



# Moving the Needle Toward Racial Justice: RWRJ Expands from Social Group to Justice Guardian

Growing up in the predominantly White, affluent suburb of Cedarburg during the '70 and '80s, gave Mary Mazzeo Pucci few if any experiences with anyone outside of her race. Going to college, where she met her future husband, Michael, changed that.

Michael grew up in Racine, where he and Mary made their home together in 1995. The move awakened something inside.

“From day one, in what was a real blessing to me, he would challenge the way I felt about diversity,” says Mary. “We moved here, and I loved living in a diverse community. For the first time in my life, I had Black friends, who I loved and adored and raised my children with. I’ve been happier in Racine than anywhere else.”

What began as an awakening turned into an active fight for racial justice following the death of 18-year-old Ty’Rese West, who was shot and killed by Mount Pleasant Police Officer Eric Giese after being stopped for riding a bike without a light.

The killing rocked the community, and when the Racine County District Attorney declined to charge the officer, Mary turned to friends and social media to discuss and process what had happened. She created a private Facebook group called Racine Women for Racial Justice, as a platform for Women of Color and White women to discuss local racial justice issues.

That’s where she met Kelly Scroggins-Powell, a Black woman who grew up in Racine and had endured discrimination and racism. A mother, a minister, and an entrepreneur, Kelly had wide experiences involving racism and a desire to work for change in the community.

*June, 2020: Hundreds march in Racine to protest the murder of George Floyd and to stand in solidarity with each other.*



*Mary Mazzeo Pucci*



*Kelly Scroggins-Powell*

A year later, when George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis, the two women teamed up to create a community protest. By that time, more than 800 women were members of the Facebook group and hundreds took to Racine’s Main Street to voice their feelings about policing and racial justice. By the end of the week, roughly 500 additional women had indicated an interest in the group.

Within weeks, Mary and Kelly recognized they needed to create a nonprofit that would take on the work that a social media page could not accomplish. Racine Women for Racial Justice became an official nonprofit charitable organization (a 501(c)3) in late 2020, and last February, Kelly became its first executive director.

Much has been accomplished in this first year, and RWRJ is eager to build its capacity and increase its impact in Racine County and beyond.



# What Can You Do to Create Racial Equity?

Inequities are embedded in virtually every system in our modern world. How do we address such an overwhelming problem?

You can start by joining the conversation on our private Facebook Group and attending our many events. Learn about systemic racism and how it affects our entire society. Then decide how you want to become involved.

Talking and listening may change hearts, but that alone won't change systems. Real change comes with action. You can assist us by joining the Justice Initiative and other RWRJ efforts. We need people to take on racial injustice in the courtroom, on the streets, in the schools, in our local governments and agencies. We do this with thoughtful contemplation about the issues and through collaboration to find solutions.



**Laura Powell**, Volunteer and Justice Initiative member

*"I've joined RWRJ because we have a huge problem in our community, and the United States as a whole, with racism. I am a true believer in taking direct action when it comes to issues in your community, and RWRJ is an organization doing just that."*



**Mary McIlvaine**, Training participant

*"Racine Women for Racial Justice shines a light on local systemic injustices, and promotes community involvement and education. I feel better informed by RWRJ as I work for change." I am a true believer in taking direct action when it comes to issues in your community, and RWRJ is an organization doing just that."*

## Justice Initiative Areas of Focus

1. **Court Services:** The Court Services Team works with professionals to bridge gaps in services to make the systems more just for BIPOC. The team also oversees the Justice Fund, which allocates resources to people who can't afford things necessary for a fair shake in the system.
2. **Policy and Advocacy:** By examining local cases and researching outcomes, this team works to identify issues and suggest actions.
3. **Response:** The Response Team engages RWRJ members and the community in actions intended to bring attention to injustices, provide services and encourage transformative change.

**The Justice Initiative meets the last Tuesday of every month at 6 p.m. Contact RWRJ to join the effort.**

## Shining Light on Injustice: RWRJ Justice Initiative and Fund

The video is horrific. A Black man is chased by a Racine County Sheriff's deputy and his canine partner, who brings him down by biting his leg. Here's the horrific part – the dog continues to attack and the deputy continues to use the taser even after the man has been cuffed and there is no sign of resistance.

This summer, RWRJ released the video and raised questions about the use of force in the case. RWRJ continues to seek answers about policies and practices of the Sheriff's Department and other law enforcement agencies when it comes to canine and taser use. Who oversees body and dash camera footage in order to recognize misuse of authority and excessive force in encounters with the public?

And because race and ethnicity are not included on police reports, it is difficult to determine what is happening to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) who encounter the Racine County Sheriff's Department.

Another video is equally disturbing. It shows a Racine County Jail inmate -- a young Black man -- in obvious mental distress. That young man, Malcom James, died in custody on June 1. The Kenosha County Sheriff's Department investigated the death and sent a sealed report to the Racine County District Attorney's Office, which has not released it.

While there is evidence that as many as one out of three inmates, nationally, have mental health issues, mental health treatment is scarce in Racine County, particularly for people of limited financial means.

RWRJ is focusing on the mental health crisis and excessive use of force as the first two major areas for study and action of its new Justice Initiative. The Initiative will shine a light on injustices embedded in the law enforcement and legal systems to raise public awareness and demand equitable treatment for BIPOC. The associated Justice Fund provides grants to BIPOC to help with court costs and other expenses that can make a big difference in a system rigged against them at every turn.



*The RWRJ Justice Fund assisted Deandre McCollum with community re-entry after his release from prison.*

# 2021 Justice Highlights

## JANUARY:

RWRJ creates an ambitious strategic plan, focused on four key areas:

- Provide education and training opportunities that bring awareness to systemic inequities and lead to transformative change;
- Increase engagement of Women of Color by creating leadership, volunteer and collective action opportunities;
- Establish community partnerships and maximize connections to bring more voices into the struggle for equity;
- Create an immediate response plan when local and national injustices come to our attention.



RWRJ joins the Racine Mirror as a co-sponsor celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King on the national holiday. The Rev. Al Sharpton is the featured guest, commemorating Dr. King's work and highlighting the work yet to be completed.

## FEBRUARY:



RWRJ celebrates **Black History Month** with daily profiles on Facebook of Black men and women who represented "firsts" for African Americans: Writers, entertainers, athletes, politicians and more.

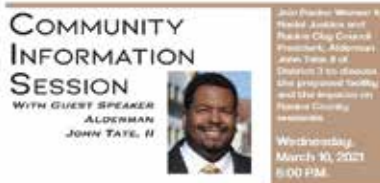
RWRJ rallies the community in support of a Black adolescent about to receive a significantly longer sentence than his White co-defendant for a crime they committed together. Over 40 people attend his sentencing hearing remotely, and many write letters to the judge on behalf of Traoun Oliver-Thomas. Following this community attention and pressure, Traoun receives a much more equitable sentence. He is scheduled for release at the end of the year.

## MARCH:

RWRJ offers **Women on the Front Line** -- civic engagement training that provides tools and resources for women about how to be advocates, allies and activists during a two-session workshop led by professional organizers.



Realizing that financial hardships create disparities for BIPOC in Racine's judicial system, RWRJ creates a **Justice Initiative Fund** to assist with court costs, clothing, housing and other needs, helping those without resources to ensure a fair trial and opportunity once they emerge from the system.



Another jail in the city? RWRJ reacts to community concerns and convenes an online community discussion with Alderman John Tate II about the proposed Racine County Youth Development and Care Center and its planned placement in the heart of Racine.

## APRIL:



Trainer Jeremy Tribblett leads nearly 50 women through a three-session **Micro-Aggression Game** so they can better understand micro-aggressions and how to respond to them in their personal lives, workplaces and social networks.

## MAY:



RWRJ initiates the **Racine Justice Alliance**, a collaborative group of 18 justice-seeking organizations that meets quarterly to

share updates and join forces on specific issues needing community attention. The more voices, the more likely the change.



RWRJ celebrates **Cinco de Mayo** with relevant history about this day and its significance to Mexican Americans.

## JUNE:

When two young Men of Color die in the Racine County Jail over Memorial Day weekend, RWRJ consoles the families and demands answers at a press conference and rally. One of the men had suffered a mental health crisis, prompting RWRJ to question our current culture of incarceration as a substitute for mental health care and leading to a mental health care focus for the **Justice Initiative**.

## JULY:

RWRJ questions the Racine County Board about its use of federal pandemic relief funds, making clear that it's a community priority to shift resources from incarceration to providing mental health care services, training county workers on implicit bias and racism, and reforming the law enforcement and judicial systems here that disproportionately impact BIPOC. Going forward, RWRJ will hold the County Board accountable for allocating funds to these priorities.

## AUGUST:



RWRJ releases shocking body camera footage from a Racine County Sheriff's deputy who pursued Deandre McCollum, a Black man, and repeatedly tasered him and ordered his canine

to attack him even after he was subdued and handcuffed. This egregious case propels RWRJ to launch its **Justice Initiative** to formally address the racial injustices embedded in local law enforcement and legal systems, and the excessive use of force in this community against BIPOC.

## SEPTEMBER:

The **RWRJ Book Club** is launched to facilitate thoughtful discussions about race. The first two books, *The Sum of Us*, by Heather McGhee and *So You Want to Talk about Race?* by Ijeoma Oluo, draw nearly three dozen women into several sessions of conversation.

RWRJ learns that Latinx/Hispanic students are being racially harassed at Racine Lutheran High School and partners with other local justice organizations to support affected students of color.

# What can you do to create Racial Equality?

Racine Women for Racial Justice is unique in that its Board of Directors and committees have shared leadership with Women of Color and White Women. Part of RWRJ's strategy is to combat systemic racism by raising new leaders and creating leadership opportunities for Women of Color.



## Meet Catalina Crespo, 24, Racine

"I was able to see the hard truth about racism and how it affects our economy, our mental health, how it affects everything in our lives," says Catalina Crespo, a Gateway Technical College graduate who was RWRJ's first intern while still in school.

Catalina shadowed Executive Director Kelly Scroggins-Powell on the job as her assistant.

"I walked away with a lot," she says. "I have a broader perspective about

what racism does to BIPOC. It has a domino effect on everything in this life."

"But I was also able to learn about the power of community and solidarity. How we did the rallies. It showed me how much power we really have to promote change. I had never attended a rally in my life. I was very empowered."

Crespo is a peer advisor at Gateway and a new member of the RWRJ Justice Initiative.

## Meet Angie Haney, 38, Kenosha

Through a partnership with the Public Allies Summer Corps Program, Angie Haney joined RWRJ as an intern. It was an investment that served Angie as well as the organization.

"My true take-away was learning to appreciate myself and what I have to offer," said Haney. "Kelly really showed me how to be there for myself, love myself and believe in the talents that I have."

The Alverno College student is working toward a Bachelor of Arts degree in Leadership and dreams of creating a nonprofit that lifts up girls and Women of Color.

"RWRJ is a great opportunity for women in the community, no matter what age, to learn about diversity, equity and to feel empowered by other women."



**The significant, impactful work we do requires funding and volunteers.  
Your contributions make RWRJ possible.**

**Please consider supporting us. You can donate today at [RWRJ.org/donate](https://www.rwrj.org/donate) Thank you!**



## Racine Women for Racial Justice

### OUR MISSION

Racine Women for Racial Justice unites and empowers Racine area women through education, conversation, critical analysis, collective action, and leadership to identify, interrupt and dismantle racism in the community.

### OUR VISION

Racine Women for Racial Justice envisions an equitable community where Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) experience justice, liberation, and freedom from marginalization, oppression and disenfranchisement.

To volunteer, contact us at: [kelly@rwrj.org](mailto:kelly@rwrj.org)  
262-977-7936

For more information,  
visit our website: [Rwrj.org](https://www.rwrj.org)



**Join us on Facebook.**

We have both a public page and a private group where we discuss issues, announce events and promote opportunities to engage in racial justice work.

(We do screen applicants for our group with a few questions when you sign up.)