

# The Town of Los Gatos Moves Forward with the Help of ALF Insights

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## Climate of Fear

Disruption of public meetings. Threats against elected officials and their families. A swastika drawn on the grounds of a local Jewish community center.

In October 2021, tensions simmering below the surface, possibly for generations, spilled out in the Town of Los Gatos Council Chambers. A group of towns folk opposed to Los Gatos' recent civic equity work, including the painting of a rainbow-colored crosswalk near Los Gatos High School, brought the proceedings in the council chambers to a halt. Angry citizens hurled verbal attacks at the Mayor, her family, and other Town Council members. The tumult extended beyond the council chambers, with protestors showing up at the homes of the Mayor and other council members.

The Town of Los Gatos was reeling from negative publicity, spasms of hate speech, and a pervasive climate of fear. The **2022 March Against Hate**, which concerned citizens organized, drew more than 2000 participants, brought awareness to a string of disturbing incidents in the Town of Los Gatos, and demonstrated the need for renewed efforts to bring the community together.

## Pushing Equity Forward

Prior to these episodes at the Town Council, Los Gatos had been working on the adoption of a [Justice Equity Diversity and Inclusion \(JEDI\) Plan](#). The work on this plan hastened in 2021 when it became clear that the Town could do more to create a welcoming community in Los Gatos.

**Laurel Prevetti**, Los Gatos Town Manager and American Leadership Forum Senior Fellow with Class XXXIV, was front and center for the disruptions of 2021 and explains that while tensions have cooled a bit, the

people who caused much of the havoc are still agitating. "Well, unfortunately, it's still out there. So, the two main players who were very active in 2021 are continuing to write to our town council; sometimes, they appear at our public meetings. The personal attacks on officials' children are not happening right now. But they are being very clear that they're watching, and they still send hateful messages to all of us."

## **The Commission**

The Town of Los Gatos contracted ALFI to lead a process of discovery, speaking with 27 different individuals from the business, education, faith, and other community groups to hear their thoughts on the JEDI work. Following that process, ALFI was contracted to dive deeper through the facilitation of a community advisory group that would provide input on the Town's proposed JEDI plan and strategies for implementation.

ALFI faculty member Jason Reynolds, a member of ALF Class XXXIII, was part of the team leading these sessions. While all participants in the Community Advisory Group were willing to do the work, Jason remembers there were also very real concerns for some. "I think there was concern about the loss of relationships. I think people have learned how to maneuver and interact with one another on a very surface level. But, if we are pushed, and we bump heads, on some ideological issues, some folks were concerned about if their relationships would last, they were wondering if it's worth it to do this work, and so, I think people were making that calculus as well." ALF Senior Fellow Darcie Green of Class XXVIII was also a facilitation team member.

## **What Makes An Inclusive Town?**

ALF Insights facilitators asked the participants of the Community Advisory Group to define what an inclusive Los Gatos would look like. The responses varied, but some consistent themes emerged. Members of the group envisioned Los Gatos as a safe, welcoming, visibly supportive town where a genuine sense of belonging is available to everyone.

Members of the group also identified several opportunities that could emerge from the Town pressing forward with the JEDI plan, including the opportunity for the Town government to create new initiatives, policies,

and actions that center community learning and leverage the power of the arts to bring residents together. Another bold possibility that emerged from the group was the idea that Los Gatos could most effectively address issues of equity by creating more affordable housing.

## **The Work Continues**

The Community Advisory Group informed a set of ALFI recommendations for the Town, including more cross-organizational collaboration, erecting safe spaces, building the capacity for equity work, leveraging diversity for economic vibrancy, involving youth, continuing to build affordable housing, and the creation of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission composed of 11 appointed members.

As exciting as all these ideas and potential initiatives were, the Town had yet to get council approval for the commission work to move forward. There were still elements inside and outside of the council chambers who were opposed to Los Gatos creating the commission and its specific focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Ahead of the vote to accept or reject the commission plan, Prevettti was well aware that this initiative could ultimately fail: "I'm hopeful that we'll have support from our elected officials. But again, part of what we're learning is that a lot of folks are new to equity work. So some folks are like, "I don't see myself reflected in the work". And so we try to explain how everybody really is reflected in the work. So we still have a lot to do."

The time and energy invested by the Community Advisory Group and members of the Town government hung precariously as the Town council would vote on whether to create a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission in September.

## **Just Getting Started**

Deliberations about the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission went late into the night on Tuesday, September 25th. Still, the Town council ultimately voted to create the 11-member commission. While this surely felt like a milestone for all those pushing for it, in many ways, it is just the beginning of the Town's equity journey. ALFI Chief Facilitation Officer Jenny Nikualus is hopeful about the Town's future direction and ongoing

engagement with ALFI: "We are thrilled by this step, as well as the prospect of ultimate acceptance of the full JEDI Plan, which will be finalized in January of 2024. It is difficult for government entities to do this work and to stick with it through many obstacles. The creation of the commission and the work of Laurel and the Town staff to continue bravely pushing forward deserves to be recognized."