

Living Room Conversations
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Joan Blades, Living Room Conversations
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Program Description: Dialogue in Complex Times: We have invited Living Room Conversations, an organization providing tools for the public to engage in friendly yet meaningful conversations with those with whom they may disagree, to introduce their model and lead attendees in dialogue. Living Room Conversations strives to increase understanding, reveal common ground and allow people to discuss possible solutions. When people of all walks of life connect, they can begin to bridge the divides that cause separation. Living Room Conversations co-founder, Joan Blades, will join in conversation with Section Chair, Ben Davis, to introduce the living room conversation model, which is based on a simple dialogue structure that does not require a trained facilitator. Following their conversation, the audience will engage in their own conversation. This special Friday afternoon session will provide an opportunity for attendees to reflect on their conference experience around the theme Dispute Resolution in Complex Times and discuss topics such as Power & Gender Equity, Money & Values, and American Culture.

This session highlighted the work of Living Room Conversations, recipient of the JAMS Foundation's 10th Annual Warren Knight Distinguished Service Award. Living Room Conversations is a non-profit organization committed to bridging divides in our communities through dialogue. Co-founder Joan Blades explained that in her earlier work she sought out people with viewpoints different from her own, and in doing so, she gained an appreciation for other perspectives that paved the way for future collaborations. Living Room Conversations grew out of her experience and desire to provide a way for people to connect through meaningful conversations.

Increasing polarization has made engagement between people with differing viewpoints and backgrounds more difficult. However, over the past year and a half, many are recognizing the importance of seeking to understand others. Research shows that facts do not convince people because people tend to decide first and then rationalize. Connection enables people to better hear others even if they disagree.

Living Room Conversation developed a specific model for civil discourse designed for accessibility. Anyone willing to use the structure can become a conversation host. Hosts invite others with diverse opinions and backgrounds to

participate in a conversation about a particular topic. Groups of four to six people gather in living rooms, libraries, restaurants, places of worship, or any other meeting spaces. Online video conversations now make it possible for people across the nation to come together.

The dialogue model includes five rounds of questions. The Living Room Conversations team has created structured topic guides as a resource available through its website, and people can also develop their own questions. Examples of topics include “Guns and Responsibility”, “Democracy, Extremism, and Outliers,” and “Healthcare.” The conversation model includes conversation agreements and a dialogue structure that assist groups in building relationship and listening to one another.

At the ABA Conference session, participants had the opportunity to participate in a conversation concerning one of the following topics: 1) American Culture; 2) Money and Values; and 3) Women, Leadership, and Power. Joan provided each group with a topic guide. At the outset, a woman who had previous experience with Living Room Conversations reminded the audience of neutrals that the goal is to note differences rather than to reach an agreement.

In one of session groups, five people discussed, “American Culture: melting pot, salad bowl or something else?” They began by reading through the conversation agreements, and then started with the first question round by sharing what interested them in the topic. Then they talked about their trusted news sources and views on news. They moved onto the second round aimed at examining the participant’s core values, which included questions about purpose or mission in life and what others might say about what makes them tick. The third round of questions focused specifically on American culture. People reflected on their cultural background and views on American culture. Because of limited time, the group combined rounds four and five and closed with reflections about the process. They opined about the power of hearing people’s stories, need for being authentic, desire for greater diversity, assumptions, and managing perceptions.

At the end of the conversations, session participants reconvened and shared about their experiences. Joan Blades noted that some people do not know people “on the other side,” and that they are creating a tool called mismatch.org to help people connect with people who have differing political views. A session participant commented that she appreciated having deeper conversations that went below the surface with others in her group. Another person mentioned that in the past she worked with the Public Conversations Projects, which focuses on dialogue about divisive issues. From that experience, she learned about the importance of humility, vulnerability, and challenging your own views in this type of dialogue.

One participant, asked for clarity about the meaning of the word “diverse” and how it was being used in the session. Joan acknowledged that Living Room Conversation’s diversity is imperfect but that they strive to include people from the right

and left, with different gender orientations, cultures, and backgrounds. While diversity is open to interpretation, the broader the perspectives, the more opportunity for developing understanding.

In closing, Joan Blades said, “This is yours...You own it...” and encouraged the session participants to have their own Living Room Conversations in order to help improve local and national relations. People can contact her directly at Joan@livingroomconversations.org, and she welcomed them to sign up at livingroomconversations.org for updates and information.