

Bridging the Difference: Strengthening Charlotte Through Conversations

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Charlotte is one of the fastest growing cities in the country and is made up of diverse residents and perspectives. To maintain a healthy community through this growth, it is important to invest in all people, address difficult issues and work to remove barriers. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD), in partnership with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Community Relations, developed an engagement initiative called *Bridging the Difference* which aims to bring the community together for conversations around issues impacting Charlotte. These conversations will cover topics such as diversity, equity and inclusion; police support and accountability; racial healing; immigration; public safety, including schools; access and opportunity; bias and privilege. Creating a space to have productive and transparent dialogue with the community is critical for local government as it seeks to engage at all levels.

Bridging the Difference has three primary goals:

- **Involve:** Involve the community inclusive of all perspectives to engage and understand wants/actions.
- **Understand:** Increase understanding and trust through a series of conversations about police and community relations and public safety.
- **Mitigate:** Mitigate potential challenges/issues in advance of major events with effective

community outreach and interaction.

The first event of the [Bridging the Difference](#) series kicked off in November 2018 and focused on police support and accountability. This topic aligned with CMPD's continued commitment to increase transparency and build trust in all segments of our community. At this event, over 130 community members attended to hear a powerful panel discussion with community leaders and the chief of police. Following the panel discussion, attendees spent time having table conversations to share their personal feelings and experiences related to this topic. To add more interactive engagement, text polling technology was used throughout the event to gauge certain demographics and initial reactions to various panel questions.

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The most recent Bridging the Difference event was included in Charlotte's weeklong celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and it was important that the topic and structure of the event had an overall unique vibe. With this in mind, access and opportunity was chosen as the topic, and the format featured spoken word performers along with a passionate and insightful panel. Each person featured in the program shared his and her own experiences with access and opportunity, or lack thereof, and gave the audience an up-close perspective of why it is so important to provide both to all segments of the community.

One of the panelists was [Dorothy Counts-Scoggins](#), who in 1957 at the age of 15, endured harassment and abuse at a segregated Charlotte high school. She became one of four African-American students who would change the inequality of education in Charlotte and across the country. Hearing her journey and that of the other panelists, all with the backdrop of what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fought for, inspired the audience and caused them to reflect on ways that they could help advance access and opportunity for others. This sentiment was consistently expressed during the audience Q&A portion of the program. In addition to the panel discussion, the moderator sat with the assistant police chief for a one-on-one segment about CMPD programs available for youth and beyond. Social media was used to stream the event and take questions from those who were not able to attend.

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Having dialogue about access and opportunity and the many other topics that contribute to building a stronger community must be coupled with action. What better way to do this than by partnering with local organizations and asking them to make resources, from jobs to legal assistance, available before and after the program. These organizations gladly answered the call and filled the lobby of the event venue with tables and information for more than 150 attendees.

The work to bridge differences throughout Charlotte will take time and commitment from both local

government and the community at-large. What is evident through this series and other engagement opportunities is that across the city, people are ready to be a part of creating a better, stronger Charlotte.

So, what's next? How do you keep the momentum going? Well, you provide opportunities for residents to stay engaged, become ambassadors and give them the tools to continue the conversation in their own circles. In the coming months, the City of Charlotte will provide training for all ambassadors that will cover government 101, mediation, facilitation and ways to assist law enforcement in keeping the community safe.

There is power in conversation, and when people from all segments of a community are engaged, it can lead to amazing outcomes. For more information about Bridging the Difference, visit bridgingthedifferencenc.com.

What are some of the innovative ways that you have encouraged impactful conversations across your community? How have you bridged perspectives?

Tags: CLT, Charlotte, police, community, community relations, collaboration, conversation, resources, access, opportunity, civic engagement, local government, trust.