Summary of SCSJ Coalition Quarterly Meeting, October 3, 2025

We had a great meeting on October 3 at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County. The focus of the meeting was a panel of local leaders discussing the topic of "**Grassroots Organizing for Social Justice."** The panel included:

- **Etta Zasloff**, *South County Rising: Resisting Autocracy. Reforming Democracy.*
- **Leslie Dunn**, *Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition*
- **April Ruedeflores**, *The Womxn Project*
- **Christine Martone**, *League of Women Voters South County*

The panel was moderated by Johnnie Rodriquez, who brought her own lived experience as a community organizer.

In response to the question "How did your organization come into being? How did your own personal commitment start? we heard the following responses:

Leslie Dunn shared that the Westerly ARC was born in the immediate aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. People came together to support each other and explore issues related to racism. For six years, there has been a weekly gathering on the steps of the Post Office in Westerly. People come together to discuss what has happened in the past week and what they will do about it. It is a place for support and a space for learning about advocacy for themselves and others.

April Ruedeflores responded that the Womxn project began with a conversation about the status of women after Trump was elected in 2016. A peaceful march in support of women's rights was organized in Peace Dale and 300 people showed up, demonstrating an overwhelming interest in preserving the idea. Since 2019 the group has evolved to support policies related to women's rights, voting rights and LBGTQ rights with a recent focus on School Committees, where the LGBTQ+ community has been targeted. They use ART and social media to educate and promote their work and have established a permanent space in Providence for the organization.

Christine Martone shared that the League of Women Voters was born during the Women's Suffrage movement to educate women about becoming informed voters. They studied problems of the time and especially related to the safety and health of women and children. In 1921 they secured matching funds for Women's Health and childcare, which eventually led to the Social Security Program. While the League has grown into a Federated organization, it is open to anyone and local Leagues focus mainly on local issues. The League is non-partisan and never endorses candidates or political parties. It provides reliable information about candidates through voter guides and live candidate forums with the goal to inform and empower voters. The League

constantly reminds voters that they hold power over the government and their vote can create change.

Etta Zasloff addressed South County Rising, the youngest of the groups in that they were just organized on March 4th of this year following a March Fourth for Democracy protest held in Hope Valley that attracted over 200 people. She noted the surprise turnout that seemed to say that more action was desired in South County. Luckily she had collected many email addresses at the protest and followed up with an invitation for help, realizing this was beyond a one person job. An eight member leadership team was formed and they continue to create events to keep the momentum going to express legal dissent with the various threats that come daily to our freedoms.

The key to grass-roots organizing is to share the organizing and having a regular place to show up is a plus.

Johnnie shared that communication is very important. That is why the SCSJ Coaltion newsletter is so important for disseminating information about events and activities of organizations throughout south county. Here are a few upcoming events:

Banned Book Exhibit at Herra Gallery in Wakefield on October 11

Local No Kings protests in Westerly and in North Kingstown and chartered buses to Providence from Wickford.

Jonathan Sigman presents “Call In” on October 23.

Next question to the panelists was “What do you consider your organization's most important accomplishments and what do you see going forward?

Christine Martone told us that the most important accomplishment of the League of Women Voters was to get women to vote! One significant program in which the League has been involved is the United Nations Observer Corps. The South County League will hold a meeting open to the public at the Narragansett Library on October 25 that will feature a current member of the Observer Corps for the United Nations. Additionally, the League is charged with observing local town council or school committee meetings. The primary goals are to determine if they are operating as they should and to provide a source of questions for our voter forums and guides. Until recently, the League has been active in registering newly sworn-in citizens to vote, but under orders from the Department of Homeland Security, non-partisan organizations cannot register new citizens to vote. In situations like this and others related to voter suppression efforts, the League will lobby to protect programs related to voter registration and rights.

April Ruedeflores shared that their greatest achievement was to be featured by PBS about their work after Trump was elected. On-going, the group is educating the community to be prepared. They were honored to be the Grand Marshall for the Providence Pride Parade. April said that with the Womxn project she has learned how to have a voice and it has provided a space to show up.

Leslie Dunn told us that the *Westerly Anti-Racism Coalition* now has a monthly column in the Westerly Sun newspaper where they can regularly share their multicultural ideas. They have partnered with the United Theatre in Westerly to present a monthly film series, have had an art exhibit and a speaker series. This allows us to meet people in a different way. We ask people to come to town council meetings and school committee meetings where they feel empowered.

They are most proud of the organizing system they have employed where they ask the difficult questions to keep the organization on track with their goals. Also, Juneteenth for the past 2 years at Wilcox Park where past and current leaders are recognized for their work for anti-racism. The first person of color has been elected to the town council and to the School Committee (Leslie Dunn is the chair of the school committee). A Multi-cultural committee has been created to help give people the respect they deserve.

Etta Zasloff has been a great role model for the organizing group for South County Rising. Her 30 -years of activism on many fronts has made her the perfect person to get South County Rising rolling. The fact that they have activated a large number of community members who seem progressive in this strong Republican town is their biggest accomplishment to date. There is a desire to come together to protect democracy. We need to accept their truth and not yell at them. Other efforts include having one-on-one conversations with neighbors, canvassing for a local candidate for the state senate race, and to get involved with other grass roots groups.

A question from the audience asked "**what is the LWV doing for the next election cycle**?"

Christine said the League of Women Voters of South County is expanding our voter guides, supporting a suite of the federal government if the SAVE act is passed by the Senate, and in general trying to identify areas/legislation that is causing voter suppression.

In response to a question about ICE activity in the area, it was offered that a group called AMOR is guiding people regarding immigration rights and ICE raids.

Jonny Rodriguez left us with these words: "In these trying times, find ways to comfort yourself. Remember people who were here today and at rallies and keep that gratitude going.

Submitted by Joanne Haynes