ONE YEAR LATER
Challenges and Successes of the University of Rhode Island Master Gardener Program’s Social Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) Task Force

We caught up with Co-Chairs Vanessa Venturini (above left) and Maria Saillant (above right) one year after launching the JEDI Task Force with the University of Rhode Island Master Gardener Program. Here is what they had to say about how their program unfolded, their successes and challenges, and dreams for the future.

**Vanessa:** I am the state program leader for the URI Master Gardener Program and I am the co-chair and founder of the Social Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) Task Force.

**Maria:** I have been an MG (novice, always learning) since 2009. I am currently co-chair with Vanessa on the JEDI Task Force for the URI Master Gardener Program.

**Q: Can you compare what you initially thought you were/would be doing with what you ended up doing/are doing now?**

**Vanessa:** We have made more progress and had more involvement, leadership development and momentum than I could have imagined. With the Black Lives Matter and civil rights movement as a backdrop, it was the right time to make progress in a long overdue way. We knew for years we needed to do better in terms of the diversity of volunteers and creating an inclusive organization. Each year people would look around the 100+ person Core Training and ask me why everyone was so homogenous (white). Who was missing? How can we improve our impact in communities where we’ve underinvested in the past?

We set out to start something new and I began to explore our internal resources at URI. When I found Dr. Joanna Ravello from URI’s office of community, equity and diversity we really began to make strides with her as a consultant and facilitator for a 5-week social justice and inclusion micro-credential. Our program was one of her pilot “engaged programs/departments” for a new university-wide initiative and we’ve become a success story to the broader university community. I asked a council member to recruit some initial members of a team, and we put the call out for others to join. We started holding monthly meetings, developing goals and from there formulating teams with co-leaders to start implementing the goals.
**Maria:** Initially I worked alongside other MGs while learning and accruing volunteer hours. Then, I was able to use my Spanish speaking skills at the Roger Williams Botanical Center in Providence while participating in the event “Celebration of Cultures” in 2015. This was an event led by the MGs in partnership with the city. It was a wonderful display of various cultures through performance, music and tours given at the RW Botanical Center.

Since 2019, I have been involved with social justice learning and working in this capacity with three other organizations, one of which was the URI MG program. In our state, the Rhode Island Foundation provided free training to individuals and organizations by the Racial Equity Institute based in North Carolina. I am also the Community Liaison at the West Warwick Public Library and also the English Language Learner Coordinator. This has enabled me to meet people from literally all over the world while humbling me to learn all I can about our past history and the present state of affairs in our country.

**Q: Doing diversity, equity and inclusion work can feel overwhelming: there’s a lot to do. How have you prioritized your work?**

**Vanessa:** If you build it they will come in terms of finding the volunteers who have talents and passion in the fields of social justice. This work can’t be done by any one person and buy in/ownership is key. Start by building the team, then set some initial SMART goals along with your team of volunteers so that your team and the broader volunteer base can track progress. Sub-teams are created from those goals so that smaller groups can tackle implementation of the goals and pilot different initiatives. We used our JEDI task force meeting as a time to foster a learning community as well as share updates or requests for assistance. Update the broader MG team often (communication) and continue to invite them in to learn with you. Now we’ve begun to make systemic changes and invest in this work through our budget in a new community needs assessment/listening session process.

**Maria:** Yes. This is very true. It can be overwhelming and consuming. Take a deep breath (I’m also a Yoga Instructor), slowly exhale and begin. First, do what is most important. This is a movement of change for racial equity and social justice. Be intentional, become an excellent listener, work towards antiracism and all the “-isms” that impede us from coming together to work together. (I have resources for books to read and Vanessa can share resources put together for the URI MG JEDI Task Force pertinent to our state.)

a. Create a platform for change (in steps). This includes educating yourselves individually about systemic and cultural racism. There are many free resources available online or possibly in your state.

b. Assess and acknowledge where the inequities are and begin to address them in order to dismantle them.

c. Seek out individuals within your program willing to do the work entailed to become intentionally inclusive and begin to create a space of belonging for all people. These individuals should include specifically BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) MGs, other MGs, faculty and staff within your university. If you don’t have BIPOC individuals as MGs, you need to ask yourselves: Why? This is where your work would need to begin.

**Q: What unforeseen challenges arose and how did you address them?**

**Vanessa:** I would say sometimes the conversations we have during our taskforce bring up difficult and uncomfortable feelings, however that’s all a part of this work. Also, there are so many resources out there and controversy may arise, especially when issues arise outside the focus of the program. We have learned our lesson in making sure that our work is targeted to topics relevant to the program. For example, examining social justice resources through the lens of Extension, food systems, land stewardship and gardening. See our justice, equity, diversity and inclusion resources for URI Master Gardeners.

**Maria:** We are still novices in this work; however, as we continue in this work within the movement, we expect resistance from those who are not inclined to want change, to change, or to believe it is necessary. You may encounter such comments such as: “Why are we doing this?” “Is this really necessary?” or “Why do we have to talk about race?” This is to be expected and an indication that you are on the right track. In any movement for real sustainable change, resistance is the impetus showing why change is needed in order to make things right and thus equitable. You may also encounter individuals of color who are not readily willing to trust what you’re doing. Lack of trust is a symptom of the injustices and inequities of the past. Hence, this is part of the work to gain their trust by listening, getting feedback and perspective from their point of view. Become an ally and use your privilege in this movement to make things right. This will require intentional consistency and patience.

**Q: Maria, what advice would you give to other Master Gardeners beginning this journey?**

**Maria:** From my own experience as an American Puerto Rican, notice that I did not write Puerto Rican American. My roots are American, as I was born and raised in the inner city of New York, not Puerto Rico. It is vastly different when one comes from a different cultural experience and background.
Yet, there is a richness to being open to learn and meet others from different backgrounds and cultural experiences. I would suggest that you individually and as a group honestly examine your biases, for we all have them. Consider taking a Racial Equity Training as both individuals and a group. Perhaps there are qualified staff at your university with this expertise.

Q: What's a big hope and dream you have for the kind of impact you're making with your program in Rhode Island?

Vanessa: We hope we inspire other organizations to tackle this admittedly overwhelming work. It’s worth it. It’s the right thing to do, AND it improves the impact of your organization, allows your organization (EXTENSION) to stay relevant and meet community needs, attracts high quality participants (advertise your work externally at recruitment time), and even for finding future funding opportunities as you begin to engage with underinvested communities.

Maria: I am very hopeful that out of the tragedies seen in 2020 involving racism, disparities and racial unrest that we will come together to work together. Hope is our state’s motto. As a person of faith, I am also hopeful that we are better together, we are our brothers and sisters keepers and we inhabit the same earth. It is time that we confront our past history so we can move forward and heal. Plus think of all the great potlucks you can have with people from all walks of life.

We are so grateful for the time and knowledge Vanessa and Maria gave to us with this interview. Thank you!

I am so excited for you at OSU extension. “There is no courage without fear.” I am quoting Mulan’s father after seeing it three times! But seriously, it is true. The work of dismantling racism and the work of social justice is hard work, but it is so very rewarding. It is redemptive and can bring about much-needed change for whose time has certainly come.
— Maria Saillant

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

View the presentation Dr. Sunshine Menezes created on Inclusive Community Engagement
https://youtu.be/_KTffh18riQ

Broadening Perspectives Toolkit  https://www.informalscience.org/broadening-perspectives

Particular items of note from the toolkit are on the following pages.