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Diversity Forum is larger than ever with the move to a virtual format

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By **DONOVAN HARRELL**

It was unclear how Pitt's annual diversity retreat would be conducted this year amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the beginning of the planning stages, Ron Idoko, the diversity and multi-cultural program manager for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, thought the office would try a more "scaled-back" approach in light of the pandemic.

But Kathy Humphrey, senior vice chancellor for Engagement, had other aspirations.

"We started this out by saying, 'OK, we can't do an in-person retreat,'" Humphrey said. "We could have accepted that as defeat and walked away, but we couldn't. We couldn't afford to accept that as defeat."

Instead, Idoko said, Humphrey wanted the 2020 Diversity Forum to go the opposite direction and expand. Now, it has grown larger and longer than ever with its transition to a completely virtual format.

The Advancing Social Justice: A Call to Action forum, which will take place from July 28 to 30, has 8,000 people registered as of July 24. At least 2,500 are non-Pitt affiliates and 1,000 are educators from outside of Pitt, Idoko said. And there are more than 55 different workshops planned. Registration is still open.

These workshops will discuss a wide range of topics from anti-racist strategies and art activism to tech equity and water insecurity. Scholar and activist Ibram Kendi, author of "How to Be an Anti-racist," will be the keynote speaker. Activist and academic Angela Davis is also scheduled to speak on July 28 in a discussion with Humphrey and Provost Ann Cudd.

"I'm delighted to be one of the speakers of Pitt's three-day virtual forum on antiracism and social justice education," Kendi said in an emailed statement. "I hope this forum can move us, move our ideas, move our policies forward towards justice and equity."

In previous years, the retreat took place in a day, and eight was the highest number of workshops held at the diversity retreats, Idoko said. The retreat last year included roughly 350 people.

"The goal was to really think about, how do we engage the broader community?" Idoko said of this year's diversity forum. "In the past, the retreat was limited to staff, faculty — and so, (we're) expanding the opportunity for registration to anyone."

This upcoming school term is the Year of Engagement at Pitt, and Humphrey saw this forum as an opportunity to engage people worldwide. For example, there are people registered from Canada and places in Africa, Humphrey said. She added that she doesn't "ever see this forum going back to in-person" because of how far it has reached.

But with a forum of this size, it can be daunting to figure out which events to attend, especially if a participant is new to topics surrounding equity and inclusion.

Humphrey said it helps if participants focus on topics that they know the least about and review the sessions before they participate.

"They have to come to the forum with needs. And they have to try to get those needs met," Humphrey said. "I want to encourage people to do some self-examination before you get there."

Since people can't attend every session, each workshop will be recorded and uploaded to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion website within a week of the forum, Idoko said, which is another advantage of the digital format.

Humphrey added that she believes the forum will still provide a similar level of intimacy compared to when it was in person. She also said that in the future, she

In the future, Humphrey believes the forum will remain virtual "because of the impact that we are able to make in this medium."

She said she hopes people leave this forum with new skillsets and a drive to use them to promote change.

"For me, the forum is about tool creation," Humphrey said. "Because I don't want people just to have conversations. I want people to walk away from the forum and say, 'these are things I concretely can do to make the places where I stand, better.' "

Featured sessions

6 p.m. July 28: "A Call to Activism: Witnessing Globally, Responding Locally," with Clyde Wilson Pickett, vice chancellor for diversity and inclusion; Leigh Patel, professor in the School of Education; Jasiri X, rapper, activist and founder of anti-violence group 1Hood; Darren Whitfield, assistant professor of Social Work

9 a.m. July 29: “America’s Persistent Pandemic — Racism: How to Foster Antiracist Practices and Create a Culture of Inclusion, Equity and Justice,” with Ibram Kendi, professor, Department of History, Boston University, and one of the nation's leading scholars on race and racism. Followed by a panel discussion with Chancellor Patrick Gallagher; Keisha N. Blain, associate professor of history; Majestic Lane, chief equity officer and deputy chief of staff, Office of the Mayor, city of Pittsburgh; and Morgan Ottley, president of the Pitt Black Action Society. Valerie Kinloch, dean of the School of Education; and Eric Macadangdang, president of the Student Government Board, will serve as moderators.

Noon July 29: “Turn the World Inside Out: Art as Activism,” with Brittney Chantele, hip-hop artist and activist; Rangoli Pittsburgh, a group dedicated to uplifting the voices of South Asian LGBTQ+ community of Pittsburgh, Sarah Huny Young, a creative director, photographer, interdisciplinary artist; and Joseph Hall, executive director of the Kelly Strayhorn Theater, as moderator

3 p.m. July 29: “The Contagion of Xenophobia,” with Phuc Tran, author, educator, classicist; Alyssa Khieu, advocacy chair of the Asian Student Alliance; Waverly Duck, urban sociologist and associate professor of Sociology; and Sheila Velez-Martinez, the professor of Refugee, Asylum and Immigration Law and director of clinical programs; and Paula Davis, assistant vice chancellor for Health Sciences Diversity as moderator.

9 a.m. July 30: “From Protest to Policy: Environmental Justice, Economic Equity and Community Activism,” with Fred Brown, president and CEO of the Forbes Fund; Carl Redwood, community organizer at Pittsburgh Hill District Consensus Group; Olivia Bennett, a member of Allegheny County Council; Jerry Dickinson, associate professor of Law; anupama jain, executive director of Pittsburgh’s Gender Equity Commission; Hillary Roman, ADA coordinator for the City of Pittsburgh; and Kristin Kanthak, associate professor of Political Science

Noon July 30: “Faith on the Front Lines: The Role Religious Communities Play in Times of Social Activism and Division,” with John Wallace, vice provost for Faculty Diversity and Development, and senior pastor of Bible Center Church in Homewood; Wasi Mohamed, senior policy officer with the Pittsburgh Foundation; Kathryn Fleisher, University student, social justice activist, and 2020 Truman Scholar; the Rev. C. Matthew Hawkins; and Emiola Jay Oriola, program manager for Pitt’s Office of Interfaith Dialogue and Engagement as moderator

3 p.m. July 30: “Working Together/Healing Together: Transforming Care via Social Justice,” with Sage Hayes, who focused on healing from collective trauma and embodied trauma; Felicia and Martin Freidman, founders of YogaRoots on Location; and Jay Darr, director of the University Counseling Center as moderator

In addition, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion is hosting the Art of Diversity Showcase and Competition. Winners will be announced at the Diversity Forum.

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