

Ames Human Relations Commission

Annual Report for 2011

Introduction

Though the Commission experienced some fluctuation in its membership, 2011 was a productive year. The Commission is a primary sponsor of the MLK Birthday Celebration and FACES of Ames, which are now popular annual events. We will continue our sponsorship and participation, as well as revive the former Humanitarian Award to honor an appropriate person at the MLK celebration.

We have also developed strong partnerships with United Ames, YSS, and AMOS, among others. Because of our limited resources, our primary role in many instances is to facilitate others' activities consistent with our Mission. In this regard, the Commission hosted a number of guest speakers in an effort to learn more about events and initiatives in the community. Guests included Josh Kriz, formerly of United Ames; and members of AMOS, who spoke about Undoing Racism, a groundbreaking anti-discrimination program.

As always, we invite your comments, questions and concerns, and we hope that our efforts continue to provide good service to the City of Ames.

Bullying

In 2010, the Human Relations Commission became aware of a serious incident of bullying. Since that time, we have been educating ourselves and talking about definitions of bullying and its effects. On several occasions, the Commission has discussed the possibility of hosting a forum to allow residents an opportunity to provide information, though no final decision has been made. Resources repeatedly referenced have been Iowa State University Professor Warren Blumenfeld, YSS, the Boys' and Girls' Club, LSI, and United Ames.

Anna Breen spoke to the Commission in February regarding bullying at the Ames Middle School. She expressed her disappointment in anti-bullying classes, and observed that at times students that “fought back” against bullies were sanctioned more harshly than the bully.

Ames Police Chief Chuck Cychosz had a discussion with the Commission in September. The Chief discussed how the Police Department and Ames schools are handling bullying. He recommended that the Commission get more involved in the neighborhoods if they want to be proactive in preventing bullying, and specifically suggested being sponsors or hosts of movie nights or other neighborhood activities.

In June, the Commission met with two Ames High School students, James Chidister and Katie Strickland, as well as Belinda Meis from Lutheran Services in Iowa. Their perspective and insight were invaluable. The students observed that there was a positive impact on the victims of bullying when other students were involved, and they suggested the need for a safe forum for students to tell their stories. Ms. Meis indicated that adults needed to be properly educated on how to address bullying behavior so as not to reinforce it, or to make matters worse for the victim, and to learn how to intercede even if the victim or perpetrator is not theirs.

Despite getting very useful information from Chief Cychosz and the students, it has been a difficult way forward. We have not yet determined the role that the Commission could play, though we have repeatedly acknowledged the various interests involved and our belief that we could assist the wider community without interfering with other legitimate spheres of interest. As is our common practice, we plan to work largely with others to facilitate scheduled activities and goals consistent with our mission.

MLK Birthday Celebration (2012) and Annual Award

The 2011 celebration of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., was cancelled due to weather concerns. The 2012 MLK Celebration was held on January 16, 2012, at the Ames Middle School. The celebration was opened to the entire Ames Community, with over 500 people in attendance. There was a great mix of families, individuals, ages and ethnicities.

Jeff Johnson, CEO and President of the ISU Alumni Association, served as the keynote speaker, with Dr. Thomas Hill of Iowa State University serving as master of ceremonies. This year's celebration continued a tradition of emphasizing service and engagement in the community, and was held in conjunction with a service project and a film discussion coordinated by United Ames. Jan Beran and Ralph Rosenberg were honored for their Friends of Iowa Civil Rights Awards.

Aaron Fultz served on the MLK Celebration planning committee. The Ames Human Relations Commission secured the birthday cakes, water, forks and paper goods. Students and commissioners served the refreshments. Leftover cake was donated to a local non-profit group.

During the planning for the celebration, committee member George Belitsos of Youth & Shelter Services suggested that the ceremony include a presentation of a humanitarian or similar award. Aaron Fultz indicated that the AHRC once gave a Humanitarian Award each year at the FACES celebration, but that it had not been given for a few years. In addition, there was not adequate time to make a selection for the January 2012 celebration.

The planning committee concluded that the award should be reinstated for the 2013 celebration, and that AHRC should coordinate the nomination and selection process. The commission has approved that plan. We will examine the criteria previously used for the Humanitarian Award and will amend the criteria as necessary. We will also establish a network for the publication of notice, set a deadline for submissions, and make a selection.

Employer Training

The Ames Human Relations Commission is partnering with the Cyclone chapter of SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management) to offer local employers training on hiring practices, documentation and affirmative action.

The training is scheduled for June 14, 2012 from 8am to 10am in the Ames City Council Chambers, and is targeted to both businesses with human resources staff and those without. The event will be promoted through the Chamber of Commerce, the United Way, and local service and professional groups. A panel of legal and human resources professionals will present on the legal issues around hiring, documentation and affirmative action; and panelists will also answer questions from attendees.

The training will be offered to the public free of charge, to encourage all employers to learn about their legal rights and obligations as pertain to these topics (a light breakfast will be provided). It is the hope

of the Ames Human Relations Commission that this outreach effort increases the awareness of employee and employer rights, and motivates the public to learn more.

4th of July Parade

The Commission made its first appearance in the 4th of July parade. A group of Ames students representing our diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds rode in an open convertible (1962 Pontiac Bonneville!) Commission members walked in front of the car to carry a wide banner with our new catch phrase: “FREEDOM and FAIRNESS,” a concise statement of what the Commission strives to assure for everyone in our City.

FACES of Ames

In September 2011, the Ames Human Relations Commission partnered with United Ames to host the FACES festival. The event promoted diversity among the community. Civic groups, local businesses, and student organizations set up booths to inform the community of their activities. There was six hours of entertainment provided by local community members. The Commission handed out brochures that covered a variety of diversity topics and also informed residents about what the commission does. The Ames Human Relations Commission was also able to build relationships with other organizations, specifically with an ISU sorority, which helped us with face painting for children. Members of the City of Ames, Iowa State University, and the community volunteered to complete the set-up and take-down process. The commission deemed the event a success and felt that turnout had increased from 2010.

FACES was held at the same time as Maximum Ames, the Farmers' Market, and the Public Library's book sale in an effort to bring attention and interest to all of these activities, and to drive traffic to all of these events.

Partnership with local groups

The Ames Human Relations Commission has been in touch with AMOS, United Ames, YSS, and LSI.

The Commission talked to United Ames about partnering up for more events after the success of FACES. The commission has been receiving ideas from YSS and LSI to figure out a way to help reduce bullying in the Ames community.

The Commission also heard from AMOS in October about collaborating on workshops for racism and poverty. The Commission was willing to collaborate for the workshops. Commissioner Klaus did attend a session on Undoing Racism. The Commission has not moved forward on collaborating with AMOS due to funding constraints.

Miscellaneous

The Commission also has also done several smaller things in support of its mission. In January, the Commission drafted and approved a letter to Iowa legislators objecting to impeachment proceedings against Iowa Supreme Court justices that voted in favor of same-sex marriage in *Varnum v. Brien*, after the failed retention votes for three justices in November of 2010.

United Ames approached the Commission in April about the possibility of a joint diversity statement to encompass the entire Ames area, including the City and the Iowa State University community. ISU

recently completed an effort to adopt a joint diversity statement. It was noted, however, that because the University had completed its efforts, any “joint” statement would have to mirror the University statement. The Commission did not receive further information on this initiative.

Goals

The Ames Human Relations Commission has adopted the following goals:

1. The Commission will continue to learn about bullying, its causes and effects, and how the Commission can be a good community resource, for the purpose of determining its role to affect positive change.
2. The Commission will continue to sponsor FACES of Ames and the Martin Luther King, Jr., Birthday Celebration, and collaborate with United Ames and other groups in the planning and coordination process.
3. The Commission will plan and host a Lunch and Learn as a community education opportunity. (A seminar on appropriate interviewing questions has been planned for the morning of June 14, 2012.)
4. The Commission will maintain or increase its presence in community events such as VEISHEA and the 4th of July celebration.
5. The Commission will provide more opportunities for the professional development of commissioners, investigators, and hearing officers.
6. The Commission will be more involved with the Iowa Civil Rights Commission and the Iowa League of Human Rights agencies.
7. The Commission will increase its outreach to urban minorities coming into Ames.
8. The Commission will collaborate with United Ames and other groups to enhance the success of existing or ongoing social projects and programs.
9. The Commission will extend its outreach to the schools and increase awareness of the commission’s mission, and discuss what human rights are, for example, what it would be like for people without certain human rights.