

Diversity Dinners leave small talk at the door

BY PATRICIA MURPHY
Triblocal.com staff reporter

The things that captivate people, that ignite passions and spark revolutions—things like religion, politics and healthcare—are typically off the table at the dinner table. Many consider it impolite or dicey to engage in such discussions except in the most private of settings.

This is not the case with Diversity Dinners, an innovative yet simple concept devised 12 years ago and carried on by founding member, sociologist and director Stephanie Hughes.

The idea is to form several groups of 10 people—people with wildly different backgrounds, interests, races, beliefs and orientations—and invite them to enjoy a meal and conversation together

about once a month from fall through late spring.

"People tend to socialize with their own identity groups so these groups are made up of people who you may never meet," Hughes said.

Kris Lim of Naperville attends Diversity Dinners with her husband Dr. Robert Lim.

"We discuss issues that aren't raised at a normal dinner party," she said.

In Lim's group, party hosts pose the questions—questions like 'what is your most joyous childhood memory?'—but other groups may select alternate ways of conducting conversation.

Because the dinners are ultimately organic experiences, Hughes doesn't lay down many rules, though it is asked that participants make a commitment to

attend every dinner, which take place at each of the member's homes and are usually scheduled for Saturday evenings. She also encourages members to allow only one conversation at a time when everyone in the group is assembled.

Each fall Hughes organizes new groups to give both new and experienced members a fresh start.

Originally from China, Amy Xie of Aurora started attending Diversity Dinners four years ago.

"We talk about religions, relationships, kids and how to be a better person," she said.

Xie has tried spreading the lessons she's learned from the dinners to other Chinese immigrants who have grown up in a society that she believes puts too much of an emphasis on careers and making money.

"For people like us who are working, working, working all the time but after Diversity Dinner, I realize there's a lot more to life than working," she said. "I want to make more time. I don't want my kids to be like me."

While member's backgrounds and lives run the gamut, they often share qualities like open-mindedness and a willingness to listen. Many times people sign up because they want people to learn an aspect of their identity [that is] often misunderstood, Hughes said.

"You can ask questions you wouldn't normally ask in a social environment because you're asking someone you know is open to the question," Kris Lim said. "You get to know people quickly and in a nonjudgmental environment."

A large group and divergent opinions is a mixture that can eas-

ily threaten to boil over, but, said Robert Lim, conversations are surprisingly diplomatic.

"My wife and I are Democrats and others in the group are conservatives but our discussions are not heated. We're trying to show different points of view in a respectful way," he said.

Through all this sharing, Hughes said, an intriguing thing happens: Stereotypes wash away and are replaced with a sense of unity.

"[Diversity Dinners] are some of the best Saturday nights I've had; delicious meals and good friends giving me contacts in many walks of life. I feel like I'm tuned into my community more than ever."

To inquire about the dinners, which serves Naperville and nearby areas and includes a \$10 administrative fee, call [630-420-4233](tel:630-420-4233).

Diversity Dinners -- Your Invitation to Join

Enliven and enrich your social life by joining Diversity Dinners this year! Many of us as "members" of certain heritage, belief, work, political, and other "identity" groups tend to spend time mostly with "our own kind". However since 1997, Diversity Dinners have been acquainting folks in and near Naperville with "other kinds" of really interesting people. ❖

You'd be placed with a congenial group of about 10 people of various backgrounds and values, who will get to know each other at Saturday night cooperative suppers that begin around 7 pm. We take turns hosting in our homes -- gathering with the same group once every 4-6 weeks over 7+ months. Each participant brings something for each meal. It's easy and delicious! Pairs and singles

are welcome. We talk about ourselves, our families, identity groups and communities; about life for others here and elsewhere; and about our issues, politics, concerns and ambitions for the future. Further explanation is at www.dupageco.org/giving/dupage, under agencies, see Diversity Dinners Naper IL US Area.

Most starts are in Sep/Oct but anyone may apply anytime year round. Applicants send to 916 Royal Blackheath Ct, Naperville IL 60563 a few lines about themselves and a small annual fee made out to "S. Hughes (DivDin)" that defrays our administrative expenses. Questions are welcome at [630/420-4233](tel:630-420-4233) or via SDownsHughes@yahoo.com. Discover the exhilaration of collaborative hospitality and wide-ranging conversation with fascinating folks.

Please copy & share this notice with individuals and groups.

Please provide your Email * address to get more information.

Inquiries are most welcome.