

SOMA Against Hate Collective Statement in response to racist attack on 5/8/2020

The members of the SOMA Against Hate Collective were incensed by the racist incident that occurred almost a month ago in South Orange. On Friday, May 8th, Maplewood resident C.J. Burgess came to assist her father, Aubrey Burgess, with his stalled car outside of his business on South Orange Avenue. As C.J. was in the process of jumpstarting Aubrey's car, Ryan Pogany drove up and began berating them for blocking his ability to make deliveries for Bunny's restaurant, where he is employed. His tirade escalated from profanity to xenophobia, as Pogany told Aubrey Burgess that he "didn't know how things worked in this country," and that he and C.J. needed to "get out of his country." When C.J. tried to protect her father from Pogany's vitriol, he called her a "n__ger b__ch." The Burgesses reported Pogany to the South Orange Police and C.J. posted her account of the incident on Facebook.

Once the incident became public, Bunny's owners compounded the harm by trying to bully the Burgesses into silence. Their attorney issued a letter full of veiled threats and using dog whistles like "insolent" to describe C.J., an African American adult woman, as if she owed a duty of deference to Ryan Pogany, son of Bunny's owner, Leslie Pogany. Harris impugned the character of a Navy veteran and accused C.J. of lying.

Bunny's must reflect on the harm caused by Ryan Pogany's verbal attack and recognize that denial and defensiveness are not a path forward. SOMA Against Hate believes that businesses that do not treat all people with respect and refuse accountability for the racist acts of their personnel should not be patronized. SOMA Against Hate calls on our community to boycott Bunny's until:

1. Bunny's issues a sincere, complete apology to the Burgesses that admits that Pogany's xenophobic, racist and misogynistic tirade was completely unacceptable and acknowledges the harm that the Burgesses suffered because of it. Bunny's must also acknowledge that their efforts to bully CJ into silence and question her honesty compounded the harm.
2. Remove Ryan Pogany from a public- facing role in the business, as he has demonstrated that his behavior endangers the public.
3. Have all management and staff undertake anti-bias training.

SOMA Against Hate also calls on The South Orange Village Center Alliance to remove Leslie Pogany from its Board. Her actions in the wake of Ryan Pogany's verbal attack are evidence that she should not occupy a position of leadership in our town's business community.

SOMA Against Hate was formed in the wake of an effort by white supremacist hate groups to recruit in our community. Above all, we are committed to preserving South Orange and Maplewood as a welcoming community where diversity is celebrated, rather than reviled or feared. Our motto is that "Hate has no place in SOMA." That applies to extremist outsiders and local business people alike. When we say, "Hate has no place in SOMA," we mean it.

[SOMA Justice Petition](#)

[Community Coalition on Race Statement from May 18, 2020](#)

Signed:

SOMA Justice: Addressing Race and Inequality

Community Coalition on Race

SOMA Action

SOMA Action Religious Justice Committee

SOMA Action Racial Justice Committee

Rev. Brenda Wheeler Ehlers, Morrow Church (for reference)

Rev. Janice Lynn, Morrow Church (for reference)

Rev. Dr. Terry Richardson

Kol Rina

Rabbi Daniel Cohen and Max Weisenfeld on behalf of Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel

Rabbi Jesse Olitzky, Rabbi Rachel Marder and Steve Weber on behalf of Congregation Beth El