

Gather & Share 49507 – “What Flavor Is Your Story?”

United with the vision and heartbeat to improve race relations and see the invisible walls that even segmented neighborhoods by color and racism diminished, four individuals came together to launch a dynamic venture. The program idea was introduced by Gary Burge, a neighborhood member who was also joined with Jennifer Reidsma of the Alger Garfield Neighbors Collaborative, Fran Dalton of the Garfield Park Neighborhood Association, and Shelby Kibler who all came together over dinner meal to share their life experiences and conversations that brought them to the 'Table' before them. It was this setting and the stories that began to form “bridges and connections” that continue today.

This enlightening experience also would serve as the bedrock and invitation that they would offer to their neighbors. Conversations were had, surveys were sent out, and meetings were scheduled to see who would participate in this innovative concept that would mirror an actual dining experience to address the biases and break down the racial barriers before and within us all. For the "Appetizer Round", 30 neighboring individuals gathered as the leaders to introduce themselves and their vision and goal for the upcoming activities. Randomly chosen, small racially mixed groups of 4-6 neighbors, but more so complete strangers, would plan, decide, and schedule to either host a dinner for the "Dinner Round" in one of their homes or just simply meet up at an agreed upon restaurant and meals of their choosing. "This is where the Neighborhood Matching Fund allowed us to do for our Dinner Round meals. They were used to either purchase food for the dinners in the homes or cover the dinner at the local restaurants" explained Kibler. It was at these dinners where the neighbors were encouraged to and did share their experiences and heard others' as well. Three of the groups had dinners in their private homes while the other three met in local restaurants. From the leaders' perspectives as well as the neighbors, the experience of breaking bread together helped to disarm the anxiety in coming together and allowed them to see one another and hear of others' humanity in their stories. These times of fellowship also compelled them to look beyond their own personal and inherited biases and racism - and look within for a deeper meaning in and impact of their own beliefs.

The "Dessert Round" brought all of the parties together to share of their experiences over actual delicious desserts from local neighboring establishments and the leaders were thrilled with the outcomes. During their Circle Time, many shared stories and made comments to report their positive experiences and impact from participating. Several groups also reported that they had made plans to continue to meet on their own after the program activities. "We felt that the dinners began to move the needle toward the goal of increasing the sense of belonging amongst the neighbors. We all want to be seen and valued as significant and to be treated with dignity and humanity", Kibler shared. This program can serve as a model for other neighboring associations to adopt to help continue to build bridges and move the needle even more positively in our community because there's much more work to do and connections to be made to see enduring change occur within our lives and lifetimes for the better.