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NEWS

Hope dims the legacy of racism at Peace + Justice Awards event

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By Ivey DeJesus | idejesus@pennlive.com

To drive her point on the economic and social cost of racism, New York Times best-selling author Heather McGhee leans on the historical narrative of the 1950s and '60s that saw a boom in the building of lavish public community pools to meet the demands of the emerging middle class.

A white middle class that is: Blacks were barred from being members of the pools.

With the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Americans began to demand in court that they too be allowed to become members, after all, they paid taxes.

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What happened is what McGhee calls the zero-sum economic and political ravage of American society: Across the country, municipalities bent on keeping Blacks out of their public pools decided to shutter the pools to stave off the appearance of discrimination. From one city to another town, authorities drained their pools, and cement trucks backed up to fill them in with concrete and gravel.

“This is our history folks but when I tell this story ... it’s really about what it costs all of us when a town destroys its public good rather than share it or makes it private membership,” McGhee said. “Everybody loses out on

something.”



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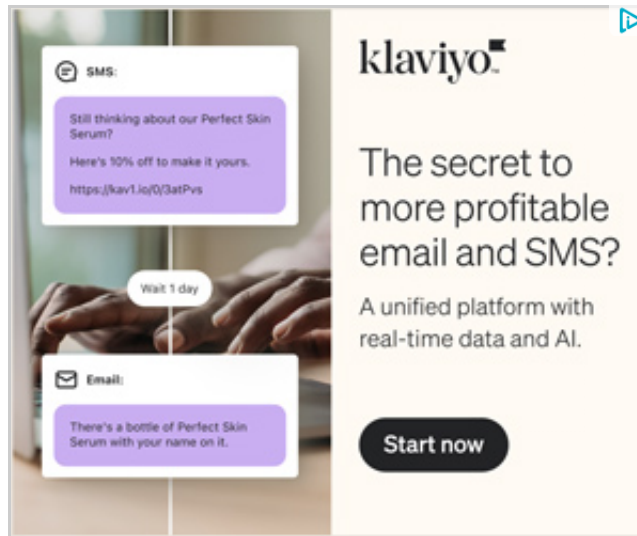
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McGhee, author of The New York Times best-selling book “The Sum of Us,” on Wednesday headlined the fourth-annual [Peace + Justice in PA awards](#) sponsored by PA Media Group, the parent company of PennLive and The Patriot-News, and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC).

The event showcases and recognizes individuals and groups that are working in their communities to combat racism and discrimination. The event was sponsored by the Foundation for Enhancing Communities.

McGhee, a scholar and researcher on racism and injustice, drew a seamless thread between the legacy of the lost pools of the 1960s and the zero-sum economic and political mindset that fuels much of the divisiveness and disparities in the country.

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“A zero-sum game is one in which there’s no mutual progress,” McGhee said. “If one player scores a point, the other player loses a point ... more broadly as a world view .. that there is a fixed pie of well-being. If I get a bigger slice, you must get a smaller slice.”

McGhee said this underlying paradigm fueling political rhetoric is false and a lie.

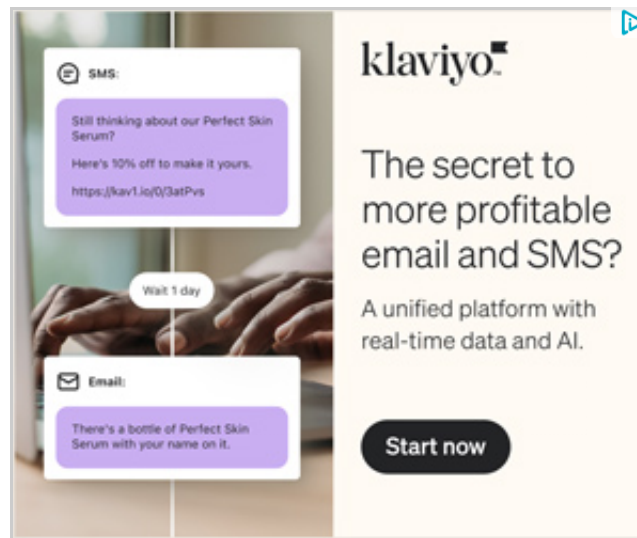
“Of all the things we hear today zero-sum is one of the loudest. It’s one of the most well-marketed and most persistent ones,” she said. “It says they are coming for you. There is an us and a them. You all can think of many examples just in the last 24 hours. I’m sure.”

The shift — from the investment in the public good to the individual family (with means) — has led to disparities in healthcare, home ownership, education and the ability to send kids to college.

The country’s unwillingness to come together and find a common solution — basically swim in the same pool — exacts a steep cost on everyone, McGhee said.

“Economists look at society as a regular sports game,” she said. “You want all of your players on the field scoring points for your team. You don’t want anyone sidelined due to debt, discrimination or disadvantage. The problem with a zero-sum game is that we are not all on the same team. ... That inequality is costing us growth. When you don’t have all your players on the field, guess what, your team is not going to score as many points.”

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Citing the work of economists, McGhee said that the Black and white economic divide has cost the U.S. economy \$16 trillion over the past 20 years.

“It makes no sense to say you have to hold some people back for other people to flourish,” McGhee said.

The event held at Central Penn College in East Pennsboro Township honored one individual and two groups:

- The Rev. Sandy Strauss for her passionate work advocating for human rights abroad and civil rights at home. Strauss is the director of Advocacy & Ecumenical Outreach for the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. She has spent decades in the Legislature and inside beleaguered communities defending the rights of the

poor and those impacted by racism, sexism, and extremism.

“I like to see myself more as a cheerleader and educator,” said Strauss, who said she was inspired to do work in social justice as a young person in Memphis in the late 1960s, a time shaped by the work of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. “My role is to help others to be able to do this work as well.”

- Wildheart Ministries, an Allison Hill-based organization dedicated to lifting one of Harrisburg’s most beleaguered communities. Since 2016, Wildheart Ministries and its founders, Tannon and Cristina Herman, have led revitalization efforts that have helped to reduce crime, rehab properties and address food deserts.

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“Real change starts by getting out more than by talking,” Cristina said. “It’s about doing the hard work ... Come you can make a difference.”

Also honored was the Pennsylvania Prison Society, an advocacy group dedicated to ensuring incarcerated people are treated with humanity.

Chad Dion Lassiter, the executive director of the PHRC, a clearinghouse for hate crimes, acts of discrimination, racial bias and ethnic intimidation, outlined the findings of the organization's annual report and a report called "Enough," which investigated racism in college campuses across Pennsylvania.

"We are not talking about micro-aggressions but racism on campuses pointed at students of color," he said.

Despite the challenges in the face of persistent racism, Lassiter said he remains hopeful for the future of the Commonwealth.

"There is peace and justice," he said. "As Dr. Martin Luther King said we must accept finite disappointments but never lose infinite hope."

The event was moderated by PennLive opinion editor Joyce Davis, who is president and CEO of the World Affairs Council of Harrisburg.



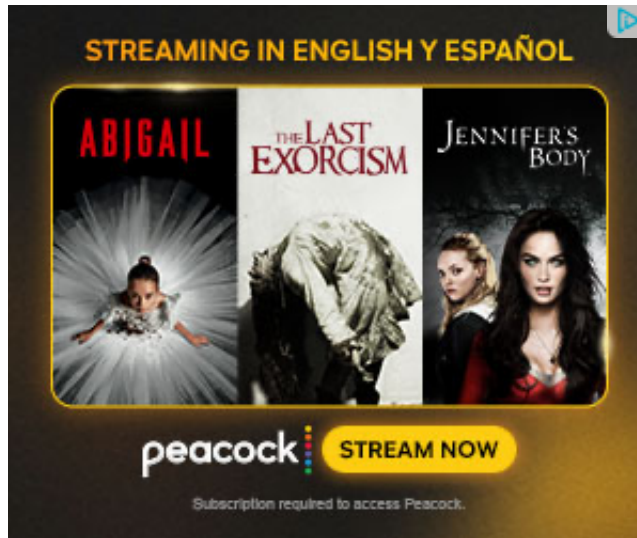
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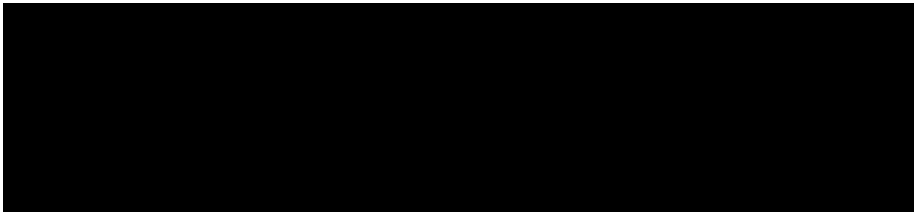
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