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ALERT

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## Beloved Community panelists discuss Norman's past, steps for future

By Adam Troxtell | Transcript Staff Writer Sep 23, 2018



The good of Norman ultimately outweighs the bad. That was the sentiment of four representatives of community groups at the first Beloved Community Speaker Series Thursday night at Meacham Auditorium on the University of Oklahoma campus.

The City of Norman, Human Rights Commission, Xenia Institute, Pioneer Library System and OU Office of University Community combined efforts to create the series. It is intended to present various topics for discussion about the community's past, present and how it will work toward various goals in the future.

Andy Reiger, former editor-in-chief of the Transcript, moderated Thursday's event. He was joined on stage by: Paula Sophia Schonauer, LGBTQ activist and retired Oklahoma City police officer -- the force's first openly transgender officer; Nouman Jan, civil engineer and former vice president of the Islamic Society of Norman; Jacob Tsofigh, retired program administrator at OU and Native American rights activist; and Dr. George Henderson, director for the Department of Human Resources advanced studies program at OU and whose family became the first black residents to purchase a house in Norman in 1967.

"I had never lived in any kind of neighborhood except an all black neighborhood until Norman," Henderson recalled. "I had been an ardent proponent of desegregation efforts, but I had never lived it."

All had a similar impression of Norman, that it stands out as a city in Oklahoma because of its size and overwhelming sense of tolerance. Tsofigh called it "an oasis."

"I have never felt excluded here," Tsoitigh said. "It has that progressiveness, that sense of inclusivity. One of the sign companies here made that 'there is no hate in this home' sign. I have that in my front yard as an expression of acceptance because of the current politics, because of 45 (President Donald Trump), who I feel foments so much divisiveness because of his ignorance.

"But with the university, people come here for knowledge, for enlightenment, so they're open and they're receptive. It blends over into the community."

It has not always been like that. This edition of the speaker series focussed on community history from various perspectives, and the panelists had some stories of intolerance to share.

Even Tsoitigh was part of the effort to remove Little Red as an OU mascot.

"I was involved with that in the end," he said. "Fortunately, the university was very open. As Native people, we are not mascots. We are not to be caricatured. And fortunately, people at the university were accepting of that idea."

Schonauer said she had a tough time at first while obtaining her master's degree in social work from OU, when somehow the incorrect gender was used in her student records.

"I was disappointed when I first started the master of social work program, when I found out someone had misgendered me on my student records," Schonauer said. "I certainly didn't apply as a male to attend school here. They used the correct name. That gave me a lot of anxiety, because if there was any reason, maybe when I used the restroom, if someone complained on me ... I just felt like it could spiral out of control. It was taken care of, but it made me really nervous."

On the flip side of that, Schonauer said she remembers in 2016 when the city council voted to include gender identity and sexuality language in its nondiscrimination ordinance. And the recent Norman Pride parade was hugely positive, she said.

Henderson recalled multiple occasions of discrimination of him or his family, particularly in the early days of living in Norman. The family moved here from Detroit, so there was definitely some culture shock.

"Imagine coming to the best part of Norman, where garbage was thrown on your lawn, you had officers asking you what you were doing in your own neighborhood, you had to stop your children from answering the phone because of the obscene calls," he said. "That's one side of Norman. The

other side, we had a neighbor who welcomed us. She made cookies for us, baked things, and said 'Welcome to the neighborhood.' That's the other side of Norman. For every bad thing that happened, two good things happened."

Jan said he canvassed the Muslim community in Norman, and overall, they all had positive things to say. Anything negative came from "politicians" and the way they described the religion and those who follow it.

"We've had some from Oklahoma call Islam a cancer, that we should get rid of it," Jan said. "It was a bad day when we heard that. We've received gift baskets, letters, bouquets from churches, people in the vicinity, from college students and high school students, telling us how worthy we were to be apart of Norman."

If there's any direction the panelists said they'd like to see from the Human Rights Commission and the community, it's greater recognition of minority communities and to continue progress. Tsotigh in particular said the Human Rights Commission should go big and focus on having Norman designated as a "sanctuary city."

"There's so much paranoia, and subsequent fear within the immigrant community, because of the outrageous decisions of this [presidential] administration," he said. "We need to make our children feel safe, feel nurtured. Move toward defining this state and become a sanctuary city."

Tsotigh celebrated the transformation of Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day. On that note, he said a month for Native American history, for instance, would be a step in the right direction.

Henderson said the Human Rights Commission needs to focus on engaging the younger generations. Additionally, he warned against accepting that its mission fits only on one side of the political spectrum.

"I suggest the commission find a way to really ... find common ground," he said. "I don't know if that's helpful or not, but I do believe it does not serve us well if we are perceived as liberal or conservative. It serves us extremely well if we are perceived as human oriented."

"Also, have a way for high school students in particular to get involved so we are working on growing our future leaders. Where are the kids? Find a way to look down at the youth and bring them up. Find a way to be considered really apolitical, if you can. Find a way to make Norman that example that is positive."

Schonauer said proclamations and recognition is never a bad thing. For example, she said when she arrested a serial rapist while working with OKCPD, but felt that the division commander shot down the idea of presenting her with a major award because of her transgender status.

"I think they were afraid that awarding me or someone like myself is tacit approval of our lifestyle," she said. "A mainstream proclamation, recognition of the contributions we make, not only because we're LGBTQ people, but we are so much apart of the larger community, it's extremely important."

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## Norman Transcript Events



Wed, Sep 26

Mon, Sep 24



**One Team Scavenger Hunt Adventure: Oklahoma City**

Recommended Parking to Beg...

**Photographer(s)**

Moore High School



MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
24	25	26	27	28	29

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