

## **Ron Chisom, The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, and Me.**

In my life, I have had a small handful of teachers who set me on new and important paths. Ron Chisom is one of those teachers.

In the early 1990's i was enjoying the fruits of a successful career in social work. My focus was mental health, for children and families. I was also deeply concerned about social issues. I knew something about sexism and I knew something about anti-semitism. These were oppressions that I had personally experienced. I did not know much about racism, but i could look around my community, my country and see that it was making us all sick. I knew I had to get a better understanding of how it operates and what to do about it.

In my agency VCS-inc (see [www.VCS-inc.org](http://www.VCS-inc.org)) I direct all the clinical services and my friend and colleague Phyllis Frank directs the community organizing work. Phyllis began to look for trainers and workshops and conferences that could help us understand the dynamics of racism better. Courageously ,she brought all kinds of experts to Rockland and I dutifully attended every program she organized. At the end of every program we would reflect deeply and say to each other, 'this isn't it.'

Then finally Phyllis came back from a conference in California saying that she had taken an 'Undoing Racism' workshop taught by a group of veteran trainers and organizers from New Orleans, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. ([www.pisab.org](http://www.pisab.org)). 'This is it', she said , 'and I am bringing them to Rockland County.'

A few months later I learned that the founder of the PISAB would be in Rockland to present an introduction to the training. I did not immediately love Ron Chisom. His ideas and thoughts shook me up and made me uncomfortable. Sometimes I just didn't get what he meant. Still, I felt like he had something I needed more of, so at the end of the night I wrote my check and signed up for the training later in the year.

For me,that two and one half day training was like getting corrective lenses.\* Suddenly i could see more, and see in new ways. I began to understand that racism is not about the cruel behavior of individual white

folks but that racism in this country is systemic and institutionalized. It is an arrangement that permeates every organization and institution in this country. It is like a computer virus making all systems sick. The training presented a power analysis which helped me begin to unravel some very complicated situations. I learned about history and culture, the way whiteness was constructed, so that many of us were persuaded to surrender our own cultural wealth, in order to keep the race construct in place.

But what is hopeful about the PI training is that in learning how racism is constructed, we can begin to think about how it needs to be deconstructed. I learned that my role as a white person is to allow people of color to define the problem and lead the way, as I work with my white brothers and sisters, doing the necessary work of organizing anti-racist alliances and actions. This understanding has taken me on new and challenging paths. I still work in mental health but since I see so much more clearly the ways in which racism makes us all sick, I do a lot of work outside of my office, participating in community collaborations and coalitions that work for social change.

The PI has returned to Rockland County every year, and by now several hundred of us have had the training. Several years ago, Sandra Bernabei, MSW, founded the Anti-racist Alliance. (The AntiRacist Alliance is an organizing collective of human service practitioners and educators whose vision is to bring a clear and deliberate anti-racist structural power analysis to social service education and practice. We work for racial justice from a common understanding of racism as presented by the Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond. see [www.antiracistalliance.com](http://www.antiracistalliance.com))

The anti-racist community in the NY metropolitan area is growing stronger. We are working to stay connected and use our collective resources to organize for change.

There is hardly a day that goes by that I do not hearken back to the teachings of the PI. My life has taken a new path, and though it is often a bumpy one, my journey so far has also been powerfully enlivening. So although I did not know what to make of Ron when I first met him, I have come to deeply appreciate his wisdom and his courage.

Recently someone asked me to be a little bit more concrete about what I had learned. In some ways this becomes more and more difficult, as the

training has permeated so much of my thinking. Nonetheless, I jotted down a few highlights of the training

### **Ten Very Important Things Learned from the People's Institute Trainings**

1

Racism is defined as race prejudice plus power. It is not just a manifestation of prejudice against people with dark skin. It is a systemic power arrangement which permeates every institution in our society. Racism is a design. It was constructed.

2

Only people of color can truly define racism. White people can not identify the many subtle manifestations of racism as it is experienced everyday by people of color.

3

In order to address racism white people will have to accept leadership from people of color.

4

People of color can not be racist because racism is about power arrangements and white people in this country are the ones who have the power. People of color can be prejudiced, biased etc. but not racist.. Thus there is no such thing as reverse racism.

5

Unless an organization is intentionally anti-racist , everything that it does will disproportionately benefit white people.

6

Before 1954, every institution in this country was created by whites for whites. Race prejudice is built into the very nature of this society.

7

What racism in this country does for whites is to create endless conditions of entitlement. In this way, all white people become the mechanisms through which white supremacy functions.

8

Every institution and professional group in this country uses 'gatekeepers' who control access to resources. The function of gatekeepers is to protect the institution, not the people who need the service. If gatekeepers recognize this, they can attempt to use their positions in more positive ways.

9

Cultural racism exists when one group has race prejudice, and also the power to

impose its way of life on another group, while destroying, discounting, devaluing and distorting the way of life of the group it oppresses or dominates.

10

Racism exists in individual, institutional, cultural, linguistic, militaristic and environmental forms.

\*I will always be indebted to my first two trainers, Rev. David Billings and Barbara Major. David has become a significant mentor in my life, and he and his wife Marjorie Freeman serve as powerful role models for me. David, a gifted historian and trainer, has inspired me to read widely and reeducate myself regarding American history. Barbara is a brilliant trainer and organizer whose understanding of how to deliver health care could change this nation.

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