

A photograph of a man in a dark suit and patterned tie sitting on a black chair. He is looking towards the camera. To his right, a woman with blonde hair is partially visible, wearing a dark blazer and a polka-dot top. Two clear plastic water bottles are on the floor in front of the man. The background is dark with blue stage lighting.

**RACE, JUSTICE
AND DEMOCRACY:
TURNING
CONVERSATION
INTO CHANGE**

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: PANELISTS
MARK O'MARA, LAURA CONTRERAS,
CHRISTOPHER PARKER AND SUE RAHR.



The screen is filled with scenes of unrest: people marching, holding signs proclaiming “Black Lives Matter,” throngs of demonstrators jamming the streets, footage of cops in riot gear, smoke bombs and gunshots filling the air. It is a montage of all-too-familiar images from across America.

“It’s time for us to come together and talk,” says the announcer’s voice. “About Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Antonio Zambrano-Montes in Pasco, Washington.”

So began “Race, Justice and Democracy,” a special town hall-style program produced this fall by PBS station KCTS 9 Yakima in

partnership with Heritage University and Humanities Washington. The forum was the first in what organizers hope will be an ongoing conversation to build understanding between the community, law enforcement and civic leaders.

At the mention of each victim’s name, a still photo appears. Videos taken on cellphones show altercations in the moment, in scenes we now know by heart. In one, a man runs, three police officers in pursuit, guns aimed. The man turns toward the officers, the video freezes, but the audio plays six gunshots. The man was Zambrano-Montes. The place was Pasco, Washington, in a scene that played out far too close to home.

“I’ve had to make statements like this

ACB, Justice
& Democracy
TOWN HALL EVENT

MORE THAN 200 PEOPLE SHOWED UP TO SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES AND CONCERNS AROUND RACE AND JUSTICE. SO MANY PEOPLE HAD SOMETHING TO SHARE THAT THE DISCUSSION CONTINUED LONG AFTER THE CAMERAS STOPPED ROLLING.



too many times,” says President Obama.

“Where do we go from here?” asks a black policeman.

“There are no quick fixes,” says a community leader. “This is not something that’s going to happen overnight or in a month or a year. This is going to take years. What we need are the first steps.”

Finding Common Ground

Throughout the nation, people are angry. People are frightened. People demand answers and look for means of change. “We’re here to find some common ground, get some conversation started,” moderator Enrique Cerna states as the program begins.

In so doing, in Heritage University’s corner of the world, the conversation has

begun. The seed of that evening’s forum discussion took root months earlier.

Heritage professor of criminal justice Kim Bellamy-Thompson, who worked for 25 years as a Florida police officer and investigator, was troubled by the lack of communication among those in her former profession and the communities they serve.

After Cerna and Bellamy-Thompson met at a luncheon one day, the two decided they were both in positions to take action. The town hall program evolved from there.

“I’ve seen both sides of race relations between law enforcement and the community,” said Bellamy-Thompson. “It’s a national problem — just with a different complexion here. It was time to do something about it.”

“We have to help people understand we all have prejudice, and be honest in saying police have bias, too, and it is our responsibility to recognize that bias and manage it.”

Joining the Conversation

The panel that evening came from the Northwest and the Southeast, with backgrounds that included law enforcement, law, civil rights representation and political science. Each panelist has his or her own personal and professional prospective.

Christopher Parker, a professor of political science at the University of Washington, lectures and writes extensively on civil rights and racial politics. Race relations are an everyday discussion in his classroom.

Sue Rahr, executive director of the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission, is a member



MODERATOR ENRIQUE CERNA SETS UP THE PREMISE OF THE FORUM FOR THE TELEVISION AUDIENCE AT THE START OF THE EVENT.

of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. She's on the cutting edge of a movement that's taken shape across the country promoting protective policing, not militaristic training.

Laura Contreras is Northwest Immigrant Rights Project directing attorney for Eastern Washington. A daughter of migrant workers and mother of Hispanic children, she's a spokesperson for civil and personal rights.

And Mark O'Mara is a CNN legal analyst who, though best known for successfully defending George Zimmerman in the controversial shooting death of Trayvon Martin, has spent his career defending poor people of color.

As the evening's conversation developed — around issues of personal and systemic prejudice, the American appetite and demand for law and order, body cameras, independent investigations and more — one thing was clear: This was only the tip of the race, justice and democracy iceberg.

Seeing the Answers

For each panelist, there was a personal — and sometimes painful — side to the experience.

"As a mother of color, I want people to understand that when my children leave our home, it terrifies me," said Contreras following the program. "I tell them, 'Be respectful — say yes, sir . . . no, ma'am. Drop

anything you have in your hand.'"

Police officers must understand that their role is to protect the civil rights of every individual, and that they are to be guardians, not a military force, said Contreras.

"We have to help people understand we all have prejudice, and be honest in saying police have bias, too, and it is our responsibility to recognize that bias and manage it," said Rahr.

"Crime-fighting is important, but defending civil rights is equally important. It's trying to find the right balance."

Problem Will Force a Solution

While the problem of quickly escalating police-citizen interactions may seem to be on the rise, said O'Mara, it isn't.

"We're seeing it more because people pull out their cellphones," he said. "Bystanders catch altercations on video."

Are more black males shot than white males? "Absolutely, and it's always been that way," said O'Mara. "We are becoming more aware. Years ago it wasn't on anyone's radar except in the black community. Now

people are seeing rallies and news coverage. It's in our face literally once a week. Cops are shooting someone or someone is shooting a cop.

"If a majority of the public sees it as not their problem, you're not going to get buy-in," said O'Mara. "But having it in our face — that's the silver lining. That's how change will happen."

He's a proponent of taking concrete action. "We need to pay cops more, we need more diversity training, and we need body cameras," said O'Mara.

"Ferguson caused a \$55 million investment by the Department of Justice in body cameras. That's the kind of action we need.

"This is exactly what will make us come up with solutions we haven't even thought of yet."

Next Generation Key

Parker says his classes are a microcosm of the change that occurs when people come together and actually talk.

"My classes are strained at the beginning, heated by the middle, but oftentimes students come out with a better understanding of each other's positions," he said.

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DR. JOHN BASSETT, HERITAGE PRESIDENT, WELCOMED THE AUDIENCE AND THE PANELISTS BEFORE THE EVENT GOT UNDERWAY.



“The hope we continue to have is the kids,” said Parker. “Kids tend to be less racist than their parents are because they’re in a more diverse environment, and the more educated they become, the less and less prejudiced they are.

“The more interracial contact we have, the less prejudiced and biased we all tend to be.”

“I really do believe that one conversation leads to another,” said O’Mara. “We can’t stop. We’re not going to solve this with silence.”

In October, KCTS 9 aired the

program statewide. **It is available to view online at <http://kcts9.org/programs/race-justice-democracy>.**

Long after the cameras shut down, members of the audience continued to stand to address the panel with their own stories and concerns. That, said Bellamy-Thompson, is exactly the reason why organizers felt the need to produce such a program.

“We hope this discussion provided insights into how issues that have been elevated into the national consciousness are playing out on the local level and

what can be done to prevent injustices in the future,” she said. “Our goal was to empower people to speak up about and take action against injustices in society and to connect individuals with local organizations and resources. Healthy communities need strong relationships with law enforcement and the criminal justice system, and we are all working in this direction.” 🐦