



## **Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

### **DRAFT Minutes – Committee Member Public Meeting #1**

### **May 14, 2024**

The meeting opened at 3:00 PM by Commissioner Schultz.

**Attendance:** Melody Mackin, Mia Schultz, Faith Yacubian, Michele Olvera and Ann Miller.

**Members of the public included:** Winnie Wilkinson, Mary Gerisch, Faye Longo, Dan Coutu, Lydia Diamond, Krista Coombs, Aurora Berger, Peg Powers, Melinda Salazar, Chief Brenda Gagne, Matthew LeFluer, Shanda Williams and Van Dora Williams.

Commissioner Schultz facilitated the meeting and started by discussing accessibility and various aspects of how we can provide accessibility to anyone that needs it. If we can get an email to [vtrc@vermont.gov](mailto:vtrc@vermont.gov), we will do our very best to accommodate needs. If Press needs to be notified of our meetings in advance, please let us know so that we can make note. We ask that the public please request access to any assistance needed in language translation or ASL via our email at least 72 hours in advance of any public meeting the VTRC holds.

Commissioner Mackin shared our land acknowledgement which is found here on our website: [Land Acknowledgement.pdf \(vermont.gov\)](#).

The meeting agenda was shared on the screen by Commissioner Schultz.

Working Pledge was shared: [Mission Statement and Pledge | Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)

Staff introductions were made, starting with Commissioner Mackin, Ann Miller, Faith Yacubian, Michelle Olvera, Commissioner Schultz.

Commissioner Mackin offered a prompt to have the Committee Members consider and share about themselves: In the interest of time we had about 3 minutes per person, the prompt is: “the world in the future is unknown and until we make it a reality and if you think of this like science fiction, all of the things that exist now, the people in the past could not or might not have been able to imagine what life is like.” “Now imagine the world 150 years from now and the type of world you want to see?” “What will your descendants or a person in the future thank you for?” “What is the work you have done or wish to do that helped to shape the world in the future?”

**Winnie Wilkinson** shared first, that she was born into slavery in the Caribbean in 1960. Her mother was born into slavery as was her grandmother, going 7 generations back. As an African Israelite, I was ashamed of my history, and I never used to speak about it, I am now bold

speaking about it so that every other person in my situation would not be afraid or ashamed of their ancestors or their ancestral history. The world that I would like to see beyond my lifetime is every human being equal and treated with respect.

**Mary Gerisch** (she/her) I am a proud mother, grandmother and great grandmother. I am of Lakota Heritage, and I have for many years since I was a teenager, taught Lakota Heritage. All of our rights and all of our dignity is interrelated. We cannot separate one out from the other and my hope for the future is that the children of my great grandchildren could live in a world where each person is treated with dignity and equity by every other person, and every person is treated with dignity and equity by every government in the world.

There will be no war, and hate will cease, and we will finally come to understand that we are all related.

**Faye Longo** - Born and raised in Vermont with a family that can be traced all the way back to the 1600's. I am Indigenous Blackfoot, but not to this specific land and I am Italian.

I'm also a queer CIS woman with close proximity to whiteness. I'm disabled and have first-hand lived experience of poverty, violence, trauma and all of the stigma that comes with those identities. I hope to see my children's children live in a world where everyone is provided uniquely for what they need to thrive, whatever that might be or look like individually and as whole.

Communities and groups of people are just provided with what they need to be their full, whole, beautiful human selves.

**Matthew LeFluer** (he/him) I have an invisible disability. It's neurodiversity, invisible because of how it's being characterized as they think you're normal when realize that you're not totally normal, and you have un-seen issues. As a black African American born and raised in Iowa, I wasn't raised in Vt. Iowa was a very prejudiced state, for a community of color. Migrated to Vermont because it was a rural community that understands diversity, but we still have a way to go. What does equity mean for Matthew? It means inclusion, diversity, and acceptance of all walks of life, not just the ones that are privileged. We must tell our white privileged, able body counterparts that this is wrong. Turn something out of misery in someone else's pain and understanding it. Be involved. I want to see in the near future that we teach our white privilege counterpart, able- bodies that equity means inclusion of all, otherwise we collaborate, or we do not survive.

**Krista Coombs** (she/her) A white woman, aged 51 years and lives in the southern part of Vermont with two daughters, husband and lots of animals. Grew up in the Berkshires of the Hilltown in Massachusetts, came from a white family who never really wanted to talk about where they came from. Parents moved to rural areas because they had such difficult times, I believe, French Canadian as my mother was and her family moved to Ohio. Great-grandmother died of bulbar polio when she was seven. During COVID, I and my two daughters became disabled by long COVID and now revisiting who I am.

All differences should be welcomed. Coming from a long family history of neurodiversity and not really fitting in, the hope is for inclusivity.

**Aurora Berger** (she/her) Aurora lives in Stratford, Vermont and has for most of her life. She identifies as queer system disabled and also as an artist, educator and writer. A Jewish descendent of people who fled Europe during the cold wars and Holocaust.

Aurora hopes that the work she is doing makes life easier for people in the future. It's easier to exist than the ways that they are currently.

**Chief Brenda Gagne** (she/her) Growing up as an indigenous person was a really rough time, as an example, when learning to dance in the tribal building was illegal and knowing that if caught, parents could be arrested. Teaching dance now and over 30 years drumming, flute, the things that their tribe is allowed to do today is better. I'm at a protest to stand up for who they are and the ability to be able to stay proud. At almost 60, I would have thought that my grandchildren would have had a little easier time of it. Racism is strong, it affects people. Watching grandchildren go through the things that they shouldn't ever have to go through is rough. People being hungry or homeless; so many things in the world and if we all focused on things like that and left the hate aside, maybe we'd get some good in this world.

In a lifetime, I hope that if grandchildren's children ever thought of Chief Brenda Gagne, I hope to be remembered for being a loudmouth, independent, and not willing to back down from racism. It is going to be important going forward, healing is going to be good.

I appreciate the time today and love hearing what everybody has to say.

**Dan Coutu** (he/him) from the Northeast Kingdom, Newport, living in the house where I grew up. Growing up in a part of the state that has been economically depressed for the better part of the century certainly teaches you some things about how to get by. I have a lot of memories of how grandparents and even parents got through things as a result of the Great Depression. Some of those lessons I have taught my children and intend to share with as many people as possible. My vision is that those elements of the different cultures that make up me and all of us, all the cultures, can be celebrated, remembered, and preserved. That's the most important piece because when you think about it, we have cultural roots that go back a very long way. Thinking of things in terms of the millennia. That is a different perspective and I want to share that perspective with people and get them thinking about that long term view. The seven generations view, if you will. Will share as much as possible and being involved here with the VTRC is how I hope to improve my ability to leave that knowledge.

**Shanda Williams** (she/her) I am a small business-owning, BIPOC African American woman, originally from Hartford, CT and now located in Montpelier. I've been in Montpelier for about 6 years, but I've been in the state of Vermont for about 8 years. I am a visionary reparations activist, equity strategist, and BIPOC community advocate. My descendants in the future will thank me for standing up and showing up for the BIPOC Community and just being an advocate for people who can't get help to access services. I often get requests to just connect with people. That's what I do. I am a connector and an advocate by helping people talk through tough situations come to resolutions.

The world in the future that I would like to see? I would like to imagine what life is like, as Reverend Martin Luther King Junior said - that people will be judged by the content of their character and not of their skin color, and that we will not have a world where we protest but that

people will be able to live in peace and harmony and there will be justice for all, as we pledge to. Because there is not justice for all, which I knew as a young black child. I became a reparations activist during the pandemic because I was tired of standing on the sidelines seeing injustices. I had the power to act. I believe my descendants will thank me for acting and hearing the call to activism. I can no longer stay silent and complicit in the inequities of this United States, which I say is disunited.

**Lydia Diamond** of South Burlington. I have been fighting my whole life because of the color of my skin. With 7 beautiful grandbabies who may have to do the same. I am hoping to pave the way for them. I've seen reparations. I the definition is off, but I want to redefine it so all can understand. Everybody can play a role in making life better. Because I'm disabled, there's no question of the why I do this work. I want justice and that's what I see when I think in terms of reparations. Justice. I think of healing, because there are some things that are out of control. As human beings, first we should be able to embrace one another, to empathize with one another. Hold on to the good things for one another. Love is an action.

**Margaret "Peg" Powers** (she/her) of Wilmington. Peg is a Gaelic nickname for Margaret. Born and raised in Northern California but did the reverse migration. Went to Fairbanks Alaska in the 60's and married a native Alaskan and Anubis Athabascan. My daughter as a result of that marriage is from Coleraine, Massachusetts, and is a Commissioner of Indian Affairs for Western Massachusetts and the Co director of OCOTEA. A proud mother of a second daughter as well, from the United Nations. I have a son-in-law who is Korean American, so I have a granddaughter whom is part Korean and the grandfathers who were all white, Western European.

I have spent a lot of time with native/indigenous rights and advocating for everyone's voice, but when I turned 52, I turned my back on a career that was prosperous but not fulfilling. I went back to college and became a special educator. If you're of special needs, I am down in the Mohawk Trail Regional School district in Buckland, Mass, and living in Vermont. I feel that everyone needs to have their voice heard.

My husband is a multi- generational Vermonter and it took him a little bit to understand that things change and it gives perspective of people that talk of change in this state, it is progress. I hope to be able to see and hear change and see people coming together.

Very proud of being able to have a business in Vermont and again I'm hoping that we will be able to all move forward in that dream of what we all most want.

**Commissioner Schultz** expressed thanks to the Committee Members for sharing their backgrounds and stories. Continued to the topic of the Strategic Plan and explained the mandate. Tasks for the Committee were discussed. Read through each part of the commissioner's work plan taken directly from the mandate. Committee members offered suggestions. The mandate will be shared out to the Committee this week with the meeting minutes.

**Faye Longo** offered to read the Mission Statement that had been placed in the chat for all to see.

**Matthew LeFluer** offered some advice on wording in places.

**Ann Miller** explained the logistics of the monthly meeting invites. The invitations to the monthly meetings will be sent out well in advance of the meeting itself, as the meeting links are shared with the public well in advance as well as placed on the State of Vermont's Library website.

The Commission will share the preliminary work to the Committee Members at least a week in advance, but as a reminder, the meeting invite will be sent a month to two in advance.

Commissioner Schultz opened the floor to the public and those that would like to speak.

**Melinda Salazar**, first generation Latina woman from Muisca, Indigenous community in Columbia, outside of Bogota, and first-generation Ukrainian Jewish from the Odessa area. Melinda expressed her appreciation to the VTRC Team. Melinda works with the Community Action Program, Co-executive director of the Truth Telling Project in the Portsmouth, NH area. Deeply involved in the reparation's movement, the grassroots movement and teaching reparations virtually.

Commissioner Schultz asked that in future meetings we include a time for share-outs of all the work that the Committee Members are doing around the state.

Commissioner Shultz asked for the Committee's permission to share their emails with the group. All agreed.

With no further questions or comments, Commissioner Schultz closed the meeting at 4:58PM.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Ann Miller, Administrative Assist  
Faith Yacubian, Executive Director

**NEXT Public MEETING is SCHEDULED for Wednesday, May 22<sup>nd</sup> -2<sup>nd</sup> Educational Series - People with Disabilities.**

**NEXT regularly scheduled PUBLIC MEETING is TUESDAY, June 7, 2024**