

Dinner & Dialogue in Oak Park helps open minds and improve understanding of divisive issues

By Cedric Melton

When it comes to fostering an honest discussion of a difficult topic, nothing puts people at ease, opens minds and improves understanding like making it a conversation over a good meal.

That's the approach the Village of Oak Park's Community Relations Department took when it launched the Dinner & Dialogue program in the winter of 2011 as part of its ongoing efforts to re-energize Oak Park's unswerving dedication to promoting racial diversity and respect for human differences.

Oak Park's popular Dinner & Dialogue program was modeled after the Jane Adams Hull House Chicago Dinner Project. By bringing together a diverse group of community residents in a safe, controlled setting over a full dinner, participants can be coaxed into honestly discussing and debating issues that can divide people, while working toward replacing prejudices and fears with mutual cultural understanding.

Keeping with the tradition of Oak Park's long history of fostering real inclusion, a unique thrust of the dinners is to intentionally pair residents of diverse ethnicities who have never met before. The goal is to have them engage in real dialogue on race and other pressing social issues in a safe environment with wide open discussion, but no judgements.

Prior to the start of the Dinner & Dialogue program, Oak Park had established a solid reputation as a diverse, inviting community. But some of those grass roots activists who had helped make Oak Park the community it is today had begun to voice concerns that the importance of continuing to work on race relations had diminished. Some said the community appeared to have said mission accomplished and moved on.

In reply to this unsettling sentiment, the Community Relations Department partnered with the citizen volunteers on the Village's Community Relations Commission to develop a new outreach program. Their mission? Reignite important conversations and challenge what some saw as declining interest in race relations and inclusion, two issues that remain among the most critical facing communities today.

The question became how would a new public discussion forum work? Large-scale dialogues are difficult to coordinate because many people are afraid of being embarrassed or seen as politically incorrect. The commission concluded that the community's race radar had become so ratcheted up that many Oak Parkers had become paralyzed by the fear of being called racist.

Dinner & Dialogue offered the answer. Small scale, intimate and nonjudgemental, the dinners operate on the understanding and guarantee that participants won't intentionally hurt or offend each other. This guarantee promotes real dialogue and allows for an open exchange of ideas and thoughts. Put simply, participants talk with each other and not at each other.

The beauty of this approach is its simplicity. Few residents ever have an opportunity for honest conversations about race and other difficult subjects even among their social and professional peers. But in a comfortable setting that uses trust, respect and intelligence, residents are better able to

navigate difficult conversations and come away with a deeper understanding of different racial groups and their community experiences.

Since the program's debut, nearly 50 dinners have been held in private homes throughout the Village. Topics have covered a wide range of issues that are important not just to the municipal government of Oak Park or community activists, but to residents who call the community home.

This is the message the Oak Park's Dinner & Dialogue program strives to share and address. The program is based on the belief that if individual ethnicities approach each other with honesty, trust and sincerity, the groundwork can be laid for a level of frank communication that can make a real difference in how races see and interact with each other.

More information on Oak Park's Dinner & Dialogue program is posted at www.oak-park.us/community.

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