

MINUTES of the  
SPECIAL MEETING OF THE SELECT BOARD  
TOWN OF MARLBORO

Thursday, July 20, 2020  
Meeting via Zoom Call Online  
5pm

ATTENDANCE: Present: In attendance via Zoom, due to COVID-19 precautions: Jesse Kreitzer, Select Board Chair; Aaron Betts, Member; Pam Burke, Select Board Assistant; Seth Andrew, Marcellina Blow-Cummings, Meg Guilford, Tonia Kennedy, Basil Smikle, Jazel Smith, and Chandell Stone from Degrees of Freedom; 143 members of the public were also in attendance on the Zoom call; Absent: Julia von Ranson, Vice Chair. Names for those who made public comments have been noted. Zoom screen names and first names are included in cases where the full name of the speaker was unknown

**Called to order 5:02pm**  
**Unscheduled Open Public Comment**

Kreitzer welcomed attendees and shared the rules of procedure for public participation. He asked attendees to submit questions to Degrees of Freedom through the Zoom chat feature. The questions would be compiled and shared with Degrees of Freedom, and the group was asked to respond before the regular Select Board meeting on August 13, 2020.

L. Perna, encouraged members of the public to speak up and be civil in the spirit of recently deceased U.S. Representative and Civil Rights leader John Lewis. Dan Macarthur, encouraged members of the public to also engage in the spirit of Marlboro College. Alice Grossman stated it was important to respect the students of Black and Brown at Democracy Prep “B&B at DP” and that she was shocked by what she read about Democracy Builders. Shakira O’Kane, an ex-employee of Democracy Prep said they were attending in solidarity with B&B at DP and that they hope that there are more POC on the board of Degrees of Freedom and wants to know how things will be different on this campus than at DP.

Lissa Harris, read a prepared statement:

*My name is Lissa Harris and I am a founding member of the Coalition for Black and Brown students in Marlboro, VT. I am also on the Marlboro School Board. I’m going to speak directly to the Democracy Builders Degrees of Freedom design team members who are on the call tonight. I’m glad that you asked for this meeting with our town. I wish you had asked for it prior to talking to the Brattleboro Reformer and The Commons Newspaper. If you had, you would have known that not all of us are interested in only saving Marlboro College, that not all of us are opposed to any changes to the Marlboro College Campus, and that not all of us are cancelling what you are attempting to build here in our town.*

*What we are looking for is accountability.*

*Most of you have had some connection with the Democracy Prep charter schools. We believe the stories that are coming out of the collective Black N Brown at Democracy Prep. We believe them because we see the same stories of abuse and racism coming from students and faculty at Success Academy and KIPP and because we know the retribution that can occur for people of color who speak out against their oppressors. We've seen that retribution in Minneapolis and Kentucky over the last few months.*

*Both the non-anonymous and the anonymous testimony we've received from former and current students and faculty at Democracy Prep, give us grave concerns about how you will run your new Degrees of Freedom program on the Marlboro College campus.*

*We will not allow black and brown bodies to be subject to the same "no excuses" education model that has plagued Democracy Prep and we demand accountability.*

*We have compiled a list of specific requests that we believe will assure us that Degrees of Freedom is promoting educational equity, cultural cohesiveness between its student population and its education model, and maintaining fiscal sustainability in order to be a viable part of our townscape.*

*These are our requests:*

- 1. That at least 2 Marlboro residents be on the Democracy Builders Fund board, chosen by the select board.*
- 2. That the student and faculty handbook be posted on the website and accessible to the public.*
- 3. That yearly dollar reparations be given to Black N Brown at DP to distribute to families as they see fit*
- 4. Access to budgets for the 1st 5 years of operations*
- 5. Transparency around funding sources including any federal or state grants and any reporting requirements*
- 6. Full transparency around student and staff recruitment*
- 7. Full list of board members including terms of office and year joined*
- 8. Full transparency around growth and sustainability plans*
- 9. Full transparency around formal structures for community, student, and family input*
- 10. Description and documentation of formal a role for Seth Andrew including an evaluation process from the Board of Trustees*

*I will post these in the chat and I'm also happy to email a copy to you all so we all can be clear about what our expectations are. I'm looking forward to getting to know you and becoming intricately familiar with your program design process over the coming weeks and months, thank you.*

P. Hasselbach, a parent of a student at DP, stated they were in attendance in support of Democracy Prep and Degrees of Freedom. They stated they never experienced anything like what she had heard from B&B at DP and that DP gave amazing opportunities to students. Liz Greco urged teachers to "do the work" of anti-racism and asked what measures will be in place to

evaluate administration at Degrees of Freedom and asked who will be hiring the teachers. They also asked how the team at Degrees of Freedom will be held accountable to make sure no further harm is done to students. Kiah Morris, former state representative from Bennington County, VT, stated that she was calling in on behalf of people who have contacted her. She stated that while some aspects of the new school sound great at first, she is worried that the work will not be anti-oppressive. She is happy to help support the students & faculty.

Emma Sherefkin, read a prepared statement:

*I am a resident of Marlboro, I grew up here and attended the Marlboro Elementary School. Obviously, this community is very important to me and, having heard the allegations about the racist abuse that has been enacted by Democracy Builders' founder, Seth Andrew, I can absolutely say that we do NOT tolerate this kind of behaviour in our community.*

*If, the Marlboro College sale has already been set in stone, I believe it is of the utmost importance that we request that Seth Andrew steps down from his role (Seth, if you do not comply with this request) then you must be held accountable for paying reparations to the students/families/faculty and staff members who have been traumatized by your role in this institution. Additionally, we should ensure that the leadership and hiring process mirrors the demographic of the student body, and that the Marlboro community is integrated in this process. We must remember that we are already living on stolen land, land stolen from brown, indigenous, people. Is your work/institution going to acknowledge this Seth? These are also questions I might have had for Marlboro College as well, but it's important for us to look at these moving forward. Is the purpose of having a school in a rural, mostly white community, to run away from your controversial past in your Democracy Prep schools in Harlem? What does opening this school in our rural landscape assist in Democracy Builders' vision and curriculum?*

*I wonder why you haven't reached out to our community to see if we are indeed a town fit for your school? I would love to believe that Vermont is this absolute liberal cornerstone but I know that many Black and Brown people are made to feel uncomfortable by the silence and hidden agendas of white liberals in this area not to mention our incarceration numbers that reflect otherwise. I am confident in Marlboro's community standards but I question why Seth hasn't done the work to make sure that this is the type of community that his students will feel empowered and supported by.*

*The way that Marlboro must show that Black Lives Matter is by not letting someone who has caused trauma on black and brown students to enter our community. I wonder if Seth Andrew, as someone who believes in the vision of Democracy Prep, as it's founder, wouldn't step down from his position and transition leadership into the hands of individuals who reflect the demographics of the school. Thank you!*

Ariel Poster read a prepared statement:

*I grew up in Marlboro and I am a founding member of the Coalition for Black and Brown students in Marlboro Vermont. I stand in solidarity with Black N Brown at DP. Thank you to the Degrees of Freedom leadership for calling this meeting and engaging*

*with the community.*

*I am here tonight because I have been listening to the voices of the Black N Brown at DP collective and the stories of harm, abuse, and racism they experienced during their time at Democracy Prep. I want to know if you too are listening to these voices and taking them seriously. As a white woman I recognize that I have benefited from systemic racism and therefore it is my responsibility to amplify the voices of those who have been oppressed by these systems.*

*I read the recent interviews in the Reformer and the Commons where it sounded like the Degrees of Freedom team was attempting to discredit Black N Brown at DP because the allegations are mostly anonymous and because you all had positive experiences at Democracy Prep. The fact that some people went through the school without having negative experiences in no way disproves the allegations coming from Black N Brown at DP. Marginalized voices don't always speak out when they experience trauma because they don't feel like they have the power to and because reporting it can often cause more trauma. That doesn't mean we shouldn't listen when they are finally brave enough to speak. By questioning their legitimacy we diminish their lived experience of abuse and silence their voices. This is another form of abuse.*

*764 Vermonters signed a Change.org petition to stand in solidarity with Black N Brown at DP. The petition called for the cancellation of the sale to Democracy Builders because your leadership has yet to demonstrate how you plan to repair past harms and do things differently this time. The petition reads, "We should have been speaking out in defense of these voices when they were kids and the harm was happening. We can't make excuses or go back but now we have an opportunity to stand with them as adults and help insure that this kind of abuse is not perpetuated. Not in Marlboro, Vermont or anywhere else. If we are silent we too are complicit in perpetuating systemic racism and abuse."*

*We, the concerned members of this community, want to know how Degrees of Freedom plans to repair past harms and provide a safe and anti-racist space for your students. We want to see yearly dollar reparations given to Black N Brown at DP to distribute to families as they see fit. We want to see an independent investigation into the allegations of racism and abuse. We want to see the majority of the leadership of Degrees of Freedom match the demographics of the student base you plan to serve. We want to know how you plan to not repeat past mistakes if so far your staff and leadership are all coming from Democracy Prep. We want to hear what formal structures for community, student, and family input you plan to use so that people feel comfortable coming forward with complaints. Thank you for taking the time to listen and engage with this community. We hope you will be transparent, take full responsibility for past mistakes, and communicate directly with this community moving forward. Thank you.*

Adrian Segar stated that he cannot find recent tax returns from Democracy Prep and has not received a direct answer concerning them. Jalyn Cox & Sydney Logan from Emerson College "Power" (Protesting Oppression With Educational Reform) stated that they were in attendance in solidarity with B&B at DP and that the students, faculty & staff from Democracy Prep deserve respect and the leadership at Democracy Prep should be held accountable. Alexandro stated that he was sorry for the town losing the college, and stands in solidarity with B&B at DP. He asked

how past harms will be repaired and not repeated. Tina Olsen said she has witnessed trauma of abuse and that abusers don't change easily. Amy Tudor, standing in solidarity with B&B at DP, read a prepared statement from Kate Hollander:

*I'm Kate Hollander, a 2002 graduate of Marlboro College. I hold an MA in creative writing and PhD in history, both from Boston University. I have taught both creative writing and history at a wide range of colleges and to a diverse body of students. I definitely understand the desire to start a new college. I understand the magic of Vermont and the campus on Potash Hill. Put those two things together, and I can imagine why you want to be there, doing what you're doing, dreaming up what you're dreaming up. But I have some questions and concerns about this new college proposed for Potash Hill.*

*I'm concerned that Seth Andrew does not hold a doctorate and I want to know if he has ever taught at the college level. I want to know if any of the founding staff hold terminal degrees, have ever taught college, or worked at or run a college. I want to know if they understand issues of accreditation, the ADA as it pertains to college-level instruction, and FERPA. I hear that all classes will be taught by adjuncts want to know whether Seth Andrew understands the exploitation inherent in that strategy and the problematic and unethical position it places both students and faculty in. I want to know what Seth Andrew and his team would do if their adjunct faculty tried to unionize.*

*I'm concerned that this college is being pitched as innovative, yet I haven't seen any argument that it's necessary. Students are served in every state, including Vermont, by a community college system, a public university system, and many large and small private colleges and universities. I don't understand why a student would choose to earn an associate's degree at this new college, and then have to transfer somewhere else to finish with a BA.*

*Seth Andrew went to Brown and Harvard. I want to know whether he thinks this college is going to deliver an education comparable to that which is available to students at those schools, or other excellent schools of all orientations and missions—including the former tenant of Potash Hill, Marlboro College. I want to know whether Seth Andrew would have chosen an education like the one he's proposing to deliver, instead of going to Brown. If not, then I want to understand who he thinks is going to choose this education, and why, and why it's worth steering them here instead of to a community college or other, already-existing institution with a **public mission**. I want to be assured that this is not simply further segregation, a college that from the outset is designed for poor or Black and Brown students out of some misguided understanding that "this is the best they can get." I want to understand why, if the mission of Democracy Prep and Seth Andrew's other schools is to ready students for college, some of them are going to want to go to this online/low-res associate's-degree-granting school instead of any other college in the United States. Does Seth Andrew think they are not capable of getting in or succeeding somewhere else?*

*I stand with the members of the Black N Brown at DP collective. I hear what they are saying, and I want to amplify it. What I hear is that Seth Andrew's other educational projects have resulted in trauma instead of learning. I read that there are disciplinary techniques that are so psychologically and physically harmful that many of us might have imagined they were phased out of schools decades ago. I hear that these are justified by the suggestion that, somehow, they are corrective or salubrious for Black and Brown students. There is no way around the fact that that is a racist supposition. I want to know*

*whether such racist thinking is also inherent in the design of this new school.*

*In my experience, Marlboro College was a place of profound freedom and responsibility. We were responsible for our own education and conduct. There were no administrators doling out discipline or punishment. We were self-governing. We engaged in deep, self-directed study. Learning happened in a spirit of curiosity, seriousness, and joy. We were understood as equals in running the school and a real, if imperfect, egalitarianism and democratic spirit suffused the place. I want to know if Seth Andrew has ever been part of an educational community like that, whether he would know what to do with one if he stumbled on it, and whether he knows how to be that kind of neighbor to the Town of Marlboro.*

At 5:28 public comment was extended for another hour. (Kreitzer, Betts)

A member using the screen name of “I support Degrees of Freedom” said they find it unfortunate that people don’t understand what they are trying to do and that they stand for positive change. Kate Judd said they were concerned about the allegations of racism and feels the organization seems financially unreliable. Michael, a parent of four children that went through Democracy Prep, spoke in support of Seth Andrew, and can’t thank him enough. He never heard complaints of abuse while his kids were at school and urges everyone to listen to other points of view. Nelli Sargsyan acknowledged that we are all complicit in the white supremacist culture in which we live. She said this process is insufficient because we need to hear more from Degrees of Freedom about their pedagogy, curriculum, and hiring processes before we can ask questions. She said we were just thinking of this institution as one white guy which erases the work that leaders and faculty of color do. She said that just banishing the school from the town is an excuse from doing the real work of eradicating racism and white supremacy and that rather, we should engage.

Lauren Poster said she believes in public education and does not support charter schools. She has many concerns about the finances and lack of transparency at Degrees of Freedom. Tish Moya, a former student at DP is in support of Degrees of Freedom. They said they felt challenged, supported & cared for during their time at DP. Tarrence MacNeille lives next door to DP in New York. He is very angry about some comments he heard in the meeting, and has had many friends attend DP, all of whom have nothing but great things to say about Seth Andrew. He asked those that are in Vermont to trust him. Dany with the Tenants Union of Brattleboro would like a statement on how they plan on not repeating past mistakes. Tonia Kennedy stated that they felt a lot of comments at the meeting had been unbalanced and asks that everyone give Degrees of Freedom a chance. Curtis Archer lives in Harlem, and his son attended DP. He stated that his experience with DP was nothing but stellar, and was very taken aback by what he was hearing at the meeting. He said maybe the town needs to give Seth and Degrees of Freedom a chance to show what they are capable of. He understands that Vermonters are very protective of their towns, but he really respects and looks up to Seth Andrew.

Stacy Byrdsell, a former teacher in support of Degrees of Freedom, said to make sure you hear all the voices and let all stories be represented. Joshua Burns said he hasn’t known how to move on from Marlboro College closing, and was originally excited to hear about a new institution. He said that the meeting had been good so far, and was happy to hear from people of color who’ve worked with DP. Mike Cummings, a former student at DP, objected to comparing discipline at DP with prison. He said that some of the statements he’s seen from B&B at DP are false and filled with hyperbole. He said that Degrees of Freedom is a wonderful opportunity and should be

given a chance.

Meg Guilford said she appreciates support for B&B at DP students in Marlboro, however she cautions readers to let the statements from B&B at DP stand on their own and let Degrees of Freedom speak. Faruq Ibrahim said he was attending in support of Degrees of Freedom, and that his experience with Seth has been very favourable. He has not seen or heard anything like the negative things described.

At 6:30, it was decided that 40 minutes of public comment would be accepted after the presentation from Degrees of Freedom. (Kreitzer, Betts)

**Presentation from the Degrees of Freedom Team:** Chandell Stone, Basil Smikle, Jazel Smith, Tonia Kennedy, Meg Guilford, Marcellina Blow-Cummings, Seth Andrew

Chandell said they had asked for the meeting to provide clarity & contextualization around the anecdotes from B&B at DP. Basil Smikle shared his experience of trauma and challenges, and stated that Democracy Prep supports students who experienced similar challenges. Black and Brown families have been dealing with education inequities for over 100 years, Degrees of Freedom won't solve the entire problem, but they will offer some students the chance to get a sense of what college life is like and improve their skill set. Tonia Kennedy has been with the organization for ten years. She is dismayed that this is taking away time from their work moving forward. She asked that they be given a chance to show what they're made of and that they wouldn't disappoint. She feels like they've been shut down before they've even had the opportunity to show what they're made of.

Jesse asked if Degrees of Freedom has a board of directors. Chandell replied they do and they plan to expand it. At present they have a board of trustees, all of whom are people of color and constitute a range of professional experiences. Jay Smith, an alumni of Democracy Prep said she is on the board along with Marcellina Blow-Cummings, Stacy Byrdsell and Seth Andrew.

Jay Smith, board member of Degrees of Freedom, shared her challenges in affording college and with racism. She said she doesn't want to silence voices but does want to move forward. They are looking into ways to make sure stories like those from Black N Brown at DP do not happen again and take it very seriously.

Marcie Commings, board member and parent of a DP student, did not experience similar things and was very surprised to hear the stories. She says the school did so much that was positive for the children in the community.

Seth Andrew stated that after having two meetings with the School Board, one meeting with the Select Board and offering to speak with local press, they are still being told that they haven't engaged enough. He said that this has not been a welcoming process, it's been unpleasant and unreasonable and the staff on the campus have not been treated with the respect that they deserve. Seth said that Democracy Builders has no relationship with Democracy Prep, though there are a number of people who have attended or taught at Democracy Prep that work at Democracy Builders. Seth said he is not Degrees of Freedom or Democracy Builders. The team of staff and board is doing the hard work. They plan to build an anti-racist institution that learns from mistakes that have been made and welcomes anyone who wants to be part of that process.

Seth stated that he is on the Board of Democracy Builders. Once Degrees of Freedom opens, he anticipates they will have a new president and leadership, other than himself.

Meg Guliford, U of Pennsylvania, a trained social scientist, spoke to using empirical data to make policy decisions. She said we must attend to the issues raised by B&B at DP, we all work to be diligent about anti-racism every day. She spoke to an intentional and inherent bias against Black and brown people that runs through higher education.

Joshua Burns disrupted the meeting and was asked to leave.

Meg Guilford resumed her presentation discussing the tradition of legacy admissions of white students at U.S. colleges and its effects on black and brown students' ability to get into those schools. She spoke also to the lack of diversity in leadership and administrative positions. Degrees of Freedom offers students an opportunity that they would not otherwise receive. The design of the school offers an alternative to those who can't enroll in traditional residential programs. She said that many schools are working on anti-racism work right now, but it doesn't mean that they need to stop progress on everything else they are doing.

Chandell, as a former DP teacher and leader in the South Bronx, spoke to the immense challenge of making sure Black and brown children succeed in this society. DP has consistently helped students meet their academic goals. DP is not a blank slate in this conversation, they have gained the trust of many. Degrees of Freedom will be designed to address the needs of POC students. They are inspired by the legacy of Marlboro College. They want to collaborate with the community and construct a school that serves their needs. They will have a fellowship program in the fall to help build the program. They plan to take an additional year before opening. Citing the lateness of the hour and the hostility of the Zoom chat, Degrees of Freedom offered to read a list of questions from the discussion and respond at another time.

### **Unscheduled Open Public Comment Resumed**

Telling Truth spoke as a member of the B&B at DP collective in response to what they had heard from DP via news articles and the meeting tonight. They acknowledge that people have had both positive and negative experiences at DP and both are valid. They ask for accountability on behalf of DP and Seth Andrews. They added the following questions to the chat:

*1. Why has it taken 7 years after leaving Democracy Prep for you to start publicly reconciling with your role in perpetuating racist structures? 2. Why did you, Seth, hide all of the replies to your initial Medium essay barring the one positive review? 3. Why delete your Medium essay, but claim that anyone who wants to hear from you can reach out privately? 4. You've implied in your initial essay that those speaking out against you have hazy memories. Does this mean that your memories from DP are clear and therefore override anyone who submits to BNB@DP? 5. How did you select your majority BIPOC board? It seems now that you have perhaps created an echo chamber. 6. Natasha Trivers noted that your project is in no way tied to Democracy Prep, and yet you have an active DP staff member on your design team. How do you plan to continue to*

*distance yourself and your team from the network that you started?*

Zenzile Keith, a former staff member at DP, said one's positive experience has nothing to do with some of the negative things that happened to other people. She spoke to things she saw and heard and not everything that happened there was honest. She alleged that administrative scores at DP were fixed in its first year of operation. Sharoan, a Marlboro alumna, sounds like there needs to be a lot of action and conversation. We should use direct democracy to build something together. She said that DP did not offer Spanish because that was "street language". Another person using the screen name "I support Degrees of Freedom" said that the team at Degrees of Freedom are responsive and open to faculty and they should be given a chance. Aaron Walsh said there is a group of people in town who have been quiet but are listening and are looking forward to moving forward with healing and working together. Jay Smith said Degrees of Freedom have already been taking these conversations seriously. They are not trying to silence anyone. David White from the Marlboro Music Festival wishes everyone the best of luck.

Chandell Stone responded to a question from Jesse that they have a projected full opening of September 2021. Their pursuit of accreditation is in process. Mary Lin is hoping that DP will be willing to learn from Marlboro College alumni about self-directed education. Kayla noticed that most criticism is focused on Seth, but we're not hearing much from Seth. Martin shared a quote about education and said he is still not giving up on Marlboro College. Mike Cummings Jr. spoke to his experience at DP listening to students and respecting their opinions, and that "Telling Truth's" testimony did not reflect how the school has evolved over the years.

Vivienne Coutant said we are two traumatized communities meeting for the first time and wonders how we can make it work. She spoke to the importance of the physical plant of the college to the townspeople and wonders how they will be welcomed there. Ayanna Mason, DP alumna, talked about the endless opportunities they were given and that the institution and Seth are not racist. She spoke of how Seth was supportive of her and her fellow students.

Jean Boardman said this beginning is not unlike what Marlboro College went through in their first years. She would like the community to welcome and help the group that's coming in. Colleges are in trouble now and a new way of education is certainly something we should be looking at, as well as keeping an eye on the concerns everyone has. Jesse encouraged the Degrees of Freedom design team to communicate and reach out to the community.

8:28 pm ADJOURN

