

A little conversation for a change

By Jocelyn Eikenburg

Maybe all Cleveland needs is a little more conversation.

At least, that's what the folks who attend the Breakfast Series at the Club at Key Center are banking on.

Every third Tuesday of the month since June 2006, a diverse group of no more than 20 entrepreneurs and corporate executives – primarily, though not limited to, members of the Club – converges upon a small corner meeting room overlooking Lake Erie and the historic mall of downtown Cleveland. There are city dwellers and suburbanites; East-siders and West-siders; natives and transplants. But one thing binds them together – the idea that conversation is more than a few trifling words. Conversation is powerful.

These salon-style gatherings – where a designated “speaker” acts more as a moderator for free-flowing conversations among the attendees – are challenging the very idea of what it means to connect. On June 20, 2006, a discussion with Doug Clifton, Editor of the Plain Dealer, spurred talk about the future and place of news media in the age of the Internet.

Craig James, partner of Catalyst Strategies – and a self-proclaimed “conversation and connection junkie” – was the speaker on July 18, 2006. That day, attendees grappled with everything from education and community building to learning the lessons of the past – and moving forward to make change.

August 15, 2006 speaker Cathy Panzica, founder of the Red Room Revolution -- an organization dedicated to encouraging growth and development in the technology sector – challenged attendees to make their own visions a reality. And what a revolution it was. One attendee remarked that he “was at the Club later in the day, and the buzz about [Cathy's session] was tremendous.”

Bring your voice to the table

It's a new paradigm shift in how we view conversation – and gatherings, for that matter. That was the intention of the founders all along. James along with Margaret Wong, attorney-at-law and founder of Margaret Wong and Associates, and other board members of the Club at Key Center, first conceived of the idea months before. Wong explains “we were thinking and tossing around ideas on how to benefit the members more and to make it more intimate but not ‘mass’.”

Then they stumbled upon the solution, something that James describes as a “candid, open and somewhat unstructured conversation to help yield the ideas, input and connections required to move forward... It's more about ensuring that we are engaging people in an authentic way, and discussing the real issues at hand.” To

create an optimal setting for this type of interaction, the founders decided to limit attendance to only 20 people.

There's something to be said for inviting the audience to finally speak up.

Susan Brooks, a financial services professional for Skylight Financial Group, was caught off guard by the new format. "I went to the breakfasts because I thought the speakers were going to talk about their fields – for example, Margaret Wong on immigration issues," she admits. "I was not sure what I thought of [the Breakfast Series] until the discussions started. And then I realized, as I too spoke up, that this is the only place that I know of where I can talk about this city that I love, and feel like something might just happen."

At its most fundamental level, the Breakfast Series is all about bringing people together.

For Marilou Myrick, President and Managing Partner of ATALX Corporation, the group provides "a forum to bring together the wealth of diverse backgrounds and experiences in the Greater Cleveland Area." She adds that this "contributes to enriching the region – in all senses of the word."

Raymond Ku, Professor of Law at Case Western Reserve University, echoes this sentiment. "By bringing together so many people with different expertise, all of whom are dedicated to improving Northeast Ohio, the Breakfast Series can serve as an important catalyst for re-energizing the region."

Engaging people – and their voices – is how Samir Gautam, Senior V.P. and Regional Wealth Executive at First Merit Bank, sees the group. "This format is providing the emerging leadership with an opportunity to have their voice heard and share with the speakers ideas and thoughts on how we 'together' can help this great city get the boost and recognition it deserves."

Words for a revolution

They say it took Gandhi years to convince the British to leave India. But it probably started with a conversation. To think that our words – a communication tool we often take for granted – could do more than just communicate.

Brooks is a believer in the power of conversation. "...Conversation does something. I do not know what or how, [but] I believe that the more of us who talk and meet and talk to others, [the more we] will somehow make an impact."

The Breakfast Series could even herald a new era of change in Northeast Ohio. According to Rob Felber, President of Felber and Felber Marketing, "The mere fact that the group is getting together to discuss these topics points to a changing and rising tide amongst those desiring to see change in NE Ohio."

So what will be the legacy of the Breakfast Series? If James has his way, it will definitely be something to talk about. He hopes that the attendees will leverage the opportunity to take what's learned – and put it into action. "One day, we could look

back and say, ‘Hey, can you believe that initiative **XYX** came from that little breakfast discussion we had way back in 2006 at the Club at Key Center.’ Lofty? Maybe. But all big things start small.”