

E. Engage V. Vote E. Enable N. Nourish EVEN You Our Learning Journey

By Sharon Davis-Murdoch, program participant

Envision Halifax is a group of community-minded leaders from various backgrounds who have come together for a 10-month learning journey. As a means of consolidating our learning journey, our intention was to consider how we could best "ignite a culture of civic engagement". We wanted to enable a discussion about something meaningful to our community and chose to explore voting. Voting was not the point though - the "what stops people from voting", was the point.

Sensing the global, social movement of engagement evident during the process of the US election of President Obama, we wanted to be open to caring about what happens outside of ourselves. We also wanted to have fun, share perspectives with people beyond our regular circles and learn from them and the process.

Leading up to the event we were reminded to be open to the thoughts of those who won't ever vote, those who will never stop voting, those who don't "get" voting and those who don't know why they should bother to vote. We saw the "what stops us" as the aspect that would inform participants about what things matter to a diversity of people in Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) about their communities, and their place in them.

The event at the Bloomfield Centre in Halifax on April 16, 2009 involved inviting people to share a light supper and to:

- o Share stories about voting
- o Listen and be heard
- o Help to make change
- o Be influential

During the event, we learned that some people in HRM wonder if their views and votes count. Some wondered if they could trust elected officials to represent their issues. A number of people said they were committed to voting and would not miss an opportunity to vote. The consistent voters believed in the "power of one" and said that voting gives them an opportunity to be heard, to help enable change and that through voting they earn the right to influence policy and to complain about things they disagreed with.

When asked about what community has to do with voting, many said that being part of a voting community was the way to make change happen. Many people spoke about the need to add voices together to make a difference. People who felt connected to their communities also said that politicians and leaders needed to demonstrate their commitment to those communities. They said that communities reciprocate when candidates and elected people show they care.

The need to engage people was a key theme. People said that they needed information so that they could decide on the best candidate. Some said that people are afraid to bring issues forward because they feel they are not the experts. Others felt that they did not know what candidates stood for and could not make an informed choice without this knowledge.

Others said that representation was important to inclusion in the voting process. A number of people spoke about the lack of representation of diverse people, including poor people and people of color as candidates and elected people. They pointed out that issues important to these communities seldom appeared in campaign information, policy platforms or priorities.

Economic empowerment or the lack of it identified as a reason that some people engage in voting while others do not. The need for role models, targeted communication strategies (like Obama's) and empowered communities were repeated themes during the event. Proposed as key strategies for engaging people in the voting process were identifying and growing natural leaders, engaging youth, community action for positive change and exciting the electorate with new ideas and positive symbols of inclusion.

This unique event was well outside an environment of "vote for me" or "vote for this program/policy/idea" rather it let us explore how collectively, we could ignite a culture of civic engagement that was not actually focused on voting but was open to it.

Throughout our learning journey, our group explored suspending judgments, about welcoming the letting go and letting come of ideas or ways of doing things. We are now able to consider prototyping this opportunity in our work and lives. We certainly had the opportunity to develop, learn and be engaged with people from the communities in which we live. The risks we took are not often encouraged risks for leaders. We intentionally tried something "outside the box" and we are better for it.

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