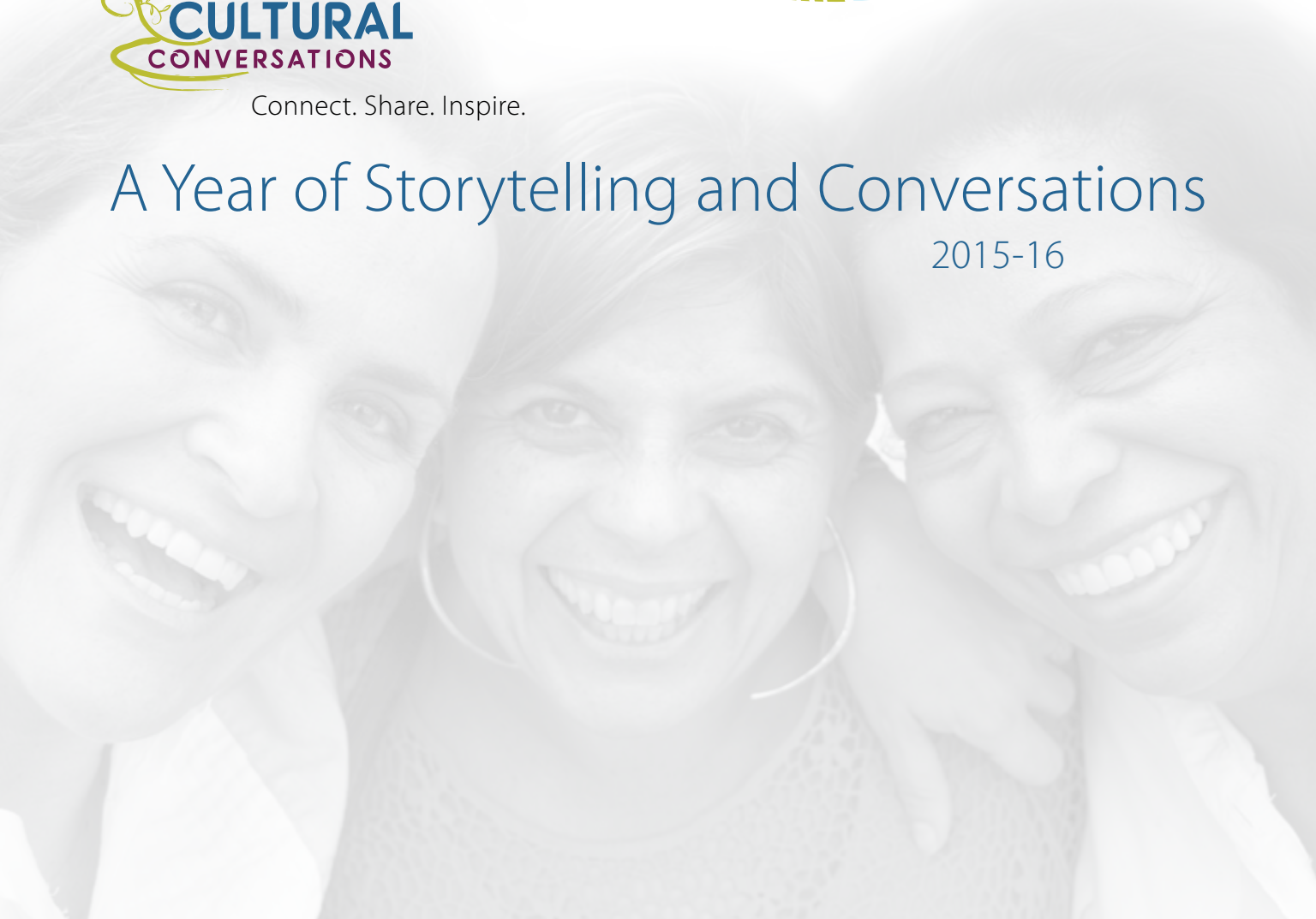




Connect. Share. Inspire.

A Year of Storytelling and Conversations

2015-16





*Council Members (left to right):
Deputy Mayor John Chelminiak,
Councilmember Conrad Lee,
Councilmember Lynne Robinson,
Councilmember Jennifer Robertson,
Councilmember Vandana Slatter,
Mayor John Stokes,
Councilmember Kevin Wallace*

“*Bellevue welcomes the world. Diversity is our strength.*”

Special thanks to our Bellevue City Council for their support and participation. We are grateful for their leadership and recognition that a connected community is a stronger more resilient community. This strong foundation encourages the community's involvement in the Cultural Conversations program.



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Planning and Community Development

Neighborhood Outreach

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www.bellevuewa.gov/cultural-conversations.htm

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Cultural Conversations is a program to meet and connect, explore and learn about different cultures, and share stories that inspire and encourage community-building. Meetings are held September through May, at the Crossroads Community Center. An annual forum is held in February at City Hall.



Connect. Share. Inspire.

cul•ture (n.) – the sum of total ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another

con•ver•sa•tion (n.) – an informal interchange of thoughts and information

Welcome to Cultural Conversations

I was pleased to be at the special evening presentation of Cultural Conversations on February 4, this year, where we heard stories from members of our Bellevue community and shared in conversations with each other.

I believe that a diverse city is a better city, rich in ideas and shared experiences.

As we become a more welcoming and inclusive community, it is our vision that those who live and work in Bellevue develop knowledge and respect for cultural differences, understand disparities and increase self-awareness of the biases we bring when we meet with others who may be different from ourselves.

Cultural Conversations gives us the opportunity to not only learn as we hear residents' personal stories but also share our own, thereby creating the possibility for developing new perspectives and connections.

Your participation in programs like Cultural Conversations will help in making our community more connected, stronger, and even more successful.

~ Mayor John Stokes



Mayor Stokes chatting with members of the community.

The Story of Cultural Conversations

Barb Tuininga and Carol Ross, who manage the program, share how it began and how it evolved to connect the community on the Eastside.

It was about eight years ago that Barb Tuininga and her colleagues from the Neighborhood Outreach Team went on a 'listening tour', visiting neighborhood groups and faith organizations to understand the needs of the community. They heard the same sentiment expressed by everyone they met: "I live in the most diverse community – I see people dressed differently and I hear all these different languages. I want to meet and know them."



"The women were looking at the diversity around them and wanted to be connected to a community they felt they didn't have ties with," says Barb. They started by meeting the women informally at Crossroads, having tea and talking to them. Soon it became a regular event and they came up with the name 'Cultural Conversations'.

It was a small group then, more intimate. The women were shy so the team had them write answers to two questions: 'What I wish women would ask me?' and 'What I would like to ask the women?'. Their responses were used to trigger conversations at the meetings. The women also discussed topics that they were interested in understanding or learning about each other, such as family, traditions, rituals and customs.

There was a core group of women who came to every meeting. They slowly started inviting other women, and the program grew organically. Some of the women came because they had read about the program in the Bellevue Reporter or Neighborhood News or heard about it through a neighbor or friend. Others came because the topic sparked their interest or they felt they had something to contribute. Long-time residents who were seeing the changing demographics wanted to understand how to connect with their neighbors from different cultures.

Over the years, the topics started becoming a little deeper, more thought-provoking, factoring in the layers and complexities of that time, and painted by what was happening in Bellevue and around the world. The women also started talking and sharing more openly about issues that were affecting them. Each woman brought a

connect

Share

different life experience or a world perspective. Many women would walk away saying, "Oh that was so rich!"

As the program evolved, storytelling became a big part of it. Barb and Carol put in a lot of time and effort to meet storytellers and guide them with the help of consultant storyteller Debbie Lacy, to tell their story more confidently. They try to build a bridge between the storytellers and the audience by sharing that the women are not professional storytellers and that their story is personal and should not be perceived as a global truth. They also invite the audience to play their part by being sensitive and respectful.



The program team cherishes the warmth and feedback they get. Many times the women will say things like: "As always, that was the most wonderful day of my month." Or "Thank you for doing this program; I had no idea what was missing in my life until I attended a meeting." The storytellers would write to say: "Thank you, I didn't realize that my story would mean so much to the women who heard it."

At Cultural Conversations, the experience of coming together is powerful. Some women walk in with assumptions, looking for differences. Some women walk in thinking that they are like everybody else, and they are not. What the women learn is not to make assumptions based on only physical appearance. They learn that there are more similarities than differences.



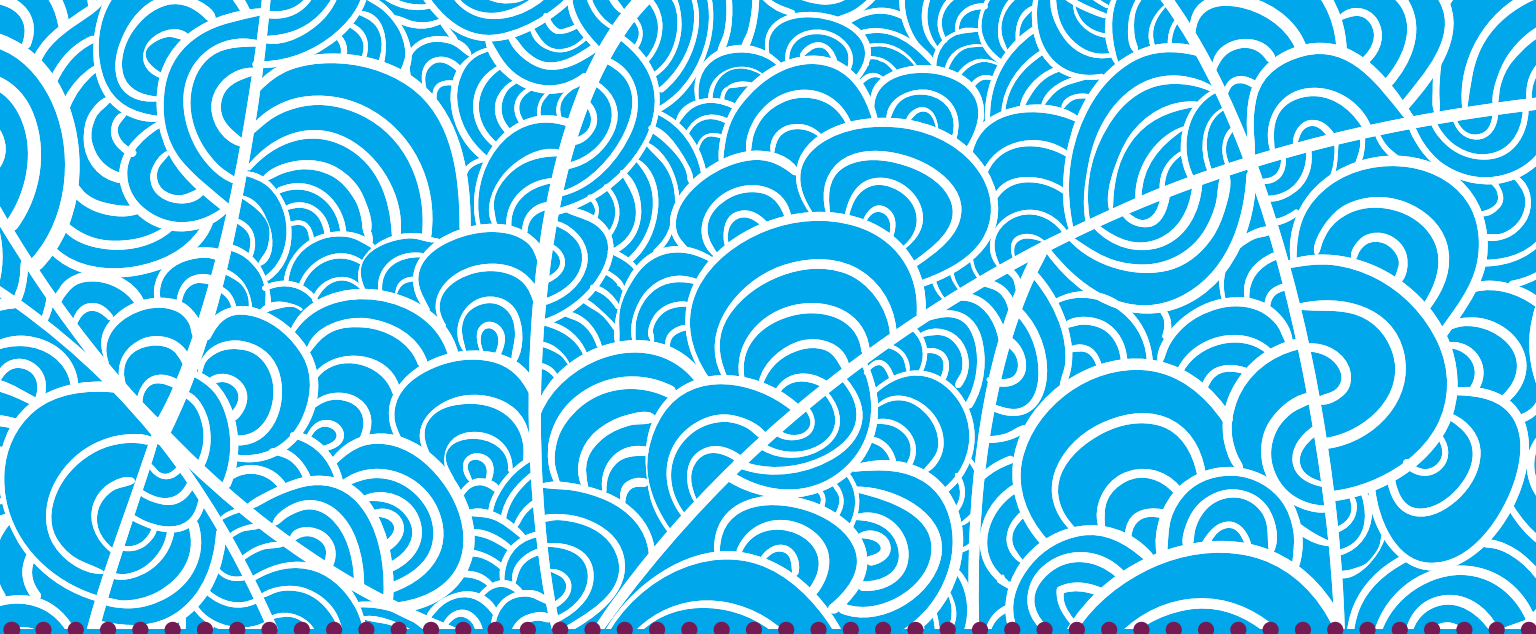
Eight years later, Cultural Conversations continues to be a magical experience. Even as the program has evolved and grown exponentially – more than 500 women are on the mailing list, and an average of 60 to 70 women are at each meeting – it is still strongly rooted in the community.

And that is the strength and success of Cultural Conversations.

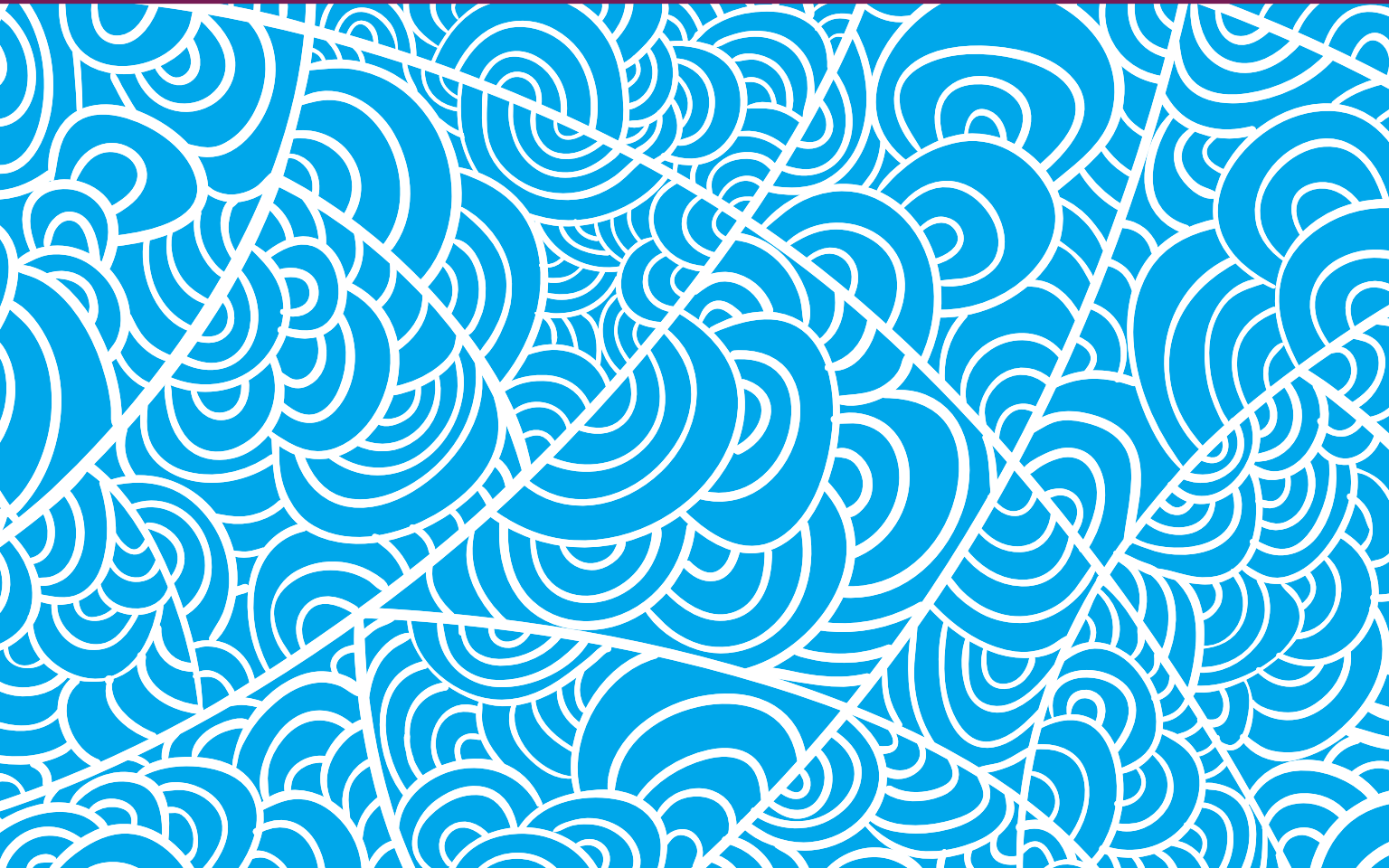
inspire

"Cultural Conversations flows outside and beyond the room. The women meet each other for coffee or dinner or go to their homes, and build deeper relationships. Our network is growing and reverberating with all this wonderful energy, and the sharing and understanding of people and cultures."

~ Carol Ross



Stories around the table



Stories Around The Table

At meetings, women are encouraged to break into small groups and sit with people they don't know to fully experience a cultural conversation. Many personal stories are shared, which lead to one-on-one connections and for some the start of a friendship. These connections would not occur if the women only had the opportunity to listen to a storyteller. It is the elbow-to-elbow closeness that encourages eye contact and makes all the difference.



"Cultural Conversations is a safe, warm, and friendly place to connect and share. The women hear incredibly inspiring and

heartwarming stories,

and take part in

powerful conversations."



"There is this web of connection that goes beyond the room."



“There’s a lot going on... women are listening to stories, and it’s almost as if they are saying – I’m with you; I’m right here and I’m engaged – it’s written all over their face. The story is so compelling.”





“As the stories unfold, women in the room are trying to process the information and are reacting to the woman telling the story.”



Safe



"Cultural Conversations acts as a catalyst that allows people to come forward and share something that was deep inside and which they felt they couldn't talk about anywhere else."





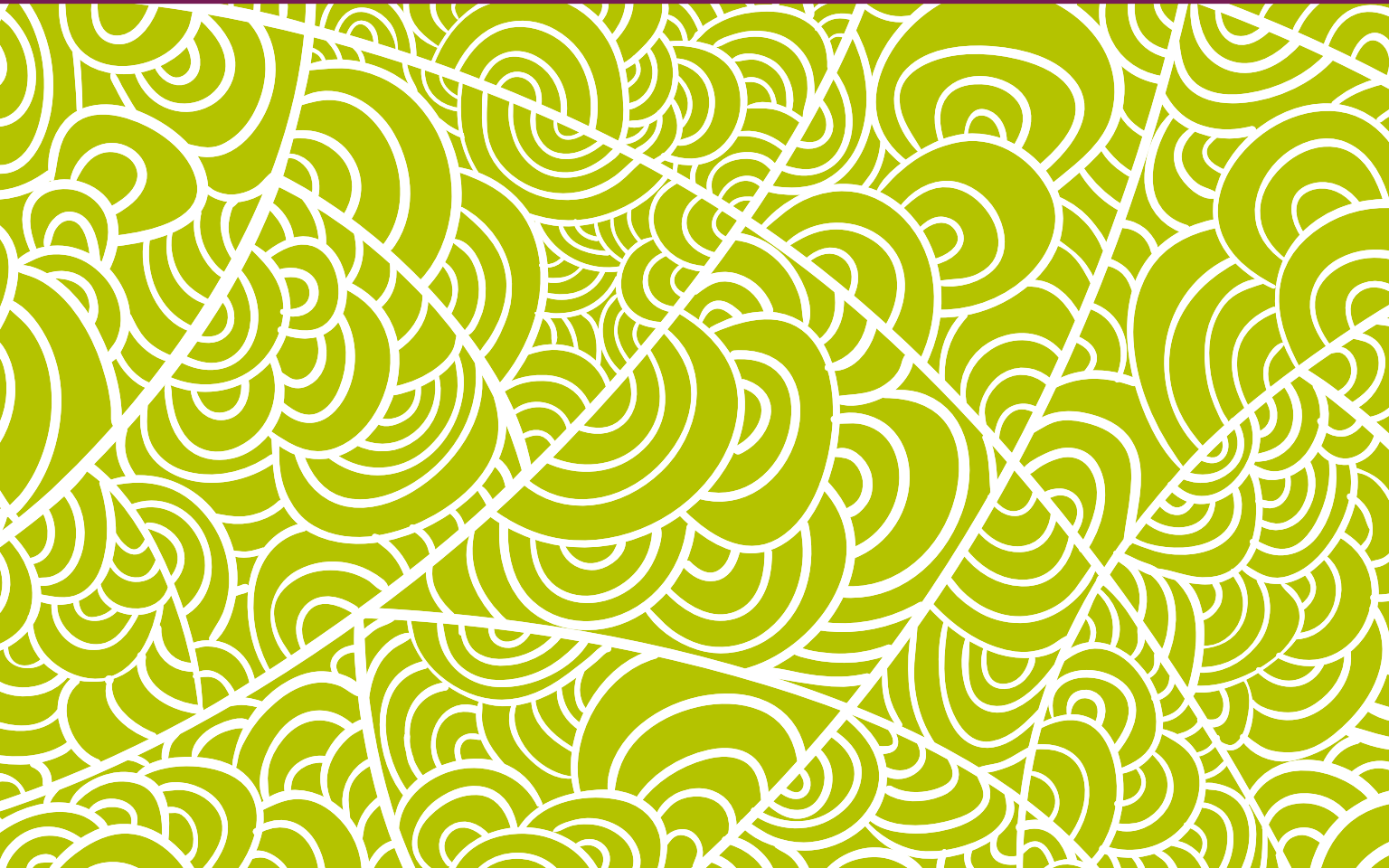
"We give and receive with every conversation."



rich



Meetings



“Planning Cultural Conversations has been such a gift. We have the opportunity to build personal relationships with the participants and the storytellers/presenters. I would say that we can’t help but be personally invested. I’m so grateful for these experiences...they have and continue to be life-changing. It’s like traveling the world without going anywhere —except instead of exploring scenery we get to share our personal stories and challenge our assumptions over and over again.”

~ Barb Tuininga

Building Deeper Connections

A long-time attendee of Cultural Conversations had a friend ask her: "What is Cultural Conversations?"

Her response: "I can't explain how transformative the experience of Cultural Conversations is; you just have to come and listen to the stories!"

It is sometimes difficult to describe the program because it offers different things to different people. For some, it is a place to connect with people within the community; for others, it is to learn about other cultures; for most, it is a place to make friends... the reasons are as varied as the powerful conversations that happen in the room!

The 2015-16 season of Cultural Conversations kicked off with four storytellers who spoke about why they moved here and how connecting with diverse women in the community expands their courage and personal awareness in profound ways. They shared how deeply these experiences changed them and the 'ripple effect', which influences and shapes the perceptions of their families, friends, and neighbors who may never have the opportunity to attend a meeting.

New Beginnings

Moving to another place can be unnerving for some and exciting for others. It takes courage. The journey is not always easy and perfect with a 'Pollyanna' outcome. Sometimes we feel or imagine we are not welcome even when we are. Many women, who are new to Bellevue or the area, find their way to Cultural Conversations. Here they connect to the community and make friends. We heard from four storytellers how they came to Cultural Conversations and why they continue to be a part of the program.

Blanca Lujan Westrich

Blanca relocated from Arizona due to her husband's new job. She had no family or friends and often felt isolated and bored, sitting at home while her husband was at work. Annie Liu who worked with her husband at Charles Schwab and had sponsored a Cultural Conversations screening of 'Girl Rising' (a film that highlighted the life-changing impact of education for young girls in Haiti, Peru, and Afghanistan), suggested that Blanca

SEPTEMBER



diverse

might like to attend a meeting. Blanca was so excited that she showed up early – on the wrong day! She came again the next day and now comes as often as she can. “I formed friendships and also found a new job,” she said.

Shirley Zapata

Shirley, a school teacher for many years on the Eastside, missed the camaraderie she shared with her colleagues after she retired. She was encouraged by Nura Adam to come to a meeting and since then comes often. At this meeting, Shirley shared her story of growing up in the International District in Seattle. She remembers finding her mother’s traditional Chinese dress in a box in the closet. Her mother never wore it after coming to the U.S. because she felt they needed to blend in and not call attention to their culture. Shirley contrasted that with her first meeting where they were shown a graphic of a woman in a burka next to a woman in a bikini, which led to a rich discussion on appearances and culture. “The program gives me the opportunity to get to know people and talk to them. I’m inspired to say hello to women I don’t know, which isn’t something I typically do.”

Lisa Merrill

Lisa is a dynamic visual storyteller and inspiring educator and enjoys helping people of all ages unleash their creativity through photography. She shared that though she travels extensively, she appreciates “the real connections that have taken place at Cultural Conversations with women from all over the world – women whom I wouldn’t normally know very well.” It’s what keeps her coming back and why she invites others to attend meetings. “We all have choices to make, and I choose to come to Cultural Conversations every month. It enriches my life and broadens my perspective.”

Nura Adam

Nura was born in the northern part of Somalia and came to the U.S. when she was 12 to escape the ongoing turmoil in her birth country. She has been a resident of Bellevue for the last 20 years. Nura talked about her role in actively inviting women to the group. “I’ve introduced Cultural Conversations to at least 50, probably closer to 100 women,” she confesses. “It helps me connect with people from all over the world. It facilitates meetings and building a community.” She senses the same need and desire for connection and warmth in the women she invites. It was her pivotal exchange with Jane York that led her to see the power of the program. *(Read more on page 49)*

First Impressions

Sujata Agrawal moved from Bombay, India to Seattle in 2015 to begin another chapter of her life. She shares the story of her first Cultural Conversations meeting.

I went to my first meeting with no expectations, just in the hopes of making new friends. I had recently moved to Seattle and was living on my own for the very first time. It was both exciting and scary. I was always looking for opportunities to meet people. When I heard about Cultural Conversations from Susan Sullivan, I was intrigued.

What I experienced was amazing. It opened up a whole new world for me. I found a place that offered warmth, comfort, and a certain familiarity of home. There was a sense of connection. I didn't feel that I was in a room with strangers. Women reached out to say hello and welcomed me to their table.

I heard four wonderful women share their stories of moving to Bellevue. And that got me thinking about 'What was my story? Why did I come to the U.S.? What do I want to achieve?'

At my table of eight, we introduced ourselves and shared our stories. By the end of the meeting, we had exchanged numbers and set up coffee dates. It was exciting!

I wanted to know more about the women and after the meeting I went up to Barb [Tuininga] and asked where I could read more stories about them. She confessed that they would love to have many more stories but didn't have the resources to capture them. I spontaneously offered to help because I'm a storyteller by profession – it was a perfect match!

So here I am, very happy to be a part of Cultural Conversations not only as a participant but also as a storyteller – helping to grow this wonderful network and encouraging women to embrace the diversity that is the Eastside.



OCTOBER

Engaging With A Diverse Community

One of the typical ways we start a conversation with someone we meet for the first time is to ask where they are from. The answer to this simple question can be complicated if people have lived in many places or difficult if they are afraid of assumptions being made about a place they mention. And people who want to be welcoming may not know where to start.

A perspective on answering this question was offered by writer Taiye Selasi in her 2014 TEDGlobal Talk "Don't ask me where I'm from, ask where I'm a local". She explored the concept of 'multilocal people' and how we can create better connections with others by first identifying common experiences. Taiye's talk was screened at this meeting and was followed by lively table discussions on how we can discover pathways of shared experience and learn more about people to create a deeper connection.

Taiye Selasi: 2014 TedGlobal Talk

How do you define where you are from or where you call home?

In her 2014 TEDGlobal Talk, Taiye Selasi described how difficult this question was for her:



"How do I define 'where I am from' — I was born in England and grew up in the United States. My mum, born in England, and raised in Nigeria, currently lives in Ghana. My father was born in Gold Coast, a British colony, raised in Ghana and has lived for over 30 years in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Some people call me 'multinational'. But Nike is multinational — I'm a human being."

Taiye offered a new perspective to respond to this 'difficult' question. She suggested that instead of asking people where they are from, ask them: 'Where are you local?' Her reasoning was

that your identity is defined by your experiences and that all experiences are local and defined by the 3 R's: Rituals (things you follow or do daily); Relationships (who you speak to or meet regularly); Restrictions (where you are able or not able to live – depending on your passport, racism, civil war, economic barriers, etc.).

Excerpts from Taiye Selasi's TedGlobal Talk

To say 'Taiye Selasi comes from the United States,' isn't the truth. I have no relationship with the United States, all 50 of them, not really. My relationship is with Brookline, the town where I grew up; with New York City, where I started work; with Lawrenceville, where I spend Thanksgiving. What makes America home for me is not my passport or accent, but these very particular experiences and the places they occur. Despite my pride in Ewe culture, the Black Stars, and my love of Ghanaian food, I've never had a relationship with the Republic of Ghana, writ large. My relationship is with Accra, where my mother lives, where I go each year, with the little garden in Dzorwulu where my father and I talk for hours. These are the places that shape my experience. My experience is where I'm from.

The next time that I'm introduced, I'd love to hear the truth: "Taiye Selasi is a human being, like everybody here. She isn't a citizen of the world, but a citizen of worlds. She is a local of New York, Rome, and Accra."

View the TedGlobal Talk at <http://bit.ly/1WA4h9I>

informative

Comments

Three women who attended the meeting share their views. They requested that their names not be published.

“When I walked in and heard the topic I thought, “What? Now I can’t even ask someone where they are from?” After we explored the topic, I realized this is not about censoring what we can ask, it’s about expanding what we can ask! It also helped me look at how limiting the question (Where are you from?) can be when I’m asked that question! I’ve lived in Bellevue for a short time, and I feel that my time in a small neighborhood in Washington DC reflects more about my experiences and who I am. So being asked the question differently would allow me to say more than just my most-recent address.”

“I was at a dinner a few days after the meeting and struck up a conversation with a woman seated beside me. Instead of asking, ‘Where are you from?’ I asked, ‘Do you live in Seattle?’ When she said yes, I asked, ‘How long have you called Seattle home?’ That really opened up the conversation, and she shared how many years she had lived here, where she met her husband, where her family was from and why she no longer felt like that was her home. We went on from there and talked about other places, both geographic and deep in our souls, where we feel ‘at home’ and where we have had our most cherished experiences.”

“I now get that the way we live (the daily rituals) and the relationships we have in a place play a big part in where we think of as home. And the more restrictions we have on what we do and who we connect with in a place (like, how far you live from people you can connect with, or if you have language or financial challenges) the more the impact on how you identify with a place. I now think of ‘Where are you from’ as a limiting question that may keep you from getting to know the places, and the experiences that people are most connected with.”

Winter, a Time for Traditions

The meeting was to be about traditions and storytelling centered around the winter season and holiday festivals – usually a time for reflection, renewal, and celebration of rituals with family and friends. Elaine Acacio, the City's new Diversity & Inclusion Program Manager, was to share her story of how the blending of many cultures shaped her family rituals and relationship.

Sadly, the tragic San Bernardino shooting just the day before the meeting altered its tenor.

Barb Tuininga Shares the Mood in the Room on that Day.

The San Bernardino tragedy was the day before the December meeting. I had been on the phone with my niece in California until about midnight; she was in lockdown in her dorm about 5 miles from the shooters' residence.

The following day around noon, my colleagues and I were busy setting up for the meeting. We didn't have much time to speak or discuss the tragedy before the women started

streaming into the room. Some women were only hearing about it as they entered the room. And every one of the 80 attendees that day had the events weighing heavy on their minds and in their hearts.

Usually when the women arrive the warmth and feelings of connection are palpable. On this December afternoon, there was a larger than

regular crowd in attendance, but there was a somber atmosphere mixed with the usual connection and warmth. The hugs were a little longer; the room was a little quieter...

Women began to approach me with comments like:

"I'm so glad we came here today."

"I don't know what I would have done if Cultural Conversations wasn't happening today."

DECEMBER





“This incident once again brought to the fore the effect the media has on me when something like this happens. . . I called some Muslim friends I’ve become close to and asked if they could meet for tea before the program; I was feeling anger and blame and going back to old fear-based feelings. As soon as we met it all melted away.”

“I know the topic is not related to yesterday’s tragedy, but I’m wondering if we can acknowledge what we are feeling and get centered first before we launch into the topic?”

So before we began the meeting, we took a little pause to remember how this program formed and why. We focused on the women who started this grassroots effort wanting to minimize or eradicate assumptions and fears and to come together from a place of knowledge and understanding. We have learned through previous storytelling from Muslim women how traumatic and painful it is for Muslims in our community when people who call themselves Muslim here at home or across the world attack others in the name of Islam. We also have learned from presenters/storytellers and one another how important it is to reach out to each other in these times and to do the opposite of what terrorists want – which is to connect rather than to retreat.

The events in San Bernardino and personal family events for Elaine, our storyteller, affected how it felt to tell her ‘family story’ that day. It also impacted the listeners and how they received and interacted with the story.

On this day, for this event, we were collectively affected and we made both personal and collective adjustments to keep the heart and purpose of this program – Connect. Share. Inspire – at the center.

We all left the event uplifted, more hopeful and more resilient than when we had arrived. That is the impact of Cultural Conversations.



perspective

A Proud Legacy—Elaine’s Story

Elaine, who has lived around the world, talked about how the different cultures shaped her life, and the rituals and relationships she developed from those experiences. She shared her ‘family story’ that she tells her children so that they can understand and appreciate their multi-cultural roots, and stay connected with their rich heritage and the wisdom of past generations.



I categorize myself as a 1.5 immigrant. I was born in the Philippines and came to the U.S. as a young child not speaking a word of English. On my first day of school, I was limited to the phrases: “yes”, “no”, and “I don’t understand.” As you can imagine I missed a few things, especially about school rules and processes.

I met my husband, Marcos, while I was studying in the Dominican Republic. Ironically enough, I was interpreting for a friend who spoke no Spanish. Somehow, through the back and forth, he and I ended up talking through the night. Of course, it wasn’t until the following week that I found out that he knew how to speak English all along! We dated a few years, got married and have two children—ages 9 and 10. For the most part of their lives, we spent 10 months in the Dominican Republic and two months in the U.S. , in a given year.

Within our family, we carried three different-colored passports representing the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, and the U.S. Two years ago, we moved permanently to the U.S., which is also the first time Marcos and our children have lived outside of the Dominican Republic. So we have undergone various cultural shocks and transitions in the process.

My ‘family story’ *(This is an edited version of the story shared by Elaine Acacio)*

A story that was told to me during my childhood was about my mother’s family and how they hid Americans during World War II.

My mom came from a humble family. They lived in the province of Bicol, Luzon that is in the central region of the Philippine Islands (7,000 strong—depending on low or high tide).

Around 1940, my mother's family befriended an American citizen living and working in the Philippines and raising his two young boys. On December 8, 1941 (ironically 74 years ago to this day), just 10 hours after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese made a second surprise attack, this time on the Philippines. The father and his sons now found themselves in grave danger of being sent to a prison camp, simply for being Americans.

The Philippines was officially under Japanese occupation from 1942 until 1945. During those three years, my mother's family hid the three Americans in a compartment under their home, and fed and took care of them. Every day, for three years, they carried on with their daily tasks hiding a 'family secret' that simply could not get to the wrong ears.

Unfortunately, someone (they never found out) tipped off the Japanese soldiers. The father was taken away and presumed to have died, as did many others, while in the prison camp. My family then took on another role – that of foster parents – to the two young boys who were left fatherless.

Shortly after, the Philippines was liberated and the boys returned to the U.S. to live with their relatives. It must have been a bittersweet moment for my mother's family – sending the boys off to safety but to a land that was culturally unknown to them, away from the only family that they had ever known and who had kept them safe through their hardest times.

Some years later, the younger boy returned to the Philippines hoping to reconnect with the family that had saved his life and ended up spending a few years in the country. As luck would have it, he went on to marry my mother's sister and became an official part of my family.

I heard my uncle speak of this story only once. With their family gone, this extraordinary story has survived through the memory of my mother—the sole person alive who saw this first hand.

Hearing that story as a child, and again in a clearer version as an adult, I realize that this is ancestral history. These are decisions and life choices that I had no part in, but at the same time, I identify strongly with and am proud that this legacy runs through my veins.

I have had similar experiences as my uncle's. I found 'home' away from home and often depended on community members, who acted like surrogate family members when I was far away from my own.



Elaine spoke about her feelings after she had shared her story:

I have spoken publicly and made presentations through the years, but this was the most unnerving and the one I prepared for the most. Part of it, I think, is that there is a high level of vulnerability and trust between the storyteller and audience as you journey together through a story.

External factors were also at play: my mother had just returned from my aunt's funeral and there was a high sense of fear and uncertainty due to the recent terrorist attack. Prior to speaking, I felt weariness in the room but at the same time witnessed hugging, heard some laughter, and most definitely noticed the larger than the usual size of the group that day. I knew that many were there to listen but also to be heard and being a part of that space, and that time was quite powerful – the room felt like a microcosm of a shared global sentiment.

What I took away with me after telling my story was the importance of connections, no matter where you are at. The immigrant/expat experience is always hard and difficult. And it can sometimes be arbitrary to determine who you trust and who you don't. For example, my uncle and his family became the enemy of the state overnight, but to my family they were friends.

It goes back to that connection piece—it is only when you make an effort to understand and identify those who at first glance may be different from you, that you really only believe and live the narrative you are told.

MARCH | A Window into a Refugee Story

The experience of fleeing from war, persecution or violence is a common thread that binds many families who seek sanctuary outside their homeland. Stories of refuge and immigration have become part of the American landscape as thousands make their way to the U.S. to begin life anew.



It was an emotion-filled afternoon as Cynthia Flash Hemphill, and her aunt Regina shared their family's immigration story at the meeting. The conversations that followed were a poignant testimony to the unfortunate parallel we see in the continuing refugee crisis around the world that is displacing families from their country of birth and driving them to seek safety outside. What was uplifting was the hope that came through the conversations around the table – stories of love, support, and trust – and how they shape our views of the world and who we are.

A Hug From Afar

Cynthia Flash Hemphill, a Bellevue resident, journalist and editor recently published her book 'A Hug from Afar.' Based on long-lost letters written by her mother Clara Barkey from 1930 to 1946, it is a compelling story of perseverance, love, and survival.

The story was one that many in the audience could identify with – about 30% of the women in the room were first-generation immigrants, and half the women had grandparents who were immigrants to the U.S.

Listening to Cynthia as she read excerpts from her book, the audience was transported back to the 1940s, to the time when the Jews were brutally oppressed and persecuted.



The story of a Sephardic Jewish family as they journeyed from Hungary to the island of Rhodes [one of the many small islands between Greece and the Turkish coast] and finally sought asylum in the U.S. to escape the Holocaust was captured through letters written by young Clara (Cynthia's mother) to her Aunt and Uncle in Seattle in the original Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) language.

This was the first time that Cynthia had spoken about her book to an audience, and she was not sure what the women might want to hear. Her sister-in-law who is a rabbi told her not to worry: "It's a good story and the story will tell itself," she said to Cynthia. And she was right. The audience was spellbound!

What really touched the hearts of the audience was when Regina, Cynthia's aunt, read her sister's letters in Ladino. Even though many of the women could not understand the language, they had tears in their eyes, caught up in the emotions expressed by Regina as she read the letters.



Cynthia shares what it meant for her to tell the story at Cultural Conversations:

When preparing for the meeting, what was it that you wanted to share?

That's a good question because there are different reasons why one would speak about a book. It's important to understand who the audience is and give them something they can relate to. I knew that the majority of people in the room might be immigrants themselves or whose parents were immigrants, and I wanted to share my family's rich immigrant story, hoping that they could relate to it.

What were your feelings after you shared your story?

It was interesting and surprising what I learned in telling the story. I've lived with this story my entire life – though the details really emerged when we found the letters 20 years ago. Then it took me 20 years to write the book. You would think I would know the story, but I had to reread the book before I spoke about it! In having to talk about it in front of an audience and getting feedback from them, I got to understand my mother a lot deeper. I also got a different perspective on the history of immigrants during that time period. It was interesting to learn how others view it.

It was a very encouraging experience, and it exceeded my expectations in every way – the large number of women, the positive feedback, that we had more questions than we had time to answer. I was really surprised that the audience was so invested in the book and the story; that they cared about what my family went through.



How did your aunt feel?

My aunt had no idea that so many people would show up. She was extremely nervous even though I'm not sure that showed, but she loved the experience and the positive reception that the story has got. People really loved her because she is the personification of the family that the story is about. She lived the story.

I was surprised at her response when someone asked her if she had been back to the island of Rhodes. I knew she had, but what

I didn't know was that the first time had been really difficult for her because she said there was nobody there that were 'her people', as she called them. I had never heard her say that before.

Did you have any reservations about telling your story at Cultural Conversations?

I did think of the fact that mine was a Jewish story and there is clearly an ongoing conflict in the world between Jews and Arabs. I came to the meeting with the expectation that there would be some Muslim women in the room and that there could be some discomfort at hearing my story. But everyone was very respectful, and it was a highly positive experience. And the awful truth is that my family was extremely lucky and there may have been Jewish people in the audience who lost their family and walked away feeling terrible after hearing my story.

I would add that Barb and Carol are very perceptive and knowledgeable, and they guided me in a way that made the presentation stronger. I think the name Cultural Conversations is really apt, especially relating to the story I shared.

This meeting was memorable for one more reason.

As Cynthia was closing her story, a woman suddenly stood up and said: "I have a story."

Hynd is a refugee from Syria and her story, like Clara's, is one of courage, perseverance, and hope. It's a story that took her from Syria, her homeland, to the Middle East and Europe before finally arriving in the U.S.

She was excited and animated, but unfortunately, there is never enough time for everyone to share their story in the moment. What was remarkable was how the small group of women sitting around her table immediately reached out to her, patted her hand, spoke to her, and listened to what she wanted to say.

We hope to have Hynd share her story at a future Cultural Conversations meeting.



support



"Cultural Conversations is a safe place to ask questions. The women are open and accepting."



dialogue

Opening Closed Doors

What informs our decisions to help people in our neighborhood and around the world? Does familiarity make it easier to know how to help? Do we only help people who are familiar to us – friends, family, and colleagues? In a rapidly changing and uncertain world, is it still possible to open hearts and doors where there are both perceived and real differences between us?

These questions formed the heart of the meeting as four storytellers shared their experiences of growing up with families where helping others in need was the norm. What came through the stories was that even though we may come from different parts of the world, the acts of kindness have surprising similarities.

Storytelling: Giving And Receiving

Four women, who lived in different parts of the world came together to talk about growing up in a giving world. A common thread that ran through their narratives was the family values that each imbibed. Another sentiment expressed by all was: "It's much easier for me to give than to receive."

Sophia Lopez

Sophia who has ancestral roots in Mexico, grew up in a military family, an army brat, as she acknowledges, and the family moved all over the country. "My father has been a 'helper' all his life. He was always helping people – whether it was a neighbor, a migrant worker, a hitchhiker...he had this knack for spotting people who needed help, and he gave freely, no questions asked."

Growing up she thought he was crazy but then came a day when she realized that she wanted to be a lawyer or pursue a profession that helped people. "I've obviously inherited my father's genes. I always carry fruit and granola bars in the car to give to someone standing at a street corner. I have a habit of saving half my meal when I eat out in case I come across a homeless person."

Sophia herself has received help a couple of times in her life when her father asked his friends and family for money on her behalf. However, she says she finds receiving help difficult.

APRIL

Wendy Pender

Wendy is a librarian with East Coast roots. Her father died when she was young, leaving her mother to raise a large family by herself. "But we had a strong community and people helped each other."

Wendy grew up thinking of helping as something you do for people who are less fortunate. In her community people were all on the same level socio-economically, so she never thought of the way everyone supported each other as "helping" in the way she views it now.

"Growing up my home was an oasis of calm and comfort for other kids, so there was a constant mutual exchange. I learned that 'you shouldn't have to ask for help'. I've learned that helping is finding a connection; helping is seeing a commonality between human beings."

Nura Adam

"My grandmother was always doing something good for the community. From my grandfather, we learned about love and compassion. He cared for others. Before sitting down for his evening meal, he would check on all the neighbors to see if they needed anything."

Jane York

"I wanted to be like my Dad, who was always helping people. We had a garden and grew vegetables, and would distribute them to neighbors and whoever needed them."

respectful

Voices Around the Table

Snippets of conversation heard at different tables.

"I sometimes feel guilty for putting myself first."

"Fear is the opposite of love – put aside your fears, and your heart will be more open to others."

"Often we enable others not to help because we are too quick to respond – give others a chance to help you."

"My mother always expected something in return. I learned to give freely, to give for the sake of giving and not to expect something in return.."

"It is human nature to help those similar to us. Sometimes it is scary to help people who are from another culture because we are not sure how to."

"Make friends with the homeless, eat with the homeless, interact with them, and hear their stories. Everyone has a story."

"If giving is within the family, you will also be a giver."

"Some people have a radar. They are always looking around to help."



MAY | **Adapting in Turbulent Times**

Immigrant stories are inspiring, filled as they are with the determination to overcome obstacles and succeed in a new country that is unfamiliar and challenging.

At the last meeting of the 2015-16 edition of Cultural Conversations, the audience heard a rich immigration story of the Balaticos' who like many immigrants of today were resourceful in their daily survival, learning a new culture, working tirelessly, adapting traditions, and financially and emotionally supporting family left behind. At the table conversations, women shared their own stories of moving to new places and the struggle to adapt and integrate into an unknown community.

An Immigrant's Story

Joy (Balatico) Page, a Bellevue resident, shared the story of her father, Andrew Balatico, former owner of 'Andrew's Farm', who as a young man emigrated from the Philippines to the U.S. seeking a better life.



The Mercer Slough Blueberry Farm is a much-loved place in Bellevue, particularly between July and September when families and children come armed with buckets to pick the ripe blueberries. However, few are aware of the people who cleared, tilled and planted the land in that area decades ago.

Joy has a close family connection with the Farm. Her father Andrew Balatico and Uncle Marc were Filipino immigrants who worked there. Later, they overcame a host of challenges, including extreme prejudice and the Great Depression, to establish their produce farm. Inspired by her Dad, Joy started her own business and is the CEO of WOW Baking Company [WOW stands for With-Out-Wheat] that creates all natural wheat and gluten-free baked goods.

As Joy related the story of her father, she was overcome with emotion and often stopped to wipe away her tears. "We all get involved in our daily life, and we forget our history," she said.

Excerpts from Joy's telling of her father's story

My father grew up in the Philippines. It was a poor community, and life was hard. The family did farming, and my father's job was to take the water buffaloes to graze. At 14 years of age, my father became an orphan, and life became harder. His older brothers and

sisters looked after the younger siblings. Five years later, in 1926, my father and his brother decided to go to the U.S. to find a better life. They traveled on a boat - Empress of China - on the cheapest ticket, which was next to the cargo hold.

When they arrived in Seattle, they had little money and knew no one. They lived in China Town where people of many cultures lived together – Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Filipinos – but the Americans called them all 'Orientals'. Most of the residents were single men, and few knew English, but the Filipino community was very supportive and helped each other.

My father found a job in construction, building the railroad (the Cascade Tunnel). It was labor-intensive work and after some time, he decided to go back to farming. He started working for a Japanese couple who had a farm in Kent and provided him a place to live. He learned about which crops to plant early and how to pick strawberries. He was fortunate that he had a job, a home, and food during the Depression.

He dreamt of having his own farm someday and saved up enough to buy three acres of land near the south end of Bellevue Way, on which he planted strawberries, peas, and carrots.

When WWII came he thought he would be drafted, but President Roosevelt stated that he wanted farmers to stay on their farms and provide food. Unfortunately, Pearl Harbor was attacked, and as we know, local Japanese-Americans were sent to internment camps. Many of them had farms, and my father helped a few by taking care of their farms. I believe that tragedy brings people together and makes the community stronger.

After the war ended, my father continued to work on his farm [Andrews Farm]. He had a very disciplined work ethic, and the farm flourished. They grew corn, fresh vegetables, and pumpkins. During the fall season, children would come in school buses to see the pumpkin patch.

At the age of 50, my father finally decided to get married and have the family he had always longed for. He knew he wanted to marry a Filipina. He was introduced to my mother (who was living in the Philippines at that time) through her cousin in Seattle who knew my father. That was how things were done then. My mother came over on a boat from the Philippines, and they got married. Then my brother was born, and I followed, and our family was complete.



Joy Page shared her feelings after telling her story:

"It was my pleasure to tell my story. Kudos to the team for putting together such a successful, unique, and meaningful program. It was great to see the interest level of all the women wanting to engage in the community and with each other."

Voices Around the Table

Carol Ross shares her thoughts after hearing Joy's story.

I was struck by Joy's storytelling of the resilience of the Balatico family. So amazing to arrive in the U.S. with farming skills and incredible determination to succeed, navigating to Seattle/Eastside, and being willing to learn from/help others and successfully build and own their business and homes.

I also sense a great amount of humility. The brothers built relationships and trust within their community of farmers and ultimately gained the respect and acceptance by the wider community in Bellevue. I see these same characteristics in today's immigrant population.



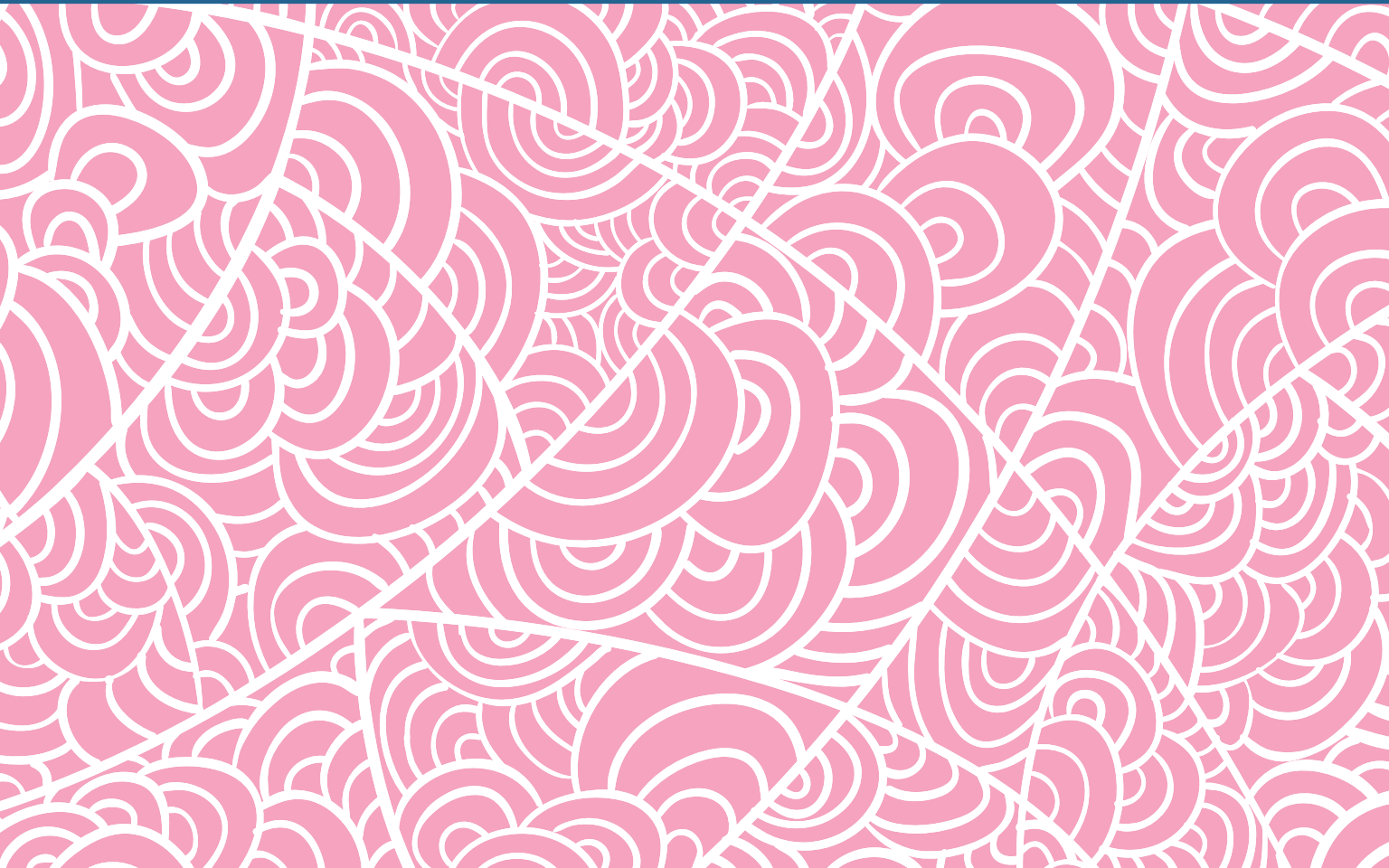
At my table were women, all first or second generation children of immigrants and had the ethnic bonds of living together in community. Each woman had some experience in being the "other" in various situations – a Jewish family (but unidentifiable as such) being told in the 50's that real estate agents did not sell homes in a

particular area of Bellevue to Blacks and Jews; another woman being of Belgian descent and their family being referred to as "Frenchies".

Each of these women seemed to reflect that because they didn't have identifiable characteristics of the "other", they had moved to a place of being accepted. I wonder if, with time, the strong feelings evoked by racial and ethnic injustice witnessed today soften, but awaken on hearing another's story.



Annual forum





"The subject, "Home," immediately hooked my own vulnerability. I have just moved here, leaving my children and friends of many years in another town."



"The speakers were great; it was interesting to hear their many different experiences they each had. As a networking event, it is also fantastic, especially for people who have recently relocated or come from another culture."



Feeling at Home

A hum of excitement tripped across the concourse at City Hall. Men and women streamed in looking for old friends and eager to make new ones. It promised to be an evening of conversation and connection.

The Cultural Conversations annual event is special because we have the pleasure of inviting men to participate. Last year was the first time that it happened and the overwhelmingly positive response encouraged us to do this every year.

The stars of the evening were five Bellevue residents who engaged and enthralled the audience as they shared why they had chosen to make the city their home. As they spoke it was clear that “Feeling at Home” is more often a feeling than a location—for many it is about feeling a sense of belonging to a community where they feel welcome and safe. Many in the audience were nodding as they heard the stories, perhaps identifying with the storyteller’s experience.

Later in the evening, conversations exploded at the individual tables. There was an excited buzz of voices, animated hand gestures, and nods of understanding, as women and men spoke about the first place they really felt ‘at home’, what they left behind when they moved here, what they found in their new home, and how easy or hard it had been to hold onto family tradition...

The Storytellers

A “longing to belong” to be “understood and accepted” is a universal theme in people’s lives. Five residents of Bellevue shared what they did to create a sense of home for themselves.

Miguel is a striving professional with a wife and a young family. His story was about the challenges he faced in Mexico that led to his moving to the U.S. He spoke about why he couldn’t create a home in Guadalajara due to the danger and fear created by corruption, about the sacrifices he and his wife made to come to this country.

“I thought to myself that I would rather clean toilets and flip burgers – which I did when I first came here – than end up in a cemetery. For me, home is a place of safety, somewhere I can live by my values.”

FEBRUARY

connect



Nishi is a Bellevue High School student. She shared the experience of not 'feeling at home' in her family's home back in India. In particular, she talked about the comments relatives made about her dark skin. She spoke about how stereotypes alienate us (excluding instead of including), how she resonated with people of color who know what it's like to be viewed differently and negatively based on skin color; and how difficult it is to feel at home when that's going on all the time.

Jayant is an Indian-American consultant who has lived in Hong Kong, Singapore, London and New York. He spoke about these places – how some seemed like they would be the perfect home, but weren't; and, others that seemed unlikely, ended up being true homes. He shared how even when he moved frequently it was the spiritual peace he attained that allowed him to find and create a permanent home in Bellevue.

Rosie is an Interlake High School student. Her story was interesting as she spoke about how she straddled two different worlds effortlessly. The first being Interlake's PRISM program for academically talented students in Bellevue where she was the only white student among Asians. The other being the summer camps she attended on the East Coast with mostly-white peers. Her story is a window into our future as the demographics change, and more and more people grow up in multicultural communities. Rosie's experiences give us hope to create a home and a sense of belonging and connection in a diverse community.

Jessica is also a high-school student in Interlake's PRISM program. She talked about how the only place she feels at home is her school – she often doesn't feel at home in her home in America because of cultural differences between her and her family, and also feels out of place when she visits her extended family in China. Her experiences and her struggle to find a "home" gave us a unique perspective into the mind of a young person on the brink of adulthood.

global

Wowed and Awed by the Evening

Rosie Skorvon was a volunteer with Cultural Conversations during the year. She shares her views of an evening that she says was very meaningful for her.

It was an extremely impactful and formative experience for me in a multitude of ways. While I have been a volunteer at earlier Cultural Conversations meetings, it was the first time I spoke at a meeting and really connected with the other attendees. I am so grateful for this experience of speaking to a large audience because it is an opportunity that is not available to me in other areas of my life.

Even more impactful was the introspection into my life that this forum necessitated. It forced me to reflect on aspects of my childhood that have shaped who I am today and consider what has been unique about my upbringing, and as a result of which, how my perspective may differ from other people that I encounter. I think, for me, the magic of this program is in the new perspectives that are offered, which hopefully, will gradually erase assumptions that often cloud our judgment of others in our community and around the world.

This event showed the underlying impressions and general ignorance about people from other cultures whom we see every day and the need to address it. Before the evening began, the storytellers shared their goals for the evening. My goal was to offer a different lens about what it means to feel at home and to challenge the assumptions someone might have about my background simply based on my appearance.

The overwhelming response that my speech generated among my classmates in the audience was: "Wow I never realized that is what you felt like, growing up." I sat at a table with a friend whom I have known since third grade, but I still learned an incredible amount about his family and upbringing just from our table conversation.



Voices Around the Table

"As I walked out to the Concourse following the storytelling in Council Chambers, it was as if I was viewing the evening through a kaleidoscope. Each table reflected a different pattern of culture, conversations, and connections. It was a whirl of colors, emotions, and sounds. It truly reflected the design concept developed for the event."

~ Carol Ross

"The tables had an array of costumes and customs, people from countries all over the world, who now live in Bellevue. At my table was an engineer from India who wanted nothing to do with his country's old ways; a Pakistani woman who got married to a stranger one day, and the next day flew to this place to begin a family; a Japanese-American city manager who has made special efforts to hold on to his family's heritage for his children; a Mexican man who is thrilled at the American practice of father-daughter dances; a sight-impaired Jamaican woman who misses the sights, sounds and smells of the warm and sunny place she left behind; a Chinese-American woman who blends Chinese New Year practices with Seahawk's games; and finally this Aussie-American who had a hard time talking lest she began crying. I am glad, humbled and awed to call all of these beautiful people my new neighbors."

~ Marcie McReynolds

"The two other gentlemen at my table happened to be retirees in their eighties, one from the UK and the other from Australia. As a matter of fact, there was only one other American at the table, who happened to be a Seattle native. It definitely put things into perspective – I thought moving from Phoenix to Seattle was a good distance, but they've crossed an ocean!"

~ Curtis Westrich





“The speakers helped to create the setting and gave us an idea of what to do in our group afterward. By the way, I really enjoyed listening to the gentleman from India - I could relate to so many of the things he said. Shams [my husband] was great at facilitating and guiding our group. We had a Canadian, two Pakistanis and two Americans at our table. The question list gave us a lead into what to discuss, and it was great listening to others and sharing our own experiences. Everyone came away feeling that they had learned something new about another culture and/or another point of view. Perhaps more time could be given for sharing at the tables. People really enjoyed sharing their stories and hearing from others.”

~ Nasreen Shamsuddin

I was glad to attend. I was impressed by the large turnout of folks. It was nice to see a distribution of different ethnic representation at the tables. Two people at our table discovered that they live close to each other and share an interest in education – they now will work together. That was great to see.”

~ Bettie Luke

“I dragged my husband to the evening, and then I couldn’t get him to leave!”

~ Farzana Rahman

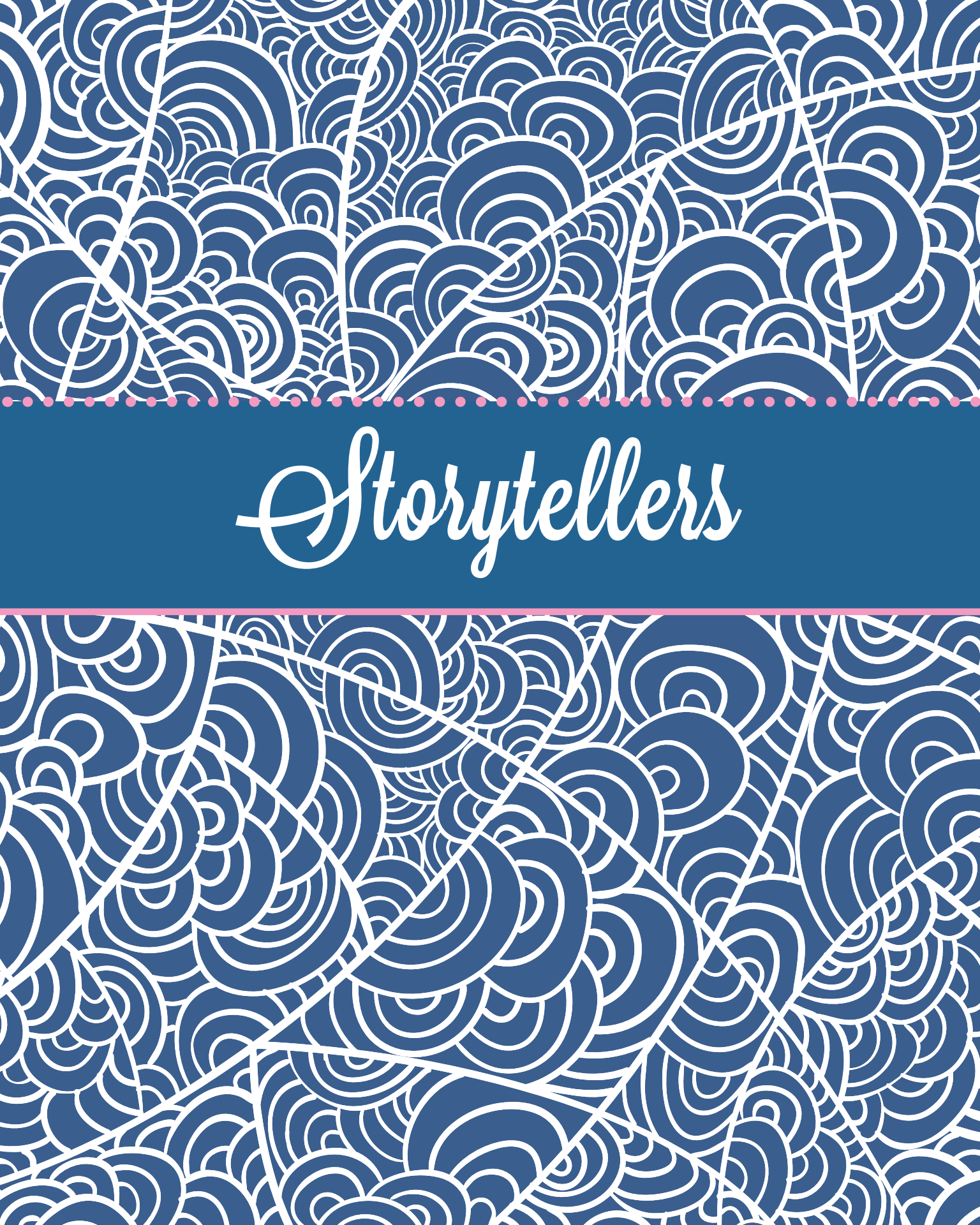
“Home” seemed to resonate with people, mostly in terms of deep relationships and experiences with a place, often in nature (more than a specific house). One can have more than one home in a lifetime (obviously), but we always take something with us, even if it’s intangible (like memories, customs or something outside of us like “the mountains”) - these things help center or ground us. Our new homes become an amalgam of all those things - sometimes the pieces we bring forward have to find their place in the new location.

~ Edie Weller

"The only problem is that this forum which includes men occurs only once a year."



"What's next?"



Storytellers

“Nura and Jane shared their story at a departmental meeting and that was really the turning point for the program. The City recognized the significance of Cultural Conversations as a program that was truly promoting cultural diversity and connecting people with the community, helping them talk and learn from each other, and breaking down barriers between people who would never have a reason to talk with each other. From then on the program became more structured and continues to evolve and grow.”

– Julie Ellenhorn

Nura Adam

A Group of Hope

Nura Adam calls herself 'an ambassador' of Cultural Conversations. She tells every woman she meets about the program and invites them to listen to the stories. She tells her own story of how Cultural Conversations has enriched her life.

Bellevue has been my home for the last 20 years, and it has given me the opportunity to be a part of the entire world. It has been wonderful and an incredible journey. I have always been intrigued by different cultures. I see diversity as an advantage, as an opportunity to learn from one another and I realize that our common denominators outweigh our differences.

Bellevue wasn't always as it is now. 20 years ago, it was a different city – more homogeneous; there were fewer foreign-born immigrants. The city has changed significantly, especially in the last five years. Many cultures have become part of the fabric of the city, giving us an array of wonderful cuisine and festivals. My children enjoy the diversity. It's such a healthy way to raise a family.

Cultural Conversations has taken this connection to the next level. I am really honored to be a part of this group from its inception. It has brought our community a lot closer. We have come to know each other at a deeper level, and we share stories about our children, marriage traditions, holidays, our faith.

Each time I walk into the room, there is something new that I learn from these beautiful women. Cultural Conversations creates that safe environment where everybody feels comfortable sharing their stories. I am touched by stories of their journey and their resilience. Their courage to speak up is outstanding. I learn about our history of humanity. I begin to reflect and think about my own experiences and journey. It's sometimes surprising how similar our journeys are. And I leave the room with a wealth of knowledge that is rich and deep and that stays with me.





Cultural Conversations: A Year of Storytelling and Conversation, 2015-16

Cultural Conversations is where I met Jane [York], and she has touched my life like no other. She is one of the most beautiful human beings that I have ever met. We call each other mother and daughter. Cultural Conversations offered us the opportunity to form a bond, and this is a potential for every woman who comes to the program.



Jane comes from a background that is different from mine. I was already exposed to diversity having lived in the Bay area, but she did not have that exposure. However, she had compassion and was willing to open herself up and experience new journeys. And that is what is unique about her and the many women who come to Cultural Conversations.

Jane joined this group when she was in her late 70's, and if we could all do what she has done with her journey of Cultural Conversations, the world would be a better place. At her age, she managed to change her whole life – from having biases that limited her to opening up her world to new experiences – all from a story that I shared at a meeting.



I was going to Djibouti to visit my father and encountered racial profiling at the airport. It hurt me at a very deep level. I felt it was not right for any human to go through that humiliation; to be looked at differently; to have people feel scared of me. It was not the first time that I had experienced it, but it was the first time it was done so publicly – and that made it worse.

Jane was sitting across from me. She was in tears and said, "Your story has changed my life. You have opened my eyes to what a terrible person I've been. You have made me see things in a different light. I realize now that I have been prejudiced my entire life. How can anyone treat you like that?" I was in tears too. I walked over to her and gave her a hug. And that was the starting point of our friendship.

That is the power of a dialogue – it opens a door based on compassion, empathy, and understanding. Dialogue humanizes us. However, it's not a one-way process. I opened the door for Jane, but she was willing to walk through it. And that is what I tell my children and others – smile and be approachable.

When we open a door, it can change the world. You can have conversations and learn about each other's journey. Imagine if everyone had that opportunity to put aside all the political stuff and seek the humanity in all of us; imagine how beautiful our world would be. It sounds like idealism, but it is possible.

Sometimes I put myself in the shoes of the people who have never met a Muslim woman and that the only thing they know about Muslims is all the horrible things (that's so un-Islamic) they read in the newspapers or see on TV. How would they react? And that was my empathy to Jane. When you do this, you don't become defensive, you become compassionate and understand why people feel what they feel. You have a dialogue and before you know it all of that fear and anger dissipates.

Jane and I have become the storytellers in our community. We show the beauty of diversity and the power of dialogue. Human beings are intrigued by each other's stories—no matter what the color of your skin is or what your culture or faith is. By giving people the opportunity to share, we bridge the gap between our assumptions, our fear of the unknown and the reality.

Everyone I know who is a part of Cultural Conversations tells me that from the moment they walk in they feel welcome. My father would call Cultural Conversations 'The group of hope'.

empathy



Lisa Merrill

Exploring with Cultural Conversations

Lisa Merrill has been coming to Cultural Conversations ever since she read an article about the program in her neighborhood newsletter, the Somerset Sun, in 2010. Read her story, in her own words.

The name piqued my interest since cultural exchange is a big part of my life both personally and professionally. I'm a travel photographer and visual storyteller, and my work is most meaningful and valuable (and fun!) when I connect deeply with people from other cultures. I feel fortunate that

Bellevue is 40% foreign-born and was thrilled to find this opportunity to connect and explore cross-cultural issues and experiences with fascinating women from so many countries. As a native-born U.S. citizen and East Coast transplant, I felt welcome at my first Cultural Conversations meeting. From that day on, it's been a treasured part of my life.

What I most enjoy about the meetings

I enjoy the warmth, openness and easy entry into worlds and perspectives so different from my own. Every time I walk into a Cultural Conversations gathering, I silently thank my city for getting us together from around the world and facilitating the sharing of vital stories. I'm always fascinated by the storytellers and deeply touched during small group-discussions which explore cross-cultural issues of consequence. Cultural Conversations feeds my soul, and my world expands with each conversation and connection.

I've made deep friendships through work on the "World in My Kitchen Cookbook" project and each Cultural Conversations meeting nurtures these treasured relationships, so I try to arrive early or stay late for individual chats. However, I love that we are always growing and feel lucky that I get to meet new women at each meeting and welcome them into our special group.

What I would tell a friend about the program

I would tell them: please join me at a Cultural Conversations gathering. It's a unique opportunity to expand your world via fascinating stories and conversations about life experiences with women of all ages from 40+ countries, a mix of long-term Bellevue residents and recent transplants.

What I take away from the meetings

I take away stories to ponder and share with my family. I also take away a renewed commitment to create authentic connections with people from other cultures by engaging in deep conversations, and listening with my mind and heart.

How it has changed my perspective

Glimpses into other worlds shared at Cultural Conversations and the connections with women have broadened my perspective and taught me a lot. In particular, I have greater empathy for anyone who moves far away from family and country, and a greater understanding of the challenges that entails. My belief in the power of community groups and gatherings has intensified. Overall, I know I'm a better person, parent, community volunteer, board member, citizen, and photographer because of the precious hours I've spent immersed in deep discussions with women at Cultural Conversations.

I'm applying the Cultural Conversations experience to other parts of my life so others can benefit. At the new KidsQuest Children's Museum, we'll launch a cross-cultural discussion group for parents. With Global Family Travels, I co-founded a Transformative Travel Connections program which includes a year of virtual and actual cultural exchange for teens in the U.S. and Nicaragua. I'll teach digital storytelling and am looking forward to inspiring youth and facilitating connections in this way.

connection

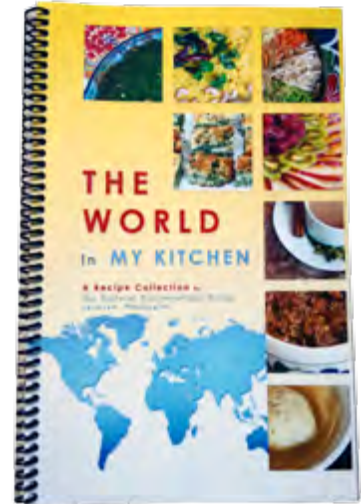
World in My Kitchen' Cookbook

The topic of food very much addresses rituals and relationships and speaks to where we have been local. Preparing, exchanging recipes, and sharing meals together opens the door to talking about family, the experiences in our lives, and the place food holds in rituals that have been passed down through the ages.

In 2012, a group of women got together and created a Cultural Conversations Cookbook. It was a labor of love for Nickhath Sheriff (chair), Lisa Merrill (photographer), Linda Chan (designer), Sher Garfield, Mary Lopez, Yvonne Keagala, Sonam Jolan, Pam Orbach and Noreen Allen (organizers and proofers). "The cookbook helped foster connections across the community through our common love of food while also helping the local community through funds raised from the sale of the cookbook," says Nickhath Sheriff.

The genesis of the cookbook was a potluck held by Cultural Conversations in 2011. The remarkable array of dishes led to the idea of developing a cookbook featuring the marvelous creations of women from Cultural Conversations. Some of the recipes had a story that spoke of family rituals and memories of special times.

"Our small group developed deep bonds through our shared work and the pride of creating cookbooks that are so much more than just that. I'm thrilled to know that our spirit lives on as new cultural connections continue in our kitchens and those of others who use our recipes, read our stories, and enjoy my photos of our delicious culinary creations," adds Lisa Merrill.



Nickhath Sheriff

A Community of Friends

Nickhath Sheriff came to Cultural Conversations to help connect her community with the larger diverse community that is Bellevue. The program also helped her rediscover herself as she evolved from her role of a wife and a mother to a community-helper. She wishes other cities would start such conversation groups that bring people together.

Nickhath Sheriff is the first generation of her family that moved to the U.S. She grew up in Chennai, India and came to the U.S. as a young bride, just two weeks after her marriage to Khizer from Mumbai. Everything was new, and she was nervous. "I had always lived in a joint family, and suddenly I was alone with my husband in an unfamiliar land. And even though I was fluent in English, I was nervous about my accent." It was only when she met an Indian couple at the laundromat and became friends with them that "my life in the U.S. really started." She slowly built up her courage, confidence, and circle of friends. "I also realized that most Americans don't look at what you wear or how you speak; they look at what is inside of you – how you treat people."

When Nickhath and family moved to Bellevue it was a different city, not as diverse as it is now. "Today I'm wearing a salwar, but back then I would wear only western clothes because I wanted to fit in the community. I felt I had to blend in to make friends."

Nickhath and her husband started the Muslim Community Resource Center in 2010 to help the Eastside Muslim community. It also helped her to rediscover herself. She had chosen to be a caregiver and caretaker after her children were born, but now that they were older she wanted to devote time for herself and to the community.

In 2001, Nickhath made a personal decision to wear the hijab. 9/11 happened just a few months later. "I heard stories of women, friends, being attacked and harassed because they wore the hijab, but I didn't want to stop wearing it," she says. "I was fortunate that I did not experience any incidents. My neighbors were very supportive, and it gave us a feeling of comfort and of belonging to the community. Unfortunately, some Muslims are



committing acts that are hurting people and the community. However, it isn't fair to hold every Muslim responsible for those acts."

She tells people: "I am not answerable or accountable for the terrorists because I am not part of their lives and thought process. Look at me as who I am; talk to me about who I am, and I will talk to you. Don't ask me about someone who I have no connection with or control over."

And that perspective is what makes her passionate about a program like Cultural Conversation. She heard of the program when Barb Tuininga and her colleagues visited a mosque in Redmond in 2011 and was impressed by the sincerity with which they were reaching out to the Muslim community.

"It had never happened before. Cultural Conversations opened a channel for the Eastside community to get to know us; for people to ask questions and for us to respond – that Muslim women are the same as other women and should not be judged on the basis of their clothing. When people look at me, they think I'm from the Middle East or Iran – they don't think I'm from India," she says with a smile. "I feel that Cultural Conversations is a great way to connect people of diverse faiths and get an understanding that even though we are different, we are the same," she adds.

Nickhath enjoys meeting the many women who come to Cultural Conversations – elderly white women, women from Asian and Hispanic communities, newly married women whose husbands are working and who feel alone – and has built a wide community of friends. "We started as strangers. Some of the women had 'never liked' Muslims. We slowly built connections and now have become a family. Cultural Conversations gives you the space to have open and honest conversations," she says. Jane York who is a regular at Cultural Conversations is a very good friend. Nickhath finds her very inspiring.

"That's what's remarkable about Cultural Conversations," she acknowledges. "You meet so many wonderful people and hear their inspiring stories. And it's where I am really comfortable. That's why I never miss a meeting!"

welcoming



Susan Sullivan

Who Am I Going to Meet Today?

Susan Sullivan is committed to bringing about positive change in the lives of kids through Eastside Pathways of which she is Board Chair. Here are her reflections, in her own words, about her long association with Cultural Conversations.

I can't really remember how I first learned about Cultural Conversations. Did I meet Barb [Tuininga] first or did I meet her after?

Getting to know Barb is definitely central. I first went to Cultural Conversations because I heard there were really interesting and diverse women there. I thought it would inform my work with Eastside Pathways and I could have stimulating conversations and meet new people.

I didn't expect that the women there would be as warm and open as they were right from the start. There is a sense of safety in Cultural Conversations that allows you to share your story with others, explore where their story and yours overlap, and wonder at and celebrate where the stories are different. This is why I am a part of the program.

I go to a meeting with the thought: 'Who am I going to meet today and what interesting conversation am I going to have personally?'

I am curious about people's life experiences and what brought them here to Bellevue. I want to know what their life journey is, even for people from here – how has it changed and what has their experience been around that change. What's been hard; what's been easy; what's been celebratory for them and how do they view their neighbors and other Bellevue community. I guess I am curious about how to create belonging for everybody, how to create connections, and how do we create community.

Now when I encounter someone [from a different culture] on the street I feel I am more intentionally open and receptive because I feel like I have greater understanding or appreciation for what their experiences has been. I think I was always open and respectful but it's been taken up a notch.

Sometimes I feel that we live in a bubble and we love the bubble because it's safe. Cultural Conversations allows us to have these conversations and acts like a bridge from that bubble of safety into our real everyday world. We start to populate and enrich real life. And I wonder if you can do more than meet once a month. Maybe someone would be willing to create a Facebook page or a private group and we could continue talking.

In the past and now too, I tend to spend more time in my head, being analytical, finding technical solutions for challenges, checking things off my lists. Through Cultural Conversations and other experiences, I am spending more time in my heart, listening to what brings me joy, building relationships, expanding my horizons.

Two women I met at Cultural Conversations who inspire me are Nura Adam and Nickhath Sheriff. Nura inspires me with her story of the generosity of people in her life growing up and how that has been a model for her. She certainly lives that in her support and embracing of the community. Nicky is inspirational because of the grace with which she walks through the world, the generosity she brings and her selflessness and the openness to all cultures.

I tell my friends that they should come to Cultural Conversations because it's a great place to meet really interesting people and to have heartfelt and personal conversations and get to know people in a different way. It's a human connection in a way that is hard to make without having a shared experience or spending years getting to know them. It's almost like jumpstarting the understanding and level of connection

Every time I go I notice there's someone I haven't seen before. When I leave I often wish I had had more time to talk to the people at my table.

warmth

Miran

A Book Club for the Soul

Miran was a stay-at-home mom when she moved to the Eastside and has experienced the isolation and disconnect from the community and the workplace that many women face. Cultural Conversations played a big part in connecting her to Bellevue and its residents.

Miran has experienced it all – the isolation; the disconnect; the feeling that you are all alone – emotions that most immigrants are familiar with.

She moved to the Eastside from London during the mid-90's. Unable to work due to her immigration status, she volunteered with companies to gain experience and assimilate into American society.

Miran felt more disadvantaged because she couldn't really fit in with other mothers who were Indian [from India]. "I tried to connect with them, but they thought that because I spoke English, I didn't need help. But the experiences are the same regardless of whether you can speak English or not. There are so many nuances to living in another country, so many things you need to navigate, and you wish someone was there to tell you. I felt that I was a little on the cusp. I couldn't fit into any one community easily. Nobody was willing to own me or help me navigate."

She started volunteering for International Community Health Services and soon went from volunteer to being employed full-time. She was part of the first team to offer the Affordable Care Act at the Bellevue Mini City Hall at Crossroads. It was there that she met Barb and Carol and shared her feelings of isolation and loneliness, which she had gone through when she moved to the Eastside. They invited her to a Cultural Conversations meeting, and that opened up a whole new world and connected her to providers in the community.





Through Cultural Conversations she met and recruited the Bellevue International Community Health Services team. “All four members of our Bellevue team have come from Cultural Conversations. It’s a great connector, an excellent network for women.”

At the Crossroads Mini City Hall she is a part of the team that enrolls people into the Affordable Care Act and finds them the services they need. As she does her outreach in the community, she sees young women who come to Crossroads holding a kid with one hand and pushing a stroller with the other and knows only too well the stage of life that they are going through. “They look lost and I know what that feels like – I was there myself in that situation. And I talk to them, tell them about Cultural Conversations, and encourage them to go and meet with women in the community.

To Miran, Cultural Conversations is not just about connecting with women. It’s about connecting with women of the same mindset, or in the same stage of life as one is, or in a similar situation where one needs help.

“I feel the program is like a book club for the soul. And therein lies its strength and power.”

network



Acknowledgements



"I am drawn to the stories, the conversations and the people of Cultural Conversations. What has been so profound for me is not just learning the uniqueness of all the different cultures, but the commonality and humanity in each one of us. This shared American experience has been the cornerstone of building a more cohesive and inclusive community in Bellevue."

~ Ying Carlson

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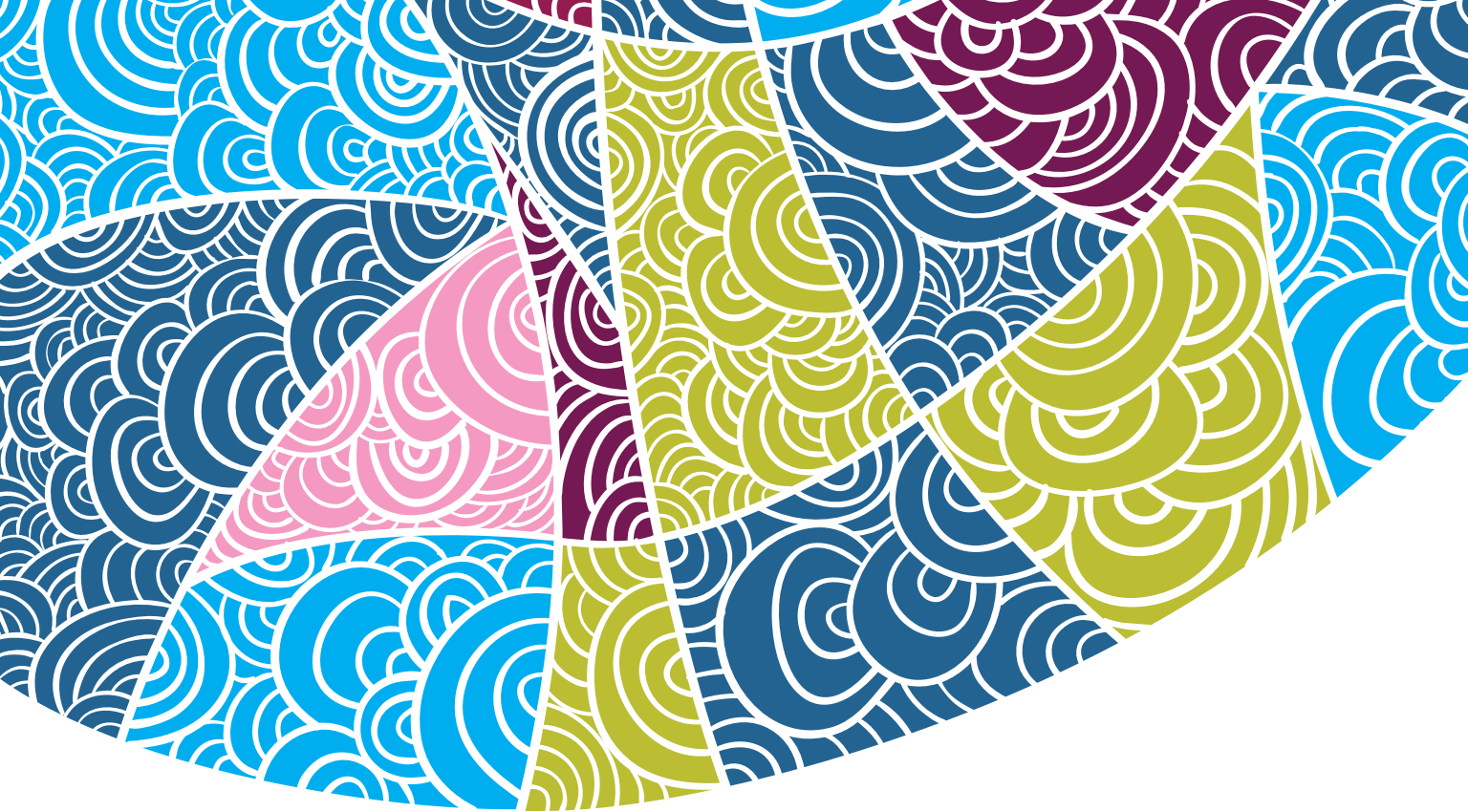
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Program Planning Team. From the left: Carol Ross, Barb Tuininga, Mike McCormick-Huentelman (Neighborhood Outreach Manager), Julie Ellenhorn, Ying Carlson



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