



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

The Transition Network's Anti-Racism Task Force on Long Island, Nella Yelenovic, left, Eileen Cohen, Carol Lioz, Roberta Rosenblum, Doreen Rose and Jane Greenberg.

More seats at the table

Over-50 group recruits women of color, seeking to make its ranks better reflect LI

BY ARLENE GROSS
Special to Newsday

When she first joined The Transition Network's Long Island chapter, Doreen Rose said she was the only Black woman out of about 800 members.

Seven years later, she is still

one of the few women of color in the group — but now, its leaders are trying to change that.

The group, a social network for women over 50 with chapters across the country, has in recent years made a concerted effort to diversify its membership, expanding its outreach and collaborating with organizations like ERASE Racism and the Women's Diversity Network. Next month, the Long Island chapter will hold

an open house for new and existing members, with the hope that women from across the Island will join. (See sidebar.)

"To live fully, we all need to know people, ideas and customs besides those in which we were born and raised," said Nella Yelenovic, administrator of the Long Island chapter's anti-racism task force. "To develop into my richest self and to truly be a soul of humanity, I need to be exposed to all

kinds of people and draw from the wealth of who they are and their experiences. I believe this is not my personal need, but a goal to which every single person should aspire."

CULTURE, CANASTA, COOKING

Founded in 2002 as a space where women over 50 could reimagine their lives in retirement, The Transition Network has since grown to 3,000 members in 15 chapters, including a "coast to coast" chapter where

people meet virtually. The Long Island chapter is the largest, said Lindsey Draves, chair of the Island's chapter.

The local chapter offers chapter-wide and national events, as well as monthly discussion groups, author events and talks with experts like James Coll, a retired detective and adjunct professor at Nassau Community College who recently spoke to mem-

See A2COVER29 on E18



Stony Brook University PhD candidate Hafza Girdap talks about Turkish history and culture for a program by The Transition Network at the Turkish Cultural Center in Ronkonkoma.

A 'reflection' of Long Island

A2COVER29 from E17

bers about a woman's right to choose and her right to privacy.

There are six hiking and walking groups, book clubs and opportunities for members to play canasta and mahjong, as well as share their passion for cooking and dining. The chapter also hosts day trips to museums, historic homes and other points of interest around Long Island or New York City.

The Contemporary Social Issues Committee, chaired by Annette Kosar, of Commack, puts on about five programs per year on topics like how women are impacted by religion in modern society and media disinformation. Recently, the committee hosted an event at the Turkish Cultural Center Long Island in Ronkonkoma featuring a panel

of educators speaking about women's rights and the history and culture of Turkey, said Kosar, 76, a former executive director of the Long Island chapter of the March of Dimes.

EVOLVING MISSION

Though the organization was originally geared to women transitioning to retirement, it has expanded to encompass women adjusting to divorce, widowhood, becoming an empty nester or relocating, according to Draves.

"We fine-tuned our mission in the last few years," said Draves, 73, of Glen Cove, who joined in 2010. "Primarily we bring women together so that they can expand their own lives," as well as support and inspire other women as they move into new phases of life.

Often when women retire, they have less access to social

and cultural stimulation, Draves said.

"That's something that [the network] provides so easily. You can find anything you want. You can learn something new, you can take up a new activity," she said, adding that if a member is interested in something that isn't offered, a new club can be started. "We start new groups practically every month."

For years, the group's members have included women of different cultural and religious backgrounds, as well as professional experience, but it was lacking in racial diversity. Currently, about 1% of the members of the Long Island chapter are women of color, according to Draves.

Rose, a retired middle school teacher from East Meadow, believes part of the problem may be that members' social

circles aren't diverse to begin with, so women of color may not be learning about the group from their friends.

"A lot of times in their professional careers, these women interacted, met and socialized at a certain level with diverse communities, but in their social lives, they did not," Rose, 77, said.

She added, "This organization is a reflection of Long Island. We have to face it that Long Island is one of the most segregated suburbs in the United States." (In 2019, Newsday reported that half of Long Island's Black population lived in just 11 of the Island's 291 communities, and 90% lived in just 62 of them.)

NATIONAL EFFORT

After George Floyd was killed while in police custody in Minneapolis in 2020, The

Transition Network started a national anti-racism task force.

To join the task force, members had to participate in a workshop titled Unpacking Whiteness, "to really heighten your awareness and enlightenment in terms of dealing with the issues of racism and diversity," said Carol Lioz, 76, of Roslyn, who retired in 2008 from teaching hearing impaired students and now facilitates the Long Island chapter's task force.

The first goal of the Long Island task force, a group of nine women — including Rose — who meet biweekly, is to educate members. The second is to promote greater diversity of the chapter, a goal that Yelenovic said they have not had great success at achieving so far.

Members have tried several



Network members who attended a program on Turkish history and culture, presented by the group's Contemporary Social Issues Committee, share a meal at the Turkish Cultural Center in Ronkonkoma.



"We would welcome new people to expand all of our experiences," says Carol Lioz, coordinator of the network's Anti-Racism Task Force.

recruitment methods, including leaving flyers in libraries with diverse communities. They're also seeking volunteer opportunities with more diverse organizations to form partnerships, Yelenovic, 60, said.

"We are plugging away. We're not finished," said Yelenovic, a retired probation officer.

The task force has held

several educational workshops, including one on racial inequality in housing, health care and education; one on critical race theory; and another with former state senator Anna Kaplan that focused on her work to combat hate. The task force's message is apolitical, said Rose.

Racial inequality, she said, is "not a Democratic or Republican issue. It's an issue that



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— Nella Yelenovic, administrator of the anti-racism task force

affects our society as a whole, and we are pointing out some of the inequities and some of the things that may have been offensive over the years, like certain terminologies that we should no longer use."

In her time as a member, Rose said she has enjoyed the group's "Diversity Doyennes" program, which has hosted events at places like a local

Sikh center and the Joysetta & Julius Pearse African American Museum of Nassau County in Hempstead.

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Yelenovic said she finds the network's offerings interesting and stimulating.

"For me, I felt like it was miraculous when I stumbled upon it while searching the web for volunteer opportunities after I retired," Yelenovic said. "I couldn't believe such an organization existed."

A lot of volunteer opportunities, such as working as a museum docent, require a commitment of more hours and days than she was willing to dedicate, Yelenovic said. The Transition Network, in contrast, offers less intensive volunteering commitments with organizations like the Family Service League and the Long Island Crisis Center.

"I retired and I worked very hard in my profession, and I really didn't want to be that bound," said Yelenovic, who has volunteered for Island Harvest and is a member of a walking group, a spiritual discussion group and a couple of other general discussion groups.

Since she joined the group in 2007, Lioz said she's seen different groups come and go, but the one that has continued throughout is the Women of Wisdom discussion group, which includes Lioz and 11 other participants who meet monthly at each other's homes. Some of the topics have included how to get rid of a toxic friend, how to cope with stress during difficult times, and imagining how their lives would have turned out if they had done what they wanted to do, she said.

"So many women as they meet new people and make friends and [the network] facilitates that so easily," Lioz said. "It's just effortless."

Said Draves, "I personally have met women, even in my own town, that I never would have encountered. I've made friends that live in various different places on Long Island" through the network.

CONNECTING DURING COVID

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rose said she participated in "The Pandemic Pearls," a group started for women living alone.

"Some women actually would wear a little pearl necklace and have a little glass of

wine or some other beverage," said Rose, noting that members would take turns organizing activities ranging from "Name That Tune" to the history of albinism. "It became informative, entertaining, and a real helpful way for getting us through those pandemic months that stretched into years."

Lioz said members "have a connection that's very special." Rose persuaded her friend Kathleen Dendy, 72, of Uniondale, to join the group about a year ago.

Dendy, who is Black, said she is impressed with the group's wide variety of offerings. She said she doesn't mind being in the minority in the organization because, after working in the insurance industry for more than four decades, she's used to mixing with all types of people.

"That is not an issue for me," said Dendy. "However, I could see that it could be for other people, that they would be turned off from it."

Through the anti-racism task force and the group's other diversity efforts, Lioz hopes members with different backgrounds can learn from one another.

"We would welcome new people to expand all of our experiences," she said.

HOW TO JOIN

Any woman aged 50 or older can join The Transition Network. There is an annual membership fee of \$85, which goes to the national organization, and a \$15 fee that goes to the Long Island chapter.

The Long Island chapter will hold its annual open house for new and existing members, called Connect Now, from 1 to 4 p.m. on Nov. 10 at the Merrick Golf Course clubhouse, 2550 Clubhouse Rd., Merrick. During the event, participants can sign up for special interest groups, transition peer groups, chapter-wide programs and volunteer activities. The event is free, but registration is required by Nov. 6.

To register or to learn more about The Transition Network, visit ttwomen.org.

— ARLENE GROSS