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Our First 100 Days: Lessons from the Lamorinda Community Conversations

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Photo provided

While the rest of the country and world might be looking at Trump's First 100 days, a local group of Lamorinda residents has been looking back on our own First 100 days of the new administration.

Since the campaign season and election that illuminated the divisive nature of politics in our country, a small group of local citizens has been organizing and hosting Community Conversations, in conjunction with Saint Mary's College.

The effort was started when Maura Wolf and Edy Schwartz, both Moraga residents, decided that there was a need for an open-to-all, face-to-face convening. They structured the Community Conversations so that people could be listened to - not debated. Attendees were invited to share what they were thinking and feeling, and eventually discuss with other people who had similar concerns. It wasn't a place for action and mobilization, but it was a place in which people were encouraged to gain clarity about how they might take action with other local or national groups. Saint Mary's College agreed to host the series.

Since the first convening in December, five Community Conversations have been hosted each month, with the last one of the academic year being hosted at the Soda Center at Saint Mary's College in late April. Topics at these gatherings ranged from discussions about crossing divides, to health care, the environment, bias and privilege in the schools, cultivating women's power, sanctuary cities, finding well-being in a turbulent time and many others.

At each one, deep listening and creating thinking were emphasized as critical skills for our current community and political environment. And an intergenerational group was encouraged to attend. This aspect offered new bridges for connection and new energy to the civic conversations. Over the six months the meetings involved over 160 Lamorinda residents. On any given Saturday the group included some mix of middle school, high school and college students, young parents, older residents and seniors.

Teresa Onoda, mayor of Moraga, noted, "Who does not benefit from learning how to be an active listener especially when you make decisions that affect peoples lives? Jeanette Fritzky (Moraga Town Council), Bob Priebe (Moraga Town Manager) and I have attended most if not all of the Community Conversations at SMC and appreciate that we have a local institution that is helping make Moraga leaders more effective. This is part of how Saint Mary's College and the town are becoming comfortable dance partners."

While the series has concluded for now, the Leadership Center at Saint Mary's College is open to community groups that want to talk about conversations for the future. You can learn more about the effort or contact the Leadership Center here: <http://smcleadershipblog.org/2017/04/towards-new-way-civic-engagement-small-town-america/>.

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