

Orlando Speaks: A Safe Space for Dialogue

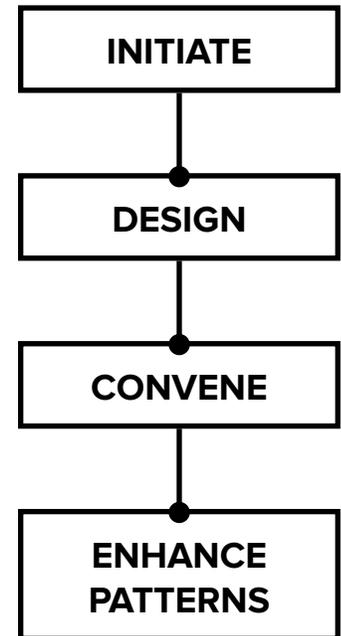
This case study describes Orlando Speaks, a collaborative partnership between the City of Orlando, the Orlando Police Department and the Valencia College Peace and Justice Institute. The effort, which began in 2015, provides a new model for police-community dialogue and relationship building.

INITIATE – time for conversation in Orlando

Nationally, events in Ferguson Missouri, Baltimore Maryland, and elsewhere brought community – police relations to the forefront of public conversation. As the City of Orlando (City), Valencia College Peace and Justice Institute (PJI), and the Orlando Police Department (OPD) considered how to improve community relationships, the *Orlando Speaks* model emerged.

At Valencia College, Peace and Justice Institute Director Rachel Allen initiated Conversations on Race for the Valencia Community. Designed as an opportunity to provide a safe space for crucial conversations, the mission was to form relationships and open up dialogue. If and when a tragedy similar to Ferguson occurred in Orlando, the community would have the resilience to move from “crisis to conversation,” according to Allen, without the destructive unrest that often follows such a tragedy.

In May 2015, PJI hosted Conversations on Race, inviting Orlando officials, including Marcia Hope Goodwin (Chief Service Officer & Director of the Office of Community Affairs and Human Relations) and Reginald McGill (Constituent Relations), to participate alongside students and staff. Valencia College Academic Dean, James McDonald, a 17-year veteran of Orlando Police Department (OPD), prompted ten Orlando police officers to participate.



“We have seen on the national level what happens when divides form between police and communities. It is important that we take proactive measures to ensure that doesn’t happen here”

– City of Orlando Mayor Buddy Deyer, April 2015 State of the City Address

Taking the Mayor's charge, OPD and City staff re-assessed community policing efforts.¹ Goodwin and McGill reported their positive experience with Valencia's Conversations on Race, planting the seeds for collaboration. However, OPD Chief John Mina and his command staff expressed hesitation about hosting community conversations. Having participated in a series of police-community-style forums, Chief Mina believed that such events were a good way to get information to the community but that they didn't promote community. Instead, someone would usually "talk at" the police panel, reinforcing divisions. Deputy Chief Mark Canty worried that because everyone was trying to get their point across, no one really listened. Orlando Chief Administrative Officer Byron Brooks agreed that police-community conversations were often unproductive and suggested the City needed a "true exchange, a real conversation" with the community.

Orlando Speaks, a collaborative model between the City, OPD and PJI emerged as a new model for productive police-community dialogue.

DESIGN

Mayor Buddy Dyer was not quite sure how *Orlando Speaks* was going to work but was open to seeing the model in action. City staff and officials wondered how *Orlando Speaks* would be productive, become well-accepted in the community, and avoid one subgroup attempting to dominate the event. They wondered whether *Orlando Speaks* would lead police-community relations in the right direction. Administrative Officer Brooks expressed concern about PJI's ability to provide an environment for thoughtful discourse. Deputy Chief Canty was likewise apprehensive, questioning how PJI could control the room and maintain safety. Canty added, "there's no way we are going to get officers . . . to come in and talk about bias."

According to Frank Billingsley, Chief of Staff for the City of Orlando, the City's objective for *Orlando Speaks* is to "enhance, improve, and solidify good working relationships between public safety folks and the general public." In partnership with City of Orlando and OPD, PJI developed the following goals for *Orlando Speaks*:

1. Increase awareness and understanding of police practices
2. Strengthen interpersonal relationships through the sharing of personal stories and experiences
3. Develop trust and sensitivity to support interactions with one another
4. Expand citizen engagement

In order to promote a welcoming environment which stimulates conversation and relationship building, *Orlando Speaks* events commence on weekdays at 5 p.m. with a light meal. Participants are asked to sit with three other people they do not know when the formal program begins at 6 p.m. Participants are encouraged to find a seat at a table that is diverse not only in race, but also in age, religion, and ethnic background. Police officers may sit anywhere they like, but cannot sit with another officer.

Each table is furnished with pens, paper for group work, handouts, assessments, and PJI's "Principles for How We Treat Each Other."² The Principles are the foundation for authentic, respectful dialogue and serve as ground rules for each *Orlando Speaks* event. They are read aloud by individual participants who feel moved to offer their voices to this part of the program.

According to Allen, the "evening is highly structured in such a way that everyone in the room participates and has the chance to listen to others" using a method called "serial testimony." Developed by scholar Peggy McIntosh, serial testimony is not a method for dialogue – it is an opportunity for participants to share their stories without interruption or comment. Each person is allotted the same amount of time, ensuring all voices are heard equally in the room. No one has to fight to be heard. No one has to worry about getting their fair share of "air time."





Photography courtesy of willie J. Allen Jr.



Tablemates discuss prompts provided by facilitators. Video is used to inspire discussion around implicit bias and stereotyping. Individual testimony is given. Each table assesses police and community needs; a sample of the tables report their results to the group as a whole.

At the close of the evening, community members are invited to commit to positive action in their community and are asked to offer written feedback on the assessment provided at the tables.

CONVENE – Police-community forums

Orlando Speaks first convened on August 25, 2015, in order to connect with the residents of Orlando’s District 5. Months earlier, police investigated an after-midnight call about activity at a shopping center in District 5. Officers were in the back of the shopping center when they observed a person run inside. Officers drew their weapons and followed. No one was hurt. It turned out that the “activity” was a church-hosted all-night prayer vigil.

For every *Orlando Speaks* event, Orlando Commissioners have recommended venues in their district. They select schools and city facilities that are easily accessible to residents, where participants are encouraged to discuss difficult topics. Between 25 and 35 officers and up to 100 community members attend each event.

Date	Location
08.25.15	Camping World Stadium Indoor Club
10.13.15	Edgewater High School
02.16.16	Howard Middle School
10.19.16	Englewood Neighborhood Center
04.12.17	Smith Community Center
06.04.18	Lake Nona High School

Orlando Speaks organizers recruited community members and police officers with different methods. Originally, the City developed an online registration tool for residents who could also call the city to register. The City asked neighborhood associations and clergy to promote the event. Prior to the first *Orlando Speaks*, Lawanna Gelzer, the President of the Central Florida Chapter of the National Action Network, felt the right people were not going to be in the room to talk about the “hard stuff.” Although Gelzer received an e-mail invitation to the first *Orlando Speaks*, she felt that other key voices would not be heard. As a result, she and others protested outside Camping World Stadium where the event was scheduled. Allen went outside, shook Gelzer’s hand, and told her, *Orlando Speaks* needed her inside to speak her truth. Most of the protestors, including Gelzer, picked up their signs and joined the event. Brooks felt that having that group join the event was the “value we hadn’t even planned.” Allen admits that in the moment she realized when people are “protesting an event meant for them, you invite them in.”

For subsequent *Orlando Speaks* events, the City cast a wider “net”, leveraging District Commissioner contact lists, the media, the City’s Family, Parks and Recreation Division, and word of mouth from prior attendees (98% of the attendees would recommend *Orlando Speaks* to others). At subsequent *Orlando Speaks* events, over a fifth of the participants are repeat participants. Goodwin says bringing people to an event is also based on “relationship building,” so she uses direct communication - phone and e-mail - to deepen the reach and to utilize “all potential contact points.”

The PJI facilitators also bring voices into the room. According to Michele Lima, PJI Academic Coordinator, they “research the community, talk to the community, and find people who can give testimony that represents the concerns and issues of that community.” Gelzer suggests inviting activists; locating residents who recently had negative encounters with police; identifying trusted community stakeholders; asking attorneys to attend who might discuss constitutional rights; focusing invitations on the community that is “hurting”.

ILLUSTRATING THE POWER OF A SAFE SPACE FOR DIALOGUE

Following her own advice, Gelzer (local National Action Network President) brought several local residents to the sixth Orlando Speaks event in June 2018. As captured by Orlando.com, Jacqueline Spencer, a mother whose son was shot by OPD after a short pursuit in 2013, reflected on racial profiling and police-community relations:

“My name is Jacqueline, and I lost my son at the age of 21 by the hands of Orlando PD,” she told the room, which was full of officers and Orlando residents.

“Profiling is real,” she said. “I would like to say that. Profiling is real.”

On Monday night, Spencer’s mother sat at a table with an Orlando police officer and two other Orlando residents, talking about how they felt and ways to heal.

“I’m very concerned because it’s like, we’re going to shoot first and ask questions later,” she said. “But again, that child is not going home to his mother, but the officer is going home as if it’s OK, and it’s not OK.”

Spencer said she attended the meeting with the intent to expose what she and her family went through. She said she walked away feeling accomplished and loved.

“I found a lot of love in this room,” she said. “I found a lot of compassion. I found a lot of officers -- they have pain, too, just like we do.”³

Chief Mina was thrilled when he learned he would sit at a table with residents, stating it would be “an extreme relief” to “actually connect” with residents. For all *Orlando Speaks* events Deputy Chief Canty was tasked with drawing 30 officers into the room. Because he didn’t want to make this event mandatory, he sent an e-mail explaining the reason for the event which was to “strengthen relationships and trust between officers and residents.”⁴ He let officers know that *Orlando Speaks* was not another “yell-at-the-police” event. He explained that it would be an opportunity to tell people how they felt - to tell their stories and to hear stories from community members. Mina feels that officers bought-in to the process when they understood *Orlando Speaks* would provide a space for their voices.

Seeking a diverse mix of race, rank, and roles within the department, Canty gave officers a week to respond. Within 24 hours, forty expressed interest; by the end of the week seventy asked to participate – more than the venue could accommodate. Canty attributes the significant response due to his and Chief Mina’s reputation as respected leaders who wholeheartedly believe in the power of fostering positive relationships with the community. Canty added, when respected leaders support an idea and participants know they will be in an environment where their concerns will be heard, it makes for success.

Canty’s e-mail was the first stage of officer recruitment and preparation. He wanted the bulk of the OPD attendees to be people who work patrol because those first responders would be the ones the community would come in contact with. In addition, he directed these officers to dress as they would for work (Canine, Tactical, Patrol, Motorcycle) so they could explain their responsibilities to residents.

Officers continue to voluntarily sign-up for *Orlando Speaks* and earn career development incentives for participating. Canty says officers are “encouraged by the Chief and his Staff to take an active role in building positive relationships” within the community. Reluctant officers are further encouraged to engage in the process.

97% of *Orlando Speaks* participants agree or strongly agree they felt engaged.⁵

“I have to give the PJI folks all the credit in the world for the facilitation and all they have done.”

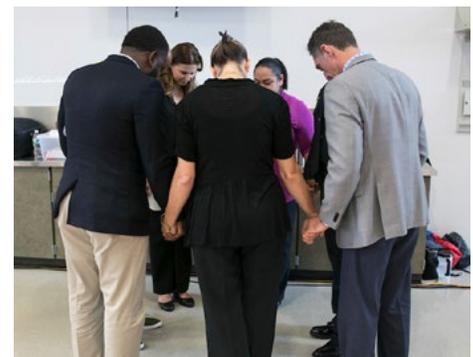
– City of Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer

Orlando Speaks facilitators are well-prepared to elevate conversations. Trained PJI facilitators meet in advance to rehearse, research and prepare for the the work in which *Orlando Speaks* participants will engage. Facilitators understand the sacredness of the space the event creates--it's a place, Allen says, where people are willing to be vulnerable, tell their stories, and risk being seen by others. Before facilitating an event, facilitators join hands in a circle to honor the space, the courage of participants, and the truths about to be told. Allen adds that facilitators examine their own implicit biases and have "done the work of facing their own identity" so they can give testimony that is vulnerable. And in modeling that vulnerability, which takes an immense amount of personal courage and strength, they encourage others to do the same. PJI facilitator Mollie McLaughlin says she thinks back to a bit of wisdom from her days as a victim's advocate and that is "you can only take someone down the road of healing as far as you've gone yourself."

As part of this inner work, not only do the PJI Facilitators examine their own biases and educate themselves in an ongoing manner, but they also utilize the "Principles" in their daily lives. Allen says the Principles create a safe space and they become the tools for navigating conflict should challenging or potentially inflammatory ideas arise in the room. As Allen says "we guide people throughout the evening to continue turning to the Principles as they hear stories that might challenge their worldview."

Chief Mina affirmed the value of the facilitators as "extremely helpful and something I had never been involved in before... Whatever we do moving forward, this is it. This has to be the model because we got rave reviews from the officers because they were able to actually tell their story without being interrupted..." Chief Administrative Officer Brooks agreed the facilitators ensured the "environment was conducive for tough conversations - that it was considered a safe place... The facilitators I think were masterful about showing vulnerability ... It really became a place where folks said 'Hey, I can share what's on my mind' and share it in the right manner..."

Principles for How we Treat Each Other: Our Practice of Respect and Community Building
Create a hospitable and accountable community
Listen deeply
Create an advice free zone
Practice asking honest and open questions
Give space for unpopular answers
Respect silence
Suspend judgement
Identify assumptions
Speak your truth
When things get difficult, turn to wonder
Practice slowing down
All voices have value
Maintain confidentiality



Photography courtesy of willie J. Allen Jr.

ENHANCE PRODUCTIVE PATTERNS

Alongside the *Orlando Speaks* experience, the City of Orlando contracted with PJI to train all employees – City of Orlando and OPD - in a class called *Conversations in Inclusiveness* which uses the same methodologies employed in *Orlando Speaks*. These workshops continue monthly for all new employees. The Principles have become part of city government culture. According to Goodwin, this training goes beyond diversity training. Participants learn what inclusiveness means and learn how to exhibit the behaviors that support it. They learn "not just acceptance, but also appreciation."

The City of Orlando and the Orlando Police Department intend to continue *Orlando Speaks* and are considering using the *Orlando Speaks* model to work with "identifiable groups" like teens, seniors, and Latino or LGBTQ groups, not just the neighborhoods.

PJI is working with several communities in the Orlando area and have received inquiries from communities across the country to implement *Orlando Speaks*-style events. For more information about the *Orlando Speaks* model, please contact PJI Director Rachel Allen at rallen39@valenciacollege.edu and PJI Community Manager William Jefferson at wjefferson6@valenciacollege.edu.

Kristin K. “Kiki” Grossman developed this case study. Kiki is PJI’s Legal Education Action Project Coordinator and can be reached at kgrossman2@valenciacollege.edu.

Kiki gives her heartfelt thanks to Mayor Buddy Dyer, Melanie McCallum, Frank Billingsley, Sharon Wilson, Byron Brooks, Janice Owens, Marcia Hope Goodwin, Sylvia Wills, Chief John Mina, Evelyn Aponte, Deputy Chief Mark Canty, Leila Barrie, Rachel Allen, Michele Lima, Aida Diaz, and Mollie McLaughlin for their big hearts, their willing help, and their authentic voices.

Endnotes

- 1 In January 2016, Brooks and Mina collectively drafted a shot memo to Mayor Dyer to titled “Orlando Police Department Community Policing Assessment” The Memo and the complete report are included in the appendix.
- 2 PJI’s 13 Principles are available in the appendix.
- 3 Erik Sandoval, Mother of man shot, killed by Orlando police speaks: ‘Profiling is real’, CLICKORLANDO.COM (June 4, 2018), <https://www.clickorlando.com/news/mother-of-man-shot-killed-by-orlando-police-speaks-profiling-is-real>.
- 4 An example of Deputy Chief Mark Canty’s e-mail to OPD officers is available in the appendix.
- 5 Measuring participant responses from the first five Orlando speaks events

The Divided Community Project's **Community Resiliency Initiative** is a coalition of organizations and volunteers who support communities seeking to transform community division into forward-looking action. As of July 2018, the Divided Community Project anticipates publishing case studies from five partner communities: Rochester, New York; Orlando, Florida; San Mateo County, California; Columbus, Ohio; and, San Leandro, California.

For more information about the Divided Community Project, take a look at our website, <http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/dividedcommunityproject>, or email Deputy Director William "Bill" Froehlich at Froehlich.28@osu.edu.

The AAA-ICDR Foundation provided significant support the Community Resiliency Initiative case study project.



Additional publications from the Divided Community Project are available as follows:

- Facing Hate (forthcoming, 2018)
- The Midland Simulation: A Tabletop Exercise on Community Division During Civil Unrest (regularly updated), email Froehlich.28@osu.edu for more information
- Divided Communities and Social Media: Strategies for Community Leaders (2017), go.osu.edu/DCPsm
- Planning in Advance of Civil Unrest (2016), go.osu.edu/DCPpia
- Key Considerations for Community Leaders Facing Civil Unrest: Effective Problems-Solving Strategies that have been used in Other Communities (2016), go.osu.edu/DCPk

In addition to the AAA-ICDR Foundation, The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, the JAMS Foundation, the Kettering Foundation, the Jacques M. Littlefield Foundation, Nextdoor, the Ohio State University Emeritus Academy, and the Ohio State University Democracy Studies Program also support the Divided Community Project.



All Divided Community Project documents are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Information about this license is available here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

