

Outside the Box

Hyams Foundation chief says racial, economic disparities affect all

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Jocelyn Sargent

TITLE: Executive director, [Hyams Foundation](#), Boston

AGE: 54

RESIDENCE: Newton

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in political science and government, [University of Texas at Austin](#), 1987; Ph.D., political science, [University of Michigan at Ann Arbor](#), 2002



W. MARC BERNSAU

Jocelyn Sargent, executive director of The Hyams Foundation, in front of artwork by Artists For Humanity, an organization for which the foundation has provided support.

A native of Austin, Texas, [Jocelyn Sargent](#) has long strived to help the country achieve social and racial equity, switching an early ambition in law to public policy as the best way of accomplishing it. Her 2002 Ph.D. dissertation on “The Pathology of Drug Policy” looked at the punitive policies around the crack epidemic — i.e., prison sentences — that largely affected people of color. Today, those policies have shifted to a treatment approach toward opioid addiction plaguing white communities.

Co-founder of the Center for Social Inclusion in New York in 2002, Sargent also worked for the Open Society Institute in that city as well as Michigan’s [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) and the Hogg Foundation in Texas. Last August, she was named head of the Hyams Foundation, which targets its \$130 million in assets to support grants consistent with a goal of dismantling “persistent, racialized economic disparities in Boston and Chelsea.”

Sargent is married to [Robert L. Adams Jr.](#), also a foundation executive and holder of a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology. A resident of Newton and the mother of two teenaged sons, Sargent spoke with Business Journal correspondent [Robin Washington](#).

Your foundation’s goal is reminiscent of that of Jim Farmer, the co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, who once said he and his colleagues started CORE in 1942 to “solve the race problem.” Decades later, he said, “We found out it was a lot more difficult than we thought.” Can you solve the “race problem”?

I would love to see that. In my lifetime, I never imagined that we would elect a black president. White people might not think racial justice has anything to do with them, but it does. Those very policies that were unjust come back to hit everybody eventually. It's striking the issues facing rural white communities are so similar to the issues facing inner-city communities.

You didn't grow up wanting to head a foundation. What did you want to be?

I wanted to be a lawyer. Thurgood Marshall was a hero. I had the opportunity to meet (Federal Appeals Court Judge) A. Leon Higginbotham. I was convinced I was going to be a civil rights lawyer. At that point I was trying to understand everything that I could about our constitution. I grew up in Austin, Texas, where it was actually in the city plan to have the interstate divide the city east and west by race.

That sounds like one of those backroom deals that you think are conspiracy theories but years later turn out to have been true.

This was not a backroom plan. This was a published urban plan, saying, "We should have the blacks and Latinos on this side of the highway." In Austin, the percentage of the black community has dwindled. There's massive out-migration of low-income people. I don't want that for Boston.

There's a long history of real estate brokers calling neighborhoods like Dorchester many different names depending on who they're trying to sell to.

That's happened around the country, in Texas and in New York City's DUMBO area (for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass.)

It doesn't necessarily work here because you can't fool anybody. People will correct you if you dare mispronounce Peabody or Quincy.

Right. I think that one of the things that is an asset to the city is the neighborhood identity. The drawback is if you're too isolated, it's hard to see the city as a whole.

What do you do for fun when you're not solving the race problem?

I have a son in 9th grade and a son in 7th grade. Their extracurricular activities are my extracurricular activities. I love to read. I have read about New England politics most of my life. Now I have the opportunity to explore those places.

Locals never hit things like the Freedom Trail. How do you keep from looking like a tourist?

One of the advantages I hope to bring is my sense of wonderment. I think I will continue to be the one walking around the city with my mouth open as I explore.