



Vermonter Shela Linton talks I AM VERMONT, TOO, Movement Activism

Local group I Am Vermont, Too unveiled their first gallery showing this month at the Vermont State House. The photo exhibit was created by a multi-generational group of People of Color (PoC) across Vermont, and features portraits of PoC holding a white board indicating racial microaggressions they've experienced in Vermont. Shela Linton has been and continues to be an engaged part of the organization and its goals.

A Native Vermonter, Shela Linton a

multiracial queer individual, a single parent of two amazing daughters, and in the next couple of days, she'll become a Gma. She's an activist, organizer, and an advocate of social justice. Shela has advocated across a variety of situations, from murder cases, driving while black, issues with DCF and bullying and harassment at schools. Even among Vermont's 90% white population, the majority of her clients have been People of Color.

Shela is one of the founders of The Root Social Justice Center (SJC), which provides a physically and financially accessible space to support and bring together communities working for social justice. They operate collectively to sustain a space that strives to be free of op-

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Attention Burlington voters!
City Council Elections are Tuesday March 7th!
Find your polling place here:
<https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/public/voter/>

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pression, harm, and injustice. They are building a PoC majority collective and advisory board, supporting PoC led programming, and working to shift resources into PoC communities.

She's also one of the leaders for the southern Vermont satellite hub for Black Lives Matter Vermont. They are doing work to create relationships, resources, and sharing of information across the state.

I am Vermont, Too was inspired by the work done by Harvard University students of color. "I heard about the Harvard University initiative: I too am Harvard: a photo project created by students of color at Harvard University, aimed at challenging racial microaggressions. I saw that and I said - We, People of Color, need something like that

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in Vermont. I can see that I can feel that!"

"We wanted to bring communities of color together, inform and educate the white community, and begin to build a statewide People of Color caucus and a movement." [I am Vermont, Too](#) is a

tool that aims to do a few different things, collected in a broad vision. ON HEALING:

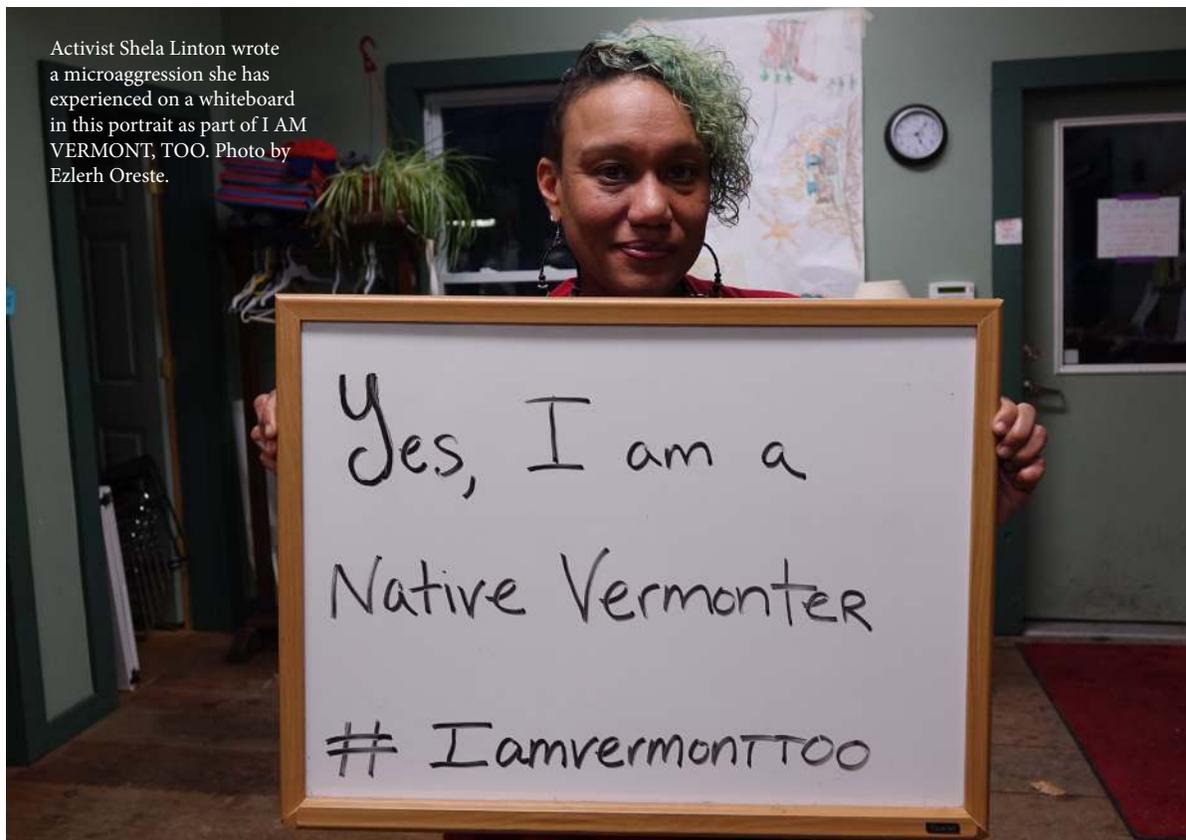
Part of this project is about healing for communities

of color through collaboration and ownership. "Participants told me that getting involved has been healing. It has enabled members to build bridges with family and friends. It helped break us out of isolation. We worked with people who look like us, that share similar experiences and culture. Building those relationships is really empowering."

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"We want to build relationships among communities of color across the state. That's why it was perfect to have our first unveiling at the Vermont State House."
Shela Linton

Activist Shela Linton wrote a microaggression she has experienced on a whiteboard in this portrait as part of I AM VERMONT, TOO. Photo by Ezlerh Oreste.



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It is important to us that this was a PoC only project. Only PoCs could participate, across writing, framing and picture taking, to name a few. Being in a predominately white state it is extremely challenging to build a collective of PoCs.

“We created this, this is ours. Working on this together helped us build social capital across often isolated PoC communities. We did the framing by hand. We took the pictures ourselves. We utilized our talents and skills. It’s beautiful and it is helping us build the relationships and build the larger movement.”

ON MOVEMENT BUILDING:

This month the first showing went up in the Vermont State House. The vision for I am Vermont, Too is much broader than that. One prong is about building relationships among communities of color across the state. We want to create a statewide PoC caucus.

ON ART AND STORYTELLING:

We want to tell the story of our experiences as People of Color in Vermont, and who we really are. It is about coming out of the shadows and visualizing communities of color. We want to build relationships among communities of color across the state. That’s why it was perfect to have our first unveiling at the Vermont State House.

ON EDUCATION:

I Am Vermont, Too is also about education across all communities in Vermont. We want people to understand what racial microaggressions are and how they impact our communities. We are in a predominantly white state and predominantly white spaces and everyday racial microaggressions are damaging and dividing for relationships across all of our communities. This impacts white communities and communities of color. The impact may be different, but this is an important message for all Vermonters.

ON WHAT’S NEXT:

This is an infinity project. We want to continue to gather photos, to have gallery openings in communities across the state. And focus on local portraits - a showing in Brattleboro with

Upcoming Events

March 8 at Noon: Toxic Whiteness Bag Lunch Discussion @ Peace and Justice Center

March 8 at 5pm: Women’s Day March @ The Statehouse

March 13 at 7p: Monthly BLMVT Meeting @ Integrated Arts Academy in Burlington

At Shop4Change, the BLMVT store at 325 Main Street in Winooski

March 24 at 7p: Wings & Open Mic

March 25 10a to 1p: Civil Rights Complaints Day from @ Shop4Change, 325 Main Street in Winooski
Get assistance filing a complaint from BLM volunteers

March 26 at 530p: Awareness Film Night

Check out the EVENTS section of the BLMVT website for full calendar and updates on events!

PoC from the local area, and the same across other communities. We’ve also been contacted by people who are excited to bring this to their own states, schools and communities. I’m also planning to write a book that will be an extension of this project. We could go a lot deeper into stories from people of color. This published piece will help bring those stories to light.

A CALL TO ACTION:

We are launching phase two soon! We need PoC to participate and have their portraits taken and more PoC to be involved in the second phase. This is a statewide call for any PoC who live or go to school in the state of Vermont. To get involved, visit the I AM VERMONT, TOO page on Facebook.

Shop 4 Change: Interview with Ebony Nyoni

BLMVT Co-founder and director Ebony Nyoni, in interview with Jabari S. Jones

JSJ: Tell me about your beauty salon- why you started it and why you decided to convert the salon into the ‘Shop 4 Change’.

EN: I started it in May of 2015 as a result of realizing that after being in Vermont for so many years, [Black women] still didn’t have a place that we could go to to have services done to our hair or be able to buy certain products for our skin and well-being. At that time I still had to go out of state, and most women I knew would travel out of Vermont just to get their hair done. One time I went to Montreal to get my hair done, and it was in a lady’s apartment, and I said to myself, “This is ridiculous.” If no one else is going to start it, I’m going to open up a space for Black women to get their hair done.

After providing beauty supplies for women of color and all women in the community, I began hearing stories from people escaping war, what happened to them and their families; how it felt coming here to the U.S. and feeling stressed; having the Chittenden Co. community half-way accept them; stories of Muslim women wearing hijab and having people tell them “go back to where you came from”, or accusing them of stealing. I heard stories from kids: one black girl said that in her school, a private school, one of her teachers dressed up as a ‘black woman’, wore a clown wig, painted her face for Halloween.

And so I felt like what I had started was definitely intended for that greater purpose, which was for people to have a safe place where they could come and have their stories heard, and use their voice, and feel safe and get advice or resources, or just be able to voice how they were feeling that day. And that it would be extremely beneficial if we offered this to the greater community of color. That was one reason for the idea of turning over my beauty shop for Black Lives Matter purposes.

The other thing was that I knew for Black Lives Matter to become a strong movement in

Vermont, would need creative streams of sustainability. That because [Vermont] was almost 100% white, we couldn’t necessarily rely on the generous resources of white people because many of them still didn’t know our purpose for existing. And so part of our sustainability was to have a place where people could come and be.

JSJ: What’s happening at the Shop now that it’s officially open for business?

EN: The newest action that we’re proud of is our coffee shop, and it’s intended to give people the opportunity to meet and share strategies and network over coffee, a place where people can read books and educate themselves on social justice issues. And we’ve also gotten wonderful donations from local artists throughout Vermont and it’s felt like a blessing to receive work from artists because it’s like a piece of themselves that they’re donating to the movement. We’ve had everything from pottery, to posters, to fabric, and we have our Black Lives Matter items like bumper stickers, t-shirts, and then we still sell hair products for women of color.

JSJ: I see the Shop is selling Equal Exchange coffee. Why Equal Exchange?

EN: Once we knew this would be an addition to the store, I wanted to make sure that our theme and values rang true even with our food products. I came across Equal Exchange coffee and I really started enjoying what I was seeing, and a few people I asked heard some really good things about the company. [The Congo Coffee Project] is a group of women from the Congo who have experienced trauma and decided, as an opportunity for empowerment, to get together and start a co-op. So they’re in Congo and they farm their own coffee, as well as other things they’re doing, and that’s cool: all Black women making coffee and being empowered to be the ones to receive the benefits of it.

JSJ: How can BLM members support the Shop? What are some of the things that the Shop needs?

EN: We always need donations from artists, or anyone who knows how to make anything, and if they think it will benefit our organization by donating it then do so. The Shop really needs volunteers. We need to fill our shifts. We're not just one person but three people, at least. As the back-room is being prepared and getting ready to accommodate people, we're definitely going to need to pump up our volunteers. Ideally, we would love to see at least six people here throughout the day, so the shifts have three to four people at a time, maybe two in the front and two in the back.

There's still a high need for women of color in the community to have a place where they

can go and get their hair done, as well as get the hair products that they need, so we are offering those things in a section in the back. The other section will be for trainings, meetings, as well as for film showings.

JSJ: What are the current open hours of the Shop?

EN: The shop is open Monday - Friday from 8am to 6pm, unless otherwise indicated. Saturday, 9-5, closed Sunday. We're starting to get more consistent volunteers but I'm the main person. We're looking for someone to take the place of me in the Shop so I can be able to travel and do the work that needs to be done.

Why Did You Join Black Lives Matter Vermont?



Erin Wolf: Because Black Lives were being treated like they didn't matter. I was fed up with seeing people dying on camera and not doing anything about it.



Mackenzie Budd: I needed others to know they are supported regardless of how they look. I wanted to make a tangible difference.



Dottye Ricks: I saw all this killing of black men in the media and I thought, "This is modern day lynching." If I want to be a decent human being how can I not do this? I feel like I'm on a mission.