

Bridge Over Troubled Water

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 22 January 2019 11:03 - Last Updated Wednesday, 23 January 2019 15:26



Something extraordinary will quietly happen here this weekend. You might not have heard about it. I just got the news, myself, right before deadline.

It's called Bridge4Unity. I don't always cotton to cutesy names like that, but Unity is one of my pet pursuits, and I'm a big fan of Bridges, too – literal and figurative – so I was immediately drawn to this story.

Here's the official scoop, from that late-breaking press release:

Bridge4Unity is an interracial dialogue and cultural exchange project that brings together three distinct communities with diverse cultural, social, historical, and political profiles. The project features two exchange weekends. For the weekend of January 25-27, 2019, Beaufort SC and surrounding areas will host participants from Western Massachusetts and Letcher County KY. On the weekend of June 28-30, Western MA will host participants from SC and KY.

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Sharon Dunn is a member of the Massachusetts contingent headed to Beaufort this weekend, and she kindly gave me some background on the project. “Bridge4Unity is affiliated with, and in part grew out of, Hands Across the Hills (HATH), a grassroots project aimed at bridging the political divide after the 2016 election. Bridge4 Unity is focusing mainly on race and class, while HATH focused on politics. The project is being directed by Dr. Paula Green, who also directed HATH, using her decades of experience in conflict resolution and peacebuilding around the world.”

I had never heard of HATH, but it sounded right up my alley. Some quick Googling revealed that the project gained quite a bit of media attention last year – particularly from NPR – and even garnered Dr. Paula Green the first ever Melanie Greenberg Award for Domestic Peacebuilding in October 2018.

Inspired and intrigued, I asked Sharon Dunn to tell me more about how HATH got started.

“After the 2016 election, in our small town Leverett, Massachusetts (pop. 1,853) many residents were shocked and in despair,” she told me. “A meeting was called at the local library, and about 80 folks, including me, showed up to brainstorm about ‘what we can do.’ Several groups formed out of shared interests – committees for sanctuary, community-building, climate change action, youth & schools . . . and one called the ‘bridging committee,’ whose members wanted to connect with a part of the country that had voted overwhelmingly for Trump.

“The bridging committee, later named Hands Across the Hills, wanted to enter into dialogue with folks who had voted for Trump in order to understand their reasons, their feelings, their history. We found a partner in eastern Kentucky coal country and embarked on a journey of two weekends of dialogue and cultural exchange. Kentuckians visited Leverett in October 2017, we visited Whitesburg, KY in April 2018. Like others from Leverett in HATH, I was deeply interested in understanding another part of the country, how their vote came out of their history, their lives.”

And out that deep interest – and those visits – something miraculous occurred. Loving and lasting relationships were born. Seriously! A group of passionate progressives from western Massachusetts and Trump-voting conservatives from eastern Kentucky became fast friends who still keep in touch. According to the HATH website, here’s how it worked:

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The heart of each gathering was structured dialogue, in which feelings could be expressed honestly and deeply, creating trust and care for each other. In addition to these face-to-face sessions, we experienced each other's community and family life through potlucks, music, excursions and home stays. The bonds between us pushed political differences into the background. We came to be friends. Now, as friends, we are working on a range of common projects, including reaching out together with our dialogue process to another region of the country, collaborating on agriculture, working on gun control issues we agree on. Hands Across the Hills has melted away stereotypes so that we can see each other's human face.

It sounds so simple doesn't it? *Doesn't it?*

Now Sharon Dunn, Paula Green, and company are hoping to apply those same lessons and principles to our racial and class divides. And they're coming to Beaufort to do it.

"Bridge4Unity was inspired initially in March 2017 by the involvement of Deborah Snow and Barbara White of Western MA with residents and artists of Beaufort," Sharon told me. "Inspired by Hands Across the Hills' success, they initiated Bridge4Unity to explore and bridge race and class. Bridge4Unity incorporates participants from both from MA and KY and includes a similar size group from Beaufort County. All groups include approximately equal numbers of African American and white American participants, and our Western Mass group also includes North American indigenous people."

The group will engage in daily dialogues at Penn Center, enjoy stories, poetry, and music, learn all about the Gullah culture, and about Beaufort's new designation as the National Monument to the Reconstruction Era.

Beaufort resident Gloria Graves Holmes will co-facilitate the daily dialogues with Paula Green. Holmes is Professor Emerita in the School of Education at Quinnipiac University and the author of *Justice in Search of Leaders*. I reached out to her for comment, but alas, as I said, this was all very last minute and we didn't connect.

But Paula Green wrote an op-ed about her upcoming trip for the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* last week, in which she says, "I will be facilitating the dialogues with an African-American woman professor of social justice living in South Carolina. So far, in the process of leading our own

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Valley group in monthly dialogues, I can say that race is harder than politics, which was the focus of our original Hands Across the Hills project. It goes deeper into the bones and DNA of this country and every one of its residents.”

I’m not 100% sure I agree with Dr. Green that “race is harder than politics.” Not anymore, anyway. In late 2017, NPR reported on a study from the Pew Research Center suggesting that politics has now surpassed all the traditional categories – religion, education, gender, class, and even race – in terms of dividing the American public. And it’s been my observation that the loudest, most frequent expressions of misunderstanding, distrust, and unmitigated hatred – in what we euphemistically call our national “discourse” – are hurled back and forth between members of different political persuasions, not different races.

But that’s merely anecdotal. And it’s just a quibble, anyway. I’m thrilled when *anybody*, from *any where*

, attempts to bridge

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gaping gulf that separates Americans from other Americans. I love what Sharon Dunn, Paula Green, and their friends are trying to do. As Green wrote in her recent op-ed, “At this moment in our acrimonious and fractured national polity, such conversations and the commitments they produce create a counter-narrative to the ways race is used to divide us.”

Welcome to Beaufort, Bridge4Unity. Bring on the counter-narrative, y’all.

The public is invited to meet the visiting members of Bridge4Unity (MA contingent pictured above) at a Community Gathering on January 26th, from 4-6 pm at United Church of Beaufort, 1801 Duke Street. For more information, visit

www.handacrossthehills.org

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. Read her regular column at [Rants & Raves](#) or visit her blog at

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