

Tri-County Sustainable Forum Hosts Conversations that Matter

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When more than 160 people from 35 communities across Camden, Gloucester, and Burlington counties came together to participate in the first Tri-County Sustainable Communities Forum sponsored by Sustainable Cherry Hill and Sustainable Jersey, Lori Braunstein, Executive Director of Sustainable Cherry Hill was overwhelmed with an emotional mix of delight and wonderment as the experiential event unfolded. The first forum of its kind in the area, Braunstein and her enthusiastic group of volunteers had prepared themselves to help facilitate an exploration of ideas based on The World Café, a concept created by Juanita Brown.

A conversational process, the World Café is a simple methodology for hosting conversations about questions that matter. “We wanted to elicit the wisdom from the people in the room on issues that pertain to improving sustainability and environmental education in school curricula, sustainability educational outreach, transportation, environmental justice, stepping up local recycling programs, expanding gardening in communities, understanding state and federal incentives for switching to solar power, and finding safe, green products for personal use in the home,” says Braunstein.

Prior to the gathering, in order to determine what issues were important to participants, Braunstein sent out a survey to the 200 individuals who registered. “We wanted to ask questions on issues that mattered to every one so that we could evoke the collective intelligence of the group, which we knew would ultimately increase the capacity for effective action in pursuit of the common aims of community and municipal ‘green teams’,” notes Braunstein.

The World Café refers to a living network of conversations that is continually co-evolving as people explore questions that matter with family, friends, colleagues, and community. Throughout the day, small breakout groups discovered how World Café conversations link and build on each other as people moved between groups, cross-pollinated ideas, and discovered new insights.

The metaphor of the World as Café helps individuals notice invisible webs of dialogue and personal relationships that enable them to learn, create shared purpose, and shape life-affirming futures together. In the breakout groups the invisible webs became visible as participants from different communities and cultures began to notice that they were meeting others who shared an

interest and passion for their issues and challenges.

“One of the greatest outcomes of the World Café process was that every one in the room got to see that they are not alone, that there are others who care and share their ideas and challenges,” enthuses Braunstein, who is considering encouraging participants to start their own world cafes and continue dialoging just as the citizens of the Tampa Bay/St. Petersburg, Florida area have been doing since 2008.

After attending an Art of Hosting workshop in June 2008 and learning about modalities that are effective for the development of conversational leadership, Sharon Joy Kleitsch, founder of the Connection Partners in the Tampa/St. Petersburg area, introduced one of the concepts, the World Café to her community several months later.



From hosting “conversations that matter” at St. Petersburg City Hall, to creating an educational curriculum for a Sustainable Tampa Bay, Kleitsch, has succeeded in engaging community leaders and key sustainability educators in the region to address how citizens and policy makers can be educated about the area’s common future.

“My work is to start the momentum, expose people to transformational tools and then trust that they will pick up on them, which is what happened after Pat Kiesylis attended the Art of Hosting workshop, which the Connection Partners hosted.

The World Café in St. Petersburg, held every Friday night at the largest Starbucks in the area, has been connecting people through conversations that matter since September 2008. “According to the World Café Foundation, it is the longest running one ever,” advises Kleitsch, who accompanied *Natural Awakenings* Editor Linda Sechrist on a Stone Soup Listening Tour last summer to hear stories from grassroots groups, local government officials, and sustainability coordinators in 10 cities. The two women hosted conversations in several cities and used a graphic facilitator to document the process so that visually oriented individuals could see as well as hear the process unfolding.



“From the feedback that I am getting from those who participated in the forum break-out groups, I can see that they want more opportunities to do it again with more of a topic-specific focus such as transportation or waste management,” says Braunstein, who has begun to integrate the processes of the day into ideas for the future of Sustainable Jersey. “Although we haven’t done our debriefing session yet, we are already sensing the tremendous potential of this process and recognizing that we aren’t alone, either,” says Braunstein, who is enthusiastic about the growing number of people who want to become civically engaged and help to create a new future for their community. “We are all interested in exploring solutions that aren’t new twists on old solutions that aren’t working.

Braunstein acknowledges that there is no one person with “the” answers. “There are many of us who know a lot about particular issues and although we haven’t figured out how to make it all happen, it is for sure that after the forum, we know that there are more of us who are willing to work together to explore the possibilities.”

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