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Sunrise Stroll at Res focuses on diversity, equity & inclusion

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Sunrise Stroll participants on Nov. 19 stretch before walking around Lafayette Reservoir. Photos Sharon K. Sobotta

By the time the sun rose on the morning of Nov. 19, an intergenerational crowd of about four dozen people were stretching in preparation for a stroll around Lafayette Reservoir. The sunrise stroll replaced the annual community breakfast and incorporated the United Against Hate theme acknowledged in the Lamorinda area for the week leading up to it.

As the community embarked on the reimagined and broadened event, they celebrated Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging progress in the community while also acknowledging the work that still needs to be done.

Jay Lifson, the executive director of the Lafayette Chamber said the vision of the event was two-fold: "We (traditionally) have an annual community breakfast ahead of the holiday chaos to get the community talking and connecting. We haven't been able to do it for the past two years (due to COVID) so I had the crazy idea of walking the reservoir," he said.

For Lifson, it was a natural fit to combine the gathering with United Against Hate efforts. "Unless you've been living under a rock for the last 400 years, you understand why we have to keep this (the united against hate) message going."

Pastor Dan Senter of Our Savior's Lutheran Church kicked off the walk with a reflection as he gently invited the crowd to continue leaning toward inclusive change.

"(As I was growing up) I loved coming together with my family which was very diverse. On the table was always a pilgrim and a Native American living in solidarity together. That's changed. We know our history much better now," Senter said. "Now when I sit with my kids and grandkids, it's all about putting on our critical thinking hats and considering that maybe this pilgrimage out to the Western world wasn't as beautiful as it was made out to be. It has created a lot of benefit for many and left and destroyed a ton of people along the way. We all live with the ache of that."

Senter no longer has the same center piece on his table during Thanksgiving dinner, but he's replaced it with something even more important. "We're more aware of what it means to be responsible for the impact we have on each other and how we think about our collective life experiences. I think that's what it means to be thankful these days. Now it's valuable to talk about those things at Thanksgiving and consider what it means to lean (in)."

Jennifer Wakeman, the chair of the Lafayette, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging citywide committee, ran a rock painting station, where folks could contribute to the BIPOC rock garden at the Lafayette Community Center. Wakeman painted a rock alongside her son and two other children as she detailed the importance of the project.

"We had a young man who painted rocks with messages like Black Lives Matter and put them along the Lafayette-Moraga trail and some people decided to deface it, so the public art commission for the city of Lafayette gave it a formal space at the community center. We talked to the artist who started the project and he said he'd welcome contributions," Wakeman said. For Wakeman, it's a no-brainer that the sunrise stroll would be connected to the city's DEI efforts.

"Our committee's intention is to make awareness and education (around DEIB) mainstream so that people feel accepted and welcome to come as they are (and be themselves). (On a city level) the committee asks the city council to consistently use the lens of DEI as they make decisions and policies throughout the city about things such as housing."

Lafayette City Manager Niroop Srivastava was among the early morning strollers. Srivastava was happy to see the reimagined version of the community breakfast. "This is such a wonderful substitute because it brings people together in the reservoir. I'm so proud of our community for having a DEI focus on this event and for stepping up and having difficult conversations (to come as far as we've come)," she said.

Srivastava has been the city manager for three years, but has worked for the city in some capacity for

nearly three decades. Over the years, she has observed many changes. "We've been able to maintain the beauty of the hills and grow our downtown and add to our affordable housing stock. Lafayette is a community for everyone. Our land use constitution says Lafayette is a place for people of all ages, incomes, ethnicities. And being able to do that has been one of the most satisfying things. We still have a lot of work ahead, (but we've started)."

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