



*A guide to supporting
diversity through good food
and honest conversation*



OAK PARK DINNER AND DIALOGUE PROJECT

SPONSORED BY THE COMMUNITY RELATIONS DEPARTMENT AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS COMMISSION

The **Oak Park Dinners and Dialogue Initiative** is an offshoot of the Chicago Dinners Dialogue Project which is a model created and coordinated by the Jane Addams Hull House Association Center for Civil Society. The purpose of the dialogue project is to provide an opportunity to engage residents in a conversation about current topics related to community life and to build a sense of community. The dinners bring together small groups of residents, civic and community leaders from a variety of racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds to discuss the issues of interest, perceptions or other challenging community topics. This concept should fit well within the Oak Park philosophy of diversity and inclusion. Because of Oak Park's long history of fostering and promoting diversity, a main thrust of the dinners will be to pair residents with people of different ethnicities they have never met before to engage in real dialogue on race and other pressing issues resulting in greater cultural understanding.

The beauty and strategy behind the dialogue series is its simplicity. Many residents rarely find the opportunity for honest conversations about race and other difficult subjects even among social or professional peers. Informal conversations among small, diverse groups of community residents can be a vital step in helping to improve our Village's cultural and human relations. Dialogues can include a wide range of topics ranging from diversity, crime concerns or the achievement gap in local schools.

A community resident who serves as facilitator hosts a dinner dialogue and chooses the location for the dinner. While private homes are preferred locations to have a dinner, local establishments or restaurants are also ideal. The host plans and sponsors the dinner with technical and financial assistance from Community Relations staff and the Community Relations Commission. The topic of discussion is determined by the host who then selects no more than twelve guests to attend the dinner.

If the resident is not comfortable as facilitator, one will be provided through the Community Relations Department. Invited speakers with areas of specialty may also be utilized depending on the topic of the conversation. Community Relations staff will coordinate closely with the host to assure plans run smoothly. Some dinner formats may choose to use written materials or use the services of a scribe to document the conversations for future reference. Dinner for the evening is sponsored by the Community Relations Commission.

Methodology:

On the night of the dinner, the host /facilitator or guest speaker briefly highlights the issue or topic of discussion for the dinner and dialogue is facilitated to explore different facets of the issue. Preferably, the dinner discussion topic has been predetermined and reading materials have been mailed to attendees in advance to ensure a meaningful discussion. The facilitator serves as the conductor who keeps the conversation flowing and monitors the exchange of information as well as keeps the conversation on track and focused.

Dinner guests are asked to share their experiences, and ideas on the subject as well as thoughts for future action. All attendees are expected to participate but will not be forced to speak at the dinner. It is also expected that many may attend who wish to only listen to the content of the conversation. The overall design is to get residents of various backgrounds who have never met to begin a dialogue with each other that will lead to greater cultural understanding and cooperation. It is the intent of the initiative to have dinner guests sponsor their own individual dinners or gatherings across the village covering a wide range of topics of interest to the community at large.

Dinner Process:

Once the dinner host and guests have been confirmed, a formal invite letter will be mailed by Community Relations to each attendee confirming their attendance. Included in the invite letter should be the dinner agenda, ground rules and copies of discussion articles or pertinent reading materials. **(Sample items attached)** Meal planning and delivery on the night of the event will be coordinated by the Community Relations Director.

Facilitator Prep/Role: Prior to the dinner, it is a good idea for the facilitator and host to meet, preferably at the location of the dinner to look at seating arrangements, etc. This meeting is at the discretion of the two. The facilitator should also make available at this time a participant sign in sheet to be used on the night of the dinner. Facilitator should also bring an extra copy to the actual dinner. The role of the dinner facilitator is to serve as the guide for the topic of conversation and to encourage collaboration. While facilitation styles vary, it is critical that the dinner facilitator keep the conversation on topic while allowing for various viewpoints. The facilitator is not there to give opinions or commentary but to draw out relevant discussion from attendees. This can be done in the form of specific questions or asking attendees who are not offering comments their opinion on the discussion topic. Depending on style, the facilitator may choose to capture important thoughts or suggestions for action on a flip chart. The facilitator may also if desired, appoint someone to serve as a scribe for the evening to capture highlights of the discussion to be used for future action items. It is critically important that next steps or identified action items are agreed to and owned by the group with an attendee taking responsibility for furthering the discussion. Attendee contact sheets should be made available to each person at the dinner conclusion.

HISTORY:

The Chicago Community Trust and the Human Relations Foundation of Chicago kicked off the original "Chicago Dinners" on November 28, 1995. That evening, more than 500 community leaders from the metropolitan Chicago area participated in 71 dinners held in people's homes, places of business or local restaurants throughout the city and suburbs. Since 1995, over 14,000 people have participated in dinners throughout metropolitan Chicago and the nation. The project has successfully launched positive dialogue to build bridges across the widening divides of race, ethnicity, class and religion. Hosts and guests alike encourage others to become involved in the project and launch similar activities that will promote deeper and more meaningful cultural understanding.

DINNER AND DIALOGUE PREPARATION CHECKLIST

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

1. Select topic of Dinner discussion, location and time. Determine group size. Twelve guests are optimal for the dinner.
2. Ensure a meaningful discussion by **proactively** seeking out guests who are ethnically diverse to secure your twelve guests. Conduct targeted outreach to specific ethnic groups, income levels, home ownership vs rental status, sexual orientation, etc. to have a wide range of opinions and experiences. There should not be overrepresentation of any particular group. The idea is to have a constructive mix of ethnicities who have never met before which will ultimately result in continued conversations or spin off dinners between the guests after the event has concluded.
3. Ten days before Dinner send invite letter to guests which include selected reading materials and Dinner agenda and ground rules.
4. Guests can be invited by letter or e-mail, whichever method is preferred by the host.
5. Food for the dinner is sponsored by the Community Relations Commission. Dinners have been previously catered by Jerusalem Café of Oak Park. Other vendors may be considered and must be willing to accept the Village tax-free exemption on the food purchase. To accommodate various eating customs or habits, it is suggested that discretion is used when planning the actual meal so that options are available for guests who may have no meat preferences or allergy concerns. The Village's Director of Community Relations coordinates the food payment and delivery to Dinner site.
6. On the day of the dinner, the facilitator should have a sign in sheet ready as well as copies of the original dinner and guest list with attendees contact information. A copy of the contact list should be made available to each attendee at the close of the event to promote communication after the event.
7. Technical assistance on any of the above steps is available through the Community Relations Department and the Community Relations Commission.

Cedric Melton, Community Relations Director

708-358-5407



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village@oak-park.us

September 10, 2015

Involved Resident
455 N. Coop Street
Oak Park, IL 60302

Dear Involved:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the Community Relations Dinner and Dialogue Project. Attached you will find the address of the dinner as well reading materials that will serve as the content guide for the discussion.

The Dinner and Dialogue project is an effort to open up the lines of communication among residents of diverse backgrounds in a safe environment with the hope of developing better cultural understanding and a stronger community.

I look forward to seeing you for dinner on September 10!

Respectfully,

Cedric V. Melton
Director of Community Relations



12:30p.m., Sept. 10, 2015
201 South Blvd.
Oak Park Public Works Center
Lunch Room
Today's Topic/ Question:
What is your state of human relations?

Facilitated by Cedric Melton

Agenda

12:45 – 1:00 p.m. Welcome/Refreshments

1:00 p.m. Lunch & Discussion

Next Steps

Adjourn

Ground Rules for Dialogue

- Take risks
- Ask questions
- Express ourselves courageously
- Everyone has to speak at least once
- Listen to each other with respect and without judgment
- Keep everything confidential to this time, this place and this room
- Suspend roles and titles
- Use "I" statements

What's going on here? Am I a racist?

2013

I never thought that I might be a racist until just recently. To be sure, anyone born and raised in New Albany, Ind., in the 1950s would be exposed to racism. I recollect my dad explaining to me the difference between a "colored guy" and the N-word. My dad's willingness to share a meal with a colored guy actually typed him as more progressive than some. Annual visits to my grandmother in Kentucky



**JOHN
HUBBUCH**

How can I have lived so long in Oak Park, yet have so few meaningful relationships with persons of color?

were highlighted by going to the Mercer County Fair with its sulky races, corn dogs and "coloreds only" bathrooms.

But I went to college at Vanderbilt, a bastion of southern enlightenment. I took the first course in black history ever offered at Vandy. Too bad there were only five or six black students in the class. On my own I read Wright, Baldwin, Fanon and Cleaver. I voted for Bobby Kennedy and cried when he and Dr. King were murdered. I bought my first home in Oak Park in 1976 and have lived here ever since. I don't want to live anywhere else.

But at 7 a.m. on a Saturday last month I was out on my morning jog/walk and I noticed that Madison Street between Lombard and Austin was abuzz with activity. Black women were pouring into beauty salons. And for the life of me this white boy couldn't figure out why so many black women would be getting their hair done so early in the morning.

I thought that I would call a black woman friend and just ask her. One problem: I didn't know any black women well enough to ask the question. That disappointment initiated a

cascade of reflections regarding my friendship with blacks. I've lived in a community that prides itself on its diversity, and I couldn't recall ever being to a black baptism, wedding or funeral. Very few African-Americans have ever been to my house. I tried to remember a black person at a block party. Oh, I've had lots of serious discussions about race — just not any with black people. To be sure, I sat with the black fathers at basketball games, and served with black men and women on the YMCA board. At the time that made me feel good about living in Oak Park, but those relationships in hindsight were situational and not very substantial.

How can I have lived so long in Oak Park, yet have so few meaningful relationships with persons of color? Is that a bad thing? If so, whose fault is it? Do I give off a racist vibe? Is there something wrong with me? To be honest I don't really think there is anything very sinister at work here. It just makes me sad.

■ *John Hubbuch, an Indiana native who moved to Oak Park in 1976, is a retired lawyer. Hubbuch served on the District 97 school board and coached youth sports. He is the father of*

Wow! Blacks like Oak Park for the same reasons whites do

2013

cheered when I read John Hubbuch's column *['What's going on? Am I racist?']* Viewpoints, Dec. 8]. For the first time, an Oak Parker admitting that, while a lifelong liberal, he actually knew nothing about black people and didn't even really know any Honesty! So refreshing!

For the first time, I see an Oak Parker revealing that he doesn't know anything about African-Americans, even though there is an almost iron-clad meme that every white person in Oak Park knows and understands blacks, and not only decided to reside in Oak Park because of its vaunted diversity but lives a life of active cultural diversity. The author is saying something he believes is unique about himself, but I think is not. Many whites in Oak Park don't know what makes African-Americans, even in their own communities, tick.

I have noted this especially when it comes to the issue of why blacks want to live here. Over the last 20 years, when my husband and I have attended gatherings where Oak Park is being discussed and when we attempt to say why we like it here, we have often been cut off by folks telling us why we should be grateful to be living here as opposed to any other community. Why grateful? Because we are told over and over that many residents chose not to flee to all-white villages when blacks started moving in. We also have never been able to understand why discussions of diversity were always limited to black and white interactions. What

LYNNE ADAMS-WHITAKER

One View

both black, like living in Oak Park.

■ We love Oak Park because it is physically beautiful with its mature trees and abundant greenery, its old and varied architecture, and its environment of peace and home that's hard to find in these times.

■ We love Oak Park because it's near our doctors at Loyola University Medical Center.

■ We love Oak Park because it was halfway between my husband's job in the Loop and my job in another suburb.

■ We love it because it's near the "aj" and the expressway and affords quick access to Chicago, where I was born and raised and my remaining relatives live.

■ We also like its proximity to Chicago, because of that city's fun and excitement, its plethora of city pleasures and diversity of lifestyles, cultures and neighborhoods. The city is an asset to the region and just plain enjoyable.

■ We love our friendly and community-minded Oak Park neighbors and low-key old-fashioned block.

I don't like it when Oak Park residents and others announce or assume that all blacks want to live in Oak Park because it is the most progressive or "diverse" com-

about Latinos, Asians, Native-Americans and other ethnic groups? What about different economic groups, religions, generational gaps? Diversity is not just about race.

I cannot speak for every black person in or out of Oak Park, but want to explain exactly why my husband and I

munity on earth. Can't blacks just enjoy living in Oak Park for the same reasons others enjoy? Other communities are diverse — yes, blacks are present in many suburban and high or moderate income mixed communities. Is it so incomprehensible that sometimes blacks choose to live in certain communities for the same reasons whites do? We looked at other villages and neighborhoods within the city. We noted the presence of blacks in Oak Park when we moved here but that was not conclusive proof for us it was the place to be.

When we moved here 22 or so years ago from Washington, D.C., we had trouble being shown acceptable housing or receiving

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ing in Oak Park was that it had "suffered enough" by accepting blacks, and it was time for other west suburban communities to "shoulder the burden."

After we went to the bank board and it intervened, we finally were able to purchase a home here, but not the one we really wanted. We have spent the last 22 years moving on with our lives, but the memory of those struggles to live in the "jewel" of the diversity crown still reverberates.

Reading Hubbuch's viewpoint article resonated deeply with us. We remembered the struggle we had to even live here, the condescending lectures we have received on why we should be grateful to live amongst "progressive" whites and their "noble experiment," and it reminded us that we should not be surprised that there is still much to learn about one another, and many more bridges to cross in this village of ours.

Mr. Hubbuch is not racist. He isn't using his power and racial bias to deny us anything. Neither ignorance of other cultures nor lack of friends from other races is racism. His article makes me believe he is a thoughtful, self-aware person, and probably a good guy to know. But he seems to be coming to the realization that diversity and cross-cultural understanding and communication are not sunk-in-concrete concepts, but are ever evolving and must be constantly nurtured and explored by all regardless of color or culture.

■ *Lynne Adams-Whitaker is a retired lawyer who has lived in Oak Park for 22 years.*

Let dinners open new dialogue about diversity₂₀₁₁

Inclusion is not just a word to Oak Parkers.

It is an ongoing imperative to create and maintain a real community for all residents.

The latest of these efforts is the Dinner and Dialogue Project, a program all residents should support.

And like all good programs to increase understanding, its core is people talking to people.

Cedric Melton, Oak Park's community relations department director, is organizing the project.

"Many residents rarely have an opportunity for honest conversation about diversity and other difficult subjects — even among their social and professional peers," he notes.

"Informal conversations within small, diverse groups can be a vital step in helping improve our village's cultural and human relations."

Specifically, the program would consist of a community resident hosting a dinner, either at his or her home or another place he or she chooses.

There would be no more than 12 guests of diverse backgrounds invited to attend. The host would outline the topic for discussion and guide the discussion toward exploring that topic.

The program is a good idea, especially if it launches serious dialogue

about diversity in the community.

There many obstacles to unity and harmony. The sad list includes — but certainly isn't limited to — race, gender, economic inequality, religion, sexuality, age and politics.

Surprisingly, in a community as open and accepting as Oak Park, there are still instances of closed-mindedness — even bigotry and hate. Such incidents include a racially derogatory sign appearing in a North Avenue store, a list ranking high school girls physically and sexually, and insensitive comments made about a low-income housing proposal.

We hope the Dinner and Dialogue Project is seed from which grows a series of efforts to heal wounds caused by divisive issues, attitudes and conditions.

The dinner approach may not be the way to deal with all issues. Many Oak Parkers can't host such dinners or even attend them.

But the dinners can provide a network to improve the quality of life for all residents.

Volunteers are needed to serve as dinner hosts. To volunteer, or for more information, call (708) 358-5407, or e-mail community@oak-park.us.

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO

Dinner, discussion

2011

Program reinitiates dialogue about race and other inclusion issues

BY TODD SHIELDS
tshields@pioneerlocal.com

When discussing achievements in diversity, fair housing and civil rights, people often point to Oak Park.

For Cedric Melton and Lennel Grace, the praise is not enough.

"We cannot rest on our laurels," said Melton, director of Community Relations in Oak Park. "We must regularly challenge, prod and encourage real diversity because it doesn't just happen."

"People have to move it along," he said.

He recently organized the Dinner & Dialogue program, where a resident hosts a dinner for 12 guests of diverse backgrounds who have not met. They eat, ponder and discuss racial and diversity issues in Oak Park.

On April 27, Oak Parker Pat Michalski hosted the three-hour dinner conversation.

"Most importantly, we will be hearing from the folks who know what is happening firsthand, residents who are encountering issues everyday," said Melton before the dinner.

For participant Lennel Grace, knowing the history of Oak Park's deep racial problems in the 1930s was essential to understanding the village's progress in diversity.

Grace, 61, said Oak Park and River Forest "were hostile environments" for African-Americans, especially when the Mount Carmel Church of Oak Park for Colored People was burned down in 1930 for racial reasons.

"At the dinner, I wanted to set the stage and provide background for people who might be unaware of Oak Park's history, then move on from there," said Grace, an African-American living in Maywood.

His family has resided in Oak Park and Maywood periodically since the late 1800s.

"Oak Park is a leader in racial integration because people allowed it to happen with superior housing programs and other quality-of-life efforts," Grace said.

"But people have to buy into diversity to make it work. Hear and adopt these efforts. That's what this dinner meeting was all about. Race is the biggest issue facing this country, and here we have towns like Oak Park willing to confront it," Grace said.

Melisa Byrd, 47, moved to Oak Park in 1998.

From the dinner, she learned that race and diversity were important to Oak Park residents.

"That was the big thing for me. Social economic status, gender, sexual identity really mattered to these people — and just not skin color," said Byrd, an African-American.

For her, race was a "huge topic."

"I hope the dinners continue. I made connections with people. It was great for me and hope-



Perla Londres-Waters (left) and Linzy Waters talk during a Dinner & Dialogue session in Oak Park on April 27. The village's Community Relations Commission organized the dinners for candid dialogue about race, diversity and inclusion. | ROB HART-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

fully for others," she said.

Oak Parker Lee Brooke has written 24 books about Oak Park — its history, people and places. But he learned even more about his hometown at the dinners.

"We have six or so places to worship in Oak Park that are not just Jewish, Catholic or Protestant. We now have Chinese and Philippine churches. This was new to me. It's wonderful," said Brooke, 80, who is white.

Khaliyah Ferguson, 31, is PTO co-president at Brooks Middle School.

She moved to Oak Park from Chicago's Auburn-Gresham neighborhood on the far South Side.

Ferguson, an African-American, wanted a better education for her daughter in a diverse community.

"I think she would feel culture shock in Bolingbrook or any predominately white village. She would feel uncomfortable in places



Cedric Melton, director of Community Relations in Oak Park, gets the discussion going. | ROB HART-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

like that," Ferguson said, also explaining at times she felt discriminated against not by race but rather by class in Oak Park.

"Yes, I've encountered that. It's class discrimination, which gets mixed up with race sometimes," she said.

Linzy Waters, an African-American and his wife, Perla, an Asian Philippina, attended the dinners.

"We represent a unique relationship, by all means," said Waters, who teaches diversity at a local university.

His parents experienced racism in southern states under Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation in public buildings.

Waters believed educating individuals in diversity can bring positive results.

"I have experienced this firsthand. Bigots and racists had changed because those individuals were educated in diversity issues. Mindsets can change," Waters said.

MORE DINNER & DIALOGUE

The next Dinner & Dialogue is June 22.

Four dinners a year were planned, Cedric Melton said, but so far about 45 residents have expressed interest in hosting them.

"It has exceeded all my expectations," he said.

The event is sponsored by Oak Park Community Relations. If you are interested in hosting or attending a dinner, contact (708) 358-5407 or community@oak-park.us.



Host or Attend a Diversity Dinner

Community Relations organizes regular diversity dinners to bring together local residents for food and conversation. Community Relations staff will provide technical assistance, and the commission will help cover costs associated with the dinner. All we need is a host to get things started – here’s how you can get involved.

- Sign up to host OR attend a dinner, either in your home or in a nearby venue.
- The host selects the dinner topic and invites no more than 12 guests of diverse backgrounds.
- The host briefly highlights the issue or topic of discussion and helps move the conversation to explore various facets of the issue.
- Guests are invited to share their experiences and ideas over dinner.

Get Involved!

Sign up to host or attend a Diversity Dinner using the form below.

- I would like to **HOST** a Diversity Dinner.
- I would like to **ATTEND** a Diversity Dinner

Name

Email

Phone

Please return this flyer to any Community Relations Commission member. Organizers will be in touch to discuss the next steps. For more information, email community@oak-park.us.

