

Community Conversations Harvest #3

Date: 6/18/2011

Location: First Christian Church Olympia

Hosts: Joy Lile and Angie Kelly

What community partners helped to support this cafe?

FSC, POWER, First Christian, Oly Childcare Collective, Downtown YMCA, volunteers

How many participants? 15

How many children? 10

What was the purpose for this café conversation?

To offer a space for families who have struggled with homelessness or low-incomes, and isolation as a result of these barriers. To come together to perhaps find common bonds and to form powerful connections with each other, and to recognize the strengths it takes to endure such a struggle. To build on previous conversations and talk about our shared values, challenges, and strengths around parenting.

What questions were used at this Café?

Introductions: How did you learn about this meeting, what brought you here today, and how many children do you have and their ages?

Question 1: How do you follow your values for your children while dealing with the every day challenges you face? Especially, when looking at the current economy and the continued cuts to programs that help support low income families.

Question 2: What community solutions do you see to some of the problems that struggling families face?

What were some highlights, insights, and themes from the café?

- There was a general unhappiness with the DSHS system, which we discussed in depth because most participants had experienced unfair treatment or were frustrated at the expectations that one has to meet in order to access benefits through DSHS. POWER members were there and shared about how POWER can help you to know your rights about subsidies, caseworkers, and sanctions.
- There are so many small things that affect families that aren't taken into consideration – like a \$3 ATM charge when accessing the DSHS cash subsidies. If you have access to lots of resources, it's hard to conceive that a \$3 charge could hurt, but it has a big effect, when your money is already tight to begin with and doesn't cover expenses that come up in a month as is.
- It takes a lot of energy to be homeless or low-income – not only physical energy of walking around all day, but the emotional and mental energy of not having your basic needs met can take a major psychological toll. Often the psychological needs aren't addressed at all, and service providers assume that people can function “normally” and punish them if they don't.

- Parents expressed concern that community members don't understand what it means to be low-income or homeless, and treat people in that situation badly. If policy makers could walk a day or a month in the shoes of a homeless family, they would change the way they treat them and the policies they make.
- Someone made the metaphor of "Horton Hears A Who" – low-income people need a "Horton" in the government who can speak up for them when policies are being made that affect families.
- Community solutions: having a "parent-service provider meeting" like a PTO at a school – a place where people can get their voices heard by government and non-profit service providers, and possibly where they can effect policy. Having Community Cafes at low-income housing complexes and starting groups or forums to discuss issues. Having better knowledge of and access to community resources so parents can get free meals, laundry, clothing, etc. and use what little money they have on things they really need. Specifically, there were a number of participants who echoed the need for the Family Shelter to implement a family orientation to community resources type of welcome process. The families mentioned that they had to find resources themselves and shared them with other residents on their own, but that it was a much needed service that FSC should consider.

What thoughts or new learning did you have as a host?

(Joy) People were very eager to talk about their challenges and share their story and insights about the way the community can better support struggling families. We didn't end up splitting into groups, instead we had a large group discussion. Because of this I worried that some of the participants didn't share very much – either they were intimidated by the large group or other people were leading the discussion. However, it was still energizing to see many people so eager to share and engage.

(Angie) We were delightfully surprised at the good size turn out of participants that showed up for the last planned Café for our series. Joy mentioned that going the night before to the shelter to remind and invite families seemed to do the trick. We had 1 family who was at the 1st Café and the rest of the families were new. A few people mentioned that they would have liked to come to one of the previous cafes, but were not able to make it.

Over the course of planning these events, we have been very intentional about whom and how we invite community members and around the questions we asked for participants to discuss each time. Our series sought to focus on the challenges and rewards of parenting in general and then to the specifics around being a family that struggles with resources and how these all interplay. We started the discussion component of once again introducing our agencies (FSC and POWER) and why we put this series of cafes together for our community. We then did a re-cap of the discussions that took place in the previous 2 cafes and shared a few highlights. This last café seemed to bring together the discussions from our series, and had the effect of eliciting an energetic "what next?" momentum from participants. I felt that I had successfully met my goals in participating on the host team when I got feedback at each café from participants who told me in their way that the discussions mattered to them personally.

Though we ended up having a large group discussion for the whole event rather than changing the dynamics of groups and sizes to hopefully initiate discussion from all participants, I felt that we did get most all participants actively engaged. There certainly were some main speakers, myself included, but almost every participant spoke up to the group at one point of the discussion. Even from the participants who were not speaking up much, there was participation in the form of nods, sounds of agreement and general body language that said, “this discussion has my attention and interest” throughout. In fact we could have easily continued the discussion but were forced to quit due to time. There was one particular participant that I noticed was not speaking up verbally during the event, and though I did see engaged participation from this person, I was very pleased to see that participant open up to a neighbor and proceed to have a one-on-one discussion throughout the time that we cleaned up from the event.

One particular issue that I felt good about with this series was our efforts to avoid the danger of having these events come from a stand point of being “for” rather than “with” the families we were inviting. One way that we addressed this was through the intentionality of the discussion questions and another was in providing participants and volunteers gift cards to local stores at each event. As a host team we all agreed that it didn’t seem right to us to use the money Joy received from a grant to run this series to get stipends for the hosts. Instead we recognized that the families we are inviting (and are of ourselves) are struggling with resources and distributing these funds was an important way to let the families know that we valued their time and contributions.

What did the Kid Café consist of?

The kids went to the Imagination Celebration at the Library.

What’s next for this café community?

We will follow up with the list of ideas for next steps. It may be possible to have another Café-style meeting to further discuss these issues. All participants were invited to the on-going weekly volunteer and monthly POWER Outage, POWER meetings, and folks might get together to discuss holding community member meetings and forums as well. It seems like POWER is a natural ally and supporter of families in these situations, and might be a good place to hold more “solutions” type meetings.

Who will you share this harvest with? (The Community Café Leadership Team posts harvests we receive on our website. Let us know if you prefer that we not post your harvest.)
FSC, POWER, First Christian Church, CCLT, Facebook, other community agencies and providers.