

Let's talk

A conversation with Oregon Humanities' Executive Director Adam Davis, who helps Oregonians engage in conversations about the difficult stuff

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To a large degree, the 2016 election was defined by vitriolic, personal attacks between candidates, the influence of social media and fake news, and a deep divide between rural and urban America – not the civil political discourse citizens may wish to see in federal politics.

Adam Davis, the executive director of Oregon Humanities, thinks the caustic divisiveness that characterizes political conversations of late has been emerging for quite some time. Oregonians need look no further than the occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge last January to see how diametrically different our views can be, particularly over something as fundamental as who should control federal lands and how.

Oregon Humanities is a nonprofit that encourages Oregonians to engage in conversations that are the complete opposite of what we might see on the evening news: civil discourse with an eye toward understanding, not condemning or even persuading.

With an organizing principle to help Oregonians “get together, share ideas, listen, think, grow,” Oregon Humanities co-sponsors dozens of events each year designed to get people talking.

The Conversation Project is co-organized with local organizations throughout the state to attract Oregonians of different backgrounds and beliefs to talk about a particular issue – homelessness, immigration, race or one of the 30 topics Oregon Humanities suggests – for an hour and a half. Davis says the conversation's facilitator always tries to get people to step back from their preconceived ideas, both about their own beliefs and the beliefs of others to think about a topic in a fresh way.

The organization's Think & Drink series invites participants to engage in “public conversations with critical thinking and fresh ideas.” In 2016, Oregon Humanities celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Pulitzer Prize by bringing to the state prize-winners, including journalists Katherine Boo and Isabel Wilkerson. In 2017, the series will focus on the importance of place and home.

Tickets to Think & Drink routinely sell out, and Davis says the requests from communities to host Conversation Projects have never been higher, and attendance is strong – signs that Oregonians want to engage in conversations about important, controversial topics in the public interest without engaging in mud-slinging.

Davis, who has been Oregon Humanities' executive director since 2013 and previously served as the director of the Center for Civic Reflection, an Indiana-based organization that promotes dialogue and reflection, talked with Street Roots about why the need for civic conversation is more important than ever – and not as hard to do as it might sound.

A.W.: How do you get people talking, engaging in the kind of conversation that Oregon Humanities

fosters?

A.D.: The hardest thing is to get people in the room. So, are we working with partners in their community that will draw people? Do people care about the topic? Can you, from the get go, encourage listening and genuine conversation? Are people looking at each other? Can you get them talking about personal experiences? Can we bump people back to seeing each other as human beings?

A.W.: *When people talk about their personal experiences, they're not talking about politics at all.*

A.D.: As a starting point. Let's take affordable housing. It sounds like an issue where you can get the statistics on it and take a stand on a particular side. Take the word “home.” What do you feel or see in your head when you hear the word “home.” If you ground a conversation there...you've got common ground. You've put everyone in a place where you can imagine them feeling at home or feeling not at home.

A.W.: *I imagine it could be disorienting for people to have that sort of conversation.*

A.D.: It can be disorienting for people to come into a room and realize that they may not come up with an answer by the end of the discussion. That there may be just as much disagreement in the room as there was at the beginning. It can be disorienting to see a person as more individual or more human than you expected to see them. In a way, we're hoping for some positive disorientation, both towards how we see others and how we see our own beliefs. Can we see each other and our ideas in a fresh way? It can be disorienting, but also useful and satisfying.

A.W.: *It's frightening to some people to engage in the sort of conversation that you're talking about—they could be frightened that they could be proven wrong, insulted, and so on.*

A.D.: It seems that way. How can we create conditions where people are comfortable enough to reconsider their own opinions? We've seen this with some subjects – just mentioning a subject, like guns, that already stir a response that is not necessarily a conversational response, even though the goal of the activity is to get people talking about these things.

We're limited when we can't hear each other. The more we're able to open ourselves to the experiences with others, particularly with those we disagree, the fuller and more just our lives will be.

A.W.: *Could you talk more about what you mean by that?*

A.D.: Ralph Waldo Emerson talks about how we

“It can be disorienting to see a person as more individual or more human than you expected to see them. In a way, we're hoping for some positive disorientation, both toward how we see others and how we see our own beliefs.”



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