



essential PARTNERS

DONOR NEWSLETTER

A QUARTERLY UPDATE FOR OUR ESSENTIAL PARTNERS | **SPRING 2025**

DONOR IMPACT SPOTLIGHTS

FEATURED STORY

Turning Towards Community in Uncertain Times: Reflections from EP's Public Dialogues

Libraries as Bridges: Essential Partners' Webinar Highlights Community Connection and Dialogue

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NAVIGATING THE UNCERTAINTY, FUELING THE NEED: WHY OUR WORK MATTERS NOW MORE THAN EVER

One defining characteristic of this moment is uncertainty. Every day at EP, our phones ring and our inboxes fill with messages from individuals across higher education, secondary schools, community organizations, and mayors' offices. They come to us with a profound and urgent need for connection, understanding, and partnership, driven by the pervasive uncertainty that clouds our collective future.

It's also true that some of our most valued partnerships have become destabilized. University departments, county governments, and civic organizations—the heart of so many transformative projects—have been restructured, had their priorities shifted, or had their budgets frozen. Their carefully laid plans for workshops, summits, courses, and community outreach are being upended by constantly shifting circumstances. Even the institutions we often turn to for solace and support during challenging times, such as interfaith groups, are themselves navigating internal divisions and distrust.

Amidst all this instability, though, the need for our work has never been greater. When stability and predictability fail, it reveals the critical role of strong connections and robust communication. Our partners are leveraging our support to strengthen those relationships and hone their ability to navigate difficult, complex discussions together. They're working to rebuild trust within the organizations, departments, and communities where it has been profoundly fractured, and to shift a public discourse that has become tangled in a web of accusation, despair, and dehumanizing language. They're building and rebuilding, reaching out and forging new bonds.

They are why we have hope. These individuals and organizations see our shared work as vital, a grounding force in this complex landscape. People turn to each other to be reminded that a path forward exists, that they possess agency in this moment, and that it is indeed okay to act out of a sense of hope.

This is what you make possible. We are acutely aware of the current economic climate and the anxieties it creates for those who generously support our work. Despite these challenges, so many of you have stepped forward, asking how you can help. We're incredibly grateful.

The work we do together is not just valuable, it is essential. Resilient communities and deep bonds of trust are the only path forward. Your contributions are a crucial part of the solution, helping to pave the way for a future that is more connected, more collaborative, more inclusive, and ultimately, more democratic.

In this moment of uncertainty, your commitment provides the certainty we need to continue striving towards that brighter future.



Thank you for your support!
With gratitude,

John Sarrouf
Co-Executive Director, Essential Partners

DONOR IMPACT SPOTLIGHTS

TURNING TOWARDS COMMUNITY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: REFLECTIONS FROM ESSENTIAL PARTNERS' PUBLIC DIALOGUES

In a world marked by division, the simple act of coming together can be a powerful source of strength and hope. In March, Essential Partners hosted two public community dialogues centered on the theme of “Turning to Community in Uncertain Times,” providing a vital space for individuals to reflect, connect, and imagine a path forward together.

Recognizing the significant tumult and difficulties faced by our partners both professionally and personally in recent months, we felt a deep responsibility to offer a sanctuary. These dialogues served as a poignant reminder of the fundamental values that bind us and sustain us. We were deeply inspired by the heartfelt values shared by participants and their resolute commitment to carry these values back into their daily lives.

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The event created deep connections among previous strangers through structured norm-setting, connecting questions, and dialogue. The questions weren't always easy to answer, but it encouraged respectful openness. My main takeaway is the powerful role of a quiet, impartial facilitator in bringing diverse voices to the forefront. One particularly impactful piece of advice I received was the importance of involving leadership from all sides early in the planning process. Doing so can help prevent cancel culture dynamics and ensure that all perspectives are represented in the dialogue.

— Sunny

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I had such a positive experience. It felt very structured yet unrushed, which would be helpful had this been a group in conflict. As it turned out, we had similar backgrounds and opinions. I sensed a great deal of sadness in the room. I took away more compassion for the impact of funding disruptions on NGOs and on the professionals who dedicate themselves to this work.

— Colleen

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The dialogues were designed to foster openness, genuine connection, and shared exploration. Individuals could articulate their experiences and hopes without being overwhelmed by the challenges we face today. Our aim was to tap into wellsprings of hope and possibility, fostering a sense of connection and a shared vision for the future.

In small group settings, participants had the chance to share personal stories and were then invited to envision the positive changes they wish to cultivate within their own communities in the weeks and months ahead. We facilitated a structured sharing process using three key questions:

- **“What is one thing you’d like others to understand about how the past few months have impacted you?”**
- **“Share a story of a time where you were a part of a community effort that modeled what community means to you.”**
- **“What core value was at the heart of that experience for you?”**

Following these initial go-arounds, the conversation opened up for a deeper exploration of what people had heard. Participants drew connections between what others had said, their lived experiences, their values, and their curiosity. We concluded with a question to reflect on the future: “What is one commitment, hope, or value you heard here that you want to take with you after this dialogue?”

Following these initial dialogues, we offered custom office hours to further support participants and to provide a platform for participants to discuss concrete next steps for their respective institutions and communities.

The coming months will present us with many moments where we can choose whether to turn towards one another or to retreat into isolation. We will each be called upon to make significant decisions for ourselves, our families, and our institutions. The very manner in which we approach these decisions will profoundly shape our collective future.

By providing a structured, open, inclusive space for reflection and sharing, Essential Partners continues to foster the sense of community and hope that will be needed to build a more resilient and democratic future. The sparks of hope and connections forged in these dialogues will remain with each participant, a reminder that, in the face of adversity, turning towards one another remains our most essential path forward.

LIBRARIES AS BRIDGES: ESSENTIAL PARTNERS' WEBINAR HIGHLIGHTS COMMUNITY CONNECTION AND DIALOGUE

On March 15th Shamichael Hallman, author of the acclaimed book *Meet Me at the Library* and a cherished member of the EP community, joined Essential Partners for an insightful Community of Practice Peer Learning Webinar that delved into the transformative potential of libraries as inclusive community spaces.

Hallman, a passionate voice for libraries and community engagement, shared valuable insights drawn from his extensive experience



reimagining library spaces as vibrant hubs for learning and positive social impact. He illuminated the crucial intersection of library spaces and dialogue, emphasizing that EP's Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) method is a uniquely powerful tool for cultivating deeper community bonds, bridging divides, and creating fertile ground for inclusive conversations within public spaces.

Hallman distilled the core message of his book: “**Libraries aren’t just about access to information—they’re about access to one another. They are places uniquely equipped to facilitate socioeconomic mixing and civic engagement. In a time of growing polarization and isolation, libraries have the power to be connective tissue in our civic and social lives.**”

Libraries today are one of the last truly public realms, spaces where individuals from all walks of life meet, engage, and collaborate. At their most impactful, libraries function as civic sanctuaries—places where curiosity thrives alongside a sense of belonging. They don’t just serve their communities. Libraries also play an active role in shaping them, and dialogue plays a crucial role in that process.

“My time with Essential Partners deepened my understanding of how intentional dialogue can transform public spaces into places of true connection,” Hallman said. “That journey began with the PhotoVoice program. While I didn’t get a chance to host one before leaving Memphis Public Libraries, the cohort experience helped me recognize how uniquely suited libraries are to hold space for that kind of engagement. Since then, I’ve participated in the EP Summer Intensive and have carried those principles into my work at the Urban Libraries Council—helping to shape programming that supports dialogue and belonging in libraries nationwide. I’m excited about future opportunities to partner with EP to train librarians across the country.”

This donor-funded webinar helped Community of Practice members across the US envision the role that libraries—and dialogue—can play in fostering cohesion in their communities.

CULTIVATING CONNECTION: DARNELL EPPS AND HAWKEN SCHOOL'S JOURNEY TOWARDS DEEPER DIALOGUE



In Cleveland, Ohio, the Hawken School has experienced remarkable growth over the past two decades, more than doubling the number of campuses and the size of its student body. As the institution expanded, so too has its commitment to fostering a community where every person feels a sense of belonging and everyone has the space and skills to engage respectfully across differences.

Recognizing the need to build the community’s competency, stamina, and tolerance for communicating across differences, Hawken has partnered with Essential Partners. The collaboration began with a comprehensive three-hour training session for all faculty members, spanning elementary to high school levels. This was followed by in-depth mapping sessions with both students and teachers to understand the existing landscape and identify areas for growth.


Darnell Epps

*Director of Fair Play
Hawken School*

Leading this crucial work is Darnell Epps, the Director of Fair Play across all of Hawken's campuses. Sitting on the school's Administrative Council, Darnell views his position as instrumental in realizing Hawken's aspirational goals. His goal is to embed a robust infrastructure within the school to support meaningful dialogue.

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It's been exciting to hear the ways that leaders across our campus are using the learning in their work with colleagues and students. Having a shared language for dialogic practices has been unifying for our community and it's a nice way to grow, collectively, as a school. Seeing student leaders embrace this work and hearing them articulate how it has helped with their peers outside of the classroom has illustrated why this work is so impactful.

— Darnell

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Essential Partners has continued to provide crucial support, supporting and collaborating with Epps as he facilitates dialogues on campus about tense and contentious topics. When students expressed a desire to discuss immigration, donor-funded consultation hours allowed EP's program team to accompany him through the intricate process of designing a productive and inclusive conversation.

Looking ahead, Epps is enthusiastic about the continued integration of dialogic frameworks within the Hawken community. **“As we progress on our journey, I'm excited to see and hear the ways in which dialogic frameworks are deeply embedded into our practice from the board level to faculty/staff, students, and parents. I'm hopeful for all leaders in our community to be able to model and clearly articulate the what, why, and how of reflective structured dialogue, and dialogic practices both inside and outside the classroom, and the ways in which it aligns with our School's mission to prepare students to be persons of high intellect and character.”**

Epps is an active member of EP's Community of Practice as well. As a member of the BIPOC Community of Practice cohort, Epps has leveraged the arsenal of donor-funded resources offered exclusively to EP's Community of Practice members, from coaching hours to webinars and peer learning engagements. His proactive engagement has positioned him as a dedicated practitioner within the EP network.

Epps highlighted the invaluable support he has received through the Community of Practice. **“Allyson [Bachta], Winnie [Rugamba], and Nadyia [Brock] have each been AMAZING! They are extremely knowledgeable, helpful, and dynamic people all around. They have each helped me as a leader in myriad ways and have supported me as I lead in this new capacity to grow our dialogue program across our multiple campuses. Coaching is a true gift, and I appreciate the spaces to problem-solve, engage, and receive hope, help to get unstuck, and encouragement when I need it.”**

Darnell Epps and EP's ongoing collaboration with Hawken School exemplifies the transformative potential of a dedicated leader taking advantage of all that Essential Partners has to offer—thanks to the generous support of our donors. As Hawken continues to grow, the infrastructure being built under Epps' guidance is becoming a cornerstone of the school's commitment to belonging, community, and excellence.

UPCOMING COMMUNITY EVENTS: SUMMER SUMMITS: CULTIVATING DIALOGUE AND ACTION

This summer, Essential Partners is excited to announce a series of focused summits designed exclusively for our community members! These events offer an opportunity for participants to learn from real-world experiences, gain practical insights, and take actionable steps towards goals as facilitators and leaders in fostering a culture of dialogue. We will host three distinct summits this summer, each designed in response to a different context: community-based work, higher education, and secondary education.

- Our **Community Summit** will explore how dialogue builds relationships, fosters inclusive cultures, and inspires community action. Join fellow advocates for hope and healing for connection, rest, learning from leaders using EP's approach, and discussion of our ongoing community.
- The **Secondary School Education Summit** will highlight innovative leaders from Hawken School, Cary Academy, and Newburyport schools to share strategies for strengthening student dialogue and connection. Explore student-led dialogue groups and EP's facilitation approach. This summit offers peer learning and discussion about our ongoing community engagement.
- The **Higher Education Summit** is for faculty, staff, and students using or wanting to use EP's dialogue approach to foster trust and understanding on divided campuses. Connect with peers, share insights, find support, and learn from innovative speakers to create transformative impact.

Interested in attending one or more of these donor-funded summits? Please reach out to [Claire Lindsay](#) for more information!

EP IN THE NEWS!



GREATER GOOD MAGAZINE, “HOW TO MOVE BEYOND OUTRAGE TOWARD UNDERSTANDING”

Greater Good Magazine featured a compelling interview with our friend and collaborator, Kurt Gray, a psychology professor at UNC Chapel Hill and author of the new book, *Outraged: Why We Fight About Morality and Politics and How to Find Common Ground*. In the article, Kurt credits Essential Partners as the origin of the burgeoning dialogue movement and discusses EP's influence on his approach.

[Read the article HERE](#)

YMCA OF PIERCE & KITSAP COUNTIES, “BRIDGE OF HOPE”



Essential Partners has partnered with the YMCA of Pierce & Kitsap Counties in Washington State to integrate dialogue practices throughout their organization, enhancing their ability to serve the community. This initiative is embodied in their "Bridge of Hope" program, for which they recently released a video sharing insights and aspirations.

[Watch Here](#)

EP IN THE NEWS!

Essential Partners is increasingly active in higher education, collaborating with administrators, faculty, staff, and students nationwide to cultivate cultures of dialogue on their campuses. We're excited to share updates from three of our higher education partners and their campus initiatives:



Shenandoah University: Through their campus-wide initiative, "Shenandoah Conversations," the university aims to foster civil dialogue in a polarized world. Their recent video showcases the program and how they are working to promote understanding. Watch the video to hear students' perspectives.

[Watch Here](#)

Scranton University: Their ongoing "Bursting Our Political Bubbles" Dialogue Initiative integrates Essential Partners' structured dialogue methods with the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola on discernment and reflection. These sessions offer students a space to engage with diverse experiences and views to build understanding through dialogue, rather than debate or persuasion.

THE UNIVERSITY OF
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A JESUIT UNIVERSITY
RoyalNews

[Read the article HERE](#)



UConn: As part of their new Common Curriculum launching in Fall 2025, UConn will embed practices learned through their trainings with EP. These courses, focusing on areas like Creativity, Cultural Dimensions, Diversity, and Environmental Literacy, will also emphasize five core competencies, including Information, Digital, and Media Literacy and Dialogue.

[Read the article HERE](#)

MEET OUR NEW PROGRAM MANAGER, GRACE BOONE!

Grace Boone (she/her) has joined Essential Partners as the Program Manager of Essential Partner's Community of Practice. Her professional background spans community engagement, conflict resolution, and systems change in schools and nonprofits, both in the U.S. and internationally. Specifically, for the past seven years before joining EP, Grace supported international peacebuilding efforts and organizational and partnership transformation and facilitated a community of practice on locally-led peacebuilding with CDA Collaborative Learning.

A connector of all Grace's work is the belief in the wisdom of communities and the transformative power of relationships. She brings that belief, backed by experience in facilitation, convening, training, program management, and strategic and systems thinking, to her role as Program Manager at EP. Grace shared, **"In these days of growing distrust and disconnection, it's an incredible gift to join an organization and wider community of people who work to make the values of democracy and hope real. EP's foundational work of supporting strong relationships to enable long-term cultural change is exactly what our world needs. I'm excited to strengthen our community's connections to us and to each other as we continue to exemplify how the world we want is not only possible, it's here - it's us."**



Born in the United States, Grace was raised in Mocuba, Mozambique, and Cape Town, South Africa. After returning to the U.S., she received her Master of Arts in Conflict Resolution and Coexistence from Brandeis University's Heller School of Social Policy and Management in Waltham, MA. Currently based in Arlington, Virginia, on the traditional and ancestral land of the Piscataway people and the site of the Torthorwald plantation. When home, you can find her printmaking and strolling with her partner and her pup.

For those who like to know a bit more, Grace brings experience managing both USG and philanthropy-funded projects exceeding \$2 million. She is also a big fan of developing strong strategies rooted in collective imagination for what's possible, clearly articulating how we'll get there. A true generalist, Grace has a love for all art forms, and while she enjoys linocut printmaking most, she would never turn down a night of collaging, painting, or ceramics.

Please join us in giving Grace a warm welcome! She can be reached via email at grace@whatisessential.org.

THANKS FOR READING—AND FOR SUPPORTING OUR MISSION.

