

---

## Stark diversity group keeps striving as it hits anniversary

**Friday**

Posted Apr 28, 2017 at 12:02 PM

Updated Apr 28, 2017 at 1:02 PM

Gathering launched a year ago by Lois DiGiacomo-Jacobson.

By **Charita Goshay**

CantonRep.com staff writer



**CANTON** In the summer of 1957, Lois DiGiacomo-Jacobson spent a week basking in the Florida sun.

Returning to work with a deep tan, she said, she was shocked by the hateful stares she received from some customers at the bank where she worked as a teller.

"I never forgot it," she said. "They (customers) thought I was black, or Latino or Muslim. I had jet-black hair back then, which I wore in a French twist."

The painful memory, DiGiacomo-Jacobson said, has been the impetus in her decades-long work on behalf of diversity.

A year ago, she launched a regular gathering of leaders in the arts, media, government, faith, and education communities who share and exchange ideas on how to increase inclusion and diversity.

It's an offshoot of Coming Together of Stark County, which she helped to organize 19 years ago and is still active.

During the meetings, DiGiacomo-Jacobson frequently uses the phrase, "Stark County... Where Diversity Works!"

"The goal is to bring to light, diversity problems, successes, programs and other things happening, together so we all can benefit from it," she said. "It is working in this community. It's been very encouraging."

The effort is even impacting small communities that don't have diverse populations, DiGiacomo-Jacobson said. She pointed to Louisville, crediting Mayor Pat Falot and Louisville High School Assistant Principal Cindy Class for taking the lead in their community.

"They've done wonders over there," she said.

### Great things

DiGiacomo-Jacobson, the creator of the Rainbow Repertory Group, also lauds Stark County's five colleges and universities, which send representatives to the meetings.

"If you have diverse thoughts and opinions and experiences, you're going to have a wealth of knowledge you can draw upon and we can learn from each other," said Ron Holden II, assistant dean of students and director of diversity and inclusion at the University of Mount Union in Alliance.

Holden said DiGiacomo-Jacobson contacted him last year to see what Mount Union was doing in terms of diversity, "and how we were celebrating it."

Kelly O. Williams Sr., a community volunteer and professional musician, said the weekly gatherings give participants a chance to see what others are doing and provides them a chance to work together.

"Diversity is important. Having people with different backgrounds creates a different energy," he said. "People have good ideas you may not know about. The more you add to a pot, the right ingredients, the better it tastes."

"People are stealing ideas," DiGiacomo-Jacobson said, laughing. "It's gold."

### Student leaders

James Knight, a crime prevention specialist with the Stark County Prosecutor's Office, said the more diversity that exists in a community, the more likely people are to be tolerant.

"I'm not saying there aren't some differences but overall, I think we're all trying to work together to contribute something," he said.

During the most recent meeting, Teresa Purses, president of the Stark Education Partnership, presented information about an upcoming student showcase on May 18 by the All In Student Academy, which is part of "All In: Success for All Students," a statewide initiative that promotes awareness and appreciation for all youth regardless of their backgrounds. More than two dozen local schools districts participate.

"We need to develop student leaders who will become activists," Purses said, adding that the goal also includes closing achievement gaps and empowering students to become advocates of social justice.

DiGiacomo said the next step for Diversity Works includes "connecting all meeting attendees to share information about their diversity programming, in order to create new initiatives and collaboratives."

For more information on the group, contact her by email at [lois.rainbow1@gmail.com](mailto:lois.rainbow1@gmail.com) or call 330.768.7500 or 330.456.7397.

Reach Charita at 330-580-8313 or \_\_\_\_\_

On Twitter: \_\_\_\_\_