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TO: Mayor Chelminiak and City Councilmembers

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SUBJECT: **Cultural Conversations Program Briefing**

Cultural Conversations recently celebrated eight years of partnership in the community and the City of Bellevue. The grassroots women's program began with conversations initiated by a small group of long-time residents, who had an overwhelming desire to welcome the changing face of their community and newcomers from diverse cultures looking for belonging and connection in their new home.

Policy/Vision

"Bellevue welcomes the World. Our Diversity is our strength. We embrace the future while respecting our past." The sentiment expressed in the City of Bellevue's vision statement is central to Cultural Conversations programming. Hearing personal stories of diverse members of the community and seeing ourselves in one another has been transformational; unlikely yet powerful connections, are created and sustained. As staff engages more with the program, the result is more community connections meeting the recommendations in the City's *Diversity Advantage Plan* for cultural competence in the community and goals for civic engagement.

Quick Statistics

- Program pilot 2009-10
- 7 events per year
- 75 women average at monthly meeting
- 700 email distribution

Key program goals

- Create a safe space to establish common ground, one conversation at a time;
- Provide connection through storytelling and small group conversations over tea;
- Respectful engagement and unique connections through Cultural Conversations;
- Provide topics that foster learning about other cultures, set the tone for new friendships and create community resiliency; and
- Nurture growth, exploration and awareness that extends beyond the meetings.

Feb 2018, 4th Annual Cultural Conversations Forum for Men and Women

Once a year, the women's program is opened to the public and includes both male and female storytellers. This year, the fourth annual evening presentation was titled "*Beyond what we see*". Four residents shared their personal stories inspiring others to move beyond initial assumptions we often make at first glance and look deeper for points of

connection. Perspectives were offered to create opportunities for discovering common ground.

The evening attendance was the largest in four years, estimated at well over 250 people, with noticeable diversity in age, race, and gender; 85 of those present, indicated that it was their first event. Following the presentations, conversation continued well past nine o'clock, at twenty-five tables that accommodated more than two hundred people.

Take-aways, Evening Program Storytelling and Conversation

- *"I loved hearing all the stories from people from different parts of the world. It gives me a peek into experiences so unlike my own."*
- *"Although our stories are different, at heart we share common doubts and fears."*
- *"To listen more and to be open to other ideas and cultures. Listening and connecting is the bridge for community."*
- *"So many things contribute to who we are."*
- *"The power of the personal narrative. Check for striped elephants. See beyond what is visible."*

Program Topics for 2017-18 Season

A key goal for the seventh season was to create opportunities for deeper sharing in table conversations by creating a safe and comfortable space for all who want to tell their stories. Through this program, staff has learned that how we listen is just as important as what we say. Awareness of how we relate is influenced by culture, our own deeper stories and empathy. The season began as part of "Welcoming America" week, *"Creating a Welcoming space for others to share"*, where we explored the role of culture and communication styles (including the gifts of Individualized "I" (focused on self) cultures and collective "We" (focused on the group) cultures. *"When We Gather: Skills for Connecting as Listeners and Storytellers"* continued with skill building exercises for participants including active listening, mindful inquiry, and "sharing to be heard". *"Sharing stories using a treasured cultural item"* provided an opportunity for all around the table to be both storyteller and listener. The next program, March 13, *"Searching for Home"* is a collaboration between Cultural Conversations and the Bellevue Arts Museum. Through storytelling, Humaira Abid will share the inspiration for her art exhibition depicting the journey undertaken by refugee families in crisis, resettlement, and the challenges faced by women as they begin the process to establish home in a new land.

New in 2018: Cultural Conversations Best Practices Handbook

Cultural Conversations *"Best Practices Handbook for Organizers"* is a "how-to" on creating cultural conversations. This handbook was created as a companion to *"A Year of Storytelling and Conversations"* which provides the story of the program and what the program means for those in the community through focus on "stories around the table". The handbook was also created in response to the increasing size of our women's group, as well as requests from participants both within and outside of Bellevue, to hold a conversation in the evening, on the weekend, and for men. The handbook is a "how to" get a group started, and includes suggested topics and details on what makes a meeting; from choosing a storyteller, the agenda and marketing, and how to create the environment for table conversation where others' connect.