

The values of the YWCA are captured in our mission statement: We seek to Eliminate Racism and Empower Women we do this by promoting peace, justice freedom, and dignity for all.

Today, the values of the YWCA are under attack. Of course, those values were under attack last year, and the year before all the way back to 1619 when the first Africans were enslaved in our country and too few people said, this is wrong.

The difference between today's attacks and those of the past few decades is that now those attacks are out in the open, they are brazen.

Throughout its history, the United States has worked to uphold its own values of liberty and justice for all.

- In 1868 the 14th amendment to the constitution was ratified providing equal protection to all.
- A 1961 Executive Order establishing Affirmative Action
- The Equal Pay Act of 1963
- The civil rights act of 1964 title VII prohibits employment discrimination
- The voting rights act of 1965
- The fair housing act of 1965
- In 1965 the EEOC was established.
- In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities act was passed.

None of these laws or amendments have been repealed or rescinded. They are the law.

Fast forward to 2024, (you remember last year) yes, significant progress had been made in the workplace. But how many of the women here would agree with the statement that salaries for men and women are equal in today's workforce? Certainly, some would agree with this statement, because we have made some progress in 60 years but not all would agree. But would the same percentage of women of color agree?

We know that 60 years after landmark legislation was enacted, discrimination still exists.

After the murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter gained national attention. Shortly after, the country seemed to have a national awakening and Diversity Equity and Inclusion programs began to become more established.

At their core, these programs sought to realize the constitutional goals outlined in the 14th amendment and the legislative goals first established during the civil rights movement of the 1960s DEI was intended to make the workplace one of equal opportunity for women and people of color.

Both Civil Rights legislation and DEI initiatives were both addressing the same problem in our society. Racism.

Fast forward to today.

Non-profits across the country are now faced with difficult decisions regarding how they position their organizations relative to DEI. And many organizations have decided that DEI was simply a tool used to create a more just world and jettisoning that tool is inconsequential to their work and mission. I don't necessarily disagree with that reasoning.

But it is very different when your mission is at the core of what DEI was trying to address. DEI was a tool to eliminate racism and gender discrimination.

When your mission is eliminating racism, empowering women, there is no room to hide.

The Board of Directors of the YWCA Greater Newburyport recently signed onto a letter re-affirming its commitment to our mission. YWCA Greater Newburyport will continue to affirm its mission in all that we do. We will continue to promote it on our website. We will continue to incorporate it into our programs and as you can see today, every event at which we are called upon to speak.

This is not without risk. Until recently, the focus has been on eliminating Diversity Equity and Inclusion. However, last week, they took a step further and began attacking books which talk about racism.

YWCA cannot abandon its mission and continue to provide this community with the same level of service it has provided in the past:

- We have stood with women of color, enabling them to raise their children in a predominately white community. Children who have moved onto successful careers.
- We have provided examples to students of how people of color, lesbians, transgender individuals and straight white women can work together to create a safe place for all students to grow and learn. An experience they simply could not get from the public school.
- We have created a work place which celebrates diversity in its employees enabling them to provide a high level of service to the community.

The success of the YWCA over the past decade has been its commitment to its mission and its commitment to understand how racism has played a role in our society. That understand has led to better programs with better outcomes.

Abandoning our mission is simply not an option for us.

Beginning a couple of years ago, we turned the focus of these luncheons more inward. And for the most part, we have been able to inform our attendees about the work we do, within the context of our mission:

- We have celebrated our work with people who have experienced cancer in their lives.
- We have enjoyed hearing of how our school age program integrates social justice into its program
- We have celebrated our affordable housing and how that has impacted the lives of women and their families.

But today, we live in darker times. Times in which our core values are under attack. Times in which I am often asked, What are you going to do? Therefore, we thought it paramount to state clearly that we intend to remain committed to our mission and stand against those who would try to move us backward. YWCA stands against those who seek to divide us by race, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation.

YWCA will continue to stand with its mission. And we know, there is risk in doing this. But we also hope that you will stand with us and stand for a better country which promotes liberty and justice for all.

John Feehan
Executive Director
YWCA Greater Newburyport
4/16/2025