

OPINIONS

MONDAY, AUGUST 23, 2010

Can't we have a civil conversation?

Project Civil Discourse hosted an event in which participants held a civil conversation about immigration last Thursday. Some attendees volunteered to host similar gatherings.

MY TURN: by Maren Showkeir

At the end of the night, people stayed to chat with acquaintances who had been strangers three hours before. "It was so nice talking to you!" could be heard again and again.

It was so nice talking to you, they said, even though topic of the evening had been immigration — an issue that has generated mostly heated, vitriolic conversations in the wake of the passage of SB 1070 in April.

On one end of the Rio Salado Conference Hall, the wall was peppered with colorful sheets with "headlines" of the collective wisdom that had been gathered during the Community Conversation on Immigration. Sprinkled among them were 18 large yellow Post-It notes with names and email addresses. Eighteen people — more than 10 percent of the 150 who had gathered to talk about immigration — had volunteered to take the conversation to the next level by hosting similar gatherings on their own. Each hoped to get more people in their communities actively involved in creating solutions to a hot-button issue that has divided the community for years.

Project Civil Discourse, a special initiative of the Arizona Humanities Council and partner organizations, has successfully hosted other

community conversations on issues such as education and healthcare. Last Thursday evening, the gathering had a twist. It featured no presentations, no panel of experts, no "fact sheets," no facilitators. It was pure, face-to-face conversation using principles developed by The World Café (www.theworldcafe.com.)

Throughout the evening, people moved from table to table, sharing their perspectives on three questions:

- During the past few months, what aspects of the immigration issues have affected you personally?
- What aspects of the immigration issues are most in need of civil and respectful discussions in your communities?
- How will you address immigration issues and opportunities in a civil and respectful way after tonight?

The one, muted complaint about the evening was lack of "diversity of thought." Supporters of the proposition were clearly outnumbered by those who don't see the law as a solution to a complex issue that has simmered for decades. One woman, who identified herself as a Tea Party member, had driven all the way from Payson to attend. Although her views were underrepresented, she took the microphone at the end of the evening

to declare she was happy that Project Civil Discourse provided an opportunity to have engaging conversations about a contentious issue. "Someone at my table said she'd never talked to someone from the Tea Party," the woman said. "I think we learned that what I had to say was similar to what she thought. This whole issue of 1070 is the symptom of larger problem — we want to work together with you."

Rich Doerrler -Peacock, a pastor at South Mountain Community church, was among those who posted his contact information. He issued an invitation to continue the

conversation with a focus on helping find practical ways of helping the children who are not here illegally by choice, but because their parents brought them. "Now that I have experienced a conversation like this, I have the confidence and tools to do the same thing in my community," he said.

Maren Showkeir is a native Arizonan. She and her husband, Jamie, are co-authors of Authentic Conversations and members of Collaborative Spark, a group with expertise in large-group conversations that worked with Project Civil Discourse on Thursday's event.