


Workshop serves as call to action on nonprofit diversity

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Waterford — Jamal Jimerson wants to be very clear: What he is doing is not diversity training.

"Diversity training is typically superficial; it's focused on optics," he said.

But he doesn't want people of color to feel like they're checkmarks, or tokens.

Rather, Jimerson — founder and director of the Manchester-based Minority Inclusion Project — is focused on what he calls "organizational community."

Jimerson was the facilitator of a four-hour workshop on diversity, equity and inclusion that the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut and the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition presented Tuesday at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center.

The event had more than 100 attendees from 63 local nonprofits, businesses and public-sector organizations.

Jimerson encouraged attendees to welcome discomfort, listen for understanding and confront their biases, which can lead to wrong judgments.

He spoke of pulling a colleague aside to explain why one **shouldn't tell a black person he or she is "articulate."** (<https://www.theroot.com/he-s-so-articulate-what-that-really-means-1790874985>) Jimerson has two master's degrees and a 15-year history in social services, and while getting called "articulate" may seem well-intentioned, "it sounds like you're praising me for being able to put language together."

After a speaking event in December, Jimerson was the one who got called out: He got off the microphone to walk around the room, and someone later approached him to say that attendees who are hard of hearing couldn't understand him.

"The moment you're called on something, it's OK to say, 'I didn't know,'" Jimerson said. "I get called on things all the time."

He talked about the privilege that comes from being white or male or able-bodied, noting that privilege is not about whether people struggle, but about how society perceives them.

"Every single person in this room has a privilege that somebody else does not have," Jimerson said. He added, "No one's asking you to denounce that privilege. We're asking you to acknowledge it, and to acknowledge it as you're making plans and strategies."

Jimerson concluded the workshop by having participants come up with ways their organizations could focus on diversity through the lenses of organizational commitment, climate and culture, recruitment, retention and talent development.

Also speaking briefly at the workshop were Preston Whiteway, executive director of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and Larry Rivarde, senior vice president at Mystic Aquarium.

Whiteway mentioned that Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of the musical "Hamilton" and an O'Neill alumnus, launched a **scholarship fund to bring artists of color** (<https://www.theday.com/aemusic/20170528/miranda-family-fund-brings-new-support-for-nti-scholarships>) to the center.

Rivarde spoke of various programs at the aquarium, such as **free admission for families who receive SNAP benefits** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20171214/mystic-aquarium-offers-free-admission-to-families-receiving-snap-benefits>), **Carnaval del Sol** (<http://www.mysticaquarium.org/event/carnaval-del-sol/>), and bilingual signs and graphics on exhibits.

Other organizations represented at the workshop included La Grua Center, Mohegan Sun, Sound Community Services, Safe Futures and Eastern Connecticut Ballet.

Beth Moore, museum curator for the Stonington Historical Society, noted that the society is seeking to expand beyond its founding in 1895 as an elitist, homogenous, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant organization.

The collections are "based off donations from those families," she said, "so everything is WASP-centric that we possess."

Wendy Bury, executive director of the Cultural Coalition, said that 51 of the 63 attending organizations responded to a survey prior to the workshop.

The results showed that 85 percent of boards of directors are less than 25 percent black, Hispanic or Asian — though Bury noted it should've asked boards if the share was zero. She also found that on 86 percent of boards, fewer than a quarter of members are under age 30.

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