

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 1, Diversity Roundtable w/Cinthya Allen

Runtime: 23 minutes 44 seconds

Tiffany Vrska, Chief Communications Officer 0:15

What's up, everybody? Welcome to *On West Gray*, the monthly podcast about all things local government here in the City of Norman. I'm your host Tiffany Vrska, the Chief Communications Officer for the City of Norman. Thank you all for being with us.

Now, this show is extra special. It's not only our first of many, but we have Chief Diversity and Equity officer Cinthya Allen as our guest today to talk about brand new programming right here in the city of Norman, our Diversity Roundtable initiative. This volunteer initiative will bring diverse communities together for engagement and education, and she is ready to tell us all about it.

Cinthya, welcome to the show.

Cinthya Allen, Chief Diversity & Equity Officer 0:52

Thank you so much, Tiffany, and congratulations on *On West Gray*. How exciting!

Tiffany Vrska 0:58

We're really excited! Yeah, this is I think a first for the City of Norman. And so hopefully, we'll reach more audiences, more citizens, for more engagement with this new program. So, thank you very much.

Cinthya Allen 1:10

That's fantastic. Well, and that's one of the keys to diversity and equity is just really engaging and growing educational opportunities. I'm so excited for what you're doing.

Tiffany Vrska 1:21

Awesome. Well, before we jump into the specifics of the Diversity Roundtable, tell us a little bit about the Office of Diversity & Equity, and what the purpose of this office is.

Cinthya Allen 1:34

Absolutely. Well, I'm so excited that for over a year now, we have had this office in play here at the City of Norman. We started with a blank slate, but really with a strong foundation of support from our City Manager, our department staff, everyone has been so on board, and Council as well. So really, with having that foundation, we have been able to transform, I think, opportunities for engagement. And the way that I have strategized our office is to really have a dual purpose of serving our internal functions. So, looking at all of our departments, all the way from Fire, PD (Police Department), to our Utilities and everything in between, to also connecting with community. So, also having that external perspective of engaging, and building opportunities to help our community feel more a part of our function and our city, really tapping into that essence of belonging and visibility, having representation. So, by having those two avenues, it's really been a constant flow of programming, whether it's engaging our employees through employee resource groups, or engaging our community through our diversity dialogues, and other ways of expanding our proclamations to really have an educative standpoint, but also an engaging standpoint. So, those are just a couple of ways that both areas, internal and external, have been touched on over the last year or so. And there's so much more going on which one of those pieces are what we'll talk about today.

Tiffany Vrska 3:23

Awesome. So, there is definitely an internal function to diversity and equity, and then externally as well with engaging the community. That kind of leads me into some of the follow up questions. There's a lot of companies, I think diversity and equity, those are kind of considered buzzwords today, right? So there's a lot of companies that are dedicating themselves to a mission of diversity and equity. Why do you think that that is?

Cinthya Allen 3:49

Yeah, that is a fantastic question, because we are seeing more and more companies, you know, dedicate a portion of their business segment to diversity and inclusion. You know, I think a lot of that it could stem from various things, and that thing of motivation is all very unique to the individual organization. It could be a response to social environments; it could also be a recognition that, in fact, workforce and employees thrive and they are more innovative when there is that inclusive space. It could also be the fact that there is a strong value to engaging an expanded market and an expanded workforce where there is tremendous economic value to having diverse populations. There are really a lot of angles, but whatever of these, or maybe a combination of these, I think what they lead us to is really having more inclusive communities and inclusive workspaces, which research shows do create more innovative and thriving environments, which I'm so excited about for our City of Norman.

Tiffany Vrska 5:07

Absolutely. Here at the city of Norman, our mission is building an inclusive community. Diversity and equity kind of plays right into that. What do you think that you've learned since taking on this position? I

know that you said a little over a year ago, you had stepped into this role, and it was brand new for our community. So, what have been your takeaways so far?

Cinthya Allen 5:30

It has been an opportunity to learn a lot, because, as I just mentioned, there are various reasons why diversity and inclusion, or diversity and equity, are brought into play. I think for us here at the City of Norman what has been one of my greatest learning opportunities have been just really the vast landscape in which we can impact and in which we can create opportunities for engagement. It could be easy to just say, "You know, what, we're going to focus on just one thing." It is also hard to do, because then we would be missing all of these other returns, and all of these other ways of affecting. So, for me, what has been one of the greatest learning opportunities is just how to measure and how to approach, in a strategic way, the various things that we can impact. So, as I mentioned, that internal driver of DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and also that external community engagement, balancing these in a strategic way in order to drive results and help people to see the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because that is one of the things that's important about this work is that everyone's at different spectrums, different places in the spectrum. Until we can really start to show those results that truly show this valuable for everyone, then that's when that magic happens. It's about driving strategy, knowing and realizing the fact that there's a vast amount of things we can be doing, but really just making sure that we're showing results along the way.

Tiffany Vrska 7:17

Awesome. Well, I think that the work that you have done so far has been incredible. I know I've been on about seven months, and I just couldn't imagine the team without you. I'm always thinking constantly, "How can we make sure that we're being accessible and inclusive?" in everything Communications says, and I think the rest of the management team kind of shares that sentiment because of your drive and passion. So, thank you for that. Now, let's go ahead and hop into the details of some of the Diversity Roundtable that we are now accepting applications for. What should people know about this program? Why was it created?

Cinthya Allen 7:54

Diversity Roundtable. Absolutely. Applications, as you've mentioned, are open now through May 30. Please go and check out, and I'll share this throughout, but go to NormanOK.gov/your-government/diversity-and-equity/diversity-roundtable for all of the information. So, what it is is a forum for community members to come in and have this two way opportunity of being able to engage and share what they know, what they feel their community needs to be, express opportunities for us to do better as the City of Norman, and our different functions of just outreaching and informing. It's also an opportunity for us to inform those communities and share educational opportunities. To show them this is the work that happens behind the scenes. This is how our boards and commissions function. This is how you can jump in and be a part of them. How do you apply? What do they do? How do they meet?

Where do they take the mission and actually apply it to be an actionable piece? Then, we're going to take it a step further as well and engage with our community by connecting with the Cleveland County election board and educating on things like how do you become a poll worker? How do you register to vote? We connect with our nonprofits and these are our various nonprofits. These are the gifts and talents they are looking for in their organizations. How do you see yourself fitting in? It's a real engaging opportunity. I'm so excited because it's not just a one way opportunity. It's a true two way opportunity for us to learn and hear from various diverse community members, but then for them to take the education that they get and share it and be able to have more inclusivity, more belonging, more presence and representation.

Tiffany Vrksa 10:09

Absolutely. I'm hearing themes of when you talk about information sharing and education, you're really empowering residents to be able to use that information and seek new opportunities and collaborations. I think that that's really special. Now, let me ask you this: how many members will you be accepting for the roundtable, and what is the process? I know that they fill out an application, but who reviews those applications? What does that look like?

Cinthya Allen 10:42

Yeah, thank you, Tiffany. I do have to say, though, I'm so happy to hear you say the word empowered. That is exactly what I think we're aiming to build: a more informed and empowered community, so that they know how to plug in, and they feel comfortable with plugging in. That's really on point. In regards to your question, this roundtable will be made up of about 11 to 15 members. I really want to make sure that it's an intimate setting where we have the ability to discuss, to be open. A lot of the items that we'll discuss I'm sure are very personal, and do take that openness, that vulnerability. It should be a space where we can trust and build that relationship. In regards to the length of time that they'll serve, it will eventually be a two year term for all of the participants. This initial one will be broken into half of it will be one year, the other half will be two years, in order to keep some folks on board as we do the next round of applications next year. From then on, two years. As far as the application, the design of the application is meant to inform what diversity they bring to the table, what their experience and that lived diversity experience brings. The evaluation of the applications will be done by a group of community members in different areas that will follow a set rubric in order to keep you that equality throughout the application process. I think that we will really come away with a strong group. I'm really excited about the fact that we're already getting some applications. That's great. We want more, so please, everyone who is interested, visit NormanOK.gov/your-government/diversity-and-equity/diversity-roundtable and submit your application. It's going to be a wonderful experience that's going to provide a two way opportunity for learning and education, empowerment, engagement, all of these powerful words that really will get us to this next level of engagement at the City of Norman.

Tiffany Vrska 13:21

That sounds incredible. I'm very excited to see that take off. I was also going to ask, and I know you teased it a little bit, but about connecting with the election board, learning more about voting, and connecting with our nonprofit sector here in the community. Is there any other special sneak peeks that you can tell us about as far as the lineup of events for this group of citizens that are coming together? What might they be able to experience during the process while they are participating in the Diversity Roundtable?

Cinthya Allen 13:57

Absolutely. You've touched on one of my personal favorites, because in fact I went through this experience of figuring it out. With the Cleveland County election board, one of the many interesting pieces of work that they have are volunteer opportunities for poll working for our various elections. By the way, we have multiple elections throughout the year. There's always an opportunity to hop in and help. I don't know about you or anyone listening, but sometimes as I would go and cast my vote, I would wonder, "Wow, what would it take to sit on the other end of that table and help give out forms, or fill out the signature books," just all of the different pieces that it takes to put on an election. I always thought, "Wow, they must have gone through a lot or they must have this special access." So, I started inquiring about it and one of the first responses that I received was, "We need more volunteers! Thank you for asking!" They were so helpful and thankful. I learned that the process is really one that is accessible. It is low barrier in regards to: are you interested? Can you serve? They will help find a way and even assign you to locations that are close to your home if transportation is an issue or something to that effect. The point is that being a poll worker is such an important piece, because not only does it give you that feeling of servitude, of being able to be an engaged part of your community, of handing out those ballots, but then it also helps the voters come in and see diversity at that table, and feel comfortable, and feel welcome to just be a part of the process. There's theories and research that show that there are these different similarity attraction theories that if you feel and you see a resemblance, then you're more apt to ask questions, to feel comfortable, to have a low regard. I think it's really our responsibility, as a community and as a city, to be able to help and partner with our election board to provide those diversity elements throughout the election process. That's a long answer, but it's one that's so important that we tap into, that we create welcoming spaces and experiences for our residents.

Tiffany Vrska 16:55

Absolutely. I love that. I did not plan to share any personal stories while I was here, but what you said just now touched my heart a little bit. The reason why I chose to go into communications is that I had a teacher in high school that looked like me. She was one of the first teachers that ever looked like me, she was actually Pacific Islander, but she looked Hispanic, long, dark hair, petite figure like me, and we connected and I think that that speaks to, especially in young minds, drawing those similarities and being empowered, and being inspired. When you see people in those types of positions, knowing that maybe you could be there at some point. I really connected with what you just said, I totally agree. Now,

let me ask you, is there anything in particular that sparked the interest in creating the Diversity Roundtable, or does it play into the overall mission of what you have spoken to as far as keeping people educated and engaged?

Cinthya Allen 18:05

In coming on to this role at the City of Norman, I had an initial vision and strategy of how to go about starting this role. It was a clean slate, never been done before. Through my previous diversity and inclusion experience, I had an idea of the pieces that would be critical. One of those, I presented to our leadership team just a few months after being in the role, which included a list of items, but one of those did include a Community Roundtable. Fast forward about a month or so, and I received notification that another of our community members had also shared with council their interest to have something like this come about. It was really one of those opportunities for just recognizing that, okay, our community is asking for it. This is something that was already in our strategy plan. Let's see how we can actually put together those feasible pieces of working the strategy. So, here we are with the Diversity Roundtable. It's going to be a phenomenal opportunity for really opening doors and creating welcoming, inclusive spaces that will benefit absolutely everyone across our community.

Tiffany Vrska 19:39

That's wonderful. I love hearing about this so much. Now, a wrap up question for you: If a person is not accepted due to capacity or certain requirements, how can interested people still volunteer with Diversity and Equity, or the City of Norman, or stay up to date with what D&E is doing?

Cinthya Allen 20:00

Yeah, thank you. Well, I suspect and I'm hopeful that we do have a robust number of applications, which will in turn turn your, to your point, you know, the roundtable is only so big. For anyone that wouldn't make it to this year's roundtable or this cohort, there are going to be a number of opportunities for us to engage. I can tell you for the month of June we have the Juneteenth festival coming up where we'll want to engage volunteers. We have other lineups happening in the fall that will take volunteer engagement. Having a list of people that we can call on and share opportunities with, even for the simple and critical piece of just information sharing, I want to make sure that anyone who signs up for this is first to know about whatever events and programs our Diversity and Equity Office has in store. It'll be a great opportunity. Either way, whether on the roundtable officially or on our contact list, Diversity and Equity will be able to help keep them engaged.

Tiffany Vrska 21:20

All right. Well, this is all excellent information. Very good timing for the city of Norman. We appreciate you being with us today, Cinthya, and telling us more about the Diversity Roundtable.

Cinthya Allen 21:31

Thank you so much, Tiffany, and congratulations to you and your team on *On West Gray*.

Tiffany Vrska 21:36

Thank you. Now, folks are welcome to visit NormanOK.gov at any time to find out more information on the Office of Diversity and Equity, or any division or department here at the City of Norman. Next month, we'll be visiting with special guests about the second annual Juneteenth Celebration, which was teased a little bit here by Cinthya, but in the meantime, here are some city events that you'll want to keep on your radar:

- We have NPDs (Norman Police Department) National Law Enforcement Memorial at 4:00 PM on May 15 at Legacy Park. It will feature keynote speaker Major General Michael Thompson of the Oklahoma Army National Guard and now the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation.
- We also have Summer Breeze, the outdoor concert series. This begins May 15 and runs every other Sunday through August 21. Bring picnic blankets and snacks and get down to Lions Park to enjoy some incredible tunes and local brews.
- Outdoor movie night on May 20, featuring *Encanto*, at Lions Park with the City's Parks and Recreation team, and the opening day at Westwood pool on May 28. If you have any questions, you can find more information at NormanOK.gov.
- Applications will also soon be open for the City of Norman's first [Citizens Academy](http://NormanOK.gov). This is an 11-week course where participants will learn more about city facilities and explore every major department of local government. You must be 18 to apply and you can learn more at NormanOK.gov.

Questions or commentary about *On West Gray* can be sent into PublicAffairs@NormanOK.gov.

Shout out to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the City of Norman Communications Office.

Until next time, stay engaged, stay informed and always remember to vote.

I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thanks for tuning in to *On West Gray*.