

SCHOOLS SUBCOMMITTEE OF ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Report on Articles 26, 27 and 28. Special Town Meeting November 2019

Introduction

The Schools Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee held a public hearing on Articles 26, 27 and 28 of the Warrant for the November 2019 Special Town Meeting on September 24, 2019 from 5:30 to 7:30 PM. Each Article supports a specific candidate for whom the Coolidge Corner School should be renamed to honor. The hearing was attended by subcommittee members Cliff Brown, Dennis Doughty, David Leschier, Mariah Nobrega and John VanSoyac. Also present were sponsors of each Article (listed below) along with approximately 40 members of the public (see the list of names attached hereto).

In excess of 30 emails and voicemails were offered in support of individual Articles. These emails and copies of material circulated or presented by each Article sponsor have been sent to the Advisory Committee in electronic format. There has been an Open Meeting Law complaint regarding the CCS renaming process filed by Article 28 sponsor Lee Selwyn against the Brookline School Committee. That filing has been previously submitted to the entire AC.

Sponsors for each Article were allotted 15 minutes to state their case for their preferred candidate. An extensive public comment period followed the presentations after which the subcommittee had its discussion, deliberations and votes.

Recommendation Summary: The subcommittee voted 4-1 to offer No Recommendation on each Article.

Article Summaries and Their Sponsors:

Warrant Article 26: Submitted by: School Committee; Deborah Brown, TMM 1; Anne Greenwald, TMM 8; Maya Norton. To see if the Town will rename the current Coolidge Corner School as the Florida Ruffin Ridley School.

Florida Ruffin Ridley was born in 1861 and died in 1943. She and her family lived in Brookline for more than 20 years and may have been the Town's first African American homeowners. Her children went to the Lawrence School and BHS. She was a suffragist (helped organize the country's first national women of color conference), civil rights activist (helped found a predecessor group to the National Association Of Colored Women's Clubs), anti-lynching advocate, teacher (2nd African American teacher in Boston), writer, publisher and religious leader (founder of the Second Unitarian Church, which is now Temple Sinai).

Warrant Article 27: Submitted by: Larry Ruttman. To see if the Town will rename the current Coolidge Corner School as the Ethel Weiss School.

Ethel Weiss was born in 1914 and died in 2015. Along with her husband, she owned and operated Irving's Toy and Card Shop from 1939 until her passing. Ms. Weiss was a neighborhood icon and an individual who served and mentored children who attend(ed) what is now the Coolidge Corner School.

She is considered by many to have been an integral part of the former Devotion community for close to 70 years.

Warrant Article 28: Submitted by: Lee L. Selwyn, TMM 13. To see if the Town will rename the current Coolidge Corner School as the Robert I. Sperber School.

Dr. Robert Sperber was born in 1929 and died in 2016. He was Superintendent of Brookline Schools from 1964 to 1982 and served as a specialist in urban education at Boston University for 20 years thereafter. Dr. Sperber was instrumental in the founding of the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, or METCO. He also implemented innovative curriculum and support programs, including the Brookline Early Education Project; Facing History and Ourselves, a Holocaust education program; and the town's Extended Day Advisory Council and its Education Foundation. Dr. Sperber instituted educational equity within the Brookline elementary schools eliminating distinctions between schools he described as "haves" and "have nots".

Highlights of Comments by Sponsors or Co-Presenters of Each Article follow:

FOR ARTICLE 26:

FOUR STUDENTS FROM CCS "Bee-lievers of Change" – Emeri Shende-Ruiz, Heath Colbert Laurie, Liv Klawiter and Felix Situ, members of the adult-guided student group that engaged school and community in a process leading to nomination of 4 finalists (Ruth Batson, Roland Hayes, Sybil Holmes, Florida Ruffin Ridley) from which the School Committee, by vote of 7-0-1, chose Ridley to be forwarded to the town Naming Committee. The students described the hours they spent on the project ("it mattered to us") and the motivation behind the choice of Ridley -- she represented "the opposite" of Edward Devotion (slave owner), sending a message "human life is worth something... that a slave is a person just like you and me... Florida Ruffin Ridley shows us we can have courage." One student specified, "We were criticized that we were manipulated by some of the adults but we weren't, and all our effort that you see today was us kids doing this for our school."

DEBORAH BROWN, TMM-1, who worked with CCS students in their school voting process described being moved to tears by the students' presentations of their research. She added that Brookline is belated in coming to a recognition of Florida Ruffin Ridley's place in history as a feminist, abolitionist, writer and more. "Imagine future students being able to say, 'She lived down my street!'... 'My school's named after her.' ... This is a magical opportunity to transform."

FOR ARTICLE 27

LARRY RUTTMAN, the lead advocate for honoring the late Ethel Weiss ("I met her in 1939 when I was in 4th grade"), described Weiss, proprietor of Irving's Toy Store, as "one of a kind" ... a friend and mentor to generations of school children, "she didn't scold them, she taught them" with "rules for living" as well as funding of scholarships. Ruttman added that he stayed in touch with Ethel from when he was 8 years old until she died at age 101... "Do you realize how rare that story is?"

ELI DAVIS, Devotion K-8 and BHS graduate, age 23. "As kids, we spent the whole week searching for money so we could visit Irving's for candy. Ethel made you feel you were supposed to be there. The store was an extension of the Devotion community. When we paid, she helped us figure out the change,

until we could do it ourselves. It was a rite of passage to visit Irving's and Ethel. I can't think of a person who had a longer lasting impact."

FOR ARTICLE 28

LEE SELWYN, TMM 13, advocated for Dr. Robert Sperber, stating that Dr. Sperber most closely meets the Town's naming criteria, (specifically the first, (reputation/character/set an example/contribution). Mr. Selwyn highlighted Dr. Sperber's contributions outlined above (specifically mentioning BEEP, METCO, EDCO and the Economic Development Advisory Board to address fostering a broader tax base for Brookline). Mr Selwyn also emphasized Dr. Sperber's core beliefs of a commitment to equality for all students, the importance of creating innovative ideas that last, and using education as an instrument of social justice. "Brookline has a tradition of naming public schools for people who were heavily involved in public education ... Runkle was one of the founders of MIT and its second president ... Lincoln was a leader at both MIT and Wellesley... Robert Sperber fits in that tradition."

Public Comment Period

Advisory Committee and Town Meeting Member Neil Gordon stated that the ultimate decision on the name belongs to Town Meeting. He stated the School Committee established a process, that the Naming Committee will make a recommendation but that nothing is binding on Town Meeting.

Several members of the public stood to speak on behalf of one candidate or to offer their thoughts on the process. Parts of those comments, grouped by preferred Article, are below:

For Article 26:

ERICA ANDERSON, mother of one of the CCS "Bee-lievers." "Renaming of the school is a teachable moment... Florida Ruffin Ridley may have been the first black property owner in the town... Renaming after Florida Ruffin Ridley in no way dishonors Ethel Weiss or Robert Sperber... They were advocates for children. They stood up for what the children want."

BARBARA BROWN, founder of "Hidden Brookline" (historical research on Brookline's ties to slavery) cited the example of opera legend Roland Hayes and John Wilson, sculptor of the MLK bust in Town Hall, as examples of Brookline African Americans whose contributions were not widely recognized in their own town. As for Florida Ruffin Ridley, "she was a parent in the Brookline Schools for 21 years... a founder of the Second Unitarian Church ... a founder of the Women's Suffrage Association."

Robert Hollister: Spoke in support of Ms. Ridley

SUSAN HOUSTON, reading on behalf of herself and Julian Houston, founder of the George Lewis Ruffin Society to advance African American education in the law. "To reverse course on the School Committee choice would be a violation of trust. The choice of Florida Ruffin Ridley gives Brookline a chance to engage in restorative justice."

JING HUENG. "The children might be the people who care the most. The role model of Florida Ruffin Ridley will make a lifelong impression on all those children. "

BETH JONES, CCS parent, cited the example of students who recently joined the climate change protest in Boston. "I don't understand why we can't give credence to the opinions of our youth. Quoting from a sign at the climate protest: "Why do children have to be the adults in the room?"

KEN LISS, President of Brookline Historical Society (testimony attached)

PAM ROBERTS, former Devotion School PTO president, mother of 3 graduates of Devotion, volunteer in CCS library. "I take my cue from my children. They are all happy with renaming the school for Florida Ruffin Ridley... It's transformative."

For Article 27:

SUSAN HALPERT: "proud alumna of Devotion School.... Years and years of alumni history cannot be erased. Florida Ruffin Ridley was a great woman, but she has no ties to the school... Ethel Weiss made such a loving impression on me and so many others. No one is more deserving of this honor. Anything else is political correctness run amok."

TRUDI GOODMAN: school teacher who "went to Devotion a long, long time ago... Ethel Weiss changed my life... She was part of the fabric of Devotion School. She loved the kids of Devotion. She did it out of the goodness of her heart."

JOYCE JOZWICKI, TM 9, former School Committee member, 50-year resident of town, children went to Devotion: "Ethel Weiss represents two underrepresented groups ... a Jewish woman .. but more than that she loved all of the kids. She went into the school and lectured to the 1st graders about saving their money. Devotion had kids from 40 countries/ 30 languages. The patience Ethel showed as kids learned English and learned about American money -- those are lessons those children, now in their fifties, remember. We should name the school after someone who so deeply affected our kids, our neighborhood, our town, not a symbol, but someone real."

Subcommittee Discussion and Vote

There was no substantive discussion about either the candidates or the selection process among the members of the subcommittee. Cliff Brown suggested "there's not a right or wrong decision" on the renaming question addressed in Articles 26, 27 and 28 and that all of the candidates were worthy of the honor. He also stated "These three articles are perfect examples of where the Advisory Committee adds no value to Town Meeting" (by expressing the personal preferences on individuals on a matter that will be decided by the preferences of a majority of TM).

Mariah Nobrega offered a motion to approve Article 26. Mr. Brown offered an Amendment of "No Recommendation" which was seconded and approved by a vote of 3-2. Subsequently, motions for "No Recommendation" were made on each of Articles 26, 27 and 28 and were approved by identical votes of 4-1.

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