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# Community Circle grapples with issues like housing, race

Richfield discussion group winds up weeks of meetings.

By Mike Westholder  
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Racial diversity, housing and education were some of the issues a Richfield community circle group grappled with during the last several weeks.

Made up of Richfield and Minneapolis residents the community circle was one of several groups that gathered throughout the Twin Cities as part of "Conversations at the Crossroads." In Richfield, the conversations were sponsored by the city's Human Rights Commission and the Education and Housing Equity Project (EHEP), a non-profit organization with headquarters at Augsburg College, said Connie McDonald, a member of the Richfield Human Rights Commission.

"The purpose was to engage people in conversation to find community-based solutions for potential problems," McDonald said. "Did we find solutions — well no. But we did come up with a lot of ideas."

The Richfield group included a diverse group with an average of eight people attending on a given week, McDonald said.

*'Diversity is making Richfield a very powerful place.'*

Odell Brown, member of the Human Rights Commission

The circle's final meeting was March 23.

Participants didn't always agree and some discussions were heated, said Odell Brown, a participant and member of the Human Rights Commission, but everyone had at least one thing in common.

"Everybody left Tuesday night with one thought: 'When can we do this again,'" said Brown.

Brown said the experience was exciting and it gave him hope and encouragement for the future.

"Diversity is making Richfield a very powerful place," he said.

The community circle provided an opportunity to do something that isn't done enough, Brown said, talk with one another.

It was a chance to express one's self on a variety of issues and communicate in a meaningful way, Brown said. It was in-

teresting to hear that other people had many of the same feelings and concerns, he added.

One thing the five weeks of discussions made clear is that all members of the Richfield community need to keep the lines of communication open, Brown said. There was a commitment by all parties to continue the dialogue and move forward, he said.

"Everybody has something to say but no way to say it," Brown said.

The metro-wide community discussion groups were organized by the EHEP, whose mission is to promote public dialogue about school segregation, housing inequity and other community issues, McDonald said.

"One of our main focuses was on affordable housing," McDonald said.

There is a severe shortage of housing in the Twin Cities, McDonald said, not only for couples but also for single parents. It's difficult for many people to find housing that accepts children and is affordable, especially when a parent has to pay for child care, she added.

One of the ideas generated by the circle was to contact legislators to promote more state-subsidized housing for low-income families, McDonald said.

There are programs and assistance for families trying to buy a home as well which many people could benefit from, McDonald said. The problem is that many of the potential beneficiaries don't know about the options available to them, she said.

Finding ways to educate and inform people about these programs is another idea the group discussed, McDonald said.

Another topic the group concentrated on was promoting a sense of community in Richfield for all residents, McDonald said. One way of doing that could be encouraging minority parents to participate more in their children's schools.

"One of the biggest things was the idea of tapping into a lot of different cultures," she said.

For example, parents whose primary language is not English could participate in classes by sharing their first language with students. This would get parents involved in their children's schools and teach children about other languages, McDonald said.

"It would be a good way for parents to get involved and help them feel a little more comfortable and promote a sense of

CIRCLE: To Page 13A

Circle

From Page 3A

belonging," McDonald said.

One barrier to the building of community can be seen in many of the city-sponsored programs for youth, Brown said. Very few minority children participate in those programs, he said.

"If you don't have a dialogue, you don't know that's happening," Brown said. "You need to sit down and have a conversation about what's going on."

Then community members can look at ways to better advertise youth activities to the minority families or find other ways to encourage them to take advantage of those opportunities, he said.

In the end, the circle agreed the focus should be on children, communication and housing, Brown said.

"There are ways to solve these problems but you can't by blaming each other and accusing each other," Brown said.

Community circle members also talked about fear, McDonald said. One participant talked about the fact that he was afraid of diversity and what could happen in his neighborhood, she said.

"We found that fear is not just a white thing," McDonald said. "Other races have fears, maybe not the same fear but they are afraid."

For example, some Hispanic people live in fear that they will be deported if they don't have the right papers, she said.

"I believe fear is a major problem," Brown said. "We're all afraid of darkness and what we don't know. We don't see it but we feel it. But there's no reason to fear... You have to put a light on these issues so you're not so afraid."

Communicating about these issues and sharing information may be the best way to address these type of issues, she added.

Later this spring, the circles will meet in a series of forums to share their ideas and perhaps develop legislation to introduce to state lawmakers, McDonald said. A Citizen Summit will be conducted in November.

That doesn't mean the issues and discussions will wait until this fall.

"We need to continue doing this," Brown said. "We don't want to wait until November."