

Civility conference sparks community conversation, initiative

by Alex Hummel - Friday, February 04, 2011

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/8837/civility-conference-sparks-community-conversation-initiative/>

In 2003, Duluth, Minn., leaders adopted “Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project” and, among other things, emblazoned the community’s schools and halls of government with posters and buttons reminding all to “Listen,” “Be inclusive,” “Don’t gossip” and six other agreed-upon standards.

In 2009, in Truckee, Calif., same initiative, same goals. The Truckee Tahoe Community Foundation hosted a series of community presentations. The mission: Get people talking -- passionately so -- but also get them listening and respecting each other’s perspectives and diverse backgrounds; strike a better balance between free speech rights and responsibilities.

Both community civility projects could provide a template for a movement in Oshkosh. Civic, business and community agency and service group leaders will hear a renowned author and authority on civility in contemporary American culture during a Feb. 24 community breakfast, while sportsmanship in the 21st Century will be the topic during a panel discussion at the Oshkosh Public Library later that day.

The community events dovetail with a simultaneous University of Wisconsin Oshkosh-hosted and UW System civility conference, “Civility in Everyday Life,” on Feb. 24 and Feb. 25.

“The national conversation about the need for greater civility in America is too important not to include to the greater Oshkosh community,” UW Oshkosh Chancellor Richard H. Wells said. “We look forward to working with our community partners to engage the city of Oshkosh’s leaders and citizens in an inclusive dialogue about our shared values and standards when it comes to how we understand each other’s perspectives, respect one another’s differences, debate the issues and confront and overcome common challenges.”

P.M. Forni, Ph.D., co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project and author of “Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct” and “The Civility Solution: What to Do When People Are Rude,” will speak at both community events while headlining UW Oshkosh’s and UW System’s multipronged campus-based workshop. Professor Forni and his work have been featured in national and international media, from The New York Times to CBS Sunday Morning to Oprah.

Community events

The two community-based civility events on Feb. 24 include:

- **A Community Breakfast, Oshkosh Convention Center:** The Oshkosh Community Foundation and the Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce will sponsor an open community breakfast session at the Oshkosh Convention Center featuring Professor Forni. The free public session will be held from 7:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. Advance registration for the free event is through the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation 426-3993 (or e-mail karlene@oshkoshareacf.org).

- **An Oshkosh Public Library ‘Meet The Author’ with Professor Forni followed by “Be a Good Sport: Civility On and Off the Field, a Panel Discussion a Sportsmanship Forum”:** After a free opportunity to hear and meet Professor Forni, a 6:30 p.m. library forum will feature a conversation connecting civility with sportsmanship. The panelists include sports writers, coaches and directors from area media, school district and recreational athletic programs. The forum is open to the public. You can learn more at www.oshkoshpubliclibrary.org.

"Hundreds of people from all walks of life gather at the public library every day, so we are in an excellent position to expand the scope of this important conversation about respectful and responsible behavior in the Oshkosh community," Oshkosh Library Director Jeff Gilderson-Duwe said. "We are honored to have Dr. Forni visit the library to talk about his work and hope that our panel discussion will show how the principles of good sportsmanship are tied to the way we treat each other in everyday life."

Civility, locally...

While the conversation on civility is of national magnitude, it started locally for Walter Scott.

The Oshkosh resident and business owner had been paying close attention to the tenor of the local newspaper's letters to the editor regarding a proposal to cull the city's urban deer herd.

"People were really nasty in how they talked to each other," Scott said.

While the debate roiled around town, in print and online, the tone wasn't much better when it came to school and city council issues, Scott said.

With family in Truckee, he grew more interested in the "Speak Your Peace" campaign. More than 70 percent of Truckee citizens surveyed said they believed their 2009 civility project had improved the community. So, Scott started conversations with Oshkosh media managers, city and school district administrators, clergy, police chiefs and university leadership.

Just as the topic was broached at UW Oshkosh last year, the nation turned its attention to Rutgers University, where a student committed suicide after his roommate posted secret video of him in a sexual encounter with another man online. Unrelated instances of racism and hatred directed at students based on their sexual orientation subsequently flared up on UW System campuses. In January, the discussion of political incivility reached new heights following the fatal shootings of six citizens and the attempted assassination of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Ariz.

Scott emphasizes the conversation about instilling greater civility in the community began months ago. And, just like in Truckee and Duluth, the decision to take action in Oshkosh is based on the local tone and a local consensus that things can and should change. Law enforcement, local government, faith community, school district and other community leaders have all signaled support, Scott said.

"The one thing (Truckee and Duluth leaders) stressed is this doesn't mean we can't have disagreements with each other, but how you handle it is what's key," he said. "... Take the national things out of it and just talk about local politics, local education, local issues, such as the deer issue. There is a lot more room to just be civil."

The two-day UW Oshkosh campus-based workshop (Feb. 24 and Feb. 25) will feature presentations and panel discussions while spotlighting the work of Professor Forni other national leaders engraining civility, inclusivity and diversity initiatives at universities in Alaska, Michigan and New Jersey. Meanwhile, Forni will help extend the civility conversation into the city of Oshkosh.

- [Learn more about the Civility in Everyday Life workshop and the community opportunities to hear speakers and become part of the dialogue.](#)
- [Learn more about the Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation's "Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project' efforts.](#)
- [Learn more about the Truckee Tahoe Community Foundation's "Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project" efforts.](#)
- [Read Oshkosh Northwestern coverage of the conversation about a civility initiative in Oshkosh.](#)