

CROSSING DIVIDES

grant program reflections



Insights from conversations with groups in Arizona, Mississippi, and Nebraska who are working to resolve conflict and heal their communities



The Cotyledon Fund

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We gratefully recognize the participation of each of the leaders of the twelve organizations, and their outstanding work:

Anastasis Theatre Company: Haley Haas, Co-Founder and Artistic Director; Katherine MacHolmes, Engagement Coordinator + Company Member

Arizona Interfaith Power & Light: Doug Bland, Ambassador; Melanie Beikman, Executive Director

Arizona Faith Network Smart Justice Cafes: Project Leaders

Civic Nebraska: Daniel Bennett, Rural Civic Health Program Manager; Nancy Petitto, Director of Civic Health Programs; Sarah Walker, Director of Development; Alex Brechbill, Grant Writer

Clarksdale Area Fuller Center for Housing: JoAnn Blue, Executive Director; Bill Sutton, Chief of Operations

Grey Box Collective: Molly W. Schenck, Founder and Creative Producer

Many Mouths One Stomach: Nadia Hagen-Onuktav, Artistic Director

Mississippi Rising Coalition: Lea Campbell, Founding Director and DORMS Organizer

Our Family Services: Former staff members Laurie Mazerbo, Jeff Tanguay, and Jared Hatchell

Pine Grove Association: Angela Carson, Executive Director

Reconciliation Rising: Kevin Abourezk, Managing Editor, Indianz.com; Margaret Jacobs, Director, Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Rosedale Freedom Project: LaToysha Brown, Executive Director; Jeremiah Smith, Lead Director of Programming

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The Cotyledon Fund is a private family fund that supports communities as they navigate severe climate and systems disruption to create a life-affirming future. Kindle Project is an outside-the-box grantmaking organization supporting emerging alternatives for personal, collective, and planetary resilience.

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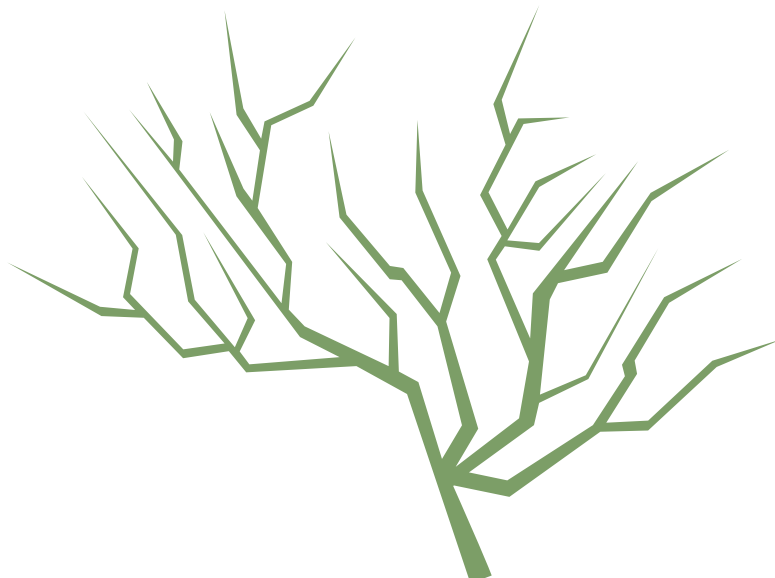
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WHAT IS CROSSING DIVIDES?

In 2021, the Cotyledon Fund and Kindle Project created Crossing Divides, a pilot grant program to explore conflict resolution in U.S. communities. We know the well-worn storyline: in this age of hyper-partisanship and social media fixation, Americans are hopelessly divided, and conversation, let alone cooperation, is less and less possible because people don't trust institutions or each other. But this view seems too simplistic. We suspected that at the community level people are working, often under the radar, to resolve critical conflicts and build or restore the trust necessary to cooperate with each other through future challenges and upheaval. We wanted to support community groups doing this work and learn from and with them about what it takes. We opened a call for proposals in Arizona, Mississippi, and Nebraska and were honored to support 12 organizations each with a \$10,000 grant. Some groups addressed specific conflicts in their communities, while others focused on healing approaches that help create the conditions for conflict resolution or prevention.

Almost two years later, if we can draw one conclusion from this pilot program, it's that **people are hungry to bridge divides**. Even within our narrow geographic scope, we found that people from many different backgrounds are dedicated, as they have been for years, to resolving a wide range of conflicts. Most of the national discourse and mainstream media coverage miss the important nuance and the long-term implications of these efforts.

This report is a synthesis of hour-long conversations we had with leaders from each organization several months after they received funding and began implementing their projects. Rather than a formal evaluation of "results," the following is a collective reflection about what we all are learning about conflict, healing, and opportunities for next steps.



THE CROSSING DIVIDES PROJECTS

Arizona Power & Light: Sacred Earth, Common Ground

Uses the ancient art of storytelling/story listening to bridge the cultural-political-religious divides that threaten democracy, devastate Creation and divide communities.

Arizona Interfaith Network: Smart Justice Cafes

Brings together formerly incarcerated individuals with community members through storytelling and conversation, helping humanize and destigmatize formerly incarcerated individuals, prevent recidivism through community connection, and educate the community about the impact of mass incarceration.

Our Family Services

Combines direct housing assistance with a broad spectrum of supportive services, outreach, and advocacy designed to address and disrupt the underlying causes of homelessness and housing instability.

Many Mouths One Stomach: All Souls Procession

Is a grassroots collective dedicated to pollinating festal culture in the Southwest.

Grey Box Collective

Is an interdisciplinary arts organization that makes weird art about tough stuff.

Clarksdale Area Fuller Center for Housing

Seeking to put God's love into action, brings people together across generational, geographic, racial, and social class boundaries to build affordable homes, vibrant communities, and transformational hope for qualified, low-income residents of this Mississippi Delta community, in order to promote dignity and a sense of purpose for both homeowners and volunteers.

Pine Grove Association, Inc.: We Are One Project

Has a goal of creating a community of trust and understanding among cultures that will lead to joint community development projects and understanding.

Rosedale Freedom Project

Supports young leaders in the Mississippi Delta in the development of critical consciousness and the practice of justice through community building, artistic creation, exploration, organizing and the study of social history.

Mississippi Rising Coalition: Dialogue on Race in Mississippi

Is an interactive and educational process specifically designed to create increased awareness and understanding that leads to informed action and meaningful change around race and institutional racism in our communities.

Anastasis Theatre Company: More Than a Number

Was originally written and performed by a group of men at the Nebraska State Penitentiary and then toured with a cast of formerly incarcerated men. This play was created to shatter misconceptions, reveal the common thread of our humanity, and to break down the walls between incarcerated citizens and the outside world.

Civic Nebraska: Civil Discourse and Media Literacy Listening Project

Is an initiative through which Civic Nebraska listened to ordinary Nebraskans to understand their news consumption habits, attitudes on confidence in media institutions, and how concerns about media relate to life in their own community. Civic Nebraska's mission is to create a more modern and robust democracy for all Nebraskans.

Reconciliation Rising

Is a multimedia project that showcases the lives and work of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the U.S. who are engaged in honestly confronting painful and traumatic histories, promoting meaningful and respectful dialogue between Natives and non-Natives, and creating pathways to reconciliation.

WHAT ARE THE KEY INSIGHTS?

Political partisanship was not the predominant source of conflict.

Interestingly, very few of our conversations with leaders revolved around political partisanship. Most of the conflicts were not easily characterized as "liberal vs. conservative" or "Republican vs. Democrat," and even where partisanship was present, the conflicts often centered around other topics. Sacred Earth, Common Ground, a project of Arizona Interfaith Power & Light, brings people of different faiths together to tell and listen to "stories of times and places where they were deeply connected—to themselves, to nature, to the divine," said Doug Bland, Ambassador for Arizona Interfaith Power & Light. He and Executive Director Melanie Beikman acknowledged the challenge of overcoming perceptions about "liberal" and "conservative" congregations, but by focusing on common spiritual values and personal experiences, participants engage in conversation that moves away from political self-sorting and toward a recognition of their shared love of the natural world and desire to protect it. For Civic Nebraska's Media Listening Project, a community research project that identifies the roots of public mistrust of institutions and information sources, the leaders did seek participants based on self-described political affiliations, but the results revealed that the causes of mistrust, and ideas for bridging differences, were not especially partisan.

The most important thing is to stay engaged.

All of the leaders we spoke with emphasized the importance of long-term engagement and commitment. Trust—in other people and in the possibility of peace—takes time to build. Smart Justice Cafes, a project of the interfaith Arizona Faith Network, are breakfast gatherings at which formerly incarcerated people and neighbors come together to break down barriers, stereotypes, and fears. Much of the work for the cafes happens long before those events. The project leaders, some of whom have past lived experience in the carceral system, foster trust with formerly incarcerated people by showing their commitment to helping them find housing, employment, and other support to rebuild their lives. Likewise, the team's relationships through their interfaith network enables them to customize the cafe program agenda to create a safe space for congregants and community members, who are more open to the experience because they know (or know of) the organizers and trust that their concerns will be recognized too.

People need to see proof of concept to gain confidence that change is possible and recognize their own agency in making that change. Rosedale Freedom Project, which teaches restorative justice through a student fellows program in Mississippi, helps middle and high school students develop conflict resolution skills through experiential learning. As students use and practice their own tools to resolve conflict, parents and teachers witness the change and become enthusiastic about getting involved in the program. Organizers LaToysha Brown and Jeremiah Smith said that as people engage with restorative justice tools, they discover possibilities not just for changing behavior to resolve conflicts but for changing the systems that promote conflict and trauma in the first place.

Angela Carson of Pine Grove Association's We Are One project (a multi-racial coalition to reduce violence and increase understanding between Black and Latino communities in Canton, Mississippi) and leaders of Our Family Services (a Tucson, Arizona organization that offered community mediation services for many years) described conflict resolution as preventative. Although people often don't think about conflict resolution until a crisis occurs, strong community bonds are necessary to weather those crises. Positive results require long-term, sustained attention especially in the face of inevitable setbacks or limited resources.

Nurturing one-on-one relationships, especially in person, is the heart of the work.

Relationships are both a prerequisite for and a byproduct of committed engagement. Although some groups turned to virtual activities during the pandemic (which had the advantage of allowing them to reach people in geographically remote locations), most agreed that face-to-face communication is necessary, at least from time to time, to cultivate a deeper level of empathy and understanding. Several leaders discussed the hurdle of making those initial connections with people who might be reluctant, distrustful, or hostile to their work. Not surprisingly, leaders of the Media Listening Project stated that their work starts with listening from a place of curiosity and respect: "People aren't empty vessels to be filled with the 'right' information; rather, their experiences with how they receive, digest, accept, and sometimes circulate information is a rich, complex, and uniquely personal process worth listening to."

Several leaders from other groups said they had learned the necessity of meeting people where they are, sometimes literally. Simply inviting people to participate or "putting out a welcome mat" is often not enough, especially if potential participants feel guarded and unwilling to be vulnerable. Creating a safe space entails making the first gesture of kindness or interest and honoring people's choice to engage—or not—without fear of judgment. Once participants experience what it feels like to listen and be heard, they become the best ambassadors for the work. Several leaders said that their programs have grown and gained momentum primarily through word-of-mouth.

Conflict cannot be resolved without a commitment to speaking truth and suspending judgment.

Leaders recognized the great care and intention required to speak truth and suspend judgment, two goals that in themselves may sometimes seem conflicting. The multi-racial coalition Mississippi Rising organizes the Dialogue on Race Mississippi (DORMS) project, a series of community dialogues around controversial topics such as the removal of Confederate statues. Drawing on a tested curriculum, leaders facilitate the conversations with people of different racial backgrounds to express and acknowledge painful truths about white supremacy. The goal is to create a learning environment in which people can speak honestly about harm while staying connected to their own and each other's humanity and being allowed to come to their own conclusions. Mississippi Rising Founder and DORMS Organizer Lea Campbell said that this often unlocks an awareness, especially among white people, about systems of white supremacy that can lead to genuine shifts in understanding and behavior.

In another example, Reconciliation Rising, based in Nebraska, is a multi-media project featuring Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who engage in honest, respectful dialogue to confront traumatic histories and create pathways to reconciliation, such as return of land to Native peoples. But real change is possible only if people approach the process with courage and authenticity. As Project Co-Director Kevin Abourezk said, "Guilt doesn't serve anybody. It just leads to negative things. We're trying to avoid doing performative work, to actually help bridge divides." Project Co-Director Margaret Jacobs added that action that comes out of a willingness to dig deep, and with respect, into the roots of a conflict over land can be truly transformational.

WHAT APPROACHES ARE EFFECTIVE, AND WHY?

Community storytelling cultivates empathy, which promotes healing.

Many of the groups incorporate storytelling as a method to help people express their personal experiences and feelings and relate empathically to others, even those who may seem very different from themselves. Intimate stories are the organizing principle for the Anastasis Theatre Company production *More than a Number*, a play written and performed by people who are affected by the carceral system, including those who are or were incarcerated and their loved ones. Learning and collaborating with theater professionals, the writers and actors explore the complexity of their personal histories, the trauma of systemic oppression, and the painful but hopeful process of healing.

Shaping this material into art requires a willingness to be vulnerable from everyone involved. According to Co-founder and Artistic Director Haley Haas, it is revolutionary and powerful when people impacted by the carceral system perform their stories on stage, rather than have them interpreted by professional actors. In this format, the creators experience a profound self-empowerment and audiences, even those without knowledge of incarceration, can empathize with the stories on a deep, often visceral level. Engagement Coordinator and Company Member Katherine MacHolmes explained that the post-show conversations with cast and audience members created “a space where people can be completely authentic, and challenge and be challenged without an attachment of value and worth,” which enabled them to debate different points of view about criminal justice policies without losing sight of everyone’s humanity.

The powerful connection between physical and emotional expression also informs the work of Grey Box Collective. This group of teaching artists in Arizona uses storytelling and experiential art to “allow people to engage empathically with...hard ideas (such as mental health, bullying, and racism),” explained Molly W. Schenck, Founder and Creative Producer. She developed a “devised performance” method through which high school students use the stage as a canvas to explore issues of social and emotional well-being. The process shifts tension and blocks in the nervous system, enhancing students’ feelings of agency and increasing their confidence to confront painful topics. Often when the students perform their productions for the community, audiences have a somatic experience too, which makes them (especially adults who may have fixed ideas about the subject matter) more willing to approach the topics with greater empathy.

Public art and ritual help people cope with complex emotions.

Through the intentional act of gathering and using creative expression to find meaning in our most elemental human experiences, strangers can build bonds that make peace possible. The goal of the Tucson, Arizona organization Many Mouths, One Stomach is to recognize our core human need for public celebration, ceremony, and ritual. At the All Souls’ Procession each November, which is open to everyone, thousands of people gather to mourn, reflect, and celebrate loss and death. Artistic Director Nadia Hagen-Onuktav described how the experience of mutual recognition affects participants: “That someone sees what they see, and feels what they feel... that’s what matters. Those moments of empathy open a door, and then we start on a path of ‘how do we now walk together?’” The collective physical experience of dancing, walking together, and creating or visiting altars fosters an atmosphere of acceptance, what she called “conflict non-resolution,” where tensions can be held safely and life’s complexity can be honored by everyone. As an example, some police officers who previously worked as public security and crowd control for the event now join the procession as private citizens to participate in collective mourning and celebration.

When people learn or do meaningful things together, they build trust and familiarity.

Sometimes giving people a reason to accomplish something together is the best way to start to cross divides. Clarksdale Area Fuller Center for Housing in Mississippi brings volunteers and community members together to build affordable housing, but the broader vision is greater inclusion and social cohesion. As people come together around an important goal with a clear outcome—building houses alongside low-income future homeowners—they are more likely to form meaningful bonds that challenge racial and class stereotypes and biases. This increased trust and knowledge create the conditions through which people may address conflicts that may have nothing to do with the activities that brought them together in the first place.

Leaders of the Rosedale Freedom Project stressed the importance of starting with something concrete and immediate first, then connecting practical experience to underlying principles. Students in the program learn techniques for conflict resolution and apply them in the moment as conflicts arise. Meanwhile, they are also learning about self-empowerment, community organizing, and other concepts on which the tools are built. The more they practice the tools among themselves, and with parents and teachers, the more they understand how their tools and principles reinforce each other to generate alternatives to ineffective, dehumanizing district policies on classroom discipline.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES

These are some tools and frameworks recommended by the organizations:

Civic Nebraska:

[A Small Group](#) methodology of conversation

Technology of Participation [focused conversation](#) methodology

Asset-mapping techniques from Asset-Based Community Development, from the [ABCD Institute and DePaul University](#)

[Dialogues on Race Louisiana](#) curricula

“Story of Me, Story of Us, Story of Now” [community storytelling techniques](#) outlined by Dr. Marshall Gantz

[Nonviolent Communication](#), originally developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg

[Trauma and creativity tools](#) developed by Molly W. Schenck



WHAT ARE THE MAJOR CHALLENGES? HOW ARE THEY BEING OVERCOME?

Breaking out of the “bubble” requires on-going effort.

Most of the leaders discussed the difficulty of attracting people from “the other side,” a challenge we also faced in developing this pilot program. Even for the Media Listening Project, designed not only to be non-partisan but also to seek out people with opposing positions, leaders struggled to find participants who identify as “conservative,” in part because of preconceived notions about the purpose of the research. Leaders of Sacred Earth, Common Ground said the most effective way to overcome the challenge of self-selection by those already inclined to get involved is through participants spreading the word to people in their circles. Of course, the diversity of participants’ own networks matters, but if people with different viewpoints have even a modest openness to something new, hearing a suggestion from a trusted source can encourage them to take a chance. Angela Carson said The We Are One project is involving young people, who tend to be less constrained by group identities in the community and can influence their parents.

Projects need support of different kinds.

Financial support is a necessity, and funding for conflict resolution is scarce, according to many leaders we spoke with. A few said they were shocked to find a grant program like Crossing Divides. After providing conflict resolution services for many years (including successful community-wide mediation regarding a controversial local recreation project), Our Family Services had to discontinue its conflict resolution program due to lack of reliable funding. The Smart Justice Cafes team and others also lamented that funders often invest in whatever is “trendy” at the moment, and fail to invest in preventative work, despite it having greater impact in the long run. This tendency makes it difficult to sustain much-needed programs that by their nature take time to develop and produce results, while public attention may be focused elsewhere.

Another challenge, related to but not exclusively linked to funding, is the time, effort, and skill required to do conflict resolution work. Nadia Hagen-Onuktav stressed the importance of having enough of the right people to develop the vision and share the workload effectively. This can be especially complicated for programs that depend on volunteers or require a time commitment for training or skill development. It is clear that there is a need and desire for these programs, but it is challenging to gather the resources (financial and human) required to sustain services and scale up. Stable, long-term funding allows leaders to cultivate staff and volunteers so they don’t have to scramble for resources or divide their attention between fundraising and program development. In some cases finding institutional allies is a way to relieve some of the pressure of funding and implementing programs.

Confronting systemic barriers means dealing with institutions.

Many organizations are battling dehumanizing institutions that at the least do not create the conditions for mutual understanding and cooperation and at worst perpetuate conflict. In just one example, Lea Campbell of Mississippi Rising noted that state policies restricting access to dashcam footage make it almost impossible to have an honest discussion about policing in the state. Avoiding institutions is usually not an option, but in some cases groups find ways to operate independently and productively even as political will waxes and wanes. As Angela Carson said, “We’ve got to know institutions and find ways to work with them, but not let institutions hinder....we’ve got to go do what we need to do in community.”

WHAT NOW?

This small cohort represents a variety of communities, conflicts, and approaches to peace and healing. Is it indicative of a much larger, mostly unrecognized, ecosystem of groups and organizations working toward the same ends in other places? We believe it may be. What can be done to support and spread these activities? While the urge to create more peace and understanding is real, the organizations in this pilot demonstrate the complexities and challenges of this work. We want to honor the intentional practice, courage, and commitment of these groups and avoid simplistic or “one-size-fits-all” recommendations that don’t take into account local contexts. In that spirit, we offer two observations that we believe warrant further exploration:

- The preventative nature of conflict resolution is generally overlooked; more concerted focus on this aspect may significantly shift tendencies toward violence and increase peace-building skills.
- Disrupting or at least augmenting the dominant media narrative about the nature and extent of divisions in U.S. society is necessary to cultivate an environment in which more grassroots efforts can grow.

As Bill Sutton of Clarksdale Area Fuller Center for Housing said, “The one word that has come up again and again in this is the word ‘dignity.’” All people need to be seen, to be heard, and to be treated with respect. This strengthens their own willingness and capacity to extend dignity to others, even in the face of what might seem like insurmountable differences. These twelve organizations show the potential for our society to heal deep wounds and develop the resilience to address conflict productively. We hope their insights contribute to a groundswell of meaningful conversation and action that will help activate this potential at a time when our society urgently needs it.



FINAL THOUGHTS from Crossing Divides organizations

Support for conflict-resolution strategies and learning is greatly needed to address the many barriers that keep our communities from healing.

Angela Carson, Pine Grove Association

It's critical to support groups creating safe and structured spaces for dialogue between community members of differing backgrounds and life experiences in order for us to remain connected to one another's humanity and build consensus around solutions to conflict.

Lea Campbell, Mississippi Rising Coalition

Resolving conflict can only be accomplished if both sides can agree to respect one another's humanity and right to express their beliefs and feelings freely.

Kevin Abourezk, Reconciliation Rising

What we learned from this experience is that people have complex relationships and experiences which influence their trust, opinions, and concerns about the media they consume.

Civic Nebraska team

Each of the organizations practiced healing and conflict management internally as much as they did externally to align and challenge their orientation with the work they were doing.

LaToysba Brown, Rosedale Freedom Project

Storytelling is the best way to get beyond the labels and ideologies that divide us. The other critical piece for building bridges with others is the art of listening to the stories that others tell. Telling stories is only half the magic. Hearing stories with an open heart is the other half.

Doug Bland, Arizona Interfaith Power and Light Ambassador

Hope. When people lose hope, and despair and division seem too big, we stop caring because we stop believing that any action can change the world, but when we gather in community and recognize one another's humanity, we create hope, and a spirit of hope is what is necessary to transform the world.

Katherine MacHolmes, Anastasis Theatre Co.



