

Greensboro Truth & Community Reconciliation Project



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SELECTION PANEL NAMES TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONERS

GREENSBORO, N.C. – District Court Judge Lawrence McSwain, chairman of the Selection Panel for the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the first of its kind in the United States, today named the seven individuals chosen to serve as commissioners.

The commissioners are

- Cynthia Brown of Durham, N.C., a grassroots organizer and leader, former city councilwoman and one-time candidate for the U.S. Senate;
- Patricia Clark of Nyack, N.Y., executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation;
- Muktha Jost of Greensboro, an assistant professor in the school of education at N.C. A&T State University;
- Angela Lawrence of Greensboro, a community activist with a long history of work focusing on education and neighborhood development;
- Robert Peters of Greensboro, a retired corporate attorney with extensive experience in arbitration and dispute resolution;
- Rev. Mark Sills of Randleman, N.C., executive director of Greensboro's Faith Action International House; and
- Barbara Walker of Greensboro, a retired manager with Wrangler Corp. and former board president of the YWCA of Greensboro.

“We wanted people to feel like some different voices were going to be heard,” McSwain said at the news conference announcing the names. He added that the panel felt it had succeeded in naming “a group of people who would be fair, who would be truthful and who would produce a report that would say what needed to be said.”

The announcement is a milestone in the Greensboro Truth & Community Reconciliation Project (GTCRP), which seeks to use a model tested in South Africa, Peru and elsewhere to transform an ugly chapter in the city's history, the tragedy of Nov. 3, 1979, into lessons upon which understanding, healing, forgiveness and true connections can be forged.

The independent Selection Panel, which included representatives from a broad array of Greensboro's social, religious and political sectors, reviewed 67 nominations received from community members.

The panel met weekly after an initial training session conducted in February by Lisa Magarrell of the International Center for Transitional Justice, an organization founded by the deputy chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that is serving as a consultant to the GTCRP, as it has in similar efforts in nations including Peru, Colombia, Guatemala and Sierra Leone.

First on the list of criteria the Selection Panel used to select the commissioners was integrity, which members believe all seven of their selections exemplify, in addition to bringing other unique qualifications.

Brown currently works throughout North Carolina as a consultant to non-profit groups working in the areas of leadership and organizational development. A graduate of Bennett College for Women who also has a master's degree in public affairs from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, she has traveled and studied internationally.

Clark has been involved in issues of justice and reconciliation since her graduation from Smith College in 1979. Her organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, is an interfaith and international movement advocating for peace, justice and nonviolence. She also has served as the national criminal justice program coordinator for the American Friends Service Committee, and as director of Southern Poverty Law Center's Klanwatch program.

Jost is an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction. Born and raised in India, she came to the United States in 1984 and earned a master's degree in journalism and mass communications from the University of Kansas and a Ph.D. in Instructional Technology from Iowa State University. She currently teaches courses focusing on issues of educational diversity and educational equity.

Lawrence is trained as a certified nursing assistant providing basic care for the elderly. She is also well respected and very active in her community supporting and counseling people when needed. She was deeply involved with community groups during the school redistricting process and continues to work as an advocate for children within the school system. A former residents council vice president of the Ray Warren Homes public housing community, Lawrence is pursuing a psychology degree from Guilford Technical Community College.

Peters, retired from Lucent Technologies, also is a legal educator who has taught courses on dispute resolution, corporate law, intellectual property and commercial law. He arbitrates disputes in civil cases for the N.C. District Court even in his retirement. He is considered a critical thinker and is respected as being skilled in assessing situations, facilitating discussions with disputing parties and working toward ethical solutions. He is a member of St. Pius X Catholic Church.

Sills' FaithAction International House is an interfaith, interracial, multicultural organization working with immigrant groups to form a united community of many cultures. Sills was this year's speaker for the Greensboro Human Relation Commission's Martin Luther King Day breakfast. Holding degrees from Greensboro College, Duke University and American University, he is former director of the Greensboro Urban Ministry. Sills, who had been asked to serve on the Selection Panel to represent the mainstream Protestant faith community, stepped aside from the selection process to accept his nomination to be a commissioner.

Walker, in retirement, is a full-time community volunteer working with the YWCA, Greensboro Community Television, the Commission on the Status of Women, the League of Women Voters, the Women's Professional Forum and Family and Children's Services. Her nominator noted that she is well known and well respected in the community as one who speaks her mind even when it is unpopular.

The new commissioners will be sworn-in during a public ceremony at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, June 12, at The Depot, 236 E. Washington St. U.S. Rep. Mel Watt (D-N.C.), will officiate the historic event along with McSwain and former Greensboro Mayor Carolyn Allen.

The historic event will be followed in the evening by a Community Cultural Celebration with diverse performers including poets from The Collective and gospel recording artist Bishop John Heath of Winston-Salem, culminating with the Reconciliation Jazz Jam featuring trombonist Fred Wesley.

Although he has not endorsed the GTCRP, Mayor Keith Holliday named McSwain to serve as his representative on the panel, an appointment McSwain said he accepted despite warnings about taking on such a controversial role during an election year.

"I said I'm going to do it and I'll take my chances," he said.

On Nov. 3, 1979, members of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party killed five people and wounded ten others gathered in Greensboro for a march for racial, social and economic justice organized by the Worker's Viewpoint Organization (later known as the Communist Worker's Party).

Despite the fact that four TV crews captured the killings on film, the shooters were twice acquitted of any wrongdoing. In a third trial, a federal civil trial, Klansmen, Nazis and members of the Greensboro Police Department were found jointly liable for one of the deaths.

Although the City of Greensboro paid that \$350,000 civil judgment on behalf of all three defendant groups, it has never apologized or publicly acknowledged any wrongdoing. Distrust and anger linger, simmering below the surface.

Once seated, the new commissioners will review documents and hear testimony to determine the truth, causes and consequences of what happened, produce a report, then suggest ways that both the individuals involved and the entire city can reconcile and heal.

McSwain was accompanied at the news conference by other members of the Selection Panel: NAACP representative Viola Fuller, community representative Woodrow Dawkins and Ed Whitfield, who served as the GTCRP Local Task Force's representative.

The experience, members agreed, supported the view that the truth and reconciliation process has value for Greensboro, as well as for other communities with similar unhealed wounds.

"This is a very new process here in this community and in this country," said Whitfield, who said he has faith in the work the new commissioners will do. "These are people who we believe people are going to be able to trust."