

# Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities: Turning up the volume on needed conversations and actions

By Karen Eure Wilson

The sound of silence. The sound of silence is a double-edged sword in the quest to quiet voices of prejudice and intolerance, while fostering a safe space to break through that silence to initiate positive action through meaningful conversations. These conversations are often overlooked and undervalued—until something happens.

The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, (VCIC), is at the tip of the spear, breaking the sound barrier through its award-winning programs that “addresses prejudices, in all forms, in order to improve academic achievement, increase workplace productivity and enhance local trust,” says Paula L. Bazemore, VCIC’s Hampton Roads program manager. VCIC works with organizations ranging from schools, businesses, non-profit organizations, professional societies and communities.

VCIC has a state board and four chapters, which include a Peninsula chapter and chapters in Hampton Roads, Lynchburg and Richmond. Jonathan Zur has served as the organization’s president and CEO since 2009. Bazemore joined VCIC approximately 15 months ago.

Says Zur, “We are so proud to have added a staff position in Hampton Roads to more deeply serve the community. This growth is possible thanks to the generosity of the Peninsula and South Hampton Roads communities over many years.”

Zur observes that in the past few years, VCIC has experienced a great increase in demand for its programs and services. “These requests are both proactive and reactive in nature. I perceive both an increased awareness of the need for our work, as well as an increase in the number of acts of hate facing Virginia’s schools, businesses and communities,” says Zur.

Programs offered by VCIC are highly interactive and participatory. The use of presentations, conversations, written



COURTESY OF PAULA L. BAZEMORE

**Following Project Inclusion, Kecoughtan High School students make a hand-print pledge to spread the word to end using derogatory labels and names.**



COURTESY OF VCIC

**Jonathan C. Zur, VCIC president and CEO, says, “As a high school student in New Jersey, I experienced a program very similar to VCIC’s Project Inclusion. I know firsthand the transformational nature of our work. It is an honor to serve an organization that has such a broad reach and impact.”**

exercises and call and response activities continue to be a formula for success with students and adults alike.

“Last year, VCIC worked with more than 28,000 people across Virginia, providing workshops where issues like prejudice, intolerance, ageism, gender, sexism and racism were discussed in a safe space,” says Bazemore.

VCIC’s “Diversity Dialogue Day” is an annual one-day forum held in October with more than 100 students and teachers participating. As students work together during these workshops, educators from their schools are onsite, going through an educator workshop to explore the same issues as their students.

“Project Inclusion” is an annual event held usually during the winter,

occurring over four days in a camp-like scenario with 60 to 80 students and facilitators. It involves several high schools. Both Newport News Public Schools and Hampton City Schools participate each year. During this activity, students learn and explore issues of diversity and prejudice and gain insight into their own lives and values. They develop action plans to share their experiences and what they learned with their schools.

“Connections,” is an annual week-long retreat for high school students across the state held the first week of August. It is an elevated form of “Project Inclusion.” Says Bazemore, “We ask the schools to look for the leaders in their schools. We know that



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**Paula L. Bazemore, VCIC Hampton Roads program manager, says, “This kind of work is very personal to me. I remember being singled out in fifth grade and I don’t want another child to feel ‘some-kind-of-way’ over something negative that was said or done.” For Bazemore, understanding the need to stand against prejudice and bigotry is generational — during the Civil Rights Movement, her father was among the students in Greensboro who sat at the Woolworth’s counter.**

not every leader is a president or vice president so we want students who are the formal and informal leaders in their schools.”

Last year, VCIC received a grant from the Hampton Roads Community

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Foundation to fund follow-up sessions with the school participants.

"With our young people, we see success when we see change in behavior. We can go into the schools and hear comments from the administrators about how they've seen a shift in how numbers for discipline have gone down, how expulsion numbers have gone down and how the climate within the school changes after their groups come back from "Project Inclusion," "Diversity Dialogue Day" and "Connections," Bazemore says. "These students create that ripple throughout the school community and that changes things."

Says Zur, "I am gratified to regularly hear from VCIC program graduates who share how their experience with our organization made a difference in their lives."

Next month, VCIC will present its Humanitarian of the Year Awards

Dinner, which recognizes people and organizations in the community that are doing great things around diversity and inclusion. It is also a fundraiser for VCIC. The awards dinner is February 20 at the Marriott City Center and is a ticketed event. Guests wanting to attend can obtain more information by contacting VCIC directly. Upwards of 500 attendees are anticipated as many come to recognize programs and honor the people who have not remained silent.

"We are living in a time when our work is so important. I think people want to have these conversations, but they don't know how to have them or how to start them. We can provide the space to help them start those conversations," says Bazemore. VCIC is truly disturbing the sound of silence to facilitate a lasting climate of respect, inclusion and kindness within schools, businesses and communities. ◀