



DONOR NEWSLETTER

A QUARTERLY UPDATE FOR OUR ESSENTIAL PARTNERS | WINTER 2026

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THE WISDOM OF THE LONG HAUL

As I reflect on my last two years in this role, one of the most profound lessons I've learned from my colleagues is that this work is a marathon, not a sprint. In a world that feels increasingly defined by a relentless cycle of headlines and crises, there is a natural temptation to move with a sense of frantic urgency. We often feel that if we don't "fix" the division today, we aren't doing enough. But true bridge-building—the kind that repairs the world and sustains democracy—is a "long haul" process. The relationships we are mending have often been fraught for years; the new ones we are building are intended to last for decades.

A 10th-grade student at our secondary school partner, Chicago Latin, recently captured this reality perfectly:

"It seems like every day that a new issue or crisis in our world is making headlines, leading to a mix of feelings and reactions from students and friends here in Latin. In school I have seen how rushed conversations about serious, pressing issues without proper leadership can lead to more confusion."

This student's wisdom reminds us that dialogue is not just a tool for connection; it is a way of operating that actively resists fear. When we rush, we risk creating more confusion and unspoken animosity—the very elements that breed distrust.

At Essential Partners, we believe that "background work" is important work. We don't just drop in and leave. We don't pursue projects for press coverage or social media reach. We evaluate a community's readiness, work deliberately, and ensure every stakeholder is truly heard. What is unique about Essential Partners is the "Essential Partnership" itself—a long-term relationship. Through our Community of Practice, we continue to guide and support our facilitators and their communities long after the training is complete, offering access to our decades of experience, ensuring that their initiatives thrive.



Thank you for being part of this marathon with us.
With gratitude,

Claire Lindsay
Development Manager, Essential Partners

DONOR IMPACT SPOTLIGHT

CROSS-CONTINENTAL COLLABORATION ON SHARED CONFLICT: A UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM CASE STUDY

In an academic world often defined by contentious debates and entrenched positions, two political scientists, one in the United States, the other in Turkey, have pioneered a collaborative, dialogic approach to teaching the complexities of Middle Eastern politics.



Dr. Sebnem Gumuscu, Associate Professor of Political Science at Middlebury College, and Dr. Ilkim Okyar, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Yeditepe University in Istanbul, co-designed a unique course that connected their respective classrooms. Together, they provided students with a safe, yet brave space to humanize difference and grapple with polarizing issues through the methods of Essential Partners.

The journey for Dr. Gumuscu began with a vulnerable realization: she was avoiding teaching some of the most critical subjects in her field.

"In the past, I saved the topic of Israel and Palestine for outside speakers," Dr. Gumuscu explained. "Although I knew the topic quite well, I would not teach it myself because I was not confident that I had the skills to manage conflict inside the classroom, so this is really coming from a vulnerable point. I thought, 'that's not sustainable, I want to do better.'"

In 2021, a faculty-driven initiative at Middlebury—the Engaged Listening Program (ELP)—provided the opportunity she was seeking. Through ELP, Dr. Gumuscu received a two-day training in Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) from Essential Partners. With ongoing support through Essential Partners, she successfully integrated RSD into her courses.

The impact was immediate and profound: "After that semester, I could not go back to regular teaching," Dr. Gumuscu recalls. She then became a key figure in Middlebury's Conflict Transformation Collaborative, managing the undergraduate pillar and professional development program, and further deepening her expertise by training as an EP practitioner at a Summer Intensive. The CTC seeks to foster individuals' and groups' knowledge about conflict vis-à-vis change; skills to engage productively with conflict and change; and dispositions that promote meaningful relationships and ethical action across communities.

DONOR IMPACT SPOTLIGHT

This foundational work paved the way for the crucial collaboration. Dr. Gumuscu connected with Dr. Okyar, whose academic background includes a PhD focused on the Middle East and years of experience engaging with peace activists and organizations in Palestine, Bedouin, and Israel.

Dr. Okyar shared her transformative experiences attending an annual Peace Platform organized by these activists. This initiative annually brings together diverse groups—including people from Israel and Palestine, spiritual leaders, and youth groups—to stay together in the desert, cooking, dancing, and hosting workshops on the power of dialogue.

"Seeing that firsthand, with the same land, we're smelling the same air, we laugh the same way, cry the same way, sleeping in beds next to each other, it changes things. It degrades the entire political arguments into nothing. It was a life-changing experience," Dr. Okyar shared.

This shared understanding — that directly humanizing the "other" is essential for conflict transformation — made the overlap between Dr. Okyar's practitioner experience and Dr. Gumuscu's dialogic methods clear. They realized that by uniting these two expertise, they could offer students an alternative narrative to the conflicts in the Middle East.

The original plan to take both sets of students to the peace conference was unfortunately canceled due to the events of October 7th. The professors quickly pivoted, focusing instead on how to bring those humanizing experiences into their campuses.

Using techniques adapted from RSD and leveraging the Essential Partners Israel-Palestine Dialogue Guide, they co-created an entire college course.

- **Essential Partners' methods were infused into the entire course structure, starting on day one with community agreements and carefully crafted connecting questions.**
- **Dr. Gumuscu noted: "We built a progressive engagement with dialogic skills for the students, starting small with lower stakes, and then building those stakes with more contentious conversations."**
- **Students from Middlebury and Yeditepe University were connected throughout the semester, engaging regularly in work that enriched their understanding of how their peers, from different social and political environments, were grappling with the conflict.**

The course successfully synthesized Dr. Gumuscu's experience with EP and course design with Dr. Okyar's connections to peace activists and firsthand knowledge of conflict transformation in the region. Dr. Okyar noticed the results right away.

“The way they were leading dialogues with each other, they became more curious and asked thoughtful questions,” remarked Dr. Okyar. “It really changed the atmosphere within the classroom. Besides making it more sophisticated and more engaging, it actually gave a different lens for the students in their thinking.”

The course became highly popular, a testament to students’ desire to engage with difference. Dr. Gumuscu noted its immense staying power: “their eyes were so bright when they’re talking about the course itself... And they’re telling me that was the best course ever.”

This deep impact solidified the professors’ commitment to the dialogic method. “After infusing EP’s methods into the course design, I can never, ever teach this course in a traditional style, again,” Dr. Gumuscu concluded, to which Dr. Okyar wholeheartedly agreed, “Yeah, no way.”

Their work stands as a powerful example of how taking a risk and embracing structured dialogue can transform the classroom into a space of deep, humanizing learning, and encourage others to believe in the worth of this approach.

[Read their full journal article published in the Cambridge University Press](#)

RESOURCE UPDATE

OUR NEW IMMIGRATION DIALOGUE RESOURCE

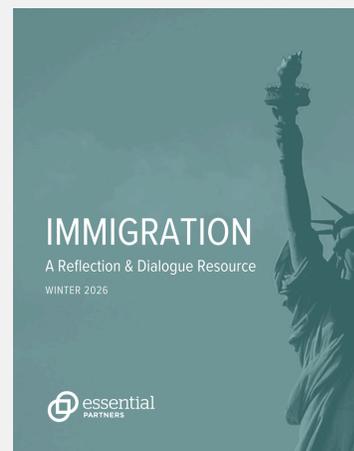
Over the past year, conversations about immigration have taken on a new urgency. Whether the topic is the meaning of belonging, the nuances of tradition, or the complex realities of enforcement and safety, these discussions are no longer just academic—they are deeply personal and, for many, also deeply traumatic.

We listened to you, our supporters and partners, and we heard a consistent request: "Help us talk about this issue in a way that heals rather than harms."

Rooted in Community Wisdom

In response to this call, we looked to our partnerships on the front lines. We reached out to our most trusted practitioners—those facilitating tough conversations in communities where immigration is a daily flashpoint.

By collecting their field-tested scripts, seasoned practices, and real-world reflections, we have developed a specialized new resource: [Immigration: A Reflection & Dialogue Resource](#).



What's Inside the Resource

This guide is designed specifically for those trained in our reflective approach. It focuses on three distinct types of dialogue that our practitioners identified as the most vital for fostering connection right now:

- **Shared Experience:** Creating space for those with similar backgrounds to find solidarity.
- **Community Wrestling:** Helping local groups navigate the tensions of change and tradition together.
- **Human Dignity:** Moving past "policy talk" to reconnect with the complex human beings at the center of the issue.

Your Impact in Action

This resource isn't about winning arguments or changing laws; it's about resilience and connection. Because of your generosity, we can provide this free resource to our network of nearly 10,000 facilitators across the country. You make it possible for hundreds of communities to invite creativity, humanity, and generosity into spaces previously defined by fear. [An additional donation today](#) will fund ongoing coaching and support for those doing the long, slow, deep work of bridging!

Thank you for making this vital work possible and for helping our communities stay connected when it matters most.

Community of Practice Spotlight: The BIPOC Community of Practice

We recognize that for dialogue to be truly effective, it must be adaptable to the lived experiences of the communities it serves. Our BIPOC Community of Practice, led by EP Associate Tanvi Mittal, meets bimonthly to do exactly that.

This dedicated space allows practitioners of color to support one another as they navigate their unique dialogue initiatives. More importantly, the group serves as a laboratory for methodological innovation—working together to adapt EP's core techniques to better resonate within diverse cultural and community contexts.

During their most recent gathering, the group focused on the emotional and logistical impact of current news and events regarding immigration enforcement. Tanvi shared her reflections:

“Together, we named the emotions rising in us, explored what sits at the heart of the matter, and spoke honestly about how it is affecting our capacity and desire to do dialogue work.

This was not a space where we rushed to fix, solve, or intellectualize. Instead, people made space for grief, fear, anger, joy, and even moments of laughter to exist side by side. We shared where we are feeling drained (holding multidimensional fear) and where we find energy (allowing joy and chaos to run together).

We closed by sharing our DREAMS for dialogue that came with a beautiful reminder that many of us are already making those dreams come true in courageous ways.”



Photo by Kaylee Buono for Essex County Community Foundation

EP DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Jim Gutstadt and Nancy Goodman

Longtime EP donors Jim Gutstadt and Nancy Goodman have lived on the North Shore of Massachusetts for 50 years. Both had careers in education, Jim as an elementary school principal and Nancy as a Director of Community Education at Wellspring House in Gloucester, MA. They're both retired now, but they continue to work towards peace through greater understanding among people in the US and internationally. Jim and Nancy recently answered a few questions about their commitment to EP's mission and work.

What does 'making a difference' look like to you in the context of our cause?

People learning to expand their understanding of what might be true, accepting that what is true for them might not be true for someone else. Still appreciating, even liking, the other person. That our goal as a society is not to have everyone conform, that a society with a range of belief systems and cultures is rich.

What are your hopes for the future of this organization five or ten years from now? What makes EP's work especially important to our country and the world at this moment?

I keep imagining that, if enough people are trained in Reflective Structured Dialogue, it will become the norm for how we approach others when there is a disagreement. In our current highly politicized environment, it can be difficult to keep such a vision alive and well. I applaud EP for continuing to draw people into dialogue so they learn experientially how powerful this approach to conflict resolution is.

As a donor, what project or initiative have you been most proud of supporting?

My husband and I have been supporting EP in general for all the reasons outlined above since it was the Public Conversations Project. One specific initiative that inspired us was working with gun rights advocates and proponents of gun control in Montana. From our point of view the normal political process had not been effective. Bringing personal storytelling into a dialogue about guns felt like a hopeful new approach.

Both Jim and I spent our careers in education. Working with children and young adults gives the opportunity to shape citizens of the future. With the school-based projects, we felt that EP would impart coping tools that could support students on into their adult life.

RAVENSCROFT SCHOOL'S STUDENT-LED DIALOGUE PROGRAM

For over 5 years, EP has worked alongside Ravenscroft leadership to embed the spirit of dialogue into the school's DNA, resulting in a robust, self-sustaining ecosystem:

- **EP has trained 44 educators and 94 students** in Reflective Structured Dialogue, creating a massive internal engine for conflict resolution.
- We designed a model where **40 new student facilitators are trained annually**. EP-mentored Upper Schoolers now lead dialogues for 5th–8th graders, ensuring empathy is taught as a foundational skill from middle school onward.
- Through our Community of Practice, EP provides ongoing guidance that prevents dialogue initiatives from "fizzling out." This long-term relationship allowed the school to navigate **11 large-scale dialogues this past year on high-stakes topics** like gun safety, reproductive rights, gender equality, and the 2024 election.

While many administrators feared campus division, Ravenscroft's EP-trained leaders held the center. As Director of Dialogic Campus Lorre Gifford noted: "These kids and the work they have been doing, have, for sure, shifted the culture of this school." Last year, we sat down with Lorre and some of their students to discuss the power of dialogue on campus:



The true measure of our work is its "ripple effect"—seeing the skills of dialogue move from community, like a high school classroom, into the broader world. Jane McNeill, a Ravenscroft alumna, is a powerful example of this trajectory in action.

After years of immersion in Essential Partners' training and serving as a lead facilitator at Ravenscroft, Jane has carried those skills to Davidson College. There, she has joined the Institute for the Public Good, an initiative dedicated to advancing the civic purpose of a liberal arts education.

In an era of deepening social fractures, the Institute operates on the belief that the world fundamentally needs more bridge builders. Jane is now applying the specific dialogic tools she mastered with EP to foster connection on her new campus. Jane reflected on her transition from high school facilitator to collegiate leader:



Jane McNeill
Davidson College '28
Ravenscroft School '24

What stands out to you as you reflect on your time at Ravenscroft as an EP-trained student dialogue facilitator?

What stands out the most to me from my time as an Essential Partners-trained student dialogue facilitator at Ravenscroft is how transformative it was to learn how to hold intentional conversations. It was eye-opening to witness how intentional, structured space—grounded in trust, curiosity, and common norms can shift the tone of even the most challenging conversations. Essential Partners (EP) taught me that as a facilitator is not to persuade or steer participants towards a particular conclusion, but rather to ask thought-provoking questions, ensure shared airspace, and allow all participants to be heard. The shift in approach I learned from EP—speaking to understand, rather than speaking to respond—was huge. I continue to see participants, and even myself, leave conversations with guards down and a deeper appreciation and understanding for perspectives they wouldn't have otherwise considered. EP also taught me that learning the “why” behind a person's beliefs restores their humanity. I continue to draw on my experience as an EP-trained student facilitator. Not only have I stayed involved with deliberative efforts, I believe I engage with others differently than I would otherwise. My EP training taught me that dialogue is not about erasing differences or opinions, but navigating them with empathy, bravery, and respect. The confidence I gained from my Essential Partners training continues to inform how I show up in classrooms, leadership roles, and civic spaces.

What motivated you to get involved with the Davidson College Institute for Public Good, and what skills do you hope to bring to the program?

Ravenscroft's Dialogue Across Differences program, developed in partnership with Essential Partners, was formative for me. During my college search, I looked for schools that offered similar opportunities for structured, meaningful dialogue. In the fall of my senior year of high school, I met with Professor Graham Bullock, faculty director for the [Deliberative Citizenship Initiative \(DCI\)](#) at Davidson College. I found that the mission of the DCI in many ways aligned with those of Dialogue Across Differences and, after being admitted, applied the following summer to become a DCI Fellow. Now, as a sophomore who has work as a DCI Fellow for two semesters and currently in my second semester as a Co-Convener, I have seen the impact of the DCI firsthand.

The facilitation skills I brought to Davidson were helpful and continued to improve. I find I am better at holding space for complexity and nuance, for example. But the most important thing I think I bring to Davidson's program is my belief that deliberation works. I have experienced the difference that challenging conversations, inward reflection, and discourse can make and am eager to make it possible for more people to have this experience.

Never has this work been more important. The more polarized our country becomes, the bigger the difference deliberation makes. The health of our democracy depends on citizens and politicians being willing to engage respectfully, thoughtfully, and courageously with those who hold different views.

Happily, more and more people seem to agree. Recently Davidson's [Martin Institute for the Public Good received a \\$4 million federal grant](#) to expand the work of the DCI and, over the next four years, work to foster civil discourse across 100 college and university campuses. Two weeks ago, I went with a group from the DCI to Duke University where we taught more than 100 students enrolled in a Philosophy class titled "Devil's Advocate: Exploring Pluralism, Free Inquiry and Belonging" the skills to host deliberation, which they will do later in the semester with their teams and friends.

Now that you have been involved in two different campus dialogue programs, what do you notice is unique about Essential Partners' approach? Are there any aspects of our program you hope to bring to your campus?

Having now participated in two different campus dialogue programs, what feels unique about Essential Partners' approach is the emphasis placed on relationships over outcomes. Essential Partners doesn't enter a conversation with the goal of trying to have everyone reach the same conclusion. Instead, it seeks to build understanding by allowing people to explore the values, experiences, and identities that shape their perspectives. I also value and appreciate the Essential Partners model that places emphasis on storytelling and lived experiences as entry points to challenging topics. By beginning with personal narratives, rather than policy arguments, empathy and humanity grow naturally. Essential Partners has taught me that lasting civic engagement begins with the trust that is built through dialogue.



EP IN THE NEWS!



CO-ED KATIE HYTEN ON TOP OF MIND

Our Co-Executive Director, Katie Hyten, recently joined Julie Rose—host of the Top of Mind and Uncomfy podcasts—for a compelling live chat.

In the interview, Katie shared practical insights on the transformative power of dialogue. She explores how we can move beyond the "win-loss" mentality of pure debate, offering heart-centered tips on using dialogic structures to navigate even the most polarizing topics with curiosity and grace.

Whether you are looking to bridge divides in your own neighborhood or simply seeking a more constructive way to engage, Katie's appearance provides a quick, powerful roadmap for staying connected in "uncomfortable" times.

[Watch the Reel here](#)

EP JOINS NATIONAL DIALOGUE LEADERS FOR STRATEGIC PANEL



In another recent appearance, Katie represented Essential Partners in a high-impact panel event co-hosted by the Democracy Resource Hub (DRH) and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD).

This collaborative session brought together a powerhouse of experienced practitioners, each bringing a unique approach to the challenge of bridging deep political differences. Rather than presenting a "one-size-fits-all" solution, the training offered a nuanced look at the landscape of modern bridge-building.

By participating in these national conversations, EP continues to help shape a field that is more adaptive, reflective, and effective. This event served as a vital resource for organizers and leaders who are navigating the complexities of our current civic climate and seeking sustainable ways to foster connection.

[Watch the Panel here](#)

THANKS FOR READING—AND FOR SUPPORTING OUR MISSION.

