

Philanthropy and Civic Reflection
Donors Forum of Chicago
Chicago, IL
2004 - 2006

Introduction

How do we draw the line between helping others and imposing our will on others? What do we expect from those to whom we give? Donors Forum of Chicago has been helping its members explore these and other questions through civic reflection conversations organized around short readings. The Donors Forum, a regional association of grantmakers, began convening these sessions with its board of directors after being introduced to the practice of civic reflection by Project Director Elizabeth Lynn, who was a featured speaker at a members' luncheon in 2004. In 2005 and 2006, Donors Forum used a Project on Civic Reflection small grant to expand its civic reflection program, holding seven civic reflection luncheon sessions.

DFC has convened directors and members in a variety of contexts to reflect at a deeper level on the nature of philanthropy and their own civic role in the larger society. Organizers have found that these regular conversations, built around discussion of short non-technical readings, result in a stronger sense of community among Chicago-area philanthropic leaders, expose them to new ideas and perspectives, and create positive changes in philanthropic practice.

Participants

Directors and members of Chicago-area philanthropic organizations.

Facilitators

Among the series facilitators were Adam Davis and Susannah Quern Pratt, both Associate Directors with the Project on Civic Reflection, and Mae Hong and Trish Gossard, Donors Forum members who attended the Project on Civic Reflection's January 2006 facilitation training workshop in Chicago.

Sessions and Readings

2004

Members' Luncheon	"The Eleventh," Henri Barbusse
Special Session of the Board	"The Spur of the Moment," Sarah Orne Jewett "Four Traditions of Philanthropy," Elizabeth Lynn & D. Susan Wisely
Members' Brown Bag Lunch	"The Spur of the Moment," Sarah Orne Jewett
Members' Brown Bag Lunch	"The Rembrandt," Edith Wharton
Members' Brown Bag Lunch	"Four Traditions of Philanthropy"
Members' Brown Bag Lunch	"The Gift," Ian Parker

Sessions and Readings, cont.

Members' Brown Bag Lunch

"The Eighth Tuesday," Mitch Albom

2005

Special Session of the Board

"The Wife of His Youth," Charles Chesnutt

Members' Brown Bag Lunch

"The Memorial Fund," John O'Hara

DFC Civic Reflection Luncheon

"A Work of Art," Sylvia Townsend Warner

"The Use of Force," William Carlos Williams

Members' Brown Bag Lunch

"The Gospel of Wealth," Andrew Carnegie

2006

Funders for Gay and Lesbian
Issues

"The Lovers of the Poor," Gwendolyn Brooks

Special Sessions for Family
Foundations

"Reb Yozifl and the Contractor," Sholom Aleichem

"Luella Miller," Mary Wilkins Freeman

Feedback from Participants

In evaluating the series, members who took part in the program described civic reflection as both a luxury and a necessity. Stepping back to take a broader view of their day-to-day work felt like an extravagance, yet doing so allowed them to perform that work more responsibly. In the words of one participant, "The act of reflecting in and with a community of peers is one of the most important acts that grantmakers can take to inform our work and worth, and yet it is the one responsibility that we fall short on many times."

Special Features of this Program

Participants recorded their thoughts in journals throughout the program, and convened at the end to reflect on such questions as, "How does individual reflection translate into institutional practice?"

Over the course of time, the practice of civic reflection has become an integral part of the culture of the DFC. The practice has been used to structure several different types of conversations with different members, illustrating the flexibility and adaptability of the practice.