

Human Rights Commission Meeting Minutes
September 6, 2007

Members attending: Laurie Graham, Lisa Bernt, Janet Boswell, Connie Williams, Judie Feins, Nan Donald, Fran Yuan, Trish Lohmar.
Absent: Moez Rawji, Camille Sarrouf, Roz Kahbrel

Liaisons attending; Lt. Peter Hoerr (Belmont Police Dept.), Hildy Dvorak (Council on Aging), Paul Solomon (Selectmen)

Laurie Graham told the audience that we were putting the ADL/NPFH (Anti-Defamation League/No Place for Hate) issue at the top of the agenda in order to allow sufficient time to discuss the matter. She explained that Belmont has been participating in the NPFH program for 2 years, and that the HRC has sponsored six events in keeping with the program. The issue before the HRC tonight was whether to recommend to the Board of Selectmen that Belmont withdraw from the NPFH program due to the policies of the ADL in terms of the recognition of the Armenian genocide.

Fran talked about the original reason for joining the NPFH program: 50-60 towns currently participate in the program, which provide matching grants and encouragement for anti-hate programming. NPFH also provides an opportunity to network with other groups.

Laurie recalled that in September '05, a member of the ADL spoke to the HRC. The woman who started NPFH had made a pyramid of hate activities - genocide was at the tip of the pyramid as the most egregious hate activity.

Trish asked about what Belmont gets out of the program, and what would be lost by withdrawing. Judie said that participation in the program indicates that Belmont takes the NPFH ideals seriously, and that withdrawing might suggest that Belmont is a place for hate. She asked what other options might be available to us other than withdrawal.

Laurie has asked the New England ADL chapter what they plan to do. She was advised that there is a national organization meeting of the ADL in November, at which time the issue of HR106, a resolution in the US House of Representatives acknowledging the Armenian genocide, will be discussed.

Connie stated that we all feel similarly about the NPFH program, but for the ADL to consider genocide a major hate crime and then not acknowledge that of the Armenians makes the ADL's NPFH program hard to endorse. She felt that Belmont can do their own NPFH program to show their support for the idea, and that they don't need an umbrella organization under which to have a program.

Janet agreed with Connie: if an organization is defined properly, it can't pick and choose which issues to support. Janet feels that the ADL is picking and choosing, and that's a big problem for her.

Lisa asked whether the ADL was actively opposing HR106 or merely not supporting it. She agrees with Connie's comments about not needing to be under an umbrella organization to have a NPFH-type program. Laurie stated that currently, the ADL says HR 106 is counterproductive.

At this point, Laurie opened up the meeting to comments from the audience. During the next hour or so, more than a dozen people spoke to the commission. Not all the speakers who addressed the commission were from Belmont - some were from surrounding communities such as Arlington, Newton and Watertown - but all requested that Belmont sever its ties with the NPFH until such time that the ADL recognize the Armenian genocide and support HR106.

Some of the people who spoke were of Armenian descent, and spoke of their experiences with the survivors of the genocide. One woman described how at age 5, her grandmother was forced to leave her home along with her mother and 3 year old brother and join others being marched to a new location. Along the way her mother died, leaving the 5 year old girl to care for her 3 year old brother. At some time during the march, the little girl lost hold of her brother's hand and he was gone and never seen again. Her grandmother lived with the guilt and pain of this loss her entire life - in her last days, when she was suffering from senility in a nursing home, she would search the halls for her lost brother.

Others spoke of the hypocrisy of the ADL to stand as a organization opposed to hatred and bigotry and yet not themselves recognize the Armenian genocide.

Finally, Michael Collins of the Belmont Against Racism board told the HRC that he and Jonathan Jacoby would be recommending to the BAR board the the group support the severing of ties to NPFH by the town.

Laurie told the group that the BOS would be discussing this matter on Sept 17th. Connie then moved to sever ties with NPFH until such time that the ADL recognizes the Armenian genocide as historical fact and supports HR 106. Trish seconded the motion.

Lisa suggested that the language regarding the requirements for getting back into the program be removed. Judie wanted to acknowledge that the NPFH is a valuable program. Laurie said we need to draft a letter to explain our reasons for severing ties and acknowledge the value of the NPFH program. Connie wanted the motion to remain as it, Lisa reiterated her concern about putting anything in resolution that is open to interpretation and suggested that we recommend severing ties, period. Connie's motion: "I move that the HRC recommend to the BOS that Belmont sever its ties to the ADL-sponsored NPFH Campaign until such time as the ADL unambiguously recognizes the Armenian genocide as historical fact and supports HR/SR 106" was passed unanimously.

Laurie raised the issue of co-sponsorship to "One Book, One Belmont", a town-wide reading initiative sponsored by the Belmont Public Library, the Youth Commission, Belmont Against Racism and others. A motion was made to co-sponsor and passed unanimously.

Laurie will be checking the phone line in September.

Respectfully submitted,

Trish Lohmar