

Hands Across the Hills by The Gratefulness Team

“Grateful Changemakers,” is a series that celebrates programs and projects that serve as beacons of gratefulness. These efforts elevate the values of grateful living and illuminate their potential to transform both individuals and communities. Join us in appreciating the inspiring and catalyzing contribution these Changemakers offer to shaping a more grateful world.

Hands Across the Hills

Hands Across the Hills formed in response to the 2016 United States (US) presidential election with the goal of bringing together people who voted differently, face to face. Two small groups, progressives in rural Western Massachusetts (MA) and conservatives in Eastern Kentucky (KY) coal country, met for two weekends of dialogue and cultural exchange in each other’s towns in fall 2017 and spring 2018.

The heart of each gathering was structured dialogue in which feelings could be expressed honestly and deeply, cultivating trust, care, and gratefulness between participants. In addition to these face-to-face sessions, the participants also experienced each other’s community and family life through potlucks, music, excursions, and home stays.

The bonds formed during these experiences pushed political differences into the background. Now, as friends, Hands Across the Hills participants are working on a range of common projects, including reaching out together with their dialogue process to another region of the country, collaborating on agriculture, and working on gun control issues. Co-founder and Lead Organizer Paula Green (part of the MA group) shares more about how Hands Across the Hills has shown that it’s possible and necessary to see past stereotypes and open our hearts with gratefulness for our fellow humans.

What sparked the creation of Hands Across the Hills and how did the project take shape?

Hands Across the Hills rose in response to the 2016 presidential election. Residents of our progressive MA town gathered to mourn the election results and then to organize — because mourning has limited social impact and organizing lights up the world. One suggested effort was to form a group to bridge political divides, which I chaired as I have decades of experience as an international peacebuilder in war-torn societies around the world. I immediately felt grateful for the opportunity as I knew it would be inspiring and intriguing to design and facilitate this project.

Finding participants in KY was a stroke of good fortune. A community organizer there named Ben Fink posted an article online that a member of our group discovered, and the rest is history. We formed a partnership and are forever grateful for his presence.

We structured our project with two weekends of three days each, first in MA and six months later in KY. Our website handsacrossthehills.org has detailed stories of our exchanges, which included homestays, dialogues, cultural sharing, music, dance, art and local sightseeing. We wanted the in-person exchanges to be long enough for some genuine relationship development and personal transformation, and short enough to accommodate participants' family and work obligations. My gratitude overflowed at the generosity of our Western MA community in their outpouring of food, funds, venues, program ideas, enthusiasm, and all around support. Gratitude has been a thread throughout, and I know is now shared by all the members of those in the dialogues.

Although we have completed our two-way exchange, we remain connected to our KY partners and they have requested a return visit to MA in 2019, which we are currently exploring and shaping. This visit will focus on dialogue and also have a component on rural economic development, which is needed both in Letcher County KY and our Franklin County MA. We also will send teams from MA and KY to our local colleges, high schools, and religious institutions to talk about bridging and building citizen connections to counteract the fear and hatred that has grown in our country in recent years. We see the impact of previous talks and know that our project offers hope in very hopeless times in our political landscape. Just seeing us together from MA and KY is enough to provide hope, as we are not "supposed" to be together because of our opposing positions on social and political issues.

What inspired participation in Hands Across the Hills? How did leaders and participants get involved?

We were motivated to reach our hands across the country to overcome the stereotypes that have developed between voters and regions. Our intention is to build understanding from the common ground we know exists and waits to be uncovered. We believe we cannot wait for government to act and need to take responsibility as citizens. We can and must do better in restoring respect, harmony, and security for all.

In our town of Leverett MA, many people were attracted to the vision and about 18 signed up to join. In Letcher County KY, our colleague Ben recruited participants. In our region, 300 people attended our public event where the KY group presented themselves. Many of those in the audience have been inspired to develop their own modest bridging conversations. We want to be a seed that grows and heals divisions.

How does Hands Across the Hills fill a need for our society?

In our age of social media and mass communications, truths and falsehoods spread rapidly and cannot always be distinguished. Not knowing each other, we are prone to believe damaging stereotypes promoted by those with their own agendas. Who will blow the whistle and stop such harm from exploding around our country? Who will help us understand that we are connected and related and that the suffering in one part of our national body harms all parts?

All of the groups offering dialogues –and there are many such organizations — share a common mission of interrupting this negativity and replacing it with face-to-face experiences between residents of the United States who differ from each other. It's such a joy to discover our common humanity and vulnerability and to wake up to the truth of our interdependence. Sadly, our national discourse and our media drive us apart rather than upholding our shared dreams and longing for peace, security, and wellbeing.

How do you see Hands Across the Hills as an embodiment of grateful living?

We in MA are so grateful to have found and bonded with our new friends and colleagues in KY. We have learned so much and come to care for each other very deeply. Grateful living does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs in our interconnections and in finding ways to express our compassion and caring.

This is the calling of our time. There is such grace and gratitude in heeding this call. We are larger than who we vote for. We are certainly larger than any stereotypes about us. Imagine the gratitude in experiencing that. We actually see, touch, and know each other. This intimate contact offers such joy; it is gratefulness embodied in a series of I-thou relationships. All humans are hungry for such encounter, such a restoration of our mutual dignity.

How does Hands Across the Hills inspire gratefulness?

I am kinder and gentler for having this dialogue exchange. I have more compassion for those who voted differently, value differently, live differently. And they of me. We have touched each other's humanity at a far deeper level. All of us in this project from MA and KY report having been deeply moved by our interactions. This level of dialogue is a spiritual journey. Taking this journey together, given how we have been taught to degrade each other, adds to the miracle.

What were some of the common barriers, obstacles, and fears that arose for participants? How were they allayed?

Everyone had fear. We were meeting the so-called "enemy," the arch opposite of ourselves. We live 15 hours apart by road. Our histories and circumstances are different. Our regions represent different realities and estranged politics. Who would not be afraid to dialogue under such circumstances?

Our KY colleagues were brave enough to come to liberal, progressive, educated, so-called elite easterners, to stay in our homes, to accept our hospitality, and to respond to the idea of dialogue that originated with us. They get a lot of credit for their courage and the curiosity that helped them engage. We were extremely well-prepared and organized to cushion our meeting with homestays (which are very personal), lots of wonderful food, and dialogue questions that began gently, all of which offered levels of physical, emotional, and spiritual hospitality. This preparation in and attention to serving our guests from KY mattered in our building trust and care.

What has been the impact of the project thus far?

Enormous learning for each of us, transformation of attitudes and thus behaviors, and inspiration for people around the country who know about us, read our website, watch our videos, and ask us to speak so they can hold on to hope and possibility. Many new dialogues have been attempted and better interpersonal relations exist in some families and communities because we have learned and modeled new communication skills that demonstrate what we say and how we speak matters a great deal. We have more compassion for others who are different because of our care for each other despite differences. We are more gentle with those who disagree, and we also take the time to find out where we do indeed agree.

How does Hands Across the Hills plan to grow/continue?

We thought the project would end when the MA group visited KY last spring. But at the end of that weekend, nobody wanted to part. We generated a list of joint projects and are working on a few. Recently the KY group asked for a return visit. We are planning that together for sometime in 2019 and are delighted that they wish to return to MA.

In the meantime, I was invited to facilitate and help plan a program using the same basic design but focusing this time on race and racism. Our partners are in South Carolina (SC), and we are also including some of our KY colleagues so that we can keep them and their mountain culture in our mix. This time all the groups have African American and white American participants and the facilitation team is also mixed. We all go to SC in late January 2019. SC and KY participants then come here in late June 2019, and we plan to continue during and after that time with both public events and sustained dialogue. We will pursue traditional and social media venues to add to the impact.

What inspires you personally about this work? How has your work in international peacebuilding informed your work in the US?

What I observed around the world in 30 years of international peacebuilding is that polarization can lead to both armed conflict and interpersonal violence. With the escalating hostilities across identity lines in the US, engaging civil society became just as essential here as in countries facing or recovering from actual warfare. Citizens need to know each other to transform the negative perceptions of those of other regions, religions, races, cultures, etc.

As the Dalai Lama wrote, "In an atmosphere of hatred and anger, no lasting peace can be achieved."

If you could share one message about living gratefully, what would it be?

Develop a daily practice of cultivating an attitude of gratitude. Make it conscious. Say aloud to family, partners, and friends what it is you are grateful for. Gratitude exists even in trying times. Find it and share it. Don't keep your gratefulness a secret!

How does gratefulness inspire you to make change in the world?

Those who have been given opportunities to share their values and commitments, received by way of their education, skill, and passion, have an obligation to use these gifts in gratitude for what has been given. We can also be grateful for having the chance to practice compassion, which heals self, others, and our shared world.

Hands Across the Hills Trailer from David Rabinovitz on Vimeo.

To read more about the inspiring projects and programs of Hands Across the Hills, visit the website: handsacrossthehills.org