Signs of Renewal

A Note from EP’s Co-Executive Director, John Sarrouf

At our recent retreat, EP staff and associates began a discourse about our guiding values. One idea that captured a great deal of energy was our commitment to the principles of democracy. We help people discuss their futures, build communities, and live side-by-side in peace with all their differences. In a way, we equip people to live out the ideals of a democratic society.

Today there is a lot of despair around the prospects for democracy. However, in the course of these conversations, I could not help but feel hopeful. Everywhere I look, I see signs of renewal. I work with champions of democracy in schools and colleges, synagogues and churches, libraries and museums around the country—and I work alongside them right in our organization too.

In this newsletter, I think you will see the same signs of hope and revitalization. Your commitment to EP contributes directly to the renewal of democratic life, supporting healthy discourse, belonging, pluralism, and connection—the things that define our impact and make democracy possible.

Featured Story

Essential Photovoice leverages modern technology for high-impact community engagements.

Also in This Newsletter

Impact Snapshot: Bridge of Hope
Testimonial: Student Leads Campus Dialogue
Donor Leadership Creates Accessibility
EP Kicks Off National Week of Conversation
The Essential Photovoice initiative blends EP’s Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) framework with Interfaith Photovoice’s visual dialogue model. This innovative collaboration, funded generously by a grant from the Fetzer Institute, expands upon EP’s robust toolbox by leveraging current visual recording technology.

Participants in an Essential Photovoice dialogue take photos of their community in response to prompts like “Where do you see your community flourishing?” and “Where is your community facing challenges?” The photos are then woven into the RSD framework. The pilot's partners were drawn from communities where EP had an existing footprint:

- Sheridan, Wyoming
- Raleigh, North Carolina
- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Charlottesville, Virginia
- Gloucester, Massachusetts; and
- a network of institutions across Arkansas and Tennessee.

The innovation has made possible discussions of issues like gentrification, food insecurity, and climate change.

“Essential Photovoice allows you to really have tough conversations, difficult conversations, but in a safe space, because you get to know one another, and you do that in a very meaningful way. I believe that’s what’s missing in society generally today.”

M Mitchell McKinney, Deputy Police Chief in Apex, NC & Essential Photovoice Participant

EP Associate Winnie Rugamba, co-leader of the Essential Photovoice training, says that the visual cues create a unique opportunity for people to reflect upon—and correct—the deeply human urge to write stories that invite and reinforce biases.

“Once the photo is up you have a moment where you just tell yourself a story,” she explains. “It’s something that we do as humans. We see something and we assume and we tell ourselves a story of who the person is. And of course, that affects the way that we then treat the person.”
Word about Essential Photovoice has already spread, with several EP partners—including secondary schools and colleges—reaching out to bring this innovative visual dialogue model into their communities.

Not only does the training remind participants of those natural instincts, it also harnesses curiosity for self-discovery.

As other participants ask questions about the image and story that was shared, the storyteller too often realizes how much about their own experience they had never considered. This encourages people to engage across differences with vulnerability, courage, and complexity.

Megan Ray, program officer at the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute in Arkansas, remarked that “Essential Photovoice helps you take control of your own narrative. You can learn a lot from it personally and how you share your story and how you show the world who you are.”

“Essential Photovoice allows you to really have tough conversations, difficult conversations, but in a safe space,” said Mitchell McKinney, Deputy Police Chief in Apex, NC, “I believe that's what's missing in society generally today.”

Amy Albrecht, Director of the Center for a Vital Community at Sheridan College, Wyoming, called the addition of photos a game-changer. “The payoff was amazing, so worth it—I cannot wait to do it again.”

“We have been using visual prompts for decades,” says EP’s John Sarrouf. “This feels like a natural extension, one that allows community members a new level of agency in the design of their dialogue.”
COMMUNITY VOICES

STUDENT ANNA HERNANDEZ LEADS DIALOGUES WITH STUDENTS, FACULTY, STAFF

Anna Hernandez, originally from La Paz, Bolivia, is a student at Juniata College in Pennsylvania, studying psychology and social work. As part of a collaboration with Essential Partners, students and faculty at the college were trained in dialogue design, the dialogic classroom framework, and facilitation. Anna sat down with us recently to talk about her experience with Essential Partners.

“In 2020 my professor, Dr. Weber, recruited me to be part of cohort of students, faculty members and administration that would get training from EP. I was drawn to it because to me it’s always been important to foster discourse and dialogue between people. I’ve seen how change can happen from simple conversations.

“After the training, I created a cultural dialogue series in my college. I constructed these dialogues so people would talk to each other about what matters to them and then talk about the campus culture. At the end, people wanted to connect more with each other. I crafted a workshop that centered around the idea of cultural humility so that people could make sure that we were more culturally humble and connected with each other.

“Essential Partners really opened my mind to the possibilities that there are to create change.”

“Essential Partners really opened my mind to the possibilities that there are to create change. Sometimes when you think about change, you think about advocacy and making sure people understand where you’re coming from and the change that you want to enact. But you don’t think about listening to the perspectives of others and analyzing if a change that you want to make really suits the reality of what's going on in your community.

“There’s so much richness in being able to just hold a space for someone else. Maybe I don’t agree with you, but I can find ways in which I relate to your experience, and feel empathy—which is ultimately, I think one of the pillars of community building.”
“My initial response to the Reflective Structured Dialogue process was skeptical,” Schneider said. “I wanted to see more free form-discussion and RSD felt restrictive. After seeing how it works, though, I’ve had a significant change in opinion. It works really well. I’m a big fan now.”

“Over the past year, Essential Partners has supported Bridge of Hope, an initiative of the YMCA of Pierce and Kitsap Counties (WA) to bring community members together for healthy, constructive dialogue about the issues that matter—and divide them.

The initiative’s purpose is “to gather people within Pierce and Kitsap Counties who desire to increase civility, understanding, hope, and trust by participating in meaningful civil dialogue around complex issues with those of differing experience and perspectives.”

Paul Schneider, a retired physician and a community leader behind Bridge of Hope, participated in an Essential Partners dialogue training through the YMCA.

“We’ve run six or seven dialogues, including two dialogues concerning homelessness. Some of the participants were city and county government leaders. They liked the format of the dialogue and wanted to know what’s next.

It’s important to address divisiveness. I’m deeply concerned about this. My attitude hasn’t changed, but I was frustrated before and I now have hope. We can actually engage folks in a broader way.”

Paul Schneider, Retired Physician & Participant

The initiative has made progress toward their goals, leading dialogues about some of the most pressing issues in Pierce and Kitsap Counties.
“It’s going well. We’ve run six or seven dialogues, including two dialogues concerning homelessness. We had great participation. Some of the participants were city and county government leaders. They liked the format of the dialogue and wanted to know what’s next.”

Recently, the YMCA of Pierce and Kitsap Counties was selected by President Biden’s United We Stand initiative as one of ten Bridgebuilding YMCAs from across the country. Bridge of Hope was a major reason they were chosen for this honor—as well as their collaboration with Essential Partners.

One YMCA leader reflected that EP’s credibility, expertise, and flexibility made it possible for them both to have a deep impact in the community and to be tapped by the Presidential initiative.

Schneider reflected on the changes that he has seen in his own life as well. “I haven’t been good at listening to people in the past,” he said. “I knew I was right and I let people know. I can say that there’s been some change though. I have a friend who’s on the other end of the spectrum from me. He and I are finally getting together to start talking about these polarized issues and there has been a real change.”

“It’s important to address divisiveness,” Schneider said. “I’m deeply concerned about this. My attitude hasn’t changed, but I was frustrated before and I now have hope. We can actually engage folks in a broader way.”

**SUPPORT LONG-TERM IMPACT**

**CONSIDER A BEQUEST OR LEGACY GIFT.**

Bequests, legacy gifts, and planned gifts all set a strong foundation to make ambitious, long-term, high-impact visions possible.

*Establishing a simple bequest in your will can be as easy as sharing this instruction with your attorney or financial planner:*

“I bequeath $__ or ___% of my estate to Essential Partners, EIN 22-3432160.”

If you’ve already established a bequest or legacy gift for EP, or would like to discuss doing so, please contact:

development@whatisessential.org
ESSENTIAL PARTNERS TO KICK OFF NATIONAL WEEK OF CONVERSATION 2023

On the evening of Monday, April 17th, National Week of Conversation 2023 kicks off with a screening of *The Abortion Talks*. That week, we will host several free programs that offer a first-hand experience of the power of Reflective Structured Dialogue and a collaboration with EP.

CITY OF MELROSE, MA LAUNCHES COMMUNITY DIALOGUES WITH EP SUPPORT

The City of Melrose, MA, announced the launch of the Community Conversations Initiative to support civic dialogue on a range of important issues facing the City. Essential Partners will train a diverse group of community volunteers to become facilitators and conduct community conversations.

“Communities like Melrose are stronger when every resident can engage in healthy discussions of the most important issues,” said EP’s John Sarrouf. “Healthy public discussions tap into a community’s innate creativity and resilience.”

RECENT NEWS

INTRODUCING OUR NEW EP COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE LIAISON!

EP staff member and practitioner Winnie Rugamba has stepped into a new role as our Community of Practice liaison. This is the first time that EP has had the capacity to dedicate staff exclusively to the support of our global network of trained community-builders, peacemakers, conveners, and facilitators. Winnie will meet with community members one-on-one, lead monthly office hours, and lead new initiatives to support the continued impact of EP’s programs around the world.

DONOR SUPPORT ELIMINATES BARRIERS TO ACCESS FOR EP COMMUNITY

Thanks to generous continuing support from individual donors, Essential Partners is thrilled to announce significantly reduced registration rates for all Community of Practice webinars. These lower costs will eliminate barriers to access, deepening the impact of these webinars while making them available to all those who are doing the hard work of strengthening relationships and renewing hope in their communities.

Thank you for your support!

THANKS FOR READING—AND FOR SUPPORTING OUR MISSION.