

Martha Barry

Chief Racial Justice Officer

YWCA

Martha Barry grew up in a small Wisconsin town of about 10,000 people. After four years of living in California, she decided to return back east in 1990 to make Milwaukee her home. She came back because she was attracted to Milwaukee's working-class roots and Midwestern character.

Resolving the underlying racism embedded in those narratives is another reason she settled in Milwaukee. For Barry, a lot can be learned about how a city views its people of color by listening to the glossy narratives it says about itself, particularly its hip areas and festivals, while telling a less than glowing narrative of the rest of the city.

Barry knows that change in Milwaukee is possible, because she is taking the journey herself. As a young white woman, she learned about race in uncomfortable ways, but it was necessary for her to understand. "I had a lot of folks of color that were way more patient with me than they had any business being," admitted Barry, "but they allowed me to start realizing the nuances of what race and racism meant. The more I knew, the more I realized how much I didn't know."

While Barry was getting her PhD and working in the HR department for a large company, she was interested in meeting white people who were on the same journey as she was – white people who were told their whole lives that race is not something they should concern themselves with, but nonetheless made it their concern to unlearn what they were taught.

"I was examining white anti-racist activists, and how they got there," recalled Barry. Her thinking is that by studying

white anti-racist activists to understand their formation process in addressing racism, it could provide examples for others. In over 14 years with the YWCA Southeast Wisconsin, where she is currently the Chief Racial Justice Officer, Barry has used that understanding to work to get more white people to be anti-racist. She creates curricula to teach professionals and institutions about the impact of racism on society and the steps they must take to be truly anti-racist. She also advises nonprofit and corporate leaders on ways to ensure that their organizations practice racial equity.

The difficulty of unlearning a socialized mindset is that our environment is built on racist principles. History is told, laws are passed, and regulations are upheld to the point where racism becomes the norm in a society. Even the city itself and the 'American dream' are constructed with this norm. Barry believes all people, and particularly white people, need to be honest about this. For industry, Barry works to encourage leaders and companies to have more conversation about race. Many are prepared to see racial bias training as the end point, but it's only the beginning.

"It's a challenge to help leaders understand that doing training, education, and awareness building is critical. But it is completely insufficient to change systems," she explained. "The YWCA is trying to get people to



understand, you can change individuals' behaviors and thinking, but if the organization is not willing to look at changing the systems, policies, and procedures that uphold its culture, it won't work." Many companies talk about supporting racial justice and equity, but they are not prepared for the discomfort that taking those positions will cause. "If you can get training in the door of your company, be prepared because it will sometimes light a spark. And are you ready for what that spark can turn into?" challenged Barry. "You've got to get people who are willing to go through that bumpiness to change racist systems."