



ACROSS THE TABLE

Uniting Communities One Meal at a Time

Placement: TimeOut Chicago

By D.L. Hopkins

Around Town: Melting Potluck

One Woman Stirs Things Up with a Dinner Series on Race-Relations

GET SERVED

Unlike family dinners, you can happily clash at Across the Table.

After she quit running a social-change program for teens, Lauren Grossman was challenged by a friend to pursue her ideal job. With an insatiable love of food, an attraction to the city's multiculturalism and a desire to change Chicago, Grossman cooked up a plan: She applied her skills as a former high-school English teacher and nonprofit worker to start Across the Table, an affordable bimonthly dinner series that brings together eight diverse people. Participants need to be open to discussing race, religion and community (at one dinner, we watched two women disagree about what being Jewish means to them). Why put people into these sticky situations? We chatted with Grossman after the plates were cleared on her second dinner.

Time Out Chicago: What's the concept behind this?

Lauren Grossman: It's a nonprofit organization that brings people together over a vegetarian meal. At this stage, [dinner registration is] first-come, first-served. Initially the determining factors were socioeconomic, religion and race. I discovered— although this should've been abundantly obvious—we may sometimes look similar, but could be polar opposites when it comes to perspectives and ideas.

TOC: What do you want participants to gain from the dinners?

Lauren Grossman: I think it's important for us to realize that although we may not look the same and hail from different regions, we still have the ability to develop significant relationships.

TOC: That's probably what a lot of people think, but they usually don't do much about it.

Lauren Grossman: I grew up in the suburbs of Detroit. My friends could have represented the U.N.—and that was what was normal. As I've gotten older, I recognize that aspect of my childhood isn't as common as an adult.

TOC: Was the first meal a success?

Lauren Grossman: The energy and the topics were great. I was pleased that guests probed each other with interesting questions. The group included a Franciscan Friar, a personal chef and a friend who works in Chicago Public Schools under Ron Huberman.

TOC: Have you faced any opposition?

Lauren Grossman: Recruitment is the hardest part. There are a million things to do nightly in the summer. I'm sure things will take off as we have more dinners and people get to talking. I hope that, when people leave [each dinner], they continue to talk about ways in which residents of Chicago or broader communities can continue to work together.