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TO: Mayor Robinson and City Councilmembers

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Community Development

SUBJECT: Cultural Conversations Annual Update

This report is for information only.

The City of Bellevue's vision statement: "Bellevue welcomes the world. Our diversity is our strength. We embrace the future while respecting our past." is central to Cultural Conversations programming. Hearing personal stories of diverse members of the community and seeing ourselves in one another has been transformational for individuals and for our community. Unexpected, powerful connections are created and sustained. The result is more community connections and meeting the recommendations in the City's ***Diversity Advantage Plan*** and goals for civic engagement. During this time of COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest where we both fear and crave connection, the need for a connected community is amplified.

"Cultural Conversations acts as a catalyst that allows people to come forward and share something that was deep inside and which they felt they couldn't talk about anywhere else." *A Year of Storytelling and Conversations 2015-2016*

Background

Cultural Conversations recently celebrated 10 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. As Bellevue's population continues to grow and demographics change, Cultural Conversations has provided welcoming, equitable and safe spaces for hearing the stories that lead to deeper connection. We have learned from the community that how we listen is just as important as what we share.

Key program goals

- Create a safe space to establish common ground; one conversation at a time
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- 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
- Nurture growth, exploration and awareness that extends beyond the meetings

Seven programs are offered during the year for residents and City visitors, providing an opportunity to increase cultural awareness and to develop and practice cultural competence in the community. Cultural Conversations now has a network of over 700 participants, averaging 70 women for each monthly in-person meeting; virtual attendance over the past two virtual meetings has averaged 55.

COVID-19 Challenges and Opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to many an unprecedented time of crisis, finding us navigating spaces that are no longer familiar. We are experiencing fear and isolation and we're stretching to reshape our relationships with technology. Finding connection and community is more important than ever before.

To bridge the needs of community and the county guidelines restricting in-person meetings, we adapted the program using technology to engage and mirror in-person connection. [Engaging Bellevue](#) was piloted in May as an online platform for storytelling and communicating with the group. Visitors were encouraged to use video, audio and written comments to share Covid-19 lessons learned, ways of building support and resiliency. Keeping best practices in mind, we surveyed the community to determine how to move forward to a virtual conversation, featuring a topic, storyteller and sharing. While the public is adapting to the practice of documenting their stories in public spaces, they are becoming comfortable in a virtual 3rd place sharing in Zoom breakout rooms with familiar faces.

Participation metrics

For those who have participated in Cultural Conversations, we are reminded that when we are most vulnerable and deeply engage, we can experience connection. While the themes shared are universal and may not be new, what is new is having the ability to have a conversation and learn from the experiences of who is in the room.

Following each program, we survey participants to determine whether they learned something new or considered a new idea or perspective as a result of the program. Additionally, we ask participants to rate the interactive aspect of the program and whether they experienced meaningful conversation. Did the storytelling resonate? Was the time in conversation adequate? Had they met someone new, including someone from another culture? The feedback informs programming.

Shared by 44 participants from the annual forum (on a scale of 1–7, low to high):

- I considered a new idea or perspective as a result of this program, Avg of 5.4
 - Today's presentation sparked meaningful conversation, Avg of 6.2
 - Additionally, we gathered many qualitative insights:
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"I learned how much I have in common with others."

"Great to hear the different stories & perspectives."

"Thinking about how others see the world."

"The depth of people's wisdom from diverse experiences."

"Very thought-provoking to me as an older white woman."

"It made me feel that I want to be more aware of people that might be struggling."

Program Topics for 2019-2020 Season

The variety of topics chosen for conversation generate different points of engagement and perspectives from the community. While some women are comfortable to attend a meeting to greet old friends, it is often the topic that attracts interest and invites new people to participate.

- *"Taking Root - Today's Special" – Bellwether @ Bellevue Arts Museum.* We explored the intersectionality of navigating identity, roots, and cultural heritage and how foodways connect us all. To help shape the exhibit, members of the community participated in a curator-led conversation sharing their local experience of shopping, preparing and eating cultural dishes. The artist storyteller's pestle and mortar exhibit "Eat Your Words," depicted the relationship between food as comfort and communication with her Korean-born mother.
 - *"What's Age Got to Do with It?"* In partnership with Humanities Washington and King County Library System, we explored ageism. We learned how to be positive and affirm all age groups, while discussing how values and traditions surrounding age vary amongst cultures.
 - *"Potlatch: How a Game Provides a Window to Understanding Local Indigenous Culture."* Potlatch is an economic system practiced by indigenous people of the Pacific NW coast of the United States and Canada, that are based on resource distribution and value sharing over individual accumulation. The storyteller and interactive program, provided participants with increased awareness of the history, culture and traditions of the Coast Salish of Puget Sound. The program encouraged a better understanding of the practice of land acknowledgement that is currently being demonstrated in different venues and public gatherings.
 - *"Just Between Us."* The 10-year anniversary celebration of the program and 6th Annual Evening Cultural Conversations forum was attended by over 100 men and women. The topic focused on the "in-between" spaces of three storytellers navigating culture and identity addressing universal themes of fighting bigotry, longing-to-belong and finding voice to ask for support.
 - *"ADLaM a new alphabet created in Guinea, Africa and its local connection."* In July, we resumed virtual programming and explored how literacy affects relationships, sustains culture and traditions with the Microsoft Story Labs journalist who interviewed ADLaM's creators, a local Gambian woman and a surprise visit by the Barry brothers, the script creators. We learned first-hand of the alphabet's impact in the United States and abroad.
 - *"Creating Home Together."* In September, for National Welcoming Week, Cultural Conversations kicked off the program's 11th season featuring themed
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breakout rooms, where stories and inspiration were shared by the community on creativity, promoting inclusion, reducing isolation and navigating uncertainty.

Next Steps

As we move into the 11th season of the program we will continue to work with the community to adapt to a virtual platform and lower barriers of participation that may be technology related. In some respects, moving to a virtual program is like beginning again; it's important to build the trust to welcome the women into a safe space. Guided by Diversity Advantage program goals of more inclusive engagement, we are exploring an alternate day and time of scheduling programs like the consideration of offering of an annual evening forum.
