

Out North Contemporary Art House

Understanding Neighbors: Art-Inspired Dialogue Bridges Diverse Viewpoints About Same-Sex Relationships

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PREFACE

In 2003, *Understanding Neighbors* brought together nearly 100 citizens in Anchorage, Alaska in a month-long series of dialogue sessions to address one of the community's most contentious civic questions: what is the social, moral, and legal place of same-sex couples in our society?

Understanding Neighbors, a collaborative project sponsored by Out North Contemporary Art House in partnership with the Interfaith Council of Anchorage and Alaska Common Ground, aimed to synthesize and test an art-inspired dialogue model that would foster respectful dialogue and mutual understanding among community members holding divergent views on a divisive civic issue. Artists Peter Carpenter, Sara Felder, and Stephan Mazurek created eight performance-based video works derived from interviews with nearly 70 community members to serve as the catalyst for small group dialogues. Using a customized dialogue approach based on the Public

Conversations Project's Power of Dialogue model, the project trained 25 community volunteers to facilitate dialogue sessions. To engage a representative mix of Alaskans with socially conservative, moderate, and liberal viewpoints on this emotionally charged topic, the project implemented a broad-based recruitment plan and media strategy. The project also engaged a social research team to evaluate the impact of the arts-based dialogue experience on community members. *Understanding Neighbors* concluded with a multimedia work-in-progress performance reflecting the artists' experiences of the community dialogues and lessons learned.

This case study reveals project organizers' discoveries about employing art with a "point of view" in dialogues, as well as about tensions between creative autonomy and civic intent in creating the artistic work. It chronicles attempts to establish neutrality and credibility in the eyes of the community, and describes the obstacles to gaining



Understanding Neighbors artists Peter Carpenter and Sara Felder in *Ambivalence*, a video created for the dialogue groups, performed by Carpenter and Felder, filmed by Stephan Mazurek. Photo © Stephen Mazurek.

participation of the full spectrum of religious and political viewpoints on the topic of same-sex relationships. Finally, given Out North's activist-oriented leadership and previous work, this case study also examines the benefits and pitfalls of Out North's effort to position itself as a more neutral space in order to encourage diverse participation, and the key questions that this prompted about civic dialogue as a means to achieve Out North's vision for social change in its community.

WHAT IS THE PLACE OF SAME-SEX COUPLES IN OUR SOCIETY?

OUT NORTH POSES THE QUESTION ALASKANS DIDN'T WISH TO ASK

After we first submitted our Intent to Apply to engage our community about same-sex relationships, we were asked by an [Animating Democracy] reviewer "if we were inspired or just crazy." We know it's a tough matter to discuss, but that's why we're doing this work.¹

Out North: A Catalyst for Creating Art, Community, and Change

Out North Contemporary Art House in Anchorage, Alaska, is a multidisciplinary cultural center that commissions, produces, and presents a vibrant mix of contemporary visual, media, literary, and performing artworks by local and guest artists. Founded in 1985 as an all-volunteer group producing and touring plays concerned with gay and lesbian issues, Out North has evolved into a professional nonprofit arts, educational, and community development organization that seeks "to create art, community, and change." To realize its mission, Out North's programming frequently tackles social and cultural issues affecting local residents, particularly Anchorage's lower-income and ethnically diverse populations. Out North's critically acclaimed productions, which often explore community concerns around race, sexuality, and/or class, are always thought-provoking, and at times controversial. To connect theatergoers more meaningfully with artists' work and foster community among diverse Alaskans audiences, Out North hosts residencies with local and guest artists that engage Anchorage residents in community-based art experiences. Out North is also nationally recognized for its model arts and literacy programs for at-risk youth.

While Out North's unwavering commitment to presenting daring artistic endeavors that explore challenging, often contentious, societal concerns has on occasion put it at odds with certain audiences and public funding agencies, the organization has earned the respect and appreciation of artists and the broader Alaskan community. In 1996 the Alaska Legislature honored Out North with a citation recognizing "the leading role Out North continues to play in promoting the artistic, economic, educational, and cultural development of our communities." Performance artist and local resident Jill Bess Neimeyer describes Out North's singular place in the Anchorage community:

We have many arts organizations in this city that provide high quality music, dance, and theater to Anchorage audiences and artists alike. But Out North is different; Out North is special. Out North has consistently been the organization willing to take risks not just with local artists, but with outside artists doing daring new works. Out North has been the organization willing to teach not just the youth of Anchorage, but at-risk youth whose families might not otherwise have the money for special theater programs. Out

¹ Out North's proposal to Animating Democracy, 2000

North has been willing to challenge not only their audiences but this community with their vision of tolerance and cultural diversity.²

From “Pancake Gatherings” to Community-wide Dialogues: The Genesis of *Understanding Neighbors*

Out North’s interest in engaging Anchorage residents in an exploration of same-sex relationships responds to the community’s continuing struggles with this divisive civic issue, as well as the personal experience of co-directors Jay Brause and Gene Dugan. As Brause recalls, the *Understanding Neighbors* project emanated out of the “recurring, intense controversy in Anchorage” in the mid-1990s regarding the legal, moral, and cultural place of same-sex couples in the community.³ That controversy was reignited in 1996 by a lawsuit filed by Brause and Dugan that sought equal legal rights for same-sex relationships. While the suit was successful in the lower court and was assigned for trial in the Alaskan Supreme Court, the Alaskan Legislature advanced a ballot measure for public vote in 1998 that called for a constitutional limitation of marriage to preclude recognition of same-sex couples. Leading up to the vote, both sides of the ballot issue waged vigorous, highly polarizing campaigns. In the final vote, the ballot measure was adopted 68 percent to 32 percent.

While deeply disappointed by the ballot’s passage, Brause and Dugan were equally frustrated by the contentious, deleterious nature of public debate surrounding the ballot vote and, more broadly, the topic of same-sex couples. Recalls Brause, “In the entire time those issues were being discussed, no one was listening to each other. It was far too easy to see the other as the enemy. And I know from my work in arts and culture that unless people have a chance to experience each other firsthand there is no hope for understanding.”⁴

In search of new ways to advance the issue of same-sex relationships through a more constructive public forum, Brause became involved in 1999 with the work of the Reverend Glen Groth, a family friend and retired Lutheran pastor, who organized informal gatherings of clergy and lay people, including gay men and lesbians, to talk about family life and same-sex issues. Believing that Alaskans holding diverse viewpoints would better understand each other if given the opportunity to tell their personal stories, Groth hosted these informal gatherings at his home, often serving his guests pancakes, to inspire respectful conversation and listening. Says Shirley Mae Springer Staten, the project coordinator for *Understanding Neighbors*, “[Groth would] say ‘Come over and let me make you some pancakes,’ and around the pancakes they would have this discussion. People learned to listen to each other in a different kind of way.”⁵

Brause and Dugan were moved by the power of Groth’s “pancake gatherings” to foster thoughtful discussions among people of diverse opinions and values, and sought to build on these efforts by developing a project for Out North in which challenging art paired with structured, listening-focused dialogue would enhance community understanding about the lives and concerns of same-sex couples and contribute to greater insight and healing. Their vision formed the basis of *Understanding Neighbors*, an arts-based civic dialogue project aimed at encouraging a community-wide conversation about the place of same-sex couples in Alaskan society.

² Jill Bess Neimeyer, “Out North Deserves Community Support: One artist reflects on the value of taking risks,” *The Anchorage Press*, Nov. 27-Dec. 3, 1997, Vol. 6, Ed. 47

³ Out North Final Report to Animating Democracy, 2003. Unless otherwise noted, quotes from key participants are drawn from Out North reports to Animating Democracy.

⁴ Pamela Cravez, “Art & Dialogue,” *Art Matters*, February 2003, p. 13.

⁵ Ibid, p. 13.

In response to Animating Democracy’s call for proposals in 2000, Out North fleshed out *Understanding Neighbors*’ complex architecture and implementation plan. The project would commission a team of artists to create performance and video works created from interviews with 60-70 community members. These new artworks would be used to stimulate facilitated discussions in small group dialogues that would convene regularly over several months. These dialogue groups, comprised of community members from all walks of life, would address the question: what is the social, moral, and legal place of same-sex couples in our society? The project would conclude with a multimedia work-in-progress performance based on the artists’ perceptions of the community dialogue experience.

Establishing a neutral, credible foundation for *Understanding Neighbors* was a key consideration for the project’s design. In view of the highly polarized and emotionally charged public debate that preceded Anchorage’s 1998 ballot vote, Out North realized that providing participants with a “safe space” conducive to respectful discussion and non-judgmental listening was paramount to the project’s success. Moreover, *Understanding Neighbors* was predicated on the participation of a diverse mix of “neighbors” representing the full spectrum of religious and political viewpoints on the topic of same-sex relationships. As the project’s sole sponsor, Out North wisely acknowledged that some community members might be deterred from participating in *Understanding Neighbors* because they perceive Out North and, by extension, the project as having a particular point of view on the topic.

To establish a neutral base for *Understanding Neighbors*, Out North partnered with two respected Anchorage groups to share responsibility for the project’s governance and implementation: the Interfaith Council of Anchorage, an ecumenical network of faith communities; and Alaska Common Ground, a nonpartisan, all-volunteer civic membership organization that serves as a forum for addressing public policy issues. The planners envisioned that this partnership would signal to community members—especially gay/lesbian people and religious conservatives—the project’s genuine commitment to neutrality and inclusion of diverse opinions on the topic of same-sex relationships. While this carefully constructed collaboration enhanced the project’s credibility in the eyes of the Anchorage community, it also set the stage for unanticipated tensions about power sharing and concerns about visibility that Out North would wrestle with throughout the project.

Artistic and Dialogic Interests

Understanding Neighbors’ primary artistic intent was to commission a team of artists to create multidisciplinary artworks that would serve as the stimulus for community-wide dialogue on the project’s civic question. Specifically, the artistic team would create six to eight short performance-based video works to be used as catalysts for the project’s small group dialogues. Incorporating interviews with Alaskans and the artists’ own story-telling performances, these video works would explore and illuminate a range of issues around same-sex relationships. To close *Understanding Neighbors*, the artistic team would also create a multimedia work-in-progress performance reflecting the artists’ experiences of the community dialogues, interviews and lessons learned.

Motivated by the desire to foster new understanding among the people of Anchorage at a scale that made a difference, Out North and partners set forth an ambitious dialogue agenda: to engage 200 to 250 Anchorage community members holding diverse viewpoints in constructive, respectful dialogue about the place of same-sex couples in Alaskan society. To accomplish that goal, the project would employ a customized dialogue approach based on the Power of Dialogue model developed by Public Conversations Project (PCP), a Massachusetts-based group

promoting “constructive conversations among those who have differing values, world views, and positions about divisive public issues.”⁶ The Power of Dialogue process, which emphasizes dialogue leading to mutual understanding and relationship building rather than agreements or solutions, was well suited to the project’s overall dialogue goal of building reciprocal bridges of understanding among community members.

To implement the dialogue component, the project would engage a professional dialogue consultant to train a team of 40 community volunteers who would facilitate 20 small group dialogues. Each dialogue group of 10 to 15 community members would convene once a week over six consecutive weeks.

Organizers placed great importance on an evaluation plan to test the project’s hypothesis that through an arts-based civic dialogue process: 1) participants would be more comfortable discussing controversial issues with others holding different points of view; and 2) the art component of the dialogue process would contribute significantly to this increase in comfort. A social research team would be engaged to conduct focus groups and create surveys to measure changes in participants’ pre- and post-meeting attitudes. The research team would analyze this data to determine the degree to which participants became more comfortable over time discussing same-sex relationships with those holding differing viewpoints. The research team would also assess the extent to which the artists’ work impacted participants’ shift in attitudes.

Understanding Neighbors also hoped to validate and gain greater insight into the role of art in the dialogic process and its capacity to inspire constructive dialogue and open listening among people whose differences have led to polarization and stereotyping. More broadly, the project sought to test whether art-inspired dialogue can help other communities like Anchorage better understand complex, emotion-charged issues and each other.

FINDING A WAY TOWARD CONVERSATION THROUGH STORY: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UNDERSTANDING NEIGHBORS

Although I will never know the depth of understanding that happened in these four Thursdays, I witnessed some profound moments... I saw 11 people making courageous efforts to understand each other and share their unique stories. Author Terry Tempest Williams asks, “How are we to find our way toward conversation? For me, the answer has always been through story. Story bypasses rhetoric and pierces the heart. Story...returns us to our highest and deepest selves, when we remember what it means to be human living in place with our neighbors.” By witnessing the stories of 11 courageous “neighbors,” I was returned to a place of hope, faith, and trust in the goodness and humanness of us all.

—Frankie Barker, volunteer dialogue facilitator,
Understanding Neighbors

⁶ Project organizers carefully considered a range of dialogue approaches for use by *Understanding Neighbors*, including the solution-oriented dialogue model developed by the Connecticut-based Study Circles Resource Center. The Study Circles approach places emphasis on engaging whole communities in productive dialogue around critical social and political issues leading to action and change. Given the focus on fostering tolerance and understanding rather than policy change, organizers viewed the Public Conversations model as better suited to this goal.

Support from Animating Democracy in 2001 provided the *Understanding Neighbors* project with the opportunity and initial resources to bring the vision of Groth and Brause to fruition. However, two weeks after receiving notification of Animating Democracy's award, *Understanding Neighbors* experienced an early setback when the project's visionary, Pastor Groth, unexpectedly died. The project owed much to Groth's inspired approach to dialogue, as well as his personal credibility and reputation as a "bridge-builder." The loss of Groth left many in Anchorage asking who would have the courage to pick up this work? With a renewed sense of purpose, the *Understanding Neighbors* partners answered that question by setting into motion a complex and dynamic artistic and dialogic process.

Project Partners and Roles

To steer the project's two-year implementation, project partners Out North, Alaska Common Ground, and the Interfaith Council of Anchorage formed the Understanding Neighbors Coordinating Committee, a governing entity having at least two representatives from each organization.

The coordinating committee's responsibilities included hiring project staff and contract professionals, fundraising, and oversight of participant recruitment for dialogue groups. Out North continued to serve as the project's fiscal agent and to oversee the artists' work. To aid the coordinating committee in exercising centralized, collective leadership over *Understanding Neighbors*, Brause made the considered choice to step back from the project and continue his involvement through Out North's committee representatives.

To carry out its work, the coordinating committee hired Shirley Mae Springer Staten, an Anchorage-based community organizer and actor/storyteller, to serve as full-time project coordinator. Kim-Marie Walker joined Staten as part-time project assistant/outreach developer. To maintain the project's neutrality, the coordinating committee established a separate and independent office.

To advance the project's dialogue activities, the coordinating committee retained Ann McBroom, a Seattle-based principal consultant with Public Conversations Project (PCP), to devise and conduct dialogue training based on PCP's Power of Dialogue methodology for the community volunteers, as well as for the artistic team and coordinating committee.

To conduct the project's research and evaluation component, the coordinating committee initially contracted Dr. Nancy Andes, director of the Center for Community Engagement & Learning at the University of Alaska Anchorage, to devise and implement an evaluation plan based on a participatory action research model. When Andes unexpectedly withdrew from the project three weeks before the start of the dialogue sessions, the Powers Action Research Group, an Alaska-based consortium of scholar practitioners specializing in research, assessment, and evaluation of educational programs, agreed to complete the evaluation based on Andes' original design.

Led by project curator Gene Dugan, the three-person artistic team included solo theater artist and professional juggler Sara Felder (San Francisco, CA); dance/movement artist Peter Carpenter (Los Angeles, CA); and filmmaker Stephan Mazurek (Chicago, IL). These highly regarded artists, all of whom have had their work presented by Out North, were chosen for their respective creative talents and the innovative artistic approaches they brought to the project. Carpenter and Mazurek had previously collaborated through their association with XSIGHT! Performance Group, a Chicago-based troupe that combines dance, theater, and performance art. Felder's

acclaimed *June Bride*, an autobiographical solo performance about a traditional Jewish lesbian wedding, received its world premiere at Out North in 1995.

While all three artists collaborated on conceptualizing and shaping the final artistic products, Felder and Carpenter deployed their talents as performers and storytellers to create performance “vignettes” animating key themes drawn from the interviews with community members. Mazurek provided video and filmmaking skills for development of the artistic works; he also contributed to the video documentation of the project’s dialogue activities.

Key Artistic and Dialogic Activities

Over the project’s two-year trajectory, the artistic and dialogue components unfolded concurrently along independent, overlapping tracks. This bifurcated approach to implementation stemmed in part from the project’s initial assumption that artistic production and dialogue facilitation were two distinct enterprises requiring specialized expertise; it was later reinforced by the project’s organizational structure, in which the coordinating committee took responsibility for executing the dialogue component while Out North directed the artistic component.

Artists’ development of video works

To realize *Understanding Neighbors’* artistic component, the artistic team pursued the following activities leading up to the launch of the project’s Community Dialogue Sessions in February 2003: artists’ dialogue training; videotaped interviews with community members; development and videotaping of performance vignettes; creation of eight catalyst videos; and development of multimedia work-in-process performance.

In preparation for the interviewing process, the artistic team participated in fall 2001 in an introduction to the Power of Dialogue training conducted by dialogue consultant Ann McBroom. To determine the tone and form the videos might take, the artists also discussed with McBroom the dialogue format and how the art would be used in the dialogues. Drawing on techniques from the dialogue training session, the artists crafted dialogue questions to guide the interview process. They conducted videotaped interviews with 68 community members throughout south central Alaska. The interviewees reflected a diverse mix of Alaskans from all walks of life: traditional conservatives, representatives of diverse ethnic groups, members of the LGBT community, clergy, seniors, and teens.

Following the interview process, the artists met in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Anchorage for several working sessions to create and rehearse the performance pieces for videotaping. In between these face-to-face working sessions, members of the artistic team—based in different cities—corresponded and critiqued their original scripts via e-mail. Out of that work, the artistic team created 20 video clips containing performance presentations.

In spring 2002, the artists met with the coordinating committee on two occasions to share progress on the evolving videos and discuss initial ideas about how the art would be represented in a structured dialogue setting. At the first session, the artists screened selected interviews with Alaskan residents and described how they would be developing performances and splicing footage of selected video interviews to create video “vignettes” of eight to 15 minutes in length. At the second session, artists Carpenter and Felder performed for the coordinating committee several works-in-process that later became integral to the project in their final video forms: “Identity,” “Being Different,” “Ambivalence,” and “Clipped.” Reflecting on these sessions with

the artists, coordinating committee member Taylor Brelsford describes his initial impressions of the video interviews and evolving artworks:

We saw some segments from the recorded interviews in Anchorage (the “talking head art”) and the first sketches of the performances named “Identity” and “Clipped.” Seeing the “talking heads,” what struck me was the eloquence, and even the “poetry,” of the speakers as they talked about their lives, their families, their loves, their church experiences. The performance “Identity” moved me in gentleness and humor with which it addressed how identities are multifaceted, while society at large might tend to lock onto and judge just a single dimension of a person’s being. The early sketch of the dance “Clipped” was actually quite confusing to me. It was, of course, a fairly abstract form of expression, in which the tension of the movement was clear, and I knew from Peter’s introduction that it would be placed in a church.

In fall 2002, the coordinating committee organized pilot dialogues which used three of the videos: “Being Different,” a video with excerpts from interviews with community members; “Identity,” a piece with a juggling sequence that explored identity/being different; and “Clipped,” a piece that incorporated modern dance within a church setting, overdubbed with music and oration by a preacher. Each video was followed by a dialogue session. The pilot dialogues yielded important insights about the potential of these videos to inspire meaningful discussion around the project’s civic question. As Brelsford recalls:

During the pilot dialogues in fall 2002, I saw the final versions of the three pieces: “talking heads” on “Being Different;” the performance “Identity,” now placed on stage and in Peter’s apartment; and the dance, “Clipped,” now placed in a church and accompanied by a wonderful musical line, with particularly resonant horns. As the pilot group on these three pieces proceeded, I was not at all surprised that “Being Different” and “Identity” has such a powerful effect in setting up very powerful sharing among participants... I was surprised, however, at how rich the dance “Clipped” turned out to be as a stimulus to dialogue. Of particular note, many of us in the pilot seemed unsure of the artist’s message in the dance—some observed tension, I liked the power of the music, some were struck by the harshness of the voice-over preacher’s comments, and others noted that the dancer seemed to struggle to escape, and yet was pulled back towards the sacristy. The discussion on this was quite probing, and I think it was clear that all of us gained important insights into the art through the comments of the group. It also stimulated much discussion of the church/religious dimension of the project question regarding the moral, legal, and cultural place of same-sex couples in our community.

A couple of videos were screened but not followed by dialogue to get feedback on their usefulness for future dialogue sessions: “Dr. Verner Von Verner,” in which artist Sara Felder plays a Freud-like figure who dispenses homophobic observations and engages doll-like characters to further advance stereotypic homophobia; and “Homosexuality and Religion,” a “talking head” video of selected individuals interviewed by the artists. An important observation for the artistic team that emerged out of the post-pilot dialogue debriefing session was the need to create a “couples” video piece in order to generate dialogue more central to the project’s question.

By early 2003, the artistic team completed eight videos for use in the community dialogues sessions: “Clipped,” “Being Different,” “The First Time,” “Identity,” “Legal Rights,” “Ambivalence,” “Vocabulary,” and “Desire.” The artists planned to incorporate unused footage

from the artists' interviews with community members and performances into the multimedia work-in-progress.

Development and implementation of arts-based dialogue sessions

To realize *Understanding Neighbors'* dialogue component, project staff undertook a year-long development and implementation process that culminated in the project's Community Dialogue Sessions held in February and March 2003. Key activities included: community "mapping;" implementation of a public relations plan; recruitment of volunteer facilitators and dialogue participants; pilot dialogue sessions; training of facilitators; dialogue design workshops; implementation of community dialogue sessions; and research/evaluation of the project's arts-based process.

In preparation for the dialogues, the coordinating committee and staff completed in spring 2002 PCP's two-day Power of Dialogue method training conducted by McBroom. The training grounded the committee members and staff in PCP's methodology, which stages dialogue to move from entry and explorative questions to Appreciative Inquiry.⁷ The training helped the coordinating committee members and staff to refine their collective understanding of "dialogue" and provided them with a fuller understanding of the project's scope and implementation in the community.



An *Understanding Neighbors* test dialogue group held at Out North. Photo © Jay Brause.

"Mapping" the Anchorage community

In spring 2002, the project undertook a four-month process of community "mapping." This PCP-based technique used a modified interview process to explore how individuals and organizations within the community perceive conflict related to the moral, legal, and cultural place of same-sex couples. Besides informing the design of the dialogues, the mapping also served to build a base for recruitment of volunteer facilitators and dialogue participants, as well as lay the groundwork for community outreach and public relations. The coordinating committee members and staff conducted one-on-one interviews with 24 individuals representing a broad swath of the community: gays and lesbians, politicians, pastors, laypersons of the church, religious conservatives, and liberals. (See Appendix I for the questions used in mapping interviews.) Project staff compared earlier community canvassing, which queried people about their views on same-sex issues, with the PCP mapping strategy, which focused on perceptions about how conflict around same-sex issues manifests itself.

In our initial canvassing of the community, we wanted to get a pulse on thoughts and feelings about the issues of same-sex couples. There are many suspicions about the topic. A variety of questions posed [by interviewees] included: "Who are the stakeholders for the project?;" and "Why was the project posing this question?" Most often the questions were: "What's in it for me?" and "Are you going to lobby for same-

⁷ Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organization development methodology devised by David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney. AI is based on the assumption that inquiry into and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams is itself transformational.

sex marriage?” These questions were asked by a variety of members in our community including gays and lesbians.

A more constructive canvassing of the community was done by PCP’s mapping process. More than 20 individuals from many sectors of the community were systematically asked, “are you aware of any conflicts within your (community, organization, and congregation) related to the moral, legal, and cultural place of same-sex couples? Mapping supported the recruitment of individuals for the pilot dialogue. It also helped get the word out on a grassroots level.

Concurrent to community “mapping,” project staff devised and launched a comprehensive, multi-pronged public relations plan to recruit community facilitators and dialogue participants, as well as to effectively position the project within the community. Recruitment efforts included: radio broadcasts of public service announcements; publication of project brochure and newsletter; advertisements in church news bulletins and other community newsletters; placement of articles in local newspapers; and one-on-one outreach to personal friends and family members.

The project also established a diverse network of project stakeholders, which included community-based groups and state and national membership organizations, such as: Healing Racism of Anchorage, the local chapter of Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays, National Association of Social Workers, ACLU, Alaska Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, Alaska Dispute Settlement Association, and several church groups. Project staff solicited the support of project stakeholders to disseminate information to their membership. The combined efforts of community “mapping” and public relations activities resulted in a core database of 195 persons indicating their interest in participating as facilitator or dialogue participant.

Restructuring the dialogue component

Summer 2002 marked a critical turning point in the project’s development and implementation. In the face of an acute budget crisis, the coordinating committee and Out North’s board, as the project’s fiduciary authority, redirected project staff efforts from community outreach to fundraising. Staff researched and submitted grant proposals to potential funding agencies; committee members made appeals to their memberships. Several individuals from the coordinating committee and Out North’s executive board made significant contributions to close the project’s budget gap.

In addition to stepping up fundraising efforts, *Understanding Neighbors* project coordinator Shirley Mae Springer Staten presented to the coordinating committee a scaled-back version of the project’s dialogue component and a streamlined budget. The coordinating committee approved a restructuring plan that cut back the number and duration of the Community Dialogue Sessions, reduced the number of dialogue groups from 20 to 12, and the number of dialogue facilitators from 40 to 24.

Piloting the arts-based dialogue process

The coordinating committee organized a pilot dialogue to test the arts-based dialogue process and revise it collaboratively with community participants, artists, and project staff. Convened over two days in October 2002, the pilot involved 18 community members divided into two separate focus groups. McBroom facilitated one group and coordinating committee member and professional mediator Mia Oxley facilitated the other. Each focus group viewed one of the catalyst videos and then engaged in the dialogue process; this sequence was repeated three times

over the course of the pilot session using three videos (“Being Different,” Identity,” and “Clipped”). Participants and facilitators then met for a two-hour debriefing to obtain participants’ feedback on their experience, and to elicit responses to two additional videos (“Dr. Verner Von Verner” and “Homosexuality and Religion”) under consideration for use in the community dialogue sessions. In addition to the debriefing session, participants and facilitators completed survey forms four weeks after the pilot dialogue sessions to capture individuals’ reflections on the arts-based process.

A number of important observations emerged that informed the development and implementation of the dialogue component. First, feedback affirmed the project’s overall arts-based dialogue structure was, in the words of project staff, “reliable, efficient, and, despite some suspicion about a hidden agenda, community members were willing to fully participate.” Most pilot dialogue participants agreed that the videos were an essential and positive element in the dialogue, moving it to different levels of understanding about same-sex relationships. As one participant put it, “[the art] focused the discussions and allowed us to go deeper into personal stories.” In addition, they noted that sharing of different viewpoints on the art enriched the overall dialogue experience.

Pilot participants suggested that the creation of a “couples”-focused video would help generate dialogue more central to the project’s question about the place of same-sex couples in society. They also noted that the absence in the pilot dialogue groups of community members holding conservative Christian viewpoints, especially those individuals opposing same-sex relationships diminished the possibilities for a fuller discussion and deeper understanding. To ensure greater representation of conservative voices in the forthcoming Community Dialogue Sessions, project staff initiated a second round of recruitment activities in January 2003; those efforts placed special emphasis on targeting local churches through personal invitations to congregations and placement of project information in church bulletins and newsletters.

Facilitator training and dialogue design workshops

In late January 2003, 22 community volunteers participated in an intensive three-day facilitator training led by McBroom and Oxley. With experience in conflict resolution, Brelsford assisted as facilitator coach. Community volunteers were identified and selected based on submission of a written application and interviews conducted by McBroom. Nearly all facilitators had professional backgrounds in conflict resolution, counseling, and/or mediation. The training grounded facilitators in the principles and elements of PCP’s dialogue approach and introduced them to the project’s intentions and design. In addition, facilitators participated in a mock dialogue session and learned techniques to conduct phone interviews with their assigned dialogue participants prior to dialogue sessions.

To finalize the design of the four community dialogue sessions, the dialogue team convened facilitators in mid-February. Key activities included: discussion around neutrality issues; introduction to performance videos; practice mock dialogue sessions; and crafting appreciative inquiries based on facilitators’ phone interviews with their participants. To plan for the dialogue sessions, trainers assigned co-facilitator pairs to design dialogue entry, opening, inquiry, and closing details. To assess challenges that might occur during actual facilitation, facilitators role-played potential conflicts and interventions as they might happen at different times in a dialogue session (See Appendix II, Structure of *Understanding Neighbors* Dialogue Session, for a description of one *Understanding Neighbors* dialogue).

Implementation of community dialogue sessions

Ninety participants who self-identified as “conservatives,” “moderates,” and “liberals” were divided into 12 dialogue groups, each led by co-facilitators. McBroom and Oxley chose the artwork/performance videos shown in the first three dialogues and facilitators chose the video for the last session based on their sense of which would be most useful for their group. The dialogue groups met between February and March 2003 for four two-hour sessions scheduled by each group. The groups convened at a variety of host sites throughout Anchorage: churches, business offices, schools, and a community wellness center. Most of the groups met during weekday evenings but several met during the day and one convened on Sunday afternoons.

Following each of the dialogue sessions, the facilitators summarized dialogue group experiences in weekly reflections, documenting what worked or didn’t work in the session and what were the areas of agreement and/or disagreement for their groups. A facilitators’ debriefing on March 31, 2003 allowed people to discuss more fully their overall observations and impressions about the community dialogue process. Facilitators also provided individual written reflections on the role, value, and impact of the art in the dialogue process.

Measuring the impact of Understanding Neighbors’ arts-based dialogue process

To assess the impact of the arts-based dialogue experience on community members, the project’s research team formulated and implemented a research/evaluation plan to answer two central questions: Are the participants changed by the arts-based civic dialogue experience and, if so, how? And what role did art play in this change? In addition to shedding light on these questions, the research and evaluation aimed to capture a broader, more textured view of the participant experience.



Understanding Neighbors artist Peter Carpenter in *Clipped*, a video performance created for the dialogue groups by Peter Carpenter and Stephan Mazurek. Photo © Stephen Mazurek.

Concurrent to, and following the implementation of, the Community Dialogue Sessions, the research team deployed several evaluation tools—surveys, focus groups, and one-to-one interviews with a representative sampling of participants. The participants completed a pre-dialogue survey designed to ascertain their comfort level and familiarity in the three key areas: topic of same-sex couples; controversial conversation; and art as a medium for stimulating dialogue. A post-dialogue survey was distributed to all participants at the fourth and final dialogue session to measure shifts in those areas. In addition, the research

team recruited 32 dialogue participants to participate in two focus groups. Finally, the research team conducted eight in-depth interviews to further understand and validate the data gathered during the focus groups.

As outlined in its final report to the project partners, the research team had mixed findings about the project’s stated hypothesis, which was that through the arts-based dialogue process participants would be more comfortable discussing controversial issues with others holding different points of view, and the art component of the dialogue process would contribute significantly to this increase in comfort. While the research data amply documented that most participants experienced the arts-based dialogue process as a useful tool for discussing controversial topics, the research team could not make definitive conclusions about the first part of the project hypothesis. This was due in part to the fact that the

respondents—all of whom self-selected to be part of the project—already had from the outset a relatively high comfort level discussing controversial topics, including the topic of same-sex couples. Another mitigating factor was that the dialogue groups lacked the diversity of opinions regarding same-sex couples necessary to test the first part of the hypothesis. With regard to the second part of the project hypothesis, the research team concluded that the art served to provide context and focus discussions at the beginning of the dialogue process. Due to the lack of diversity of opinion among participants, however, it was unclear whether or not the art served to increase participants' comfort level in discussing controversial issues with others holding divergent viewpoints.

Understanding Neighbors' Coda: "A House with Many Rooms"

Understanding Neighbors concluded at Out North with the spring 2003 presentation of the artists' work-in-progress multimedia performance of "A House with Many Rooms." Many of the project's staff, facilitators, and dialogue participants attended. The 60-minute interactive performance interspersed video clips—excerpts from catalyst videos and new pieces—with moments of humor, dance, juggling, and monologues performed by Felder and Carpenter to reflect the artistic team's observations of the dialogue process and their personal reflections about the project.

The preparation of this work-in-progress and subsequent performance was cathartic for the artists, as it gave them a real chance to be seen and heard by both the public and facilitators in the project. The artists and Out North staff felt that this performance piece, if it had been deeply examined with the project staff and facilitators, would have led to many constructive insights for the future of this kind of arts-based dialogue work.

OUTCOMES AND ANALYSIS

From the time Glen [Groth] and I started this project to pose a question others didn't wish to ask, Out North moved from the process of debate to dialogue; from governance that was unitary to shared; from organizational spotlight to footlight; from staffing that was internal to external; from art that was challenging to questioning—all to create a neutral base from which to welcome conservative participants to dialogue. Yet with all these changes made, we found that conservative people still participated in small numbers. As I consider next steps for Out North, I wonder whether civic dialogue is an appropriate tool for a minority people when their opponents haven't asked to sit down and talk.

—Jay Brause

Artistic Outcomes

Overall, the project's primary artistic intent—to create insightful, stimulating videos to catalyze dialogue on same-sex issues—was realized on many levels. From an artistic standpoint, the artists skillfully wove the voices of community members culled from the interview process with their own artistry as performers and storytellers to create eight aesthetically compelling and thought-provoking videos. Furthermore, these artworks proved to be a potent tool in stimulating dialogue by triggering dialogue participants' personal experiences, stories, and opinions on the topic of same-sex issues. And, as facilitator Jackie Buckley describes, the artwork invited participants to contemplate viewpoints other than their own:

The videos had the effect on participants that we anticipated they would have; namely, they provided a stimulus that inspired agreement, disagreement, contemplation, concern, and a wide range of emotions that were stirred. While the conversations rarely invoked the video images or sounds, except in passing references, they engaged the observers and invited reflection based on stories other than their own. The video had a voice in the group. Once that voice had been expressed the questions raised by participants seemed to frequently consider the video “character” point of view.

Was the artwork biased or a “participant” in dialogue?

While functioning as a powerful stimulus for dialogue, the videos also raised intriguing questions about the fundamental nature of art in relation to the project’s concerns about neutrality. In carrying out their creative role in the project, the artists crafted videos reflective of their aesthetic interests as well as personal experiences and viewpoints about same-sex issues. Consequently a “point of view” was inherent in the artwork—one that tended to identify with and highlight gay and lesbian perspectives. That the artwork had a “point of view” was initially troubling for the project partners, staff, and facilitators, given their commitment to establish neutrality in the dialogue groups and create a non-judgmental environment in which participants felt comfortable to tell their stories and listen to others’ stories. Project staff and facilitators struggled with the dilemma of introducing into a “neutral” dialogue process artwork that many perceived as biased.

[As] the facilitator training took place, some were troubled that the artwork plainly empathized with the struggles of lesbian and gay persons. Most facilitators grew comfortable framing the artwork as “having a point of view” and “representing a voice” in the dialogue process, but some continued to see the art as plainly biased. Understandably, the artists responded that as gay and lesbian people themselves, it would be inappropriate to try to speak from a point of view outside their own experience. Unlike a play, this was a work based on personal voice and that was a central factor for the creation of the work.

Many dialogue participants perceived the artwork as partial toward gay and lesbian perspectives, though they did not feel this bias detracted from the dialogue process. Surprisingly, dialogue participants holding conservative Christian viewpoints shared the same perspective. As a group of dialogue participants from the Abbot Loop Community Church commented, “We did feel the videos were slanted (encouraging acceptance of homosexuality), but not so much that the process was harmed.” Other dialogue participants concurred that the artwork’s slant toward one side of the same-sex issue was inconsequential in terms of the project’s concerns for neutrality. However, they suggested that artwork representing a multiplicity of viewpoints would have made for a more stimulating discussion. Says facilitator Laura Bain:

The feedback from participants was that the “art” was too biased on one side and did not have equal dialogue on the topic. This was brought up by one of the gay participants. They felt that it would have been more stimulating for discussion if it [the art] had offered more viewpoints.

One of the project’s most intriguing and unexpected discoveries was the way “biased” artwork, or art with a point of view on the topic, functioned positively in the dialogue process. As many of the facilitators observed, the artists’ work was seen as another “person” in the room—a voice that invited dialogue participants to consider a perspective beyond their own personal experiences and opinions. And, as facilitator Jennifer Esterl observed, the artwork’s role as

“participant” in the dialogue process brought forth “minority” viewpoints underrepresented in the dialogue group’s participant make-up.

One of the things I noticed in our dialogue group is that the videos provided an outlet for the more marginalized voice. It worked well to use the suggestion that the videos be seen as “another participant,” especially because they ended up serving as an ally for the one gay male in our group. I think they alleviated some of the burden and pressure on him to provide the viewpoints of the whole gay and lesbian community.

While the project unearthed fascinating insights into the interplay between art with a “point of view” and dialogue, it left many unresolved questions about the nature of art in effecting neutrality in dialogue. How important—or even possible—is “neutral” art for effecting “neutrality” in dialogue? Does art with “a point of view” diminish or enhance the possibility for “neutral” dialogue?

Finding balance in the project’s art-dialogue equation

Fully integrating the art and dialogue components formed one of the project’s greatest challenges. By virtue of the project’s design, the artistic team operated with considerable autonomy in the creation of the catalyst videos. While this gave the artistic team free rein to create videos as they saw fit, it also unintentionally circumscribed the artists’ role in design and implementation of the dialogue component. Consequently, the artistic team was challenged to insert its voice in the dialogue design process. More broadly, the artistic team struggled for equal footing and presence in a project that, as it unfolded, placed increasing emphasis on the dialogue process.

The “disconnect” between the art and dialogue components was reinforced by the absence of direct, ongoing communication between the artists and the coordinating committee and dialogue team. The artists felt largely “left out of the loop” about the project’s core purpose and activities, especially about how the art would be used in the dialogue sessions—information that would have informed the creation of the videos. Carpenter describes the artistic team’s frustration about the dialogue team’s selection of the catalyst videos:

After an informal training in the Public Conversations Project dialogue model by the project’s dialogue consultant [Ann McBroom], the artistic team asked for her guidance and suggestions as to the tone and form the catalyst videos might take. She stressed that the videos should be artist-driven and that the artists should not worry about the principles of dialogue in their creation. Unfortunately, many of the videos were not chosen for use in the dialogue groups precisely because of an incompatibility between the tone and/or content of the art and the purpose of art in the dialogue sessions... I actually feel that [McBroom] was acting under the assumptions of the project: that experts should exercise control over their areas of knowledge. Unfortunately, (and as is often the case) this project placed the artistic team in a subordinate role to the role of dialogue.

Carpenter also points out that the videos could have been used to greater effect had the dialogue team received guidance from the artistic team about how art conveys meaning:

Another frustration of the artistic team came when we were sent questions that were asked during the dialogue groups. Based on the questions that we were sent, there seemed to be very little attention paid to the content of the videos and/or the questions seemed to be so vague as to remove the artwork from the conversation altogether. In

retrospect I think the project would have benefited from the artistic team informally training the dialogue team as to how art operates to create meaning. Indeed, speaking with members of the dialogue team after our work-in-progress performance of “A House with Many Rooms,” the desire was expressed for more inclusiveness across disciplines to be built into the structure of the project.

In *Understanding Neighbors*’ final report to Animating Democracy, project members agreed with Carpenter’s assertion that closer collaboration between the artists, dialogue team, and the coordinating committee would have fostered productive interplay between the art and dialogue components. They also recognized that incorporating an artists’ orientation into the facilitator training sessions would have enhanced the dialogue facilitators’ understanding about the artwork and their capacity to use it effectively in the dialogue process.

We now recognize that the project design did not thoroughly conceive, nor effectively implement, a training component to fully integrate the art into the dialogue process. The facilitators (along with the coordinating committee) had varying levels of sophistication with the art forms. Some among us were impatient and critical of certain art performances or questioned whether the documentary interviews represented art at all... As noted above, most on the coordinating committee now conclude that more direct involvement of the artists in the facilitator training sessions would have been a great help, perhaps by giving an orientation to the aesthetic choices used given its sometimes abstract nature; and to be briefed on the intentions of their work. This review could also have grounded the facilitators in the process of conducting their own group analysis of the art, when that was desired.

The project members also contemplated whether the integration of the art and dialogue components would have been better served had the dialogue method been determined in advance of the creation of the art.

Some felt it would have helped if the dialogue method was identified in advance, before the art was developed, so that the art could have been designed more specifically for the dialogue. Others felt this was precisely the problem, that the art became too focused on dialogue rather than the artistic process and impact—that it was valid and critical in this project to “let the artists be artists”—to enable them to create work which was focused on what they needed to say.

Project members remained divided about how to bring balance to the project’s art and dialogue equation. Should the artwork be shaped to serve dialogue? Or should the project “let artists be artists” in creation of their work? How can art and dialogue co-exist without one being overshadowed by the other? While *Understanding Neighbors* surfaced many more questions than answers about the pairing of art and dialogue in an arts-based civic dialogue project, Oxley considers that the most important lesson of the project was:

...that dialogue and art can indeed be combined to encourage constructive conversation on a controversial topic. Art can enrich a dialogue process; it was so in this project even with the unfortunate decision to keep separate the artistic and dialogue design process, and even with the disproportionate emphasis—from inception though implementation—on dialogue. Like much learning, this project leaves me pondering. What magic could spring from more fully integrating the creation of art and dialogue?

Dialogue Outcomes

The project set forth a bold and challenging dialogue goal: to engage 200-250 Anchorage community members of diverse viewpoints in constructive, respectful dialogue about the question, “What is the social, moral, and legal place of same-sex couples in our society?” Taken as a whole, *Understanding Neighbors*’ dialogue component succeeded on many levels. Through its carefully constructed and thoughtfully implemented dialogue framework, the project successfully renewed interest and raised awareness about the issue of same-sex relationships. It also engaged new circles of Anchorage residents, both as facilitators and dialogue participants. In view of several setbacks the project experienced along the way—the untimely death of its co-founder, acute financial stress, and the unexpected withdrawal of the project’s original evaluator—these achievements are all the more remarkable.



Understanding Neighbors artists Stephan Mazurek, Peter Carpenter, and Sara Felder hold a post-work-in-progress discussion with dialogue participants and facilitators at project end. Photo © Jay Brause.

The dialogue “evangelists”: The critical role of the dialogue facilitators

The design and execution of the project’s multidimensional dialogue component yielded a wealth of valuable techniques and methodologies. Among the most significant was the recruitment and training of 25 volunteer dialogue facilitators. This dedicated cadre fervently embraced the project’s dialogue principles and goals and undertook their role with professionalism and commitment. In many ways, the dialogue facilitators were indispensable to the project, not only for their skillful work with Community Dialogue Sessions, but as “evangelists” within the community for the kind of constructive dialogue the project sought to foster. Project members concluded that the volunteer facilitators stood alongside community members as central participants in civic dialogue.

We were fortunate to draw upon a very dedicated group of 25 facilitators, many with professional skills in mediation and group dynamics, willing to devote a great deal of time to this community project, and even to pay to help defray the costs of training... Since the conclusion of the project, it has become apparent how critical this group is to considering an extension of this process—for without this trained group, there can be no *Understanding Neighbors*. How to keep them motivated has stepped up as a major question for continuation. This raises questions about who should be central to civic dialogue. In our case, the facilitators clearly became a critical participant, as important as the community participants themselves.

Netting media attention while defusing potential controversy

The project’s lengthy, intensive recruitment efforts and public relations plan formed another critical dimension of the project’s dialogue component. These activities resulted in the recruitment and participation of nearly 100 community members in the Community Dialogue Sessions, as well as forged critical alliances with a diverse mix of “stakeholder” organizations.

Given its potential for igniting controversy within the community about the emotionally charged topic of same-sex relationships, the project took a proactive stance in garnering media attention. Drawing on her previous experience working with local media outlets, Staten crafted and implemented a media strategy that carefully positioned *Understanding Neighbors* in the public eye, highlighting the project's commitment to welcoming community members representing both conservative and progressive viewpoints to dialogue on same-sex relationships. As Staten described it at Animating Democracy's 2003 National Exchange, this strategy was realized most effectively by bringing forward voices on both sides of the issue in editorial sections of the newspaper and in radio and TV interviews.

Through the editorial sections we brought voices of people on opposite sides of the issue forward. This was important because that was the model for our project. We had to project that we welcomed conservative and progressive viewpoints. We used feature articles in the mainstream news and alternative newspapers. We had radio and TV interviews bringing together conservative and liberal points of view. A prominent Lutheran minister who was an early participant helped keep communities together. What would have been an inflammatory issue was not.

The project's proactive media strategy netted extensive press coverage and helped cast the project in a positive light within the community while simultaneously circumventing the potential for controversy. Ironically, *Understanding Neighbors'* challenges in bringing together participants representing a wide spectrum of perspectives may have been due to the project's success in averting controversy in the media. Says Brause, "Out North has wide experience with how controversy in the media results in higher participation in audiences... [T]hat our project staff was successful in keeping controversy out of the media is precisely one of the problems of gathering people to participate."

Did "understanding" happen?

In spite of *Understanding Neighbors'* proactive media and recruitment strategies and its conscious efforts to establish and evidence neutrality, the project was challenged to bring a range of voices to the dialogue groups. As the research/evaluation team's final report points out, the majority of dialogue participants, all of whom self-selected to be part of the project, were centrists on the topic of same-sex couples. Most participants expressed regret about the lack of diversity among group members; they were particularly disappointed by the relatively few conservative voices represented in the dialogue groups and the missed opportunity to hear and learn about this position. The lack of diverse viewpoints within the dialogue groups diminished opportunities for "understanding" to occur among community members who had hoped to learn about "the other side" of the same-sex issue.

The tepid response *Understanding Neighbors* received from both ends of religious and political spectrums raised a critical question for the project members: was the community ready to take on this civic issue? The project's community "mapping" and extensive outreach indicated that large segments of the Anchorage community were indeed ready for the general topic and supportive of the dialogue process. At the same time, the project leaders realized in retrospect that the gay/lesbian and the religious conservative communities were much less disposed at the time of the project to engage in dialogue on the topic of same-sex couples.

...[W]e are acutely aware that broad sectors of our community are not ready for a dialogue on the topic of same-sex couples. Some in the LGBT community expressed frustration that arts funds were being deflected to conversations with "people who will

never accept us.” Some church leaders who initially expressed support for the project curtailed their involvement during the developmental phase—a reflection of concerns over the project topic, sponsorship, lack of conservative presence, and other factors such as time required. In addition, many of the outreach meetings were met with a polite but cool reception.

Reflecting on the project’s challenges in obtaining diverse viewpoints, McBroom suggests that conducting the community “mapping” process before designing the project (as opposed to using it to inform the dialogue design) might have yielded a more nuanced understanding of the community’s overall level of readiness. Moreover, the project’s design would have benefited from greater insight into how specific segments of the community have previously encountered the topic of same-sex relationships, and what factors might motivate or hinder them from re-engaging around this issue. Says McBroom:

The biggest challenge was bringing a range of voices to the project. The most important lesson I learned was the need to spend substantial time and energy (up front) to understand the nature and impacts of controversy on the whole community, the old conversation, the potential value and motivation across different factions to engage in new conversation, etc. Although this preliminary “mapping” was attempted in the spring and summer, the project would have been more successful if this engagement had occurred prior to the designing the project for the grant. The art, the dialogue design, and the outreach might have been more focused to meet the needs of the community as a whole, thus encouraging more participation from “conservatives” to allow for a richer, deeper dialogue.

Posing the project’s civic question: Was it addressed or avoided?

From the outset, project members gave careful consideration to issues of neutrality in the formulation of *Understanding Neighbors’* central question—What is the social, moral, and legal place of same-sex couples in our society?—in order to provide a broad cross section of the community with multiple entry points into the topic. Toward that end, the phrase “same-sex marriage,” which appeared in the original question, was changed to the more neutral “place of same-sex couples.” The question in its final version formed the springboard for the artists’ work and guided the development of the dialogue process.

One of the most interesting dialogue outcomes was the extent to which the project question was addressed. Many dialogue participants expressed disappointment that the dialogue groups did not delve directly enough into the question, particularly the legal and public policy aspects. From a structural standpoint, the reduced number of dialogue sessions did not provide adequate time for fuller discussion about other aspects of the project question. More importantly, the artwork and nonanalytic style of the dialogue design encouraged participants to respond to the project question by bringing forth and sharing their personal stories and experiences. As project members explain, the indirect way in which the project question was addressed evoked meaningful conversation among group members



Understanding Neighbors Coordinating Committee members Peg Tileston and Mia Oxley in a final project debriefing. Photo © Jay Brause.

about the general topic, but not a focused discussion on the legal/moral issues concerning same-sex couples.

...[T]he project unfolded through the combined efforts of the artists, participants, facilitators and the coordinating committee, and there was certainly an evolution in the way the question was addressed, or in the eyes of some, avoided.

The artists responded to the central question with an affirming, personal artistic vision, not always focused on couples. The design of the dialogue groups sought explicitly to avoid the analytic-debate style of conversation, and so directed attention to the variety of life experiences refracting from the central question. For example, dialogue questions asked participants to share their own experiences about being different, or being accepted in critical life choices. For most groups, the artwork, combined with questions of this sort, brought people to share their life experiences in a non-judgmental way, and to explore the many facets of experience for same-sex couples. However, there were no directed questions of the sort: do you agree with same-sex marriage? And the topic question was not posed by the facilitators.

Organizational Outcomes and Challenges

The coordinating committee structure: Did it work?

In addition to establishing a neutral and credible base for the project, the coordinating committee was charged with overall implementation of *Understanding Neighbors*. Drawing on the resources and expertise of the three partner organizations, the coordinating committee brought consistent and conscientious leadership to the project's execution. Individual members dedicated significant time and energy to serving on the committee.

Given the project's ambitious scope and complexity, the coordinating committee experienced many challenges, particularly in the areas of communication and decision-making. The coordinating committee struggled to build consensus within itself and among key project players around a shared understanding of the project concept, and to speak with a unified voice throughout the implementation phases. The structural separation between the coordinating committee and Out North leadership, namely Brause and Dugan, led to misunderstandings and strained communications.

While acknowledging the coordinating committee's value and critical contribution to the project, some project members suggest that a different type of governance structure, such as an advisory committee, might have proved as effective and more cost-efficient.

...[T]he basic organizational structure of the three sponsors was a sound approach to concerns about credibility of an Out North solo effort, and brought some new instructional resources to the project. Various coordinating members contributed significant skill and effort to the implementation of the project. The separate office for *Understanding Neighbors* staff initially appeared to have been appropriate for clarity about the independence of the project. At the same time, the sheer labor of creating shared understandings and effective working relationships among the various entities was extremely demanding. While the collaborative governance approach was valuable, the coordinating committee has come to believe that a lower profile, advisory role for the

coordinating committee, with greater reliance on the Out North staff would have reduced the costs of coordination, both financially and emotionally.

The efficacy of Out North’s “distancing” strategy

Understanding Neighbors had profound organizational implications for its originator and co-sponsor, Out North. To address the project’s neutrality issues, Out North made the crucial decision to distance itself from *Understanding Neighbors* by partnering with Alaska Common Ground and the Interfaith Council of Anchorage, and ceding its sole authority over the project to the coordinating committee. This was not only a structural strategy; Out North and the coordinating committee also agreed to establish a project office physically separate from, and independent of, Out North’s headquarters.

From an organizational standpoint, Out North’s “distancing” strategy had unforeseen and largely negative consequences. The physical separation of the *Understanding Neighbors* office strained communications and working relations between Out North and project staff. The arrangement also diminished opportunities for Out North staff to benefit from the experiential knowledge gained through the project. More importantly, the project’s co-sponsorship model and shared governance structure reduced Out North’s visibility and the centrality of its role as cultural organizer. In the end, Out North’s “distancing” strategy, devised for the sake of the project’s neutrality, effectively made this activist organization invisible.

In light of the weak response *Understanding Neighbors* received from the community’s conservative sectors, these organizational consequences were all the more disheartening for Out North. Ironically, one of Out North’s key findings was that the project organizer’s “neutrality” was of lesser consequence to fostering meaningful community dialogue than active participation from all sides of a given issue. This also raised important questions for Out North about the efficacy of civic dialogue as a means to achieve its vision for social change in its community. How can dialogue foster understanding among “neighbors” when key segments of the community haven’t asked to sit down and talk? And how can dialogue move a community from understanding to action around a critical civic concern?

That *Understanding Neighbors* would bring together Alaskans representing conservative and progressive views in meaningful dialogue on same-sex relationships was an expectation largely left unmet for Out North. Nevertheless, the project’s carefully constructed pairing of thought-provoking art with structured dialogue broke new ground with regard to effective arts-based dialogue practices. More importantly, *Understanding Neighbors* stands as an inspiring arts-based dialogue model for Anchorage and for other communities seeking to engage their citizens in controversial civic issues. Says dialogue facilitator Jennifer Esterl, “...I am very excited about the [*Understanding Neighbors*] dialogue process and its potential application to other divisive issues in our community. I am particularly interested in seeing what it could do with issues of racism, and I think a similar type of artwork (i.e., videos) would be not only useful, but perhaps essential in helping to assure a diversity of viewpoints...”

* * *

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Appendix I: Mapping the Conflicts

MAPPING THE CONFLICTS

Understanding Neighbors conducted exploratory interviews using a process modified from the Public Conversations Project to inform the focus and design of the project's arts-based dialogue sessions. Interviews aimed to deepen understanding of how issues regarding same-sex couples were affecting the community; identify where conflicts existed; evaluate the costs of these conflicts; and understand what had worked and not worked in the past to address or transform these conflicts. A range of community members including pastors, politicians, state and local public agency heads, organization members, and others participated in one-hour interviews. Following is the central question for the interview followed by follow-up questions.

Are you aware of any conflicts within your (community, organization, congregation) related to the moral, legal, and cultural place of same-sex couples?

If the answer is NO:

- How do you account for the absence of conflict that is straining other organizations, communities, congregations?
- Have there been conflicts in the past?
- Are there conflicts about other sexually-related matters? What are they about? Who is involved?
- Are there lessons in the experience of your (community, organization, faith community) for those who are struggling with these conflicts?
- Who could we talk to in order to learn more?

If the answer is FORMERLY BUT NOT NOW:

- What were the issues in the conflict?
- How did the conflicts manifest themselves? How did the conflict evolve?
- How polarized did the matters become? What voices were devalued or silenced? Who were the bridges?
- Were there deliberate attempts to transform the negative sides? If yes, who made these attempts? How effective were they? What limited their effectiveness?
- If no such attempts were made, what changed the course of the conflict?
- Are there lessons in what you did and didn't do that could be lessons for others?

If the answer is YES:

- What are the specific issues around which there is conflict? In what context does it surface (local, regional, national)?
- How divisive is the conflict compared to other conflicts? What issues are more divisive?
- How has the presence of conflict around same-sex couples expressed itself? What are the signs of its presence? Who is affected by it and how?
- How polarized have these matters become? How many “sides” are there? What voices have been devalued or silenced? Who are the bridges?
- What impact is the conflict having on your (community, organization, congregation)?
- How widespread is the concern about the costs of the conflict? Who is most concerned?
- What steps have been taken to transform/address/contain these conflicts? How effective have they been? What has limited their effectiveness?
- Have members been trained as facilitators/mediators/discussion leaders to bring people together? Who are they? How were they trained? What role do they play?
- Have you ever retained a “third party” practitioner to help with these conflicts?
- What are the lessons you have learned from what has and has not gone well that you can share with others in similar struggles?

POTENTIAL FOR PARTICIPATING IN DIALOGUE PROJECT (Modified)

- What, if any, potential value do you see in members from your (organization, community, congregation) participating in a dialogue project on the role of same-sex couples? Who would you like to see involved? What role would they play?
- What would happen during the dialogue that would make participation worthwhile?
- What would be your interest level in participating in a dialogue project on the role of same-sex couples?
- What concerns would you have about participating or recommending participation, in a dialogue about the role of same-sex couples?
- What should dialogue planners keep in mind when planning the dialogue sessions?

CLOSING

Appendix II: Structure of An *Understanding Neighbors* Dialogue Session

Following is an abbreviated outline used by dialogue facilitators describing the structure of one *Understanding Neighbors* dialogue session.

ENTRY

- Prepare yourself energetically to co-facilitate, doing whatever works to center yourself to prepare for the meeting and to be fully present for participants.
- Develop a plan for a safe environment:
 - Arrange chairs in a circle and ensure comfort of the room; and
 - Greet people as they arrive and make informal introductions.
- Describe the process being used by *Understanding Neighbors* over the four dialogue sessions, using the following ideas: sessions are designed to deepen listening and curiosity about our own and others' experiences for more understanding; understanding, on its own, has merit; and this process is not about debate or discussion. Here's how it works for each session:
 1. We set group agreements to be used or revised for all sessions.
 2. We view a short video related to the topic.
 3. The facilitators guide the dialogue by posing pre-formed questions that everyone will get to answer.
 4. You have a chance to ask questions and offer answers about your experience in this dialogue session.

Understanding Neighbors was formed around the question: what is the legal, moral, and cultural place of same-sex couples in society? Many of you may have an answer to this question. This dialogue will be an opportunity to reflect and we will be focusing on aspects of that question rather than answering it directly.

- Invite participants to introduce themselves using a different one of the following questions each session.
 - What are you setting aside to be here today?
 - Tell us something about yourself that most people know about you.
 - What book, movie, or television show would you most like to take a vacation in?
 - What if anything would you like the group to know about you?
- Develop agreements within the group about confidentiality and ground rules for participation.

OPENING

Introduce the video:

- The art for this dialogue is in the form of video.
- It has a point of view in order to stimulate dialogue. Its role is to stimulate dialogue and open conversation through a shared viewing experience.
- This video today is called “Being Different.” It’s eight minutes long.

Show the video, then ask participants for the following:

- What feelings or thoughts did the video stimulate? What memories or images did it evoke?
- Jot down your immediate response. This will help you respond to specific questions about your own experiences.

Facilitate the dialogue around these two talking points:

- We’ve just seen a video of men and women describing their personal stories. *Please tell us about a time when you were uncomfortable because you felt different.* Jot down a few words to describe the experience. You’ll have a minute and a half to share your experience.
- *Is there anything you wish you or others had done differently in this experience?* You’ll have a minute and a half to share your experience.

INQUIRY

Guide the participants in the following thinking:

- Shifting gears, we’ve heard some personal stories from the folks on the video and here in the group. The next 15 minutes will be a period of direct inquiry. This is a chance for you to pursue your curiosity, to follow up on something you’ve heard in order to deepen your understanding.
- During this time, we invite you to pose a certain kind of question. A lot of questions we usually ask are really statements in disguise. This isn’t a time for commenting on what others have said. (The facilitator should be ready to model a question of curiosity, e.g. “What did it mean when you learned ‘to deal with it?’”)

Invite questions “popcorn style” (as people feel the urge to respond) and facilitate the conversation.

CLOSING

Close the session by asking participants the following:

To end our session, please turn to your notes responding to the video. What if anything did you not have a chance to say? (Take a moment to reflect and you’ll have a minute to respond.)

If there is time, the facilitator may also ask: “What is something new that you will leave with as a result of participating in this dialogue tonight?”

Thank the group for their participation, abiding by the agreements created as a group, and remind about the confidentiality agreement.

Make announcements about next week’s dialogue.