Thanks to the Syracuse-based InterFaith Works, Dialogue to Change is routinely offered in schools, homes, community colleges, and with police and community members and other institutions throughout Syracuse and the central New York region. Hundreds of student and adult facilitators and thousands of participants have experienced the power of openly talking about race, getting to know people who are different from them, and working together to address issues in their community. InterFaith Works has also developed a set of awards and events that recognize and honor outstanding community work addressing racism.

Everyday Democracy’s Sandy Rodriguez visited Syracuse New York to see InterFaith Works and its partners in action, and shares this account of how dialogue is impacting their community and region.

Central New York’s InterFaith Works’ El-Hindi Center for Dialogue continually confronts “hot topics” in the community head on, with thoughtful, facilitated listening and sharing sessions that gather people together and lead to planning and action. From dialogues on Police Community Relations to Ending Racism to Youth Cultural Exchanges to conversations on Education Equity, the Center has been successfully building bridges of understanding throughout the community, and is a sought after source for institutions and initiatives seeking racial equity and equitable solutions to day-to-day challenges they may be facing.
Imagine all of these dialogues taking place, on a regular basis, at various places, with people from diverse groups who don’t usually talk to each other: Police officers with community members, Community Colleges, with students and teachers. Private homes with members of different faith groups and workplaces.

This is the reality in and around Syracuse, New York, where InterFaith Works’ El-Hindi Center for Dialogue has been successfully building bridges of understanding throughout the community for decades. It’s also one of seven Everyday Democracy Anchor Partners – institutions throughout the country that incorporate Dialogue to Change, a focus on racial equity, and other principles of inclusion into their work.

As an Everyday Democracy Anchor Partner, InterFaith Works’ El Hindi Center is committed to creating the conditions for many diverse people to come together in ways that don’t always occur in public life – or at all, for many people.

In addition to the El-Hindi Center for Dialogue, InterFaith Works also offers many human service programs under one roof: a refugee resettlement program; an employment assistance center; a Chaplain program; a senior services program; interfaith initiatives and youth services.

“So why not just have town hall meetings?”

Town hall type of meetings often result in a lot of yelling and only a handful of people being heard, when so many others in attendance have something to say. Dialogue sessions create a venue for more in the community to be heard.

“InInterFaith Works was one of the first organizations to recognize and embrace the power of both dialogue and of addressing structural racism,” said Everyday Democracy Executive Director Martha McCoy. “They have used this knowledge over many years to embed key elements of Dialogue to Change into important systems in their community and we are continually grateful for all we learn from them. Their example as an Anchor Partner and Civic Change Champion is powerful. Their leadership supports and sustains equitable change rooted in the voices of people throughout the Central New York region.”

Connecting with Education Adds Up With Peaceful Schools

The Center’s educational partners range from the region’s community colleges, to Syracuse University and the Syracuse City School District schools – both public and private. It also provided ending racism dialogues with the leadership and staff teams of its partner, Peaceful Schools, a local nonprofit founded in 1997 to provide mediation and conflict resolution services in schools and which now addresses social-emotional education issues to preempt conflict before it materializes.

“Peaceful Schools serves as an enrichment partner with four city schools – adding 300 hours to their school days, extending their curriculum with both culturally responsive
dialogue and professional development for teachers," explained President and CEO, Lura Lukenheimer. “We are working with InterFaith Works to offer structured dialogues in a six-part series, where participants first identify their own biases, then address how they are doing in improving the culture in their school, and finally spend some time on future planning. The goals are for each school to be more culturally sensitive on an ongoing basis, regardless of staffing changes, and for the materials being used in school not only fulfill educational requirements but culturally reflect the student population.

“The schools we work with are mostly black and Hispanic,” continued Lukenheimer, “yet when looking at the reading materials, where are the authors who look like them? It should not just be the classics they are reading. The books, posters, etc. should represent many cultural lenses so the students can relate to them.”

The Syracuse School District has been working to change these schools from operating with a “traditional” school code of conduct, to a restorative school code of conduct, and has been working with Peaceful Schools and other local partners to accomplish this. Outcomes so far include a reduction in the disproportionate number of special education and students of color who receive disciplinary action; more engagement with parents; and creation of an in-school mental health center. The culture and climate is why these schools are starting to turn around, organizers say, by setting a tone of acceptance and excellence.

Another example of how dialogue and raising cultural awareness is positively impacting Syracuse students is InterFaith Works' extended “Seeds of Peace” program, offering after-school gatherings at all five of the city's high schools. Students are trained to be dialogue facilitators as well as team leaders, like Henninger High School Senior Dyna Umutoni.

Dyna leads after school gatherings on building cultural understanding of often misunderstood countries and cultures like that of Rwanda, the Congo, or the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, and also participates and facilitates community-police dialogues on behalf of the city’s youth population.

“Students receive training and then are tasked with ‘being the change’ in their schools,” said Kofi Addai, InterFaith Works Dialogue Coordinator, who heads this program. Addai also manages development of many of the community, interfaith and anti-racism dialogue guides for InterFaith Works' Dialogue Center.

Karen Calenzo is the coordinator for the Dialogue Center’s similar “Starting Small” program. It matches students from Syracuse city schools with students from mostly white suburban schools and brings them together for an ending racism program that incorporates five dialogue sessions – engaging 20 students from each school, organized into three dialogue circles comprised of ten students for each session. An additional 10 students are selected and trained to be dialogue circle facilitators. Participants say there has been a culture change at their schools.

“They go back to their classes and use some of the same dialogue techniques they are learning,” Calenzo said. “So they bring both anti-racism and dialogue skills into the future learning and work they do. Some of our students go on to work for international organizations. The dialogues have given them career direction.

“And the schools themselves have been raising their cultural awareness by adding related coursework to their core curriculum like the ‘Cultural Voices’ class at Nottingham High School or Fayetteville-Manlius High School’s ‘Rhetoric of Race’ class,” she continued. “Even the private schools like Manlius Pebble Private School want to get more involved and are reaching out more to refugee families to provide more scholarships. They are committed to talking about racism
– in real time.” These experiences are having an impact in the student participants’ leadership capabilities well beyond high school.

One student from Henniger High School who was a ‘Starting Small’ student facilitator went on to a private Jesuit college that had a primarily white student population. He noticed everyone was “hanging out” in their own groups on campus. So he decided to bring these separated groups together - through a fashion club. His campus-wide, multi-cultural fashion show is unifying the student population in collectively organizing this fun-for-all event.

**Discovering the "Community" in Community Colleges**

Leadership at Onondaga Community College, committed to bring in more opportunities for cross-cultural experiences, recognized the value of the dialogue process that InterFaith Works had successfully been implementing throughout the Syracuse community for more than 20 years, and now partners with the Center to train facilitators and conduct dialogues.

The College’s Chief Diversity Officer Eunice Williams discussed the 1997 book, “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria,” with her lead campus dialogue facilitators, Denise Valdes and Russ Corbin. “We asked, how can this be, that 20 years later, not much has changed? When people of the same ethnic heritage stay exclusively together – it perpetuates stereotypes and maintains divides.”

They piloted a dialogue program on race and ethnicity in 2015 with ten facilitators and 70 students, and before they knew it, 150 students signed up. Since then, 1,200 students have been through the dialogue process and 50 facilitators have been trained.

And the program continues to expand. Students want to talk about more than race and ethnicity, so a planning and curriculum committee was formed.

Many of the dialogues over the years have been eye opening. One effective component is the “privilege walk” exercise, which calls for participants to take a step forward if they have experienced certain advantages in life. Denise and Russ noted that there are many white students who are clearly uncomfortable with their level of privilege and want to hide it by not “taking a step forward,” for every instance that applied. Once a black woman came in late during a privilege walk exercise and, not even knowing what was going on, automatically went to the back of the room – because that is where “her people” were.

“The dialogues build bridges,” said Facilitator Denise Valdes. “And not only do the students learn more about each other, we, as facilitators learn more about ourselves.”

One of the best outcomes for all their work was the creation of a post-dialogue component for participants, funded by the college and outside financial support – the option for participants to submit a proposal for a stipend-funded applied learning experience. Those whose proposals are accepted will have up to three months to complete and report on their experiences. Students who are selected partner with a community based agency and can choose to work with troubled youth, homeless, refugee or other challenged populations.
One student chose the Boys and Girls Club for her applied learning experience, and has continued to volunteer with them well beyond her project. Another student, a Muslim woman who immigrated from Afghanistan, was quiet and shy during the dialogue process, but following the process chose to work with a refugee resettlement center in North Syracuse leading dialogue initiatives and working with the women there to exchange cooking recipes, and make jewelry as ways to earn income. Yet another student went on to transfer to Cornell – and wrote her thesis on Social Justice. Dialogues served as a springboard for her career and she was recently invited to the University of Michigan to continue her research.

One white student originally believed poverty was a choice. At one point, he had “chosen” to become homeless early in his otherwise privileged life. But after dialogues, and an applied learning experience with the homeless, he was enlightened about the many ways that poverty becomes someone’s reality as well, and that it wasn’t just about his experience. He is now trying to take responsibility and accountability for helping others.

Onondaga’s program has received national recognition and other area community colleges are also embarking on similar endeavors.

Another positive outcome of its dialogue work was the implementation of an annual Unity Day - “celebrating uniqueness – together” with events throughout campus with cultural food stations, games, art exhibits, interactive boards, photo booths and even sidewalks for students to share their expressions on diversity.

An integrated approach to community-police relations is the “secret sauce” for Syracuse

On a recent Monday night at the InterFaith Works Dialogue Center, while most in the city were all going home to eat dinner and relax, some dedicated city residents opted to spend their evening at a training for facilitators of community and police dialogues. There were community members, young and old who reside in the low income sections of the city. There was a pastor, a student and representatives of different political affiliations. They were black, white, and Asian. There were members of the police force, some new to the force and some veteran law enforcement officials.

All in all – they were representatives of the community with a common goal of providing racially equitable policing while keeping the city residents safe, learning how to recruit for and facilitate dialogue sessions, maximizing the democratic principle of “empowered voice,” to “be” the change that is needed to reduce crime in the community while at the same time being equitable and fair to all.

The Syracuse Police Department takes these dialogues very seriously and employs them in as part of a comprehensive training infrastructure to reduce undue use of force. The Police Department also integrates dialogues with comprehensive police skills training, Community Justice Department input, and a civilian institute.

Facilitators Melody Holmes and Phil Rose led the group, which included both experienced facilitation leaders and leaders-in-training. This provided implicit comfort in experience and evidence of very successful work, and reassurance that their work has meaningful and lasting positive impact in the community.

The group walked through the five-week curriculum in preparation for spring dialogues that are expected to include some 80 community members and police officers.
They reviewed a “hot topic” - a recent article about an African American professional pulled over by a Syracuse police officer for no apparent reason, and treated with disrespect. The police shared their thoughts and feelings about the story and the community members shared their reactions. While one might have expected that the conversation would result in an “us vs. them” posturing – it did not. Shared understanding grew. It is this shared understanding and collective approach to devising community solutions that these dialogues produce.

"Hot topics" were the hot issue in this training. While hesitant, all agreed that if there was something in the news that touched on sensitive policing issues it should be discussed. If police could offer any insight to why things may have been the way they were, other than what was simply covered in the media – and if the community could help those on the force better understand the systemic reasons that may be resulting in inequitable treatment -- both have a better likelihood of reaching common ground.

Sometimes there is conflict in a dialogue. And one police officer in the training noted that without conflict, the sessions don’t accomplish anything. The challenge is to find that sweet spot of enough conflict to make everyone think -- but not too much to tip the conversation in an uncivil or disrespectful nature.

A Sense of Place

You know InterFaith Works is on a mission from the very moment you walk into their somewhat new offices. They were renovated in 2014 and are delicately and generously furnished with donations from Stickley Audi & Company based in Manlius, New York. The Audi family has been actively involved with InterFaith Works for many years and employees many former refugees in its manufacturing operations. Mrs. Audi and wanted to make sure that the “new Americans” being welcomed into the community did not need to sit on broken down, cheap plastic chairs any more. They felt that with all these families are going through, they should sit in comfort and regain the dignity they deserve. “Affirm dignity,” is InterFaith Works’ tag line, and they do this for all who take part in their activities.

Beth Broadway, InterFaith Works’ President and CEO, inherited her passion for advocating for those who have been marginalized from her mother. In the mid-1960s, at age 11, she observed her mother in front of a bus of young, African-American students outside of a Chicago school that was one of the first in the Midwest ordered by a court to integrate. The bus was surrounded by angry protesters rioting against the integration, and Beth and her mother, who was President of the Parent-Teacher Association at the time, helped to make sure the bus reached its destination. Beth now continues this work, building systemic, racially equitable solutions for positive community change.

Why Dialogue?

The Dialogue to Change process used by Everyday Democracy and our anchors has been developed over time with the input of hundreds of communities and thousands of participants. We have learned the power of learning about structural racism, as racism remains a key barrier to progress in our country, and the value of face-to-face dialogue to share personal experiences and build trust. We have also learned the importance of building on the connections, and moving from dialogue to positive community action.
Some people are skeptical about the value and impact of dialogue. It can be a slow process, and can include painful moments of silence. It may involve several instances of discomfort. Some are still trying to “find their voice,” and are hesitant to trust the process and the people around them. Some don’t think they “need” this kind of dialogue.

InterFaith Works’ Beth Broadway response is the same, to both skeptics and supporters of this work.

“Everyone experiences oppression in some way – even white men,” she explained. “Investing our time in understanding the intersectionality of all our oppressions is as important for a healthy democracy as is understanding the richness of cultural diversity embedded through the mosaic of communities in our nation.

“We need to keep offering the opportunity, to be connected with each other across the false divides society sets up for us,” she added.

All in all, InterFaith Works, and its Dialogue Center are a welcoming habitat. From its Stickley-furnished lobby, to its variety of meeting rooms, full kitchen to cook multi-cultural meals, a “Room of Peace,” a Wall of Distinction and an Interfaith glass cabinet displaying the sacred writings of many religions. Moreover, the staff and volunteers work hard to ensure they are providing community-wide support keeping a laser-focus on strengthening and elevating democracy in the Syracuse community. It is a mission to be reckoned with.

*Everyday Democracy’s Civic Change Champions are people and organizations whose work is bringing Everyday Democracy’s values of equity, voice, sharing power, and participation to life.*

*To nominate someone for recognition as a Civic Change Champion, please send your name and your nominee’s name, organization if applicable, address and website, and a short description of their work to Everyday Democracy’s Communications Manager Rebecca Reynandez, rreyes@everyday-democracy.org*