

Brooklyn Residents Take a Grassroots Approach By Using Dialogue To Build Local Partnerships

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Members Plan to Bring Bay Ridge Program To Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill, Heights

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COBBLE HILL — Earlier this month, a diverse group of Brooklyn residents gathered in the basement of Community Board 6 to talk about talking.

It may sound trivial, but it was really quite the opposite: a group of Arabs, Jews, Muslims and Christians, they were working out the details of how to bring more people who live in their neighborhoods into organized dialogue about their religious and cultural differences, in hopes of creating understanding and partnerships.

Community Board 6 Assistant District Manager Leroy Branch was one of a dozen people who attended this meeting — a planning committee meeting, to be specific — for Speaking Across Differences, a community empowerment program that brings longtime Brooklynites into dialogue with newer Arab and Muslim residents.

"I think we are all curious, but we are afraid to take that first step," said Branch. "[The program] gives people the courage to take that first step." Branch said he attended the planning committee meetings on behalf of Community Board 6 and St. Peter's, St. Paul's, Our Lady of Pilar in Cobble Hill, but he also goes to simply represent himself. "This is something I'm interested in personally," he said.

Largely funded by a grant from the Independence Bank Community Foundation, Speaking Across Differences has a pilot program currently underway in Bay Ridge, and community members like Branch have been meeting in hopes of bringing the neighbor-to-neighbor dialogues to the Carroll Gardens/Cobble Hill/Brooklyn Heights area.

Branch told a story about encountering a woman wearing a hijab at a local coffee shop in Cobble Hill, soon after his first planning committee meeting. He overheard her talking about an upcoming trip and realized he was curious as to whether or not she wore her hijab on vacation. So he asked her. And she answered. (Sometimes she did and sometimes she didn't). But their simple, courteous interaction had a profound effect on Branch. "It made an indelible change inside myself," he said. "I'd always been taught that Muslim women couldn't talk to men."

He added, "I'm looking forward to talking with her again."

Speaking Across Differences is a program of the Dialogue Project, a Brooklyn-based organization that hosts interfaith events and dialogue training for youths in addition to the adult, community-based dialogues. According to literature provided by the Dialogue Project, Brooklyn has the largest concentration of Muslim and Christian Arab citizens in New York City.

Marcia Kannry, who founded the Dialogue Project in 2001, felt that stories such as Branch's were proof that the organization has already succeeded. "To allow curiosity to override fear, you have to develop it," she said.

Nearly 20 years ago, Kannry traveled throughout Israel, the West Bank and Gaza during the First Intifada as a former executive director of the Jewish National Fund. The experiences, questions, and dialogues she encountered later became the seed from which the Dialogue Project sprouted. "If I hadn't been given those opportunities, I could still be putting those walls up," she explained. "There's so much wonderful stuff that all around us," she said, waving her arms as she walked down Court Street in Cobble Hill. "Why not enrich ourselves with what everyone has to give?"

Four-Pronged Approach

Speaking Across Differences takes a four-pronged approach: dialogue, training, outreach and replication. The goal of the dialogues — which are led by trained facilitators of various faiths — is to establish a safe and non-coercive environment in which conversations about cultural and faith differences may take place. Throughout a total of six dialogue sessions, participants are taught skills such as active and reflective listening while dealing with specific neighborhood issues.

The training phase occurs next, during two workshop sessions. Participants work on developing their leadership and facilitation skills, and focus on how to use them in everyday situations as well as in their schools and workplaces.

For outreach, the group attempts to engage neighbors by planning a series of neighborhood walks and community interfaith events. And during the final phase, replication, participants work on creating a multi-lingual manual that includes basic methods for incorporating dialogue, testimonies from Speaking Across Differences participants and a list of resources for interested parties. The manual is then distributed throughout the community.

While the Bay Ridge pilot program just recently held its first neighborhood walk and is planning an interfaith event on Nov. 12, the Cobble Hill/Carroll Gardens/Brooklyn Heights team is currently in the planning stages and hopes to begin dialogues at the beginning of next year.

Committee members who met at CB 6 are actively in the process of recruiting participants — they are committed to a balance of ethnic groups — and grappling with a number of issues about the criteria for potential participants. Some of the questions under discussion at the last planning committee meeting were whether to or not to include the neighborhood of Red Hook in this group of dialogues and if those who attend religious services in Brooklyn but do not live in the borough should be considered for participation.

The planning committee members are doing the grunt work in hopes of reaching neighbors who probably have never considered engaging in facilitated dialogue. At the meeting at CB 6 earlier this month, Kannry said, "Even in this neighborhood where there's such wonderful diversity, there is resistance." The purpose of the planning committee, she said, is "to bring people who aren't leaders, who don't have the opportunity to come to planning meetings, and give them an opportunity to dialogue."

To learn more about Speaking Across Differences or to get involved, contact the Dialogue Project at (718) 768-2175.

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