

The Dialogue Project Annual Report 2005

We are five years into our journey of face-to-face encounters - Diaspora Palestinians and Israelis, people of many ethnicities, American Jews, Muslims, and Christians - who make room for the intimate stories and human knowledge of the "other". We have learned to honor the places where we are vulnerable. We struggle to quiet voices of judgement. Together we become curious about each other's way of life, history and ideas for future coexistence.

In 2005 we focused our activities on:

1. Enriching our current dialogues;
2. Special Events – Interfaith, Campus and Organization Programs - creating partnerships /strengthening existing partnerships with diverse organizations/schools around New York.
3. Implementing/expanding SPEAKING ACROSS DIFFERENCES – a Bay Ridge (and soon to be Cobble Hill/Brooklyn Heights) community development project.

We are moving forward and maturing. Our focus for 2006 is on capacity building and establishing a full time paid Executive position and staff support. This report offers an in-depth review of the past year's activities. We welcome your feedback, comments and ideas!

Sustainable Middle East Dialogues

The continuity and regularity of the dialogue circles have created a comfortable place to explore differences. Genuine affection among individuals in each circle has developed. While each group has its own dynamic, all of the dialogues reflected the often tense on the ground situation in Israel and Palestine. Dialogue participants have family in Israel, Palestine and the Middle East who are affected daily by political decisions – Gaza disengagement, the separation wall, land confiscation in West Bank and Jerusalem, targeted assassinations and suicide bombers. And dialoguers themselves are affected when they travel to the region.

Dialogue Summary – In any given month there are approximately 110 active dialoguers (150 on the circle lists). There is a palpable sense of trust among circle participants, though strong differences regarding Palestine, Israel and the statehood of each people exist.

Dialoguers express deep affection for each other. They are touched by personal stories even from those of opposing political views.

An Israeli American man tells a Palestinian Christian woman that he was very moved when she spoke of her father and the effect of his flight from 1947 Jerusalem on his life, mentally and physically. She appreciates the Israeli's story of his father's survival in Nazi Europe and landing in Palestine, in 1947. She tells him "I do not hold you responsible for being born an Israeli, it is your home, and I want it to remain your home."

A Palestinian from Gaza who has lost several cousins over the past two years to the conflict speaks to an American Jewish woman who is fearful of anti-Jewish sentiment in the Arab world. He tells her that that he understands Jewish fear because he knows his own fear and rage. It is something he struggles with every day.

Participants ask each other hard questions, and do not rely on the facilitators to “make it nice”. These questions reveal fears, and biases and also challenge deeply held assumptions about “the other”.

A young Arab Yemeni woman read Eli Weisel’s “Night” (after sitting with a Holocaust survivor for months in her dialogue), and wondered why she had not been taught this Holocaust history.

An Israeli Jewish man began to fear for his Palestinian Israeli neighbors and wondered if he would have to “hide” or protect Palestinians living in Israel as ideas like “separation” or “expulsion” were circulating.

A Palestinian American social worker finds she has feelings of betrayal just being in dialogue, and realizes this is the only place in New York where she can sit with Jews/Israelis on an equal footing and speak about Palestine and Israel.

An American Jewish woman finds she is questioning her place of privilege and the “conditions” she requires Palestinians to meet for her to think they are “reasonable”.

The facilitators are flexible and create exercises that keep the concept of “generous listening” in the circle. Personal friendships have developed and there is much more acceptance of each individual person for who she/he is.

Dialogue Circle review:

1. Park Slope, Brooklyn – Initiated May 2001 – Palestinian American Muslims, Yemeni Muslim, Iranian, American Jew/Israeli, Interested others of different denominations. Stable energetic group.
2. Bay Ridge, Brooklyn - Initiated November 2001. Palestinian Christian, Muslim and Egyptian Muslim, Jewish American, Israeli. No interested others. Stable diverse group.
3. Mid Town Manhattan – Initiated July 2002 – This group evolved after we appeared on The Brian Lehrer Show on National Public Radio. It has always had difficulty in attracting Palestinian participants. One Israeli, One Palestinian American Christian, Interested Others. Outreach needed to young Manhattan Professionals (Jewish American, Palestinian American and others).
4. Upper West Side – Initiated March 2002. The group has core participants that include Palestinians (Muslim and Christian), American Jews/Israelis, and Holocaust Survivors. We have combined this group with the Mid-town circle.
5. Riverdale/Westchester - Initiated August 2003. Initially a progressive Rabbi called and asked if we would help establish a dialogue circle. The circle now draws a balanced group of Israelis, Palestinian Americans and American Jews.
6. Upper East Side Islamic Cultural Center, Manhattan. - Initiated April 2004 - This group is in constant flux. Muslim Americans and immigrants who worship at the

mosque join for one dialogue or two. Members of the Upper West Side and Mid Town group (Jewish and interested others) also attend. The Manhattan Quakers at Irving Place have asked if they could join in partnership with us to attend these dialogues. We are re-forming this group for 2006.

Future Plans - Adult dialoguers are suggesting it is time to move to a place where we can “look at the future together” and examine how we want to live.

Creating More Circles: We plan to create circles in: Montclair, NJ and/or Patterson, NJ areas and Tarrytown, New York, seeded by current dialoguers who live in those areas. We are seeking funds to create a dialogue circle in Queens where there is a growing Palestinian community.

Reconciliation trip to Israel and Palestine: The trust and affection that participants experience with each other has led to an expressed desire to meet the family members and visit the towns and villages where they have historical ties. The Board of Directors of The Dialogue Project has approved a *Reconciliation Trip* to bring a select group of 8 – 15 dialoguers to Israel and Palestine. The Board understands how delicate this project is because of the often-unclear status for Palestinian Americans who wish to return to their hometowns.

We plan to meet with dialogue and conflict resolution practioners on the ground. We will visit homes left by Palestinian dialoguers in 1948 or 1967 and visit Israeli families of Jewish/Israeli dialoguers. We will collaborate with diverse groups in Israel and Palestine who utilize dialogue in many forms including: Givat Haviva, The Israel Committee Against House Demolitions, Sabeel, B’Tselem, Al Quds Unviersity; Israel-Palestine Center for Research and Information, Neve Shalom/Wahat Al Salaam, Bereaved Parents Forum, Open House, New Israel Fund, One Voice, Physicians for Human Rights (Israel/Palestine). Marcia Kannry, President who has lived in Israel and traveled extensively in the West Bank and Gaza, and Paula Pace, Chair of the DP Board and lead facilitator, will travel to the area in 2006 to plan/arrange the program.

SPEAKING ACROSS DIFFERENCES - Initiated July 2004. This pilot project’s goal is to bring long time residents of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn into face to face contact with Arab (Muslim and Christian) new immigrants and citizens in the neighborhood. for dialogue and eventually develop community action projects.

Since 9/11 tensions have arisen on an everyday basis, reflecting the uncertainty of today’s world. This program creates a safe place where differences and commonalities are explored.

In 2004 we formed a Planning Committee and began bi-weekly meetings to scope out the concerns long time residents and new Arab and Muslim immigrants had about each other in Bay Ridge. On March 7, 2005 a public kick off event was held at PS 102 in Bay Ridge. Over 120 people gathered to meet the “other”. Playback Theatre and listening exercises were introduced (see article attached). Residents of Cobble Hill and Brooklyn Heights joined the planning committee to learn how to develop this project in their neighborhoods.

Partner organizations include: The Jewish Healing Center; Public School 102; The Arab American Association; Salaam Arabic Church; Good Shepard Lutheran Church; Bay Ridge Jewish Community Center; Our Lady of Angels R.C, Church, St. Andrews R.C, Church, Community Board 10 and the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge.

Following the event, 85 people signed up for ongoing dialogue and community action programs. The effort now has a core group of about 30 people, which expands for group events and committee work.

Getting to Know each other – Identity dialogues - April 2005 – July 2005 –There were eight culture/getting to know each other dialogues. Participants established a warmth and ease that cut across social/economic divides in the neighborhood. Long time residents were curious and a little uneasy about their Muslim neighbors. This led to discussions about changes in the neighborhood over the past 40 years. The dialogues were held in various ethnic/faith-based institutions (mosques, synagogues and churches).

Dialoguers were challenged to be in the “other’s shoes” and learn how neighbors from a different background see “the other”. Long time residents were challenged to explore privilege and power. For several conservative Muslim immigrants participants, coming into a circle of others and speaking about Islam on a personal level was a new and sometimes difficult experience. The planning committee addressed this issue and asked the larger dialogue circle to have a transparent conversation about this focus.

Three Dialogue project Board Members (Thomas Cox, Debbie Almontaser, Father Khader El Yateem), were asked to take on special out reach responsibilities to the Arab and Muslim community. Over time people began to trust the dialogue process. For others in the program whose previous community work was directly related to their own ethnic/religious group, having a safe place to ask questions about another tradition was very important.

Community Action Dialogues/Programs – August 2005 – December 2005. Another valuable lesson was the sharing of information regarding local community programs. Most residents are involved with their own community initiatives and not aware of the breadth of programs that exist in the neighborhood.

Issues participants explored include:

- English as a Second Language – professional and volunteer efforts
- Health Care (mental health and child health initiatives)
- Library/Culture programs regarding Islam and the Arab world
- Neighborhood Beautification - Business trash clean up, block clean up, tree planting, and recycling.

Participants chose two action project areas: 1. English Language and Culture and 2. Neighborhood Beautification.

Community Action Programs and Trainings – January through September 2006. Participants are planning two action programs; ***Coffee and Conversation*** – A volunteer effort that will bring new immigrants studying ESL into one half hour conversational practice with

long time resident volunteers and **Neighbor to Neighbor Block Outreach** that will bring multi ethnic teams of neighbors to one specific block. Neighbors will survey residents about tree planting, recycling or general ideas about neighborhood cleanliness/quality of life issues.

A small grant from Citizens for NYC will fund a participant created Newsletter. The newspaper will explain SPEAKING ACROSS DIFFERENCES and the purpose of neighbors working across ethnic/religious boundaries. Teams of dialoguers will distribute the newsletter throughout the neighborhood.

Facilitator trainings will be offered for those participants interested in maintaining ongoing multi-ethnic dialogue in Bay Ridge.

Special Events – Interfaith, Campus and Organization Programs and Web Site

We encourage people to call us and learn about how to develop a dialogue circle. This year we were invited to speak, model and facilitate dialogue with:

- New York University – Gallatin Division – Course on Different forms of Activism (*Jan 05*)
- The Workmen’s Circle – Yiddish Cultural Organization – Special Shabbat Presentation (*Feb. 05*)
- Fordham University – Lincoln Center Campus. (Jan – Dec 05)**
- Queens College – Dialogue Panel with Political Science Professor Ziva Flamhaft and dialoguers: Gon Kafri (Bereaved Parent’s Forum), Salem Mikdadi, Yehuda Ehrlichman and Linda Sarsour (dialogue participants) (*May 05*).
- New York Chapter of Brit T’zedek V’Shalom – Helped facilitate a dialogue with Adeeb Fadil, a Palestinian Christian, on the issue of right of return (*June 05*).
- Community Development: -Open house at the Bay Ridge Islamic Center for a “know your neighbor” event. Participants learned about Islamic culture and religion as well as meeting members of the community who are neighbors. -The Dialogue Project attended the IFTAR Ramadan Dinner in Brooklyn hosted by the Muslim American Society of New York with Columbia Professor of Middle East Studies, Rashid Khalidi. -We also co-sponsored a city council Candidates Forum with the South-West Brooklyn Congregations Committee. (*June – Oct 05*)
- Womens’ Federation for World Peace. (*Sept. 05*)
- Annual Interfaith Study Session at Grace Church on Jerusalem, Justice and Rituals – (Brooklyn) co sponsored with The Arab American Association of New York, Bay Ridge Jewish Center, Congregation Kolot Chayeinu, Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture, Dawood Mosque, St. Andrews Church, R.C., Grace Church, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Old First Reformed Church, Muslim American Society-NY Chapter, The Yemeni American Association, St. Nicholas Orthodox Cathedral, Salam Arabic Lutheran Church, The Islamic Cultural Center of New York (*September 05*)
- The Westchester Center for Christian, Muslim and Jewish Understanding – The Dialogue Project co-sponsored the 2005 Andalusia Festival. We were featured at the Israeli and Palestinian Artists Opening Reception, Rockefeller State Park Preserve (*Nov. 05*)

- All Soul's Unitarian Peace Task Force (Upper East Side Manhattan) – Series of events focusing on Israel and Palestine, co-sponsored and/or facilitated with The Dialogue Project (Oct 05 through Jan 06)

****Aelia Shusterman an Israeli international student, and Sherihan Khalil, an Egyptian American senior founded The Fordham University Reconciliation Project** in January of 2005. The women were disturbed by the often polarizing discussions that took place on campus around the Middle East. They found The Dialogue Project web site and after consulting with Marcia Kannry, DP, President, chose to organize and self facilitate a campus dialogue. Marcia created a ½ day intensive facilitation training for students. The dialogues kicked off in April 2005 with two speakers from The Bereaved Parents Forum, a young Israeli and young Palestinian man, who had each lost a loved one to the conflict. Two listening dialogues were held. Encouraged by the response on campus, the students voted to continue the dialogues and raised \$800 to bring in Dialogue Project facilitators for the Fall 2005 semester. Issues examined include identity, Zionism and security.

Web Site - Matthew DiGiusseppe a Master degree candidate in international relations at St. John's University is the DP Project Coordinator and Web Site manger. Matt overhauled our web site and added friendly text, photos and graphics. Improvements are made weekly and we are devising a questionnaire for web site visitors to further expand what we offer on line.

In 2006 we hope to offer the The Facilitator Guidebook on line and more links with partner organizations in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel.

Funding Sources -

- Independence Community Bank Foundation for the planning and initial implementation of SPEAKING ACROSS DIFFERENCES.
- The Mazer Family Foundation has provided basic operating support for Sustainable Middle East dialogues and Interfaith Learning Programs throughout 2005.
- New York Community Trust, New Citizens Fund has allocated funds towards facilitating interaction among Arab and Muslim new immigrants and long time residents throughout New York.
- Citizens for NYC provided small seed money grants for Newsletters, and the Interfaith Event.
- Individual donors, in kind contributions and small private foundations provide the bulk of our funding.

You may request a copy of The Dialogue Project IRS form 990 by calling us at 718-768-2175 or in writing to The Dialogue Project, 123 Seventh Avenue, Box 234, Brooklyn, NY 11215.