

# Public Conversations Project

Update Fall 2007

- Letter from Laura Chasin, Chair – 2
- Dialogues’ role in religion – 3
- PCP methods in Mexico – 4
- Cherry Muse – 5

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## FLINT’S UNHEARD STORY

# Determination, dialogue shape revival

You may think you’ve heard the story of Flint, Michigan. General Motors job losses. A thriving city lost to depression both economic and emotional. But Michael Moore—and America—missed the real story. The heart of Flint is a community as strong as the steel car parts welded there, and its determination is in overdrive.

Fortunately, the Flint-based Ruth Mott Foundation recognized that heart and soul is not enough to save a city. Issues loom large: the effects of race and class inequities on the community, concerns about the welfare of many neighborhoods, and the need to create opportunities for young people.

Community members needed to have difficult conversations and find constructive ways to address their challenges. While many people

“People are taking pride in being part of a community that is on its way back.”

Dave Joseph, PCP Program Director

“The Foundation had three goals [when it brought PCP to Flint],” explains Elizabeth Jordan, Program Assistant at the Foundation. “To train members of the Flint community in dialogue methods; to provide space and opportunity for new ideas and partnerships to emerge; and to build an alumni network that provides ongoing support to those interested in applying dialogue skills.”

Later that year, PCP Senior Associates Meenakshi Chakraverti and Dave Joseph delivered what would be the first of three trainings at the

thirty-four-acre Mott family estate, Applewood, which is operated by the Foundation.

The Foundation had identified a cadre of local people—including local political figures, nonprofit leaders, youth, and artists—who were active in the community and interested in being trained to facilitate dialogue.

“The city needed a different approach to having conversations about public issues,” says Jordan. “It can sometimes be very challenging to



Applewood Estate (Courtesy of the Ruth Mott Foundation)

move ideas forward here because of a pattern of very tense relationships in the public realm. PCP really brought the strength of having a new and productive way of shifting conversations that have been stuck.”

A second training was held in August 2006, and a third followed in October 2007. In total, more than forty Flint community members have attended the trainings.

“The Power of Dialogue training felt like the most relevant training I have been to because it offered the framework for understanding how conversation can become narrowed and specific tools for how to open up the conversation again,” says Jordan.

What stood out to us, according to Joseph, was “the courage, perseverance, passion, and commitment that Flint’s citizens demonstrate toward addressing the challenges that face them. People are taking pride in being part of a community that is on its way back and are building ties and connections that will allow them to work together more effectively.”

▶ Two years after the first training, alumni are applying their dialogue skills to a wide variety of settings. With conversations ranging from art to school reform, Flint residents have multiple opportunities to connect in a new way:

Two alumni led study circles after Michigan outlawed affirmative action, a significant and controversial change in the law.

Another woman applied her new dialogue skills to a discussion among her church community, which was struggling with whether to openly welcome gays/lesbians. “People were able to have a conversation about their opinions that was respectful and left people feeling heard,” says Jordan.

More than seventy-five people attended conversations organized by an alumnus to discuss interpretations of power, history, and art in response to a local art museum exhibit depicting the Lewis and Clark era, Western expansion, and Native Americans.

Both Joseph and Chakraverti expressed admiration for the trainees’ work. “It could be very easy to feel powerless and resigned in a situation like the revitalization of Flint. What was really amazing to see was that people did not minimize the challenges they face. At the same time, they brought tremendous perseverance, patience, and enormous creativity as they applied what they were learning to many different areas,” says Joseph.

Social justice consultant Regina Laurie, who attended PCP’s first training at Applewood, co-designed The L(ink)t Pilot—which links diverse communities through art and dialogue—with another PCP training alumnus, Erin Onweller.

Ten pairs of African-American spoken-word artists and ten predominantly white artists had dialogues over a ten-week period. Then, participants created art based on their experiences and held an exhibition for the community. Laurie says the project showed “that effort is being put forth to address segregation and separation. And that great things can happen in our community through the merger of dialogue and art.”

Her next project, Link Community Arts, brings the community together each month to discuss topics such as “What is public art?”

“Our whole mission is to help make Flint a place of community that is vibrant, has pride in itself, and is hopeful,” says Jordan, “and I think that productive public conversation is an essential part of community vitality.”

It is a mission well on its way to fulfillment. “There is just no question of their energy. Despite dealing with major divisions in the town, the spirit was always positive and focused on how they were going to move forward,” says Chakraverti. “It left me feeling like I could easily move to Flint.” ■



## From the Board Chair

I have always loved the Public Conversations Project button that proclaims, “Shifts happen.” Although the wordplay often evokes smiles and the slogan captures the heart of what happens in a PCP dialogue, it is unclear what shifts it refers to. (A security staffer at Logan airport once guffawed because she thought it alluded to work shifts!)

Perhaps the time has come to create a complimentary button that says something like “Relations*hifts*” to communicate the primary focus of our attention.

Although other organizations also address conflicts stemming from core values, worldviews, and identities, PCP focuses to a greater degree than most on altering the way people involved in such conflicts relate to each other. We do so with the conviction that when relationships shift in positive ways, fresh ideas and hitherto unseen possibilities can emerge and lead to constructive action.

When my own relationship with PCP shifted last year, I discovered new and surprising priorities. While I was Executive Director, I focused on the people in PCP’s inner circle who clothed the founding vision in organizational form and worked regularly to conduct dialogues, develop trainings, and extend our reach. As

Board Chair, I am increasingly aware of PCP’s dependence on an ever-expanding outer circle of colleagues, donors, clients, trainees, and other friends who have made significant contributions to our effectiveness and growth. Today, I am focused on enlivening these relationships—and identifying others who are likely to be attracted to our mission and resources.



As we approach our third decade, I am especially excited by the prospect of working with charter members of The PCP *exCHANGE* to create a brave new network that builds mutually rewarding bridges between PCP’s inner circle and our far-flung outer circle of diverse friends. I encourage you to consider becoming part of this pioneering venture by visiting our Web site or contacting Christine Armstrong at 617-923-1216 X10 or [carmstrong@publicconversations.org](mailto:carmstrong@publicconversations.org).

With anticipation,

*Laura Chasin*

Laura Chasin

## RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY THRIVES

# Healing faith groups, striking stereotypes

In this interview, Senior Associate Maggie Herzig, who has been with PCP from its formation, shares some of the pivotal moments and shaping circumstances in her life, as well as her insight on the challenges of PCP's interfaith work.

**How did you get involved with PCP?**

I was at the right place at the right time. In the late 80s, I worked with Dick Chasin who was giving workshops on stereotyping at the Congress of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. I found my way to this topic because I was concerned about the arms race. When I tried to address my concerns by learning more about it, I found myself less interested in the machinery of war and more interested in the psychology of the enemy relationship. Then, in 1989, Laura Chasin invited me to join a group of family therapists, including Dick, to begin brainstorming about whether family systems ideas could be useful in the realm of public conversations on divisive issues.

**Are there certain kinds of dialogue projects that you are especially drawn to?**

I've never met a project I didn't like, but lately I've been especially drawn to interfaith and intra-faith dialogue.

**"Out in the larger world, people of different faiths tend to get into trouble when religion and politics get enmeshed."**

**How is interfaith dialogue different from other kinds of dialogue?**

Often the people who come out for interfaith dialogue are people who feel disconnected or stereotyped, not people who are personally embroiled in conflict. Interestingly, I see more painful conflict in my intra-faith work, where people's sense of belonging and identity is challenged within their beloved community. This is especially true for Muslims and others whose faiths are less well understood in this country.

**You have worked for many years now in this area of interfaith dialogue—is there anything in your own background that prepared you for this?**

You could say that! I grew up Catholic with a Catholic father and a Protestant mother. I appreciated what I learned in Sunday school

about compassion and love but when I was young I was disturbed by the thought that my mother, a cheerful, kind woman raising ten kids, was somehow less worthy in the eyes of God because she didn't attend Mass. This led me to look inward and to develop my own views of spirituality, which include respect for multiple ways of connecting with God—or with whatever guides people to goodness. This viewpoint comes in handy in my personal life. I have a Jewish husband, a Muslim son and daughter-in-law, and a Unitarian-

**"In intra-faith conflicts, people's sense of belonging and identity are challenged within their beloved community."**



Universalist (UU) daughter with Quaker leanings. And we get along just fine! Out in the larger world, people of different faiths tend to get into trouble when religion and politics get enmeshed. Then groups get into power struggles. Those struggles often involve in-group righteousness, humiliation and demonization of the other, and sometimes, of course, war. We get caught up in self-perpetuating cycles and, unfortunately, new generations enter into those cycles. It's depressing.

**Sounds like a powerless place to be. How do you maintain your energy for working with immense, deep conflicts?**

Well, when I first got interested in the arms race, I felt really powerless, but I didn't know what to do. Then I met a complete stranger on a vacation who happened to work for the arms control agency of the US government. I told him that I was concerned about the arms race, but I didn't see myself as an activist because I didn't understand enough—I didn't think that I really knew what a cruise missile was! He challenged me to learn and to be accountable. I needed to ask what my part could be in addressing the problem and pledge not to be someone who simply gets paralyzed by the immensity or by the complexity of a situation. This, in effect, is what PCP dialogue participants are doing too. They're saying, "I am going to learn about the complexities of the issues: I'm going to insist on not being stereotyped, and I am going to do the work that I need to do in order to not stereotype others, no matter how strongly I disagree with them." This might not seem like a lot, yet, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." ■

# DIÁLOGO A TRAVÉS DE LAS DIVISIONES

## PCP in Mexico, from Congress to coast

Q: What do political legislators enraged by Mexico's 2006 presidential election have in common with teachers in Mexico City schools and a bay threatened by pollution?

A: All recently benefited from the Public Conversations Project's approach to constructively addressing conflict.

After Julián Portilla, an environmental mediator, interviewed several senior Public Conversations Project staff for the online conflict resolution project *Beyond Intractability*, he was intrigued and impressed. Portilla then became involved in El Centro de Colaboración Cívica (CCC)—an organization in Mexico City that uses both traditional and nontraditional conflict-resolution methods, including dialogue, to support democratic change in Mexico.

"We wanted to bring PCP here because Mexico was so very polarized" after the highly contested presidential elections of summer 2006, says Portilla.

In December 2006, PCP Senior Associate Sallyann Roth and her Mexican colleague Sylvia London delivered a three-day workshop, *The Power of Dialogue*, in Mexico City. Participants included Portilla, leaders of indigenous groups in Oaxaca, peace negotiators from Chiapas, nonprofit/non-governmental organization staff, and a prominent member of the dissident teachers' union in Mexico, which is constantly in conflict with another very powerful teachers' union.

### DEL CONGRESO...

Following the election of Felipe Calderón, the newly elected Congress was beset by conflict. By constitutional law, Calderón was required to make a speech to Congress before assuming office. However, both Calderón's supporters on the Right and his opponents on the Left attempted to seize the stage. Members of both parties—450 of them—camped out together for three days, insulting, accusing, and demonizing each other.

In response, CCC trained sixty members of Mexico's legislature, using many of the Public Conversations Project's methods. Like PCP, CCC collaborates with community "bridge-builders," identifying what is driving people's positions and issues, encouraging new kinds of conversations, and building relationships.

According to Portilla, "the legislators loved" a PCP stereotyping exercise in which participants identify and discuss stereotypes that opponents have of them.

Afterwards, participants on all political sides said they felt validated and more aware of stereotypes. Ironically, the legislators see the

incident as ultimately beneficial because it introduced them to one another. Now, Portilla has been told, legislators from opposing parties "say hi to each other in the halls and actually talk in depth about the issues."

According to one congressman, "We saw the possibility of constructing consensus-based agreements and I think that if we put the tools we've learned to use we can achieve them."

### ...A LA COSTA

On the shore of Mexico's Bahía La Paz was a conflict vastly different from that of the national Congress: A disparate group of people—fishermen, environmentalists, and people in the tourist business—had created a coalition to save the bay.

"You'd think their common goal would make it easy for them to work together," says Portilla, who has worked with the group, Grupo Bahía La Paz.

But dissent about who should lead and how to go about their mission threatened to undermine the coalition's effectiveness. So Portilla brought some of PCP's methods to Grupo Bahía La Paz, asking participants why the coalition is important to them and what they most wanted other members to recognize about them. As in all PCP-style dialogues, coalition members shared personal stories and asked questions of each other.

"It was like a silent mediation," Portilla recalls. "I used the PCP structure, put the questions together, and hardly talked!"

The group then made a decision about who would coordinate Grupo Bahía La Paz, and members began attending outside meetings together. They lobbied for and received funding that they had never been able to secure as separate interests.

"All the squeaky wheels showed up in one place and couldn't be denied," Portilla says. "They stopped squeaking at each other and were able to be more effective as a group."

### ...Y EN LAS ESCUELAS

After co-leading the initial training, Sylvia London tackled violence and bullying in Mexico City schools by designing a training to help teachers and tutors develop conversational and relational skills they



## ▶ DIÁLOGO A TRAVÉS DE LAS DIVISIONES (CONT.)

could model in the classroom. Among other things, the training addressed common speaking practices in Mexican culture—a very fast pace and common interruption. As London puts it, “people wait until you breathe to jump in.”

Since the training, teachers say that PCP’s practices like the “pass” rule and the pause between speakers allow them time to think and to choose what to say or not to say. Now, teachers do not interrupt as often, and a sense of politeness and respect is emerging in the classroom; in teachers’ relationships with students, administrators, and other teachers; and even among students themselves. “We have a long way to go,” says London, “but PCP’s tools have provided a hopeful beginning.” ■

“We have a long way to go, but PCP’s tools have provided a hopeful beginning.”

Sylvia London



The Coat of Arms of Mexico



## From the President

How do you really feel about change?

I like to think of myself as a person who welcomes it. Increasingly though, I worry about the unintended consequences of our modern forms of communication: laptops, cell phones, iPods. What happens when people are

always electronically plugged in? Do we still know how to listen to ourselves, much less to the person sitting next to us? Is it a good thing that my husband and I are e-mailing one another... from different rooms in the same house?!

When we are plugged in, we are in control. Our iPods don’t talk back and we can screen unwanted messages with caller ID. Sending an e-mail requires less time and energy than a tough discussion.

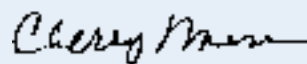
The Public Conversation Project’s dialogues bring people face to face to communicate with one another. But, there are risks. Participating in a “live” conversation requires us to give up some control. We may have to listen to ideas we don’t like or look at our own ambivalences and uncertainties. This can be scary; dialogue isn’t for wimps!

By being in relationship with “the other,” dialogue participants open themselves up to the possibility of change. This happens in large part because PCP dialogues and facilitations are designed so that no one wants to—or can—“phone it in.” People are present in every sense: physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

In much of PCP’s work, changes in relationships lead to important changes in behavior. Talk replaces shouting. Group problem-solving replaces the blame game. Dialogue participants lower their voices, listen respectfully to one another, and share their stories. They grow to appreciate one another as people, not merely as the embodiment of an obnoxious point of view. They experience the magic of human communication. Sometimes they even hug.

As far as I know, no one has produced a bumper sticker asking, “Have you hugged your laptop today?” When it comes to communication, my cell phone and laptop are great tools, but they’re no substitute for unplugged, real-time human conversation. And the next time I start to e-mail my husband, I’m going to step away from the computer, walk down the stairs, and talk to him instead.

“At a dialogue, people are present in every sense: physically, emotionally, and intellectually.”



Cherry Muse

## ASSOCIATES' CORNER

# How do we honor unity and diversity?

The entire staff helps the Public Conversations Project thrive, but it's the Associates who carry the mission into the world, facilitating, training, teaching, speaking, and writing on behalf of PCP. Each issue of Update highlights a different Associate and his or her work. This issue introduces Raye Rawls, who joined PCP as an Associate in July.

"The world is working for me," says Raytheon (Raye) Rawls, of her recent appointment as a PCP Associate. But the truth is, Raye is working for the world.

The realization that launched her lifework came at Georgia State University Law College in 1982. "I thought, 'Wow, so much of this is about putting systems in place that help people fight each other. Law has an incredible history and tradition, but it feels like something else needs to happen.'"

Dismayed, Raye took a mediation course: "That's what set me on a different trajectory and really changed my life."

Twenty-two years later, Raye is an attorney, arbitrator, mediator, and faculty member at the University of Georgia's Fanning Institute. She is the Founding President-elect of the Georgia Chapter of the Association for Conflict Resolution, was appointed to the Georgia Commission on Dispute Resolution, has served as an Administrative Law Judge, and is former Assistant Dean of the Georgia State University Law College.

Despite this impressive list of accomplishments and extensive work in the area of race relations, Raye admits that she is still searching for a different approach to diversity work.

"It is important to understand the history [behind conflicts around race], but the planet is shrinking; we are becoming a lot more global, and at some point we have to figure out how to move forward with the understanding that we are one human people."

"How do we honor both unity and diversity?" The question defines Raye's work as well as her Bahai faith, which is based on the unity of all people. "I am Bahai, and that question is fundamental to who I am," says Raye.

Then came an answer to that question: Isabella, her first grandchild. "My daughter met her husband in Baghdad. She was a black girl from Georgia and he was in the Australian army. Isabella embodies family and community, harmony and oneness," says Raye. "She makes it even more imperative for me to do my part in changing the world."

The world that Raye saw in her mediation practice, which focused on couples and small groups, was a world that "embraced the argument culture."

"The whole adversarial way of looking at things is so natural to us in our culture, and it's really time for us to take a step back and look at other options. I have worked with people who have been in conflict for years but didn't understand or know each other. They didn't even understand the conflict."

Raye's relationship with the Public Conversations Project began in South Carolina fifteen years ago when she and Bob Stains became co-leaders of a workshop at the last hour. From sporadic emails with Bob, to collaboration on a domestic violence project with Dave Joseph in 2006, to a visit to Watertown to meet the staff and participate in a

"At some point, we have to figure out how to move forward with the understanding that we are one human people."



Power of Dialogue workshop, Raye and PCP have a history built upon a true appreciation for each other's work.

"Raye Rawls is an extraordinary human being: vibrant, funny, keenly intelligent, deeply compassionate, and sophisticated, yet down to earth. She's a tremendous asset to PCP," says PCP Program Director and Senior Associate Dave Joseph.

"When I worked with her last year at the Building Bridges conference, I was impressed by the way in which she lives out her values and how that allowed her to interact so effectively with the many very diverse participants," he adds.

"Being officially a part of PCP says to me that I'm ready to take what I've learned from my work, make a giant leap forward, and work with larger groups," says Raye. "I'll bring new insights and new ideas to PCP, and I'll be working with a group of like-minded people who have a real commitment to changing the world."

"We're creating models for people to be better world citizens—that's a very exciting change for me." ■

## CONVERSATIONS FOR WORK, HOME

# New training: Everyday Dialogue

EVERYDAY DIALOGUE WITH CORKY BECKER, PH.D. AND DAVE JOSEPH, LICSW

For years, people have asked PCP, “How can we talk about challenging, awkward, or divisive issues with family, friends, and colleagues?” This workshop will apply the Public Conversations Project’s approach to maintaining good relationships over time.

Through live-demonstration interviews and coached practice exercises, the workshop will emphasize the following:

- preparing to speak, which involves getting clear on purposes
- inviting the other person to speak in a way that is respectful and collaborative
- speaking directly and clearly about your own experiences and feelings
- listening openheartedly to the other person with resilience and a commitment to understanding the ways that their experience and perspective may be different from yours



POD workshop participants, Seattle, WA

Space is available in the first Everyday Dialogue workshop, as well as many other fall workshops.

**EVERYDAY DIALOGUE:** November 8 in Watertown, MA

**POWER OF DIALOGUE:** November 14, 15, and 16 in Cambridge, MA

**INQUIRY AS INTERVENTION** Crafting Questions with Purpose and Impact: December 3 in Watertown, MA

For more information, please go to [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org). To register, please contact Alison at [888-PCP-TEAM X13](mailto:888-PCP-TEAM X13) or [training@publicconversations.org](mailto:training@publicconversations.org).

## JOINING THE TEAM

# Two new staff boost PCP’s roster

The Public Conversations Project’s new Executive Assistant, **Christine Armstrong**, focused on Community Planning and Youth Work at the University of Massachusetts, Boston and is presently there as a graduate student pursuing her MBA in Nonprofit Management. Armstrong’s experience includes studies in Israel and work at several nonprofit organizations including the YMCA.

She enjoys reading, learning about social justice and different cultures, and is interested in someday creating an organization that empowers youth and promotes racial and cultural awareness.



Christine Armstrong and Jen Di Maria

**Jen Di Maria**, a graduate student at the New England School of Art & Design at Suffolk College, joined the Public Conversations Project’s team in the role of graphic designer. She has a degree in advertising, graphic design and psychology

from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and is currently pursuing a master’s degree in graphic design. Di Maria’s graphic design experience includes two years as graphic designer for MIT’s Broad Institute, a nonprofit genomics research organization. She enjoys photography, music, swimming, biking, walking, and hiking. ■

## ON THE BOOKSHELF

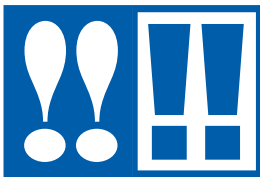
### Associates kick off book discussions



The Public Conversations Project's birth drew upon the creative input of professionals from many disciplines, ranging from family therapy to filmmaking to anthropology. Eighteen years later, the organization continues to thrive on the stimulation and cross-fertilization that thinkers from many fields can provide.

One way PCP practitioners maintain a fresh perspective is by discussing key readings. A quarterly book group offers a valuable opportunity to mine the writings of thought leaders and to refresh both creativity and collegiality.

Recent literary choices include John Paul Lederach's *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Dan Siegal and Mary Hartzell's *Parenting from the Inside Out*, *A General Theory of Love*, by T. Lewis, F. Amini, and R. Lannon, and *White talk black talk*, in which author Roger Hewitt focuses on friendship and communication between interracial youth. ■



#### PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS PROJECT

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#### ▶ THE PCP *exCHANGE*

## Wider Circles. Greater Impact.

October 1 marked the kickoff of a new membership group that provides PCP supporters with an extensive menu of ways in which they can help the Public Conversations Project.

In return, members of The PCP *exCHANGE* receive exclusive benefits—invitations to private events, access to choice resources and members-only publications, and, if desired, public recognition of their support. Members of The PCP *exCHANGE* commit to one item from the menu in order to qualify for benefits.

Please contact Christine Armstrong ([carmstrong@publicconversations.org](mailto:carmstrong@publicconversations.org)) for more information about becoming a charter member of The PCP *exCHANGE* or sign up on our Web site, [www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org). ■