

Dinners put strangers at the same table to share food and thoughts

Hyde Park restaurant hosts Across the Table group

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By Ellen Warren, TRIBUNE SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

When was the last time you sat down and had an interesting, thoughtful conversation with someone you just met?

How about never?

Lauren Beznos Grossman, a veteran of Chicago non-profit organizations, hopes to change that.

Earlier this year, combining her passions for bringing people of different backgrounds together and eating tasty restaurant meals, Grossman started Across the Table. Its aim? "Uniting Chicago one meal at a time."

"I saw all these communities across Chicago that don't really connect with each other," said Grossman. To combat the problem, break down barriers and promote some intriguing talk among people who might not otherwise sit down together, she organizes small-group restaurant dinners built around a wide array of provocative topics.

At typical social gatherings, she said, "It's hard to have deep conversation" and "everyone looks just like you."

"I wanted to do something -- in a fun way -- to connect with people whose experiences are different than my own."

Apparently others feel the same way. Since she started these biweekly dinners in June, she has had no trouble recruiting the maximum eight guests at the table where she cheerfully guides the conversation.

Recent restaurant forays have chewed over the role of friendship in our lives and the question of how we define family.

The topic last week at the Hyde Park dinner at Medici on 57th was built around the question of ethnic identity and how it affects where we live. It was compelling and -- yup -- fun.

Four bottles of wine (BYO) were shared. Lots of pizza and pasta were consumed by a group of participants whose ages and backgrounds varied hugely.

Among them was artist Luis DeLaTorre, 40, who lives in Bridgeport, where he first settled when he came to the United States from Mexico with his mom and two older brothers as an 8-year-old who spoke not a word of English.

Tanya Lane, 27, the resident manager of the Ronald McDonald House in Hyde Park, refers to herself as "black" rather than "African-American" and savors discussions about race and identity.

Randy Fuller, 52, of Oak Park, grew up in a town of 250 in central New York where everyone was a WASP. Because of that, he said, "I like to be exposed to multiple viewpoints." Vanessa Mendicino, 29, who grew up in and still lives in Berwyn, said, "It's good to get out of your comfort zone."

They and their fellow guests had come to the right place.

Introductions made, wine poured, Grossman got people talking by asking them to describe a fun thing they'd done last weekend and tell "one thing that makes you who you are."

For Regina Shoykhet, 35, who lives in Old Town, it was fireworks at Navy Pier and "My family emigrated from the former Soviet Union when I was 5 and a half. ... Being a child immigrant, you don't have an accent. You know popular cultural references." Yet, "I always knew I was a Russian Jew."

Shoykhet brought along a friend visiting from New Hampshire, Jamie Alford, 33, and by the time it was her turn to talk the introductory questions had faded away and Alford jumped in on the ethnic issue. "My mother didn't want us to say we're 'white, Caucasian,'" on the many forms school kids fill out. "She made us write 'human.'"

"I would put 'Mexican' because 'Hispanic' is kind of a made-up thing," chimed in DeLaTorre.

Lane said, "I always ended up with a lot of white kids, so ethnicity is kind of hard for me." African-American students would tell her, "You act white. You talk white," she recounted. "But I feel black."

At this point, Haresh Shah, 69, born in Bombay (now Mumbai), asked Lane how she felt about the phrase African-American, pointing out that there are whites who live in Africa who also consider themselves African.

Clearly this is not your average dinner party small talk.

"I'm very easygoing. ... I use the term black," Lane answered, but she said that some people are hesitant to use the word, fearing it's not politically correct or it will offend her.

Grossman, a former English teacher at Chicago's Kelvyn Park High School, made sure that everyone got his or her say, and as the evening (was it the wine?) warmed up, the guests seemed ever more ready to tell stories from their very different lives.

Inquiring about "the role that food plays in our ethnic identity," Grossman elicited tales of family dinners and rhapsodies about ethnic comfort food. Mana Hongisto, 32, who left Bulgaria when she was 19, confessed, "I feel like ... I'm letting down my ethnicity" by not putting on lavish dinners.

Thus the conversation veered to gender roles. Do women have to be the cooks? "Do you want to go there?" asked Grossman. They did. Shah said he would not describe himself as a great chef, but when he prepares meals for his women friends, they tell him, "No man has ever cooked for me."

Grossman said that the Across the Table dinners have led to surprisingly personal revelations and this gathering was no exception.

DeLaTorre reached back to his grade-school traumas, remembering there were fights in school because he and his brothers were so different from the other kids. "Then we discovered baseball. That made a connection. Kids accepted us. It was an easy transition to English."

Fuller asked, "How do you break the cycle? How do you get [prejudice] out of the heads of kids?"

"I go back to the personal connection," DeLaTorre said. He was talking about his experience as a little boy playing baseball, but it also summed up the essence of the dinner they were just finishing up.