

# The Dialogue

of the National Civility Center

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"I've heard this language before but now I'm hearing it in a new way"

*Anne Kubisch  
The Aspen Institute*

"There is an element of humanity that must be involved."

*Dwain Kyles*

## Inaugural Convening Held in Muscatine The Journey Begins

The National Civility Center was born out of the simple concept that our communities can be better places to live. We believe there is a replicable process that will help individuals and institutions/organizations in creating an environment that will give all people the opportunity to improve their lives. At the heart of this belief is the manner in which people treat each other. Thus, civility becomes a key ingredient in any community building activity. We want to help in the advancement of this belief. Our initial act was to gather individuals who have a wide variety of knowledge in community building practices. In bringing a diverse group of people together we could better define the Center's mission.



Muscatine community members turned out to meet our participants. We were graciously hosted at the Allsteel corporate headquarters.

Our inaugural convening was held April 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>, 2001, in Muscatine, Iowa. Members of the National Civility Center's Staff and Board of Directors played host to a dozen invited guests from around the country. Each participant brought to the event their unique perspective and interest in the development of building civil communities. The Center's expectations were:

- 1) confirm direction
- 2) elicit response to initial materials concerning the "process"
- 3) seek alignment, support

and partnerships

- 4) have fun productive dialogue.

The guests had various expectations, as expressed by these examples:

- 1) find the missing piece that will make a difference
- 2) learn how to engage private business
- 3) learn how to build better partnerships and engage all people
- 4) gain insight into how to convey that the "process" may be the product
- 5) the general excitement surrounding this type of dialogue.

### VISIT US

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### STAFF

Ann Meeker  
Beth Crookham  
Kent Roberts

## Center Builds on Momentum

The Center is actively moving ahead from this initial gathering. With the cooperation of Marty Carver and Bandag, Inc. we are happy to announce the addition of Ann Meeker to our staff as a Director of Communication and Development. We are growing in capacity and focus. Presently, we are reformulating and developing new material. We have plans to facilitate another gathering,

tentatively set for this July, focusing on community practitioners. The leads and ideas generated from the gathering are being pursued. We hope you will continue to be an active partner and join with us in this exciting journey.



Ann Meeker enjoys breaking bread with Larry McClellan

"If you have the process the product will come"

*Martin Carver  
Bandag, Inc*

"The point is bringing people together"

*Hal Green  
Wesley United  
Methodist Church*

## Summarizing the Journey

Much of what happened at the convening is hard to describe. "Simply amazing" seemed to sum up most people's point of view. The event was best captured in Marty Carver's words, "I expected fragmentation on these topics but found the opposite. I found violent agree-

ment." Each participant took away many treasures that will not be found in this summation but speak to the success of the event. This summation attempts to focus on the general themes of agreement that were the result of the dialogue.

## Principles of Engagement

In order to build civil relationships, everyone must feel valued and welcome. The law of the harvest is very clear. If you do not make the preparation before the planting, you will not reap the benefits that are possible. Yet we often try to implement community strategies and ideas without preparing the foundation of relationships and dialogue; this is capacity building. When you seek common language, common circumstance and the commonality of

our shared humanity, you have increased your chances of being successful in whatever you try. Many of the participants stressed the importance and benefit of common language. Anne Kubisch said, "Language is the building block from which we can then discuss change." And Liz O'Dell stated, "Common language unites people and creates community." The notion of creating community is intoxicating.

## Foundation of Process

"Short term pressure has to do with product. To take a long-term view we must start looking at process." says Marty Carver. "It is important to document what you are doing so you can see your progress. Everything is measurable if you know what the problem is, what led to it, and what the outcome will be." Rob Chaskin's comment hit on a topic around which we had lively discussion.

"You must have a neutral place where people can go to ask questions and get help." Dwain Kyles made that statement feeling this is essential and a number of others agreed with him. Curt Johnson was concerned with how we knit together all the diverse initiatives going on in communities. He also stated the need to identify outcomes early in the process and think in terms of tracking progress rather than

final outcome. All of these issues have to do with the process. There must be an understanding of the difference between short-term, issues-oriented, immediate actions and the long-term investment and sustainable actions. Without process your efforts will end with each short-term action. With process you have continual growth and sustainable development.

Process is the crux of the issue. There is a clear need for a neutral facilitator, a neutral place, documentation, democracy, action, and evaluation. With the foundation of process; relationship-building, civility, common language, and sustained change efforts can begin to make communities better places to live.



Veronica Green, Donna Gaines, Dwain Kyles during the Thursday morning sessions

## Civility

The word has an attraction and is like a magnet that draws people into discussion. The concept of civil, humane engagement is very appealing. As Hal Green put it, "It's all about love. If you love someone you are willing to enter into a relationship with them." Jay Newman added, "If there is no relationship, there is no need for civility." That sums up what everyone said in so many ways; we must get people together and build relationships.

## Convening Attendees

- Martin Carver—Bandag, Inc
- Robert Chaskin—Chapin Hall Center for Children
- Beth Crookham—NCC Staff
- Hal Green—Wesley United Methodist Church
- Veronica Green—Masters Student
- Curt Johnson—United Way of America
- Anne Kubisch—The Aspen Institute
- Dwain Kyles—Lawyer/Entrepreneur
- Dick Maeglin—NCC Board
- Larry McClellan—Governors State University
- Ann Meeker—NCC Staff
- Jay Newman—St. Joseph County, MI, ISD & NCC Board
- Elizabeth O'Dell—St. Joseph County, MI, HSC
- Kent Roberts—NCC Staff
- Freddy Webb-Petett—W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Donna Gaines—The Phoenix Company

“People are the resources from which answers can come.”

*Kent Roberts  
National Civility  
Center*

## Engaging the Private Sector

Creating healthier, better communities benefits all. It is good business for the private sector to invest in community betterment. As Anne Kubisch put it, “Often, a key player missing in Community Building Initiatives has been private business and all it has to offer.” The skills and knowledge the private sector has gained in improving the quality of their workplaces is of immeasurable value to communities. We must align with the private sec-

tor, combine resources, and share knowledge to expedite achievement of our common goals. Beth Crookham believes, “corporations have learned a lot about what it means to bring community to the workplace. There are many lessons that civic communities can take from what companies have been trying.” We need to leverage the experience and resources of the private sector for the betterment of communities.



Elizabeth O'Dell and Kent Roberts discuss process methods.

## Ongoing Dialogue

“Remember, you are very infectious people. You need to pull people together more.” This was the comment made by Bruce Brown, a Thursday morning visitor to our convening. *Infectious*. It’s up to us to “spread the virus”. “The National Civility Center should help like-minded people and communities be paired together.” according to Liz O’Dell. This is accomplished by

ongoing dialogue through the natural vehicles of dialogue

within communities as well as new, unique avenues yet to be created. We were reminded of Odysseus’ journey to Ithaca; the journey was the thing, not the destination. There will never be a time when everyone is healthy, all schools are great, all cities are safe. But the ongoing dialogue of life renews and rekindles the human spirit.



Martin Carver, Elizabeth O’Dell, Freddye Webb-Petett, Jay Newman at the community dialogue.

“We must listen to the people they know what is needed to improve the community.”

*Freddye Webb-Petett  
W.K. Kellogg  
Foundation*



Mary Wildermuth asks questions of participant Freddye Webb-Peteett at the community Dialogue

## National Civility Center’s Role

The Civility Center must be a catalyst for action and offer guidelines and principles that work. However, as Freddye Webb-Petett said, “The Civility Center must gain credibility. You must DO community building in Muscatine.” And Larry McClellan cautioned us to remember, “Many issues are regional, not local. There must be a regional center where people look at regional concerns.” Everyone agreed the Civility Center should be an oasis where people involved in community building activities can

come and “replenish the spirit” by conversing with like-minded people. In Hal Green’s words, “The Civility Center provides the forum, structure, and process for interactions with the goal of attaining Common-unity™.” We must serve as the place where dialogue is fostered and heard in a different way. We must learn to ask the right questions of the right people. Above all, we must help people discover the opportunities and enormous rewards of building *their* community.

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## National Civility Center says "Thank You!"

What can you say when you spend weeks putting together your first major event as an organization and you bring in some of the brightest and busiest people you have ever met and the event is one of the most amazing experiences you have ever had? Thank you doesn't seem to quite cover it.

The National Civility Center Board of Directors and staff are still smiling from ear to ear from the two days spent together in Muscatine, Iowa,

with a wonderful group of friends new and old. We laughed, we debated, we pondered, we created "goddesses" and we were enlightened.

Since the event we have gotten down to work moving forward the many great ideas and recommendations that were made.



Attendees spoke with members of the Muscatine community during a public dialogue.

Thank you to everyone for setting the standard for all further convenings at such a remarkably high level.

If you are interested in a transcript of the convening or would like copies of the convening printed materials please contact a member of the National Civility Center staff.