

Talk anything but cheap at City-Wide Dialogues

Michelle Sedaca

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Seeking to evoke both Boston's proud history of abolitionism and the city's ugly past of racist attacks and violent protests during desegregation, Harvard Law School Professor Charles J. Ogletree Jr. took a page from one of Charles Dickens' most famous books.

"This," said Ogletree, "is a tale of two cities."

That tale was an important topic in the keynote address Ogletree delivered last Wednesday morning at the Boston Private Bank and Trust Company, where more than 60 people gathered for a seminar in the company's "social investing series" to discuss one important piece of the puzzle on how to unite those two disparate sides of Boston — The City-Wide Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity.

Launched in 2003 by a broad-based coalition of organizations, the Dialogues attempt to bring together Boston residents from a variety of backgrounds to address their fellow citizens' attitudes on race and ethnicity — and, perhaps more importantly, to challenge their own.

"The Dialogues make a difference," Ogletree said. "They change the way we see each other. The Dialogues will be even more important as we go forward."

Boston residents ages 15 and older can register for free to join the Dialogues online at www.bostondialogues.org. A group is formed when at least 20 people, with an equal number of white people and people of color, sign up in any given Boston neighborhood.

The groups hold two-hour meetings once a week over the course of four weeks, with an optional-but-encouraged fifth session to follow. At the meetings, participants engage in discussions, activities and exercises aimed at encouraging frank discussions about race.

Each session builds upon the one before it. In the first group, icebreaker activities familiarize attendees with each other. The second meeting explores race and

class systems. Next, small groups based on the same racial/ethnic identity assemble to speak about their own unique experiences. In the fourth session, participants discuss ways to improve relationships between Boston's numerous racial groups.

The fifth and final session is actually a beginning, as the group comes together to brainstorm concrete steps to positively affect race relations in its community.

Jennifer Bechet, a 41-year-old African American and former resident of Hyde Park, joined the Dialogues to be a part of solving some of the city's longstanding tensions.

"Boston has a terrible reputation for race relations and I thought, 'Someone is trying to do something about it,'" said Bechet, who now lives in Franklinton, La.

From the first meeting, Bechet found herself confronting her own preconceptions.

"I thought I would be a role model [for whites], as an educated black woman ... White people were more open-minded than I expected," she said, citing the example of one exercise in which participants were asked to name eight friends they would invite to a party.

"My group of friends was less diverse than [those of] some of the Caucasians," she said.

Bechet also explored the complexity of identifying the races of people of color, and of racial definitions in general, when she realized that a woman in her group whom she had previously assumed was African American was actually Cape Verdean.

"The term 'African American' is problematic — it's used too broadly," she said. "You can't assume that a black person is African American."

In addition to providing a space to openly discuss race, the Dialogues also serve a social purpose, introducing participants to diverse members of their community they may not otherwise have encountered. Bechet, who moved to Boston to attend Harvard Law School,

found new friends through the program.

"[The Dialogues] connected me to people in Boston," said Bechet.

Another participant, 52-year-old Jamaica Plain resident Diane Simpson, examined racism as an institutional structure of power and its impact on both whites and persons of color.

"The Dialogues helped me understand why people of color don't have the same opportunities [as whites]," said Simpson, who is white, during an interview.

Simpson credited an exercise called "the opportunity walk" for vividly illustrating racial inequities.

In the activity, participants form a line while a facilitator calls out a number of statements to the group. When they have experienced one of the positive statements — for example, having both parents graduate from college — they take a step forward. When a negative statement — such as having experienced poverty — applies to them, they take a step back.

"By the end of the opportunity walk, white people were very clearly separated from people of color and were way ahead," Simpson said.

Both Jeff Stone, director of the Dialogues, and Roscoe Thomas, chair of the group's board of directors, strongly believe in the series' power to transform people. "We don't trust each other to share how race affects us," Thomas said. "Race affects us all. The Dialogues give us the language of race discussion, while providing a safe space for conversations."

Stone and Thomas say the Dialogues' success is measurable, noting that since 2003, approximately 800 people have participated and their feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

A more telling fact may be that many groups have elected to continue meeting even after the fifth session ends — for instance, the longstanding Roslindale group has continued to meet for two years since their participation in the Dialogues concluded.

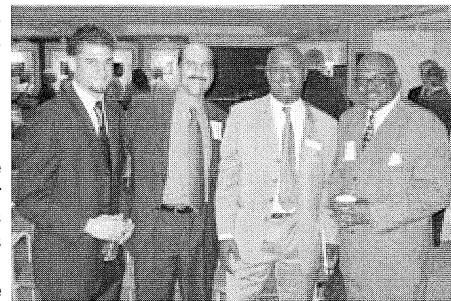
While other initiatives, such as President Bill Clinton's 1997 "National Conversation on Race," preceded the Dialogues, Stone says this program's local bent is what makes it unique.

"It's a national problem, not a Boston problem. But we're doing what we can do in Boston," he said.

In addition to the conversations about race, another series called the Youth-Police Dialogues exists to address the distrust between young people and law enforcement officers.

"[Showing that] law enforcement is for youth, not against them, is an

important manifestation of the Dialogues," Ogletree said during his address last Wednesday. Over 200 participants have completed the Youth-Police Dialogues.



Harvard Law School Professor Charles J. Ogletree Jr. (second from right) was the keynote speaker at a recent breakfast gathering in Boston Private Bank and Trust Company's "social investing series." The event highlighted the work of The City-Wide Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity. Pictured from left: Michael Norman, community outreach assistant at the City-Wide Dialogues; Jeff Stone, director of the Dialogues; Ogletree; and Roscoe Thomas, board chair of the Dialogues. For more information about the breakfast seminar and the Dialogues, please see our story on pg. 1. (Mori Insinger photo)

With a three-person staff, volunteers serve as the backbone of the organization, fulfilling roles as facilitators and members of the steering committee. Facilitators undergo a six-hour training in preparation for moderating the conversations and are paired with another facilitator of a different race.

Despite receiving financial contributions from the state Legislature and organizations like the Hyams Foundation and the Boston Globe Foundation, sufficient funding is a constant concern for the fledgling initiative, with its modest annual budget of just \$20,000 to \$40,000.

Additionally, the initiative has benefited from the donation of meeting spaces from the Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Center in Roxbury and the Harriet Tubman House in the South End. The Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts serves as the project's fiscal agent, a role it will hold until the initiative attains nonprofit status.

Martina Bouey, a 33-year-old African American facilitator, said that with additional resources, the Dialogues could offer another series for those who have already completed the first round.

Besides the need for the city and state as strong allies, the Dialogues rely on its participants to contribute to racial justice each in their own way.

"The Dialogues start the conversation, but don't finish it," said Bouey. "It's a lifetime of work ... every single day, you have to make yourself conscious of the world around you."