



## My Sister's Keeper Challenge Conference

*Q & A with Local Organizer Libby Greene*

The My Sister's Keeper Challenge Conference will take place on Thursday, August 31, 2017 at Winooski High School. First announced by Ebony Nyoni, co-founder and Executive Director of Black Lives Matter VT, at the Women's March in Montpelier in January, this conference will "provide a platform for women of color to bring to light issues affecting them". In doing so, it will promote the My Sister's Keeper Challenge, an initiative aimed at encouraging white women to step up to the

challenge of providing effective and engaged allyship. This conference is also an opportunity to bring women together to engage in the work of combating systemic racism. Last but certainly not least, this is a community investment event: conference fees that attendees pay will go toward raising money for ongoing Black Lives Matter programs and initiatives. [Registration](#) is open online now, and registration fees range from \$20 to \$25 dollars. There is also a premium continued on page 2

Summertime  
is Action time  
at BLMVT Summer Camp!

**ACT NOW!**  
Find out how on page 7

Updates on the  
Racial Justice  
Oversight Board,  
page 3

## Black Lives Matter Goes to Camp!

The Black Lives Matter Vermont Summer Camp Program (BLMVT SCP) is a new community service that will provide young people with opportunities to learn, play, and grow in a safe and structured environment. BLMVT SCP is an initiative planned and operated by Black Lives Matter Vermont. In pursuit of our goal to support the wellbeing of all our community members, BLMVT SCP will seek to empower youth to learn, ensure educational access, and enhance achievement opportunities. Consistent with BLMVT's commitment to be by the community, for the community, and of the community, BLMVT SCP will be primarily funded and supported by BLMVT and by community members using its

programs. This structure will allow BLMVT SCP to be fully responsive to its community, to advance innovative strategies that support our youth, and promote self-reliance and self-direction for BLMVT SCP families.

BLMVT SCP's mission is to provide high-quality growth-oriented programming that will support all students' success while remaining responsive to the concerns of Black Vermonters. BLMVT SCP's vision is to decrease the aspiration-attainment gap and promote student development within an environment that values Black lives, teaches Black histories, and celebrates Black culture. BLMVT SCP is scheduled to open its first program this year in summer 2017.

CONFERENCE continued from page 1

registration available for \$75, which comes with several special perks including the opportunity to significantly support BLMVT in the community. *Note: the scheduled conference date reflects a time change. Originally scheduled for May 6 2016, this conference has been pushed back to allow for more people to register for and attend the conference. BLMVT hopes our readers will help spread the word to encourage more community members to attend this historic event!*

Libby Greene is among the leadership planning the event. She provides context for the

conference, the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, and some of the topics that will be explored in conference workshops and presentations in the interview below.

### **Can you sum up the Sister's Keeper conference, and what folks can expect if they attend?**

A number of presenters will address the high priority issues within the Black Lives Matter movement. Speakers include students and faculty from area universities and organizers within the movement as well as community members.

### **Why does Vermont need a**

### **program specifically for women of color?**

The Black Lives Matter movement is a unique movement because of the way it prioritizes and centers the leadership of women of color. The leadership and influence and guidance of women of color were frequently sidelined in the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s. Further, even as the feminist and women's rights movements took shape and took off (and dovetailed quite nicely with the aims and goals of the civil rights movement), women didn't have a clear space in the recognized continued on page 4

## Update on Racial Justice and Oversight Board!

Black Lives Matter VT and racial justice allies have shifted focus and support from H. 492 to the related bill, H. 308 with amendment. This bill, which will be finalized and sent to the Governor's desk as early as this week, has gone through much legislative maneuvering in the recent weeks but retains at its core a racial justice board.

The board will be established in the Attorney General's Office and will review racial justice reform efforts across the state, including in the education, employment, housing, healthcare, and justice institutions in Vermont. BLMVT joins ACLU of Vermont, Justice for All and Migrant Justice / Justicia Migrante, and many others in this effort.

WHAT CAN  
YOU DO?

[Follow Justice for All's steps to help and show your support](#)  
[Find out more about H.308](#)  
[Read the full amendment](#)

**SPOTLIGHT:** The March 1<sup>st</sup> issue of Seven Days featured Black Lives Matter Vermont and our founder, Ebony Nyoni, with a 6 page article about the organization, the recent calls to action, and what comes next for racial justice in Vermont. Seven Days VT has a circulation of 36,000 including greater Burlington, Middlebury, Montpelier, Rutland, White River Junction and Plattsburgh.

[Read the full Seven Days Article](#)



CONFERENCE continued from page 2



leadership of the civil rights movement. And women of color didn't have a recognized space within the feminist movement.

The recent Women's March that took place in Washington presented an opportunity for collaboration possibilities between feminists and between those working for racial justice. Now feels like an opportune time for Vermont to take advantage of that same momentum, and capitalize on that opportunity to build coalitions across and between movements. So part of the conference is this coalition building and forming the foundation for white women allies. And part of it flows right squarely in the ongoing emphasis of the BLM movement and to recognize, center, and validate the leadership of women of color.

**As a woman of color in Vermont, how has your experience been in general? Is the state hospitable to live in compared with other states you've lived in? Has white supremacy influenced your daily life in VT?**

I think the experience of being a woman of color in VT is like many other experiences of living that are integral to one's identity: it's a hard thing to sum up. There's always a feeling

of excitement and relief and affinity when I have the opportunity to interact with, meet, interface with other women of color. There aren't a lot of people of color in VT so it's always a nice immediate affinity space.

**If you experience a relief when in a shared space with other women of color, does that mean that being around white Vermonters is some kind of strain?**

Yeah that's a fair way to put it, it can be a strain. Not that people are inhospitable or hostile. But there is at least the assumption of a shared experience and a shared understanding of the world that exists when I'm around another person of color. There's a fear that's always nagging at the back of my mind when I'm with white people. That question in my mind is, "Will they say something that betrays the trust we've developed? Will they say something that will require me to respond in a way for which I'm not emotionally prepared?"

I think for people who have seen *Get Out*, there's a clear example of this. It's a brilliant movie and people need to go see it. What really resonated with me was this idea of wanting for white people to succeed in being good allies. And that fear of, what if they aren't and what if they prove that to me? Then what will I do? The cool thing about horror is it exposes anxieties you didn't even know you had. And what we're talking about now is very interpersonal, but I expect the Sister's Keeper Conference will focus less on the interpersonal and more on the systemic. And in creating conversations around institutions, between self-advocates and allies, there will be opportunities to connect in a way that can put roots down for the work we do. I don't think Vermont is a hostile place, but I haven't been here long and there have been a lot of other women of color I've talked

continued on page 5

CONFERENCE continued from page 4

to who have said, “This place is hostile and it has done a number on me.” That hasn’t been my experience but certainly there is something going on. The purpose here is to create a safe space--an affinity space--so we don’t have to bear so much of the burden of the emotional work of confronting racism without a support network. The conference will be a space for activists to come together where you don’t have to lay the groundwork for what is racism and does it exist. You can just dive in. And it’s a freeing thing to bring in people who are already engaged at least on the level of knowing there is work to be done and wanting to be about that business. Sister’s Keeper is not a space that requires existing expertise, but it is a space that requires existing engagement.

**Have you ever had a mentor that influenced you?**

I’ve certainly had mentors that have influenced me. One person that immediately comes to mind is Dr. Susan Abraham. She is a woman of color and a scholar who does work in religious studies around christianity and colonialism. She comes to mind because she helps me think about problems in systemic ways . She helped me look at systems of oppression and see the spiderweb-like quality to it. She helped me to look beyond the individual experience to see the structures. She helped me see the world in a different way and that’s what a mentor does. I hope this conference provides a plethora of opportunities for people to look at things in new ways. People can come engaged and get energized. That would be a really wonderful thing.

**Are you concerned with violence against women of color in this state?**

Always concerned with violence against any group of people who have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised. I worry

about the things that are happening at [South Burlington High School](#) and the rebel controversy. Trump hasn’t really brought about a new thing necessarily but I think people are more frequently more overt than I’ve seen in recent memory and I worry about that. I worry about speaking in a public forum about an unpopular subject. I worry about my colleagues and friends who do the same thing. I certainly worry about that and I think probably all of us do.

**How do you see women of color interacting with the higher education system? Is there enough access? Once there, is there enough opportunity? Have you personally ever experienced the negative effects of white supremacy in the higher education system?**

That’s a great question, and the role of women of color in academia is going to be on the list of topics at the conference. [Professor Kathryn Dundy](#) from St. Mike’s is on the list of possible presenters, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she talked about that very topic. The thing about women of color in academia that I’ve heard is that you’ve got to be twice as good to get half as far. Without doing a statistical analysis of the veracity of that maxim, it’s certainly true that there’s extra work that has to be done and that doesn’t always get you as far as you’d like. That’s certainly true for students who feel pressed to demonstrate that they deserve be in that space. It’s true for professors who take on the extra, unofficial but very real emotional burden of mentoring every student of color that comes through their door seeking a sympathetic ear from someone like them. Women in our society are stereotypically expected to be in the role of nurturing. We assume that women will naturally provide the nurturing work. Couple those gender expectations with the supply-and-demand effects of lots of students

continued on page 6

CONFERENCE continued from page 5

of color seeking out very few faculty of color to mentor and guide them, and you have black and brown professors with a huge amount of added work. I guarantee you, students of color will seek out faculty of color, particularly women, for support. Maybe professor Dungy will be able to speak to that more at the conference.

**Why are you personally motivated to make change for women of color in Vermont?**

To the degree that we're able, we're required to give of our gifts. I'm someone who has benefitted from the support of a strong and loving community and that's something I want to be able to pass on. I don't know if motivated is the right word. It feels like duty a lot of the time. Sometimes I feel like I'm coming into it kicking and screaming. There's always something I'd rather be doing, like resting, spending time with friends and family, or just taking in some Netflix, but I don't think our community is at a point where we can put this work off. The resting time is going to have to come later.

**Do you see the opiate crisis affecting women of color differently?**

I'm sure there are different nuances to how it affects women of color. What I have found to be true is when people are facing a challenge--especially when they are in a situation when they are on the margins--there is that much more effort required and difficulty involved in accessing those services. One thing that's frustrating for a lot of people of color in watching this crisis right now is knowing that this time around white families are being affected--white parents' babies are dying--and *now* the country is paying attention. People paid attention before with crack cocaine epidemic of the nineties, but now they are paying attention with empathy. Crack cocaine was re-classified and hyper-criminalized in a

much more expansive way than cocaine was. It was the same drug, but crack was the drug black people were using. It came with higher penalties, longer sentences, more-focused enforcement; we criminalized the hell out of it. We [communities of color] faced the [90s drug crisis](#) experiencing a lot of force and no mercy, and it's a very different story now to hear calls for understanding, calls to see this as a disease. Calls to respond with compassion. It's not that the black community doesn't want that for our white brothers and sisters, but we want that for ourselves, too. It saddens us to know that we weren't offered that. So does the opioid crisis affect women of color differently? Well, given the history and what we know about access for people of color and marginalized populations, yeah I'm certain it does affect women of color differently.

**Is there anything else you'd like to add about the conference or other topics?**

I just want to come home to the original point. This conference is going to be an opportunity to come together, be in an engaged space, and explore the most pressing issues of our movement. continued on page 7

Libby Greene is a Black Lives Matter Vermont member and organizer who is involved in the Burlington and Rutland areas. She moved to Vermont at the end of 2015 from the greater Boston area and has been involved in the movement since the roll out of the first phase of strategic growth. Libby is involved in the Black Lives Matter Newsletter and is always excited about bringing new people into the movement. Libby holds a masters degree in theology from Harvard Divinity School, and professionally, she is interested in helping teams honor values and manage change. Libby lives with her wife and family in Essex Junction.



A family-friendly day filled with speakers and workshops. Free childcare will be provided. [Register](#) online. BLMVT Members \$20 / Non-member Students \$22 / Early Registration \$22 / Non-members \$25 / Premium Registration \$75\* (includes raffle entry, t-shirt, bumper sticker, 25% off coupon at Shop 4 Change, one week free coffee, significant portion of your fee supports the first annual BLMVT Summer Camp.)

CONFERENCE continued from page 6

We're hoping there's a great turnout on this. We're reaching out primarily to women of color; this conference is for them. Secondly we need and want our sister allies to attend. After those two groups, we are hoping we'll have men of color interested in the issues of women of color. Finally, we want our white brothers at the table, too. We have a partner in the Winooski school district that is working with us to provide space, so we hope the largest turnout is from Winooski residents themselves. When activists and community members get together, unbelievable things can happen and there's no limit to what we can accomplish. It's always surprising. In my experience, it's impossible to know how these things go and what happens there unless you show up. Those of us involved in planning the My Sister's Keeper Conference are hoping everyone shows up for this.

## **ACTION!** *Steps you can take to support the movement today*

- **SUPPORT** the amendment to H.308 (formerly H.492). Call the Sergeant at Arms at 802-828-2228 to express your support. If you don't know who your state senator is, you can find that out [here](#). You can also send an email to [jmiller@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:jmiller@leg.state.vt.us). When you call or email, you can say: "Hi, I'm [Name] from [Town]. I would like to register my support for the amendment to H.308. We need a Racial Justice Oversight Board to ensure we are implementing initiatives to advance racial justice in Vermont. I encourage [legislator] to support this amendment.
- **FOLLOW** Black Lives Matter Vermont on Facebook to stay up to date with the latest BLMVT news and events. Search "Black Lives Matter VT" to find, like, and follow our page. Check in often for info and updates!
- **INVITE** a friend to be a part of the movement! Encourage them to attend the next BLMVT meeting or event to learn more, or have them visit our [website](#) to become a member.