

The Dialogue Project 2004 Growth and Activity Report

In the 2004 year we concentrated our efforts on:

1. Strengthening, enriching and expanding our ongoing dialogue circles (bringing dialogue into the Islamic Cultural Center, outreach and in-reach activities).
2. **SPEAKING ACROSS DIFFERENCES** - a new neighbor to neighbor program that reaches Arab and Muslim new immigrants and citizens and long time residents of Irish, Italian, Jewish and other ethnicities in neighborhoods where post 9/11 hostilities exist on the corner and in the schools.
3. Facilitator Enhancement and Development

Enriching ongoing Circles/New circles - With the creation of the Islamic Center Mosque dialogue circle (96th Street and 3rd Avenue), we now have six monthly circles. Each circle's membership lists 22 – 30 participants. The actual dialogues draw an average attendance of 12 - 18 people per month. Dialogue locations include: Manhattan - Upper West Side, Mid-Town, Upper East Side; Brooklyn – Park Slope/Midwood and Bay Ridge; Bronx/Riverdale. A seventh circle meets intermittently in northern New Jersey.

What is most gratifying in our third year is watching how people develop communication skills and speak and develop confidence in their own truth, thereby making them more open to the “truth” of others. The dialogue process provides a safe environment, a means outside a controlled classroom effort, for adults, the newest immigrant or long time citizen, to come together to discuss their understanding of the Middle East Conflict through story and active listening.

Our dialoguer's range from age 18 to 90. We have dialoguers who have lived the history of the Middle East conflict since the days of the British Mandate and the forests of Nazi resistance in Europe. There are Palestinians who have survived recent Israeli jail time and veterans of the Lebanese and six day wars. As the dialogue groups mature, acknowledgement and even empathy for the experience of others has started to happen. Each person comes to this place on their own, by forming relationships and trust through steady, regular contact with the “other” as well as having exposure to different readings and people from Israel and Palestine. Deeper conversations began to emerge this year around issues of security (what it looks like), borders, acknowledgement and accountability.

We brought Palestinian and Jewish lawyers and academics into the circles including Omar Dajani, a former advisor to the PLO security negotiating team and Mark Rosenblum of Peace Now.

Yonothan Shapiro visited our dialogue circle. A former Black Hawk Air Force Pilot, Yonothan is one of 27 Air Force Commanders who has refused to serve in the occupied territories. His encounter in our dialogue with Palestinians from Deishe refugee Camp and 2nd generation Palestinian Americans was a moving and profound experience for all.

Two women from the Bereaved Parents Circle spoke with dialoguers at several intimate venues. Most important was their visit to the Islamic Cultural Center . At this mosque on a sweltering, humid August day, they met with 80 Jews and Muslim worshippers who had no prior dialogue experience. The Palestinian woman and South African/Israeli Mother had each lost a loved one to the conflict. Their story and work so moved those present that the Imam (A Palestinian refugee from 1938) immediately offered the mosque as a gathering place for dialogue on a regular basis. The mosque dialogues are now in their fourth month with an average attendance of 20 Muslims, 4 Jews and two interested others. The focus is interfaith/intercultural.

Our outreach to young Arab professionals has encouraged The Dialogue project to create an Education Committee, to begin meeting in 2005. The committee's purpose is to bring a small, select group of seasoned dialoguers together with leaders from Jewish progressive and Arab civil society and/or Palestinian support organizations into a trust building process. Utilizing dialogue as the tool for discussion, the group will explore in depth United States legislation and plans regarding potential peace agreements. The idea emerged from the dialoguers. Many feel that the monthly circles, while touching on many of these issues, do not always allow time for a full focused discussion around pending bills in Congress or plans on the table for Palestinian and Israeli negotiators. They felt the dialogue format would allow for an authentic exchange, rather than debate. Utilizing dialogue guidelines we hope that this will be the first step in building bridges that can create joint educational platforms. The committee will send people into the circles to guide more focused discussion on political topics and will also be able to create events that move beyond debate, for a broader audience.

Other Special Events included: “A Land Twice Promised – May 2004. Israeli Actress Noa Baum brought her one-woman show to Westchester, Manhattan and Brooklyn. The piece tells the stories of four Jerusalem women and is drawn from Noa’s mother’s story and the story of her best friend’s family, a Palestinian Jerusalemite. The Dialogue project provided a post performance phone hook up with the Palestinian woman who was featured in Noa’s play. Community Partners for these events included: The Unitarian Church of White Plains, The Brooklyn Ethical Culture Society, Grace Episcopal Church-Brooklyn, and Congregation Kolot Chayeinu.

Interfaith Study at the Muslim Youth Center –March 2004. This event involved clergy members and study tables at a conservative Muslim Center in Brooklyn. The event took place 3 days after the assassination of Sheikh Yassein by the Israeli Army. Tensions ran high in both the Jewish and Arab communities yet over 65 people attended, the majority Muslim immigrants who had no prior contact with Jewish clergy. Participants sat at tables with a discussion “teacher” of a different faith. There were two 1-hour sessions. Topics covered: Forgiveness, Charity/Justice, and Life Cycle Events (birth, coming of age, marriage, divorce, death, women etc.). Teachers included: Rabbi Simka Weintraub of JFCS – Jewish Healing Center; Dr. Ahmad Jabber – President, The Arab American Association; Rev. Jean Person – Grace Episcopal Church; Father Khader El-Yateem – Salaam Arabic Lutheran Church; Rabbi Sue Oren – Educational Director, Kolot Chayeinu; Imam Omar Abu- Namous & Ayesha Mohammed – Islamic Center of New York; Rabbi Jeff Marker – Jewish Chaplain.

Food for Thought Outreach Event – March 2004 - Ya Hala Restaurant, Yonkers, NY. - Our Riverdale/Yonkers/Westchester dialoguers planned an Arab community in-reach program at Ya Hala Restaurant in Yonkers. Owned by a Palestinian immigrant, 8 dialoguers and a facilitator reached out to patrons to join their open conversation. The event yielded one new Jewish participant and two new Palestinian participants.

The 2004 year was one that saw participant growth in skill and depth of conversation. Our experience tells us that when people have an opportunity to learn and meet each other in these public programs, hope is ignited, rather than despair, and people are then motivated to begin their own learning process. Some choose dialogue, others choose other methods, the point is that they begin the journey.

Speaking Across Differences is a new direction for The Dialogue Project. Three years of sustainable dialogue has created a foundation for trust and dialoguers are now extending into other arenas. An exciting new project, SPEAKING is located in Bay Ridge and Cobble Hill/Brooklyn Heights. In these neighborhoods there are large concentrations of Arab and Muslim immigrants and new citizens, living alongside long time residents, Jewish, Italian, Irish, Hispanic, Asian and Black Americans.

Since 9/11 tensions have arisen on an everyday basis, reflecting the uncertainty of today's world. This program is a local neighborhood dialogue and training effort that focuses on surfacing these tensions among neighbors who today do not have much contact with each other.

Independence Community Bank Foundation has provided a pilot grant of \$25,000 towards the total \$120,440 budget. They are asking others in the New York funding community to step up to the plate and support such grass roots, organically grown programs. We must secure at least \$50,000 in funds to achieve the full \$25,000 from Independence Bank. We have submitted proposals to the Stella and Charles Guttman Foundation and private donors.

The program will accommodate 25 – 35 adult participants and include outreach efforts to hundreds in the neighborhoods targeted. Over a period of 18 months participants will move through a process from initial outreach to Dialogues, training workshops, neighborhood walks and development of a community manual. By the end of the 18-month project period people from all walks of life will have experienced each other through Dialogue and community action on local issues.

Community Partners who meet bi-weekly include: Rabbi Simka Weintraub of The Jewish Healing Center in Cobble Hill; Father James Devlin of Our Lady of Angels Catholic Church (Parish Cluster); Ms. Pellagrino - multi-cultural educator Public School 102; Linda Sarsour of the Arab American Association; Father Khader of the Salaam Arabic Church; Rev. David Rommerein of the Good Shepard Lutheran Church; Dr. Joel Sokol - Bay Ridge Jewish Community Center; 73rd Street Block Association; and a variety of other Intermediate and High Schools in Bay Ridge and Cobble Hill.

Facilitator Development - Our five facilitators began meeting monthly in January 2004. We debrief each dialogue gathering and develop consistent tools for use in dialogue. We examined our different facilitation styles and philosophies. What has emerged from these monthly meetings is a written outline for a facilitation guidebook, questions for provoking dialogue and an outline for dialogue that is loose enough for organic dialogue, yet one that allows for a safe, consistent format. This model includes:

- A written, transparent agenda presented at the top of each dialogue circle
- Review of 5 basic Dialogue Guidelines
- Introduction of New participants/name – identity question go around
- Check in on current months events (see if that leads to a dialogue that picks up on the past month).
- Reflections on the past month dialogue – themes/hot words that surfaced are reflected
- Topic or guest dialoguer who brings insight relating to prior issues that came up

The outline for the guidebook and a survey for the dialoguers to be completed in March are on our table now. We held 11 meetings and sent Mino Akhtar, our only Muslim facilitator and Marcia Kannry to the National Conference on Dialogue and Deliberation in Denver, Colorado, utilizing the remaining funds (plus scholarships). We are still assimilating the information and models that were taught in workshops at this important national dialogue gathering. If we receive funding to continue meeting we will finish the facilitators guide book and expand our facilitator circle.

Plans for the Future = We will continue to enrich the current circles and maximize participation. We will provide facilitators and email information and reading materials. While we do have a waiting list of those interested in participating in dialogue, we must continue the outreach and in-reach that goes on in-between dialogue circle gatherings and events. We are now asked to provide speakers or material at large Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Arab events around New York.

Stabilize Staffing - While we would like to grow more circles, we are unable to forge ahead without a full time salaried Executive position and Program Coordinator funding. We require capacity building funds at this juncture, of at least \$150,000 to allow us to create a strong funding/grant/development program. The President CEO is a full time, unpaid volunteer and our Program Coordinator works no more than 16 hours per week. Our time is utilized directing the programs, developing facilitator meetings, creating the organizational structures and community outreach for public dialogue and SPEAKING ACROSS DIFFERENCES. Development and fund raising, including maintaining better contact with current funders, does not get the attention it requires.

We have instituted a Board review of by-laws by a Board attorney and have secured a financial manager who handles bookkeeping, budget preparation, and taxes (see attached statements).

Summary – We have created an important and valued community agency on a shoestring budget. Dialoguers are maturing and find themselves ready to tackle more pragmatic

political issues, though personal story and experience is still the cornerstone of the dialogues. Dialoguers are also taking the dialogue experience back into their communities and cooperating on programs that are local and specific to their block and community. We are at a critical point where we have the people resources and community good will behind us to allow us to grow and expand. We lack the funds to execute this next stage. Our Board will address this issue at our Annual Meeting on December 16th.

We ask our current funders help in opening up doors to other family run foundations so that we can pursue capacity building funding.