  
Conditions that  
Ultimately Cause  
Bias and Hate**

**Promote Cultural  
Diversity,  
Inclusion,  
Human Rights, and  
Human Dignity**

**Celebrate  
the Richness  
of Life**

# The UCHRC Commissioners

**CO-CHAIRS: DR. MARTIN DICKERSON, ED. D.** (SCOTCH PLAINS, HILLSIDE)

**ASST. PROSECUTOR CHANELL JOHNSON** (UNION COUNTY PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE DIVERSITY INCLUSION COMMITTEE)

**RECORDING SECRETARY: \*KAREN E. POSITAN** (SPRINGFIELD)

**Dalvin Adeybiyi, Esq.** (UCPO Diversity Inclusion Committee)

**Lorraine Aklonis** (Clark)

**\*Reverend Alfred E. Brown** (Cranford, Plainfield)

**Aristo Carranza** (Springfield, Mountainside)

**\*Faheemah El-Amin** (Plainfield)

**Beth Giannobile** (Clark)

**\*Flor Gonzalez** (Plainfield, Latin American Coalition)

**\*Sgt. Leonard Guarino**, (ret.) Elizabeth Police Department

**Peter Jacob** (Union)

**Annabell Louis** (Linden)

**\*Peter McTiernan** (Cranford, Linden)

**Laura Morana** (New Providence Diversity Committee)

**Constance "Connie" Perkins** (Scotch Plains)

**Detective Grace Proetta** (Union County Prosecutor's Office Bias Unit)

**Detective Christine Spady** (Union County Prosecutor's Office Bias Unit)

**Dr. James C. Russo, MA, Ed.S** (Cranford, Linden)

**Cliff Simon** (Plainfield)

**Union County First Assistant Prosecutor James O. Tansey**

**Esmeralda Vargas** (Berkeley Heights)

**Linda Weissbrod** (Rahway, Scotch Plains)

**Chelsea Young** (Youth Representative)

**Marjorie Young** (Plainfield)

**Detective Afstratios "Steve" Zevlikaris** (Linden Police Department)

ITALICS DENOTE FOUNDING MEMBERS. \*ASTERISK DENOTES FORMER CO-CHAIR.