



# American Ethical Union

## *Inspiring Ethical Communities*

*2 West 64<sup>th</sup> Street • New York, NY 10023 • [www.aeu.org](http://www.aeu.org)  
Phone 212.873.6500 • Fax 212-624-0203 • [office@aeu.org](mailto:office@aeu.org)*

## **ANNUAL SOCIETY REPORT** **Summer 2020 through Spring 2021**

### **Society Report for Ethical Culture Society of Essex County, NJ**

Leader: None

President: Thomas Cunningham

Administrative Director/Office Contact: Jeanine Rosh, Office Supervisor

#### **Updates for Summer 2020 through Spring 2021:**

#### **Special Programs: “Living Ethical Culture in our Time”**

This educational program was introduced in June 2020 by Meredith Sue Willis and Alice Robinson-Gilman with approval from the Board of Trustees. The program’s goals were to foster an overall cohesiveness among the members about who we are as a congregation and a common understanding of what Ethical Culture’s main tenet “Act as to elicit the best in others and thereby in one’s self” means. We hoped that knowledge of the historical and social roots of Ethical Culture would strengthen our platforms, workshops, colloquy and member-initiated activities. We also wanted to make members aware of our relationship with the other Societies and the AEU.

Over the past year, the program offered the following:

- 11/22/20 Colloquy, lead by Sue & Alice, Thoughts During the Pandemic
- 2/14/21 Platform, Tom Cunningham
- 3/14/21 Platform, Jone Johnson, Women in Ethical Culture
- 4/24 & 5/1/21 Workshop, Bart Warden, The Board in a Leaderless Society
- 6/19/21 Workshop, Jim White

Planning has begun for the year 2021 - 2022. A questionnaire will be sent asking for responses to the program so that new offerings can best meet the needs of the Membership.

**Ethical Action:**



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This year the Social Action Committee has been meeting by Zoom roughly once every month or six weeks. We continue to buy ads for certain celebratory journals (like the Coalition on Race, First Friends, and/or Peace Action) as a way to support like-minded organizations and to publicize the work of Essex Ethical and the Social Action Committee.

This year, in the area of **Climate & Environment**, we continued our Bee Friendly lawn sign project, headed by Jackie Herships and Martha Howlett. Jackie reported that we've taken in \$190 selling Pesticide Free signs for \$10 apiece. We have also planned our sixth annual local hero award (held over from 2020) to be given in September 26, 2021 to Nancy Zak, who for many years has fought for clean-up and open space in the Ironbound Section of Newark.

To work towards **Racial and Immigrant Justice**, committee members...

- ... completed @ 500 get-out-the vote post cards in summer 2020. thanks to Bill Graves, Irene Dunsavage, Yasmeen Anderson and several of her friends, MSW, and Martha Howlett.
- We wrote letters to Governors Murphy and Cuomo that said in part: "We sincerely ask you to use your good offices now and in the future to stop local, county and state law enforcement from funneling people into the ICE system."
- In the fall, individual committee members continued to work with organizations like Vote Forward and Reclaim our Vote.
- Early in 2021, we reached out to First Friends of NJ & NY to find out what is needed most urgently for people who are immigrant detainees. The organization especially needs \$10 International Calling Cards which provide 30 minutes of conversation with families and friends overseas. The Committee is now collecting money to buy these cards and send them to First Friends. So far, we have money for ten cards.
- We wrote letters to legislators protesting the transfer of two immigrant detainees who had been on a hunger strike from the Bergen County Jail to the Batavia Detention Facility near Buffalo, New York. We additionally asked that they as well as the other individuals on hunger strikes who do not pose an imminent threat to public safety be released immediately while they wait for their deportation hearings. See the letter:  
<https://www.essexethical.org/socialaction.html#iceletter2021>

In the areas of **Economic Justice and more**, we began a Social Justice/Social Action Resources page online at the Essex Ethical website. We are collecting links for people who want to take action, The page is at  
<https://www.essexethical.org/socialaction%20RESOURCES%20page.html>).

Finally, we have been trying to educate ourselves on issues of ethical voting. Committee member Martha Howlett did excellent research and prepared an informational sheet on ranked choice voting, and Committee Member Bill Graves presented a sharply organized and well-received platform on some of these voting issues on April 18, 2021.



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### **Ethical Education:**

The Family Program at ECS of Essex County is focused on families with young children. With the pandemic shutdown, the program continued on with five core families including 11 total children participating regularly via video. The program met every other week on topics that included environmentalism, mind-body, emotional intelligence, and social activism. Some weeks featured socially distant outdoor activities, such as a tree identification game at a local park. There is not a program for older children, but there is a high school student involved in the Family Education program as an organizer and helper.

### **Communications:**

In this year of covid 19, communications were limited to emails announcing our programs, and those of interest presented by other societies and sources. We discontinued the monthly Newsletter. Our building use was severely curtailed, with no groups meeting there. Attendance at platforms at biweekly Zoom meetings averaged 16-20 people.

We organized phone calls to Members who could not connect via Zoom to check in and make sure they were getting what they needed to stay safe and healthy.

### **Finances:**

As use of the building was stopped in March of 2020, income from rentals was greatly decreased. We permanently lost a long time tenant, The Apostolic Church, which found another venue. In spite of the curtailment we did manage to finish the last fiscal year (ended 8/31/20) slightly in the black. This year's budget anticipates return to the building in September 2021. We face financial challenges in the coming year as we anticipate we will soon need a new roof, and the building exterior needs some repairs and staining. Funding for this is under discussion.

### **Membership:**

One of our Members passed away at the end of 2020. We have recent interest in membership from a young family of 5. Activities revolving around membership have all but ceased, but we are in meetings to spark new membership activities. We are also working on revising the membership application to step into the 21st century.

### **New Developments:**

The only New Development of note is our acquisition of a license to use Zoom and our slow mastery of the software to offer services such as Platforms to Members. We believe that there will be opportunities to continue to use Zoom in the coming year, even as Covid-19 restrictions ease. Board Meetings, for instance, are easy to run via Zoom and there may be new offerings or programs



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that we can create using the software now that so many of our Membership are familiar with it.

### **Goals for 2021-2022:**

After this difficult year, we have ambitious goals for the next one:

- Reopen our building, hopefully in September, so that we can begin meeting in person again.
- Re-engage with those who rent our building for meetings and events, allowing us to again become a gathering place for our community.
- Strengthen our Board of Directors' structure and discipline, leveraging what we've learned through our workshops with Bart Worden.
- Restart our Membership activities so that we can attract new Members to our Society.
- Create a better defined "Friends" program so that we can better identify and cultivate potential new Members.
- Expand our Family Program so that we can again invite new families to participate.
- Better integrate our Family Program into the rest of the Society.
- Host a weekend retreat so that Members can continue to deepen their understanding of Ethical Culture and its meaning in their lives.
- Create reading groups, discussion groups, and other activities leveraging Zoom so that we can continue to include Members and other interested parties who may have trouble getting to our physical location.
- Re-energizing or strengthening our partnerships with other organizations, such as The Coalition on Race or SOMA Action, that have also seen their activities curtailed by the pandemic.
- Educate our Members on the resources available through the AEU so that they can engage with the Ethical Culture movement more broadly.