

# **Preserving the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission**

**Mayor C. Kim Bracey**

**Tuesday, June 7, 2016**

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. As always, it is a distinct pleasure and honor to be with you.

When we, as communities and citizens, consult the chambers of our hearts and our grey *matter*, we realize and appreciate that all people *matter*. But *that* realization and appreciation come to us in often rocky and erratic journey of education, life experiences, tolerance, understanding, empathy, and compassion.

Like anyone on this mission of life, I've evolved in my own understanding of other peoples, and, as Mayor over the last six-and-a-half years, I've been blessed to meet remarkably diverse people throughout our City of York, our County, our Commonwealth and our nation.

I've come to the strong conviction that our nation and Commonwealth's greatest resource and greatest **untapped** resource is our people.

When we work, encourage, ennoble, empower, and enlighten each other, we make the improbable possible. We make the possible reality. We make momentum unstoppable.

We make dreams of the shiny city on the hill real.

But that quest, journey, and realization don't just happen on their own. And just because we have a more diverse palette of elected officials throughout Pennsylvania, just because we finally have marriage equality, and just because **Roots** is on television again doesn't mean we've completely weeded away festering prejudice, bigotry, mistrust, and animus – the toxic chemicals that sprout violence. It would be sheer naïve folly to think so.

I say that in terms of all of us – black, white, orange, brown, yellow, Christian, Catholic, Buddhist, Muslim, and on and on and on. No corner, quadrant, or sector of creed, belief, or color is immune from nature's festering weeds. And nature always fills vacuums of apathy, ignorance, and inaction.

Talk to any seasoned, rational law enforcement professional and they will tell you: Unrest and violence in Baltimore or Ferguson or

Philadelphia or New York City are lurking beneath the shimmering sheen of tranquility.

One jury verdict, one I-pad post on social media, one act of random violence, one incident at a school or sporting event can spark the tinderbox of passions and fears that lurk in the human heart. No community is immune.

In York County in the mid-1990s, the Borough of Hanover experience racial disturbances or riots marked by violence, property damage, and unruly mobs.

In our City of York, as a child of Penn Street, I remember National Guard tanks rumbling through my neighborhood while we hid behind windows not knowing what would happen next. During those tragic days of July, 1969, York lost citizen Lillie Belle Allen and Police Officer Henry Schad – one black, one white. One eye for an eye, one black for one white makes us all blind, but we can only see that if we learn to see each other as equals as mutual beings groping through the weeds of a rough and tumble society.

That's why I've come to have a great respect for and appreciation of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. The dispirit of 1968 reared its ugly head again in our York during the murder trials of those charged with killing and/or collaborating in the murder of Lillie Belle Allen. When our York was on high alert, so was the

Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, quick to assess the situation, perform community outreach, educate members of the media and public officials.

Not only does the PHRC provide education and training to communities in need, it provides vital education and training to often under-staffed and under-funded community relations commissions, like our City of York's decades-old Human Relations Commission.

These local agencies and commissions do not operate in a vacuum. Often, small communities' human relations commissions are staffed by only a couple employees, who often rely upon the professional expertise and wisdom of the PAHRC in dealing with a multitude of troubling situations that crop up each month.

Also, small communities' HRC caseloads include many complaints that transcend invisible municipal boundaries. And, while counties like York's seem wary to create human relations commissions, city's that can least afford them – like York's – are forced to provide services that ensure equality, justice, and opportunity for all. So, state expertise, training, and education, and assistance are vital.

Let's embrace honesty. These words – “liberty and justice” – are enshrined in our Pledge of Allegiance. They are not left-win, radical concepts. All of us can agree on the value of these principles

pervading our workplaces, civic spaces, and housing so that we not only have communities of peace, but communities that hum, tick, work, learn, and achieve.

The PAHRC has provided education and training to York City Human Relations staff, Commissioners, and the greater community on fair housing, workplace discrimination, employment law, public safety, and sexual identity and gender identity equality.

It has done all of this under the leadership of JoAnn Edwards, who has worked diligently to reengineer the organization and staff, and to insist upon quality performance upgrades.

The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission stands to lose quite a bit without support and a regaining of funding and staff. So does our great Pennsylvania and her sons and daughters, like York, and our human sons, daughters, grandsons, and grand-daughters. They all yearn to live and thrive in a communities of freedom, peace, equality, justice, and opportunity for all.

So, as a Mayor, as a mother, as a grand-mother, and as one of God's searching creature, just like all of you, who is still hiking on a long, rewarding journey of acceptance, appreciation, and empathy, I urge you to fully restore funding to this vital, professional commission.

The fragile, tender optimism and potential of our Pennsylvania and her sons and daughters depends on her expertise, wisdom, and values, as well as those of her children agencies scattered throughout our great Commonwealth.

Thank you.