

Holmes: Building community one idea at a time

By Rick Holmes/Opinion editor

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First, they told their stories. Around the table, they were given two minutes each to say who they were and what had first drawn them to community service.

One said John F. Kennedy had inspired him to join the Peace Corps. One volunteered to help a library fund-raising campaign. Another lost a friend to domestic violence and decided, in her memory, to help out at a shelter for battered women. One said residential growth was eating away at his hometown's rural beauty, so he volunteered for the open space committee.

The stories came out at table after table, from one end of the Framingham Sheraton ballroom to the other. They were just the ice-breakers, but they provided vital reference points. The talk then turned to ideas. Our communities have all kinds of needs, and government can't fill them all. What could the people at each table do to make MetroWest a better place?

The ideas flowed on to flip charts at every table:

- Start a Web site for kids, sort of a MySpace MetroWest, so young people could connect with others in nearby towns.
- Organize a family day to get people out to the region's art museums, historical places, parks and libraries.
- Clean up around area reservoirs - and partner with Framingham State College to get young volunteers.
- Help immigrants connect with the community and aspire to the middle class by building up the Framingham ESL (English as a Second Language) program.
- Create an online database for organizations that welcome volunteers.
- Pull together leaders from Framingham and Natick to brainstorm opportunities for collaboration.
- Create a welcome packet for newcomers, with information about organizations, public safety, local government and volunteer opportunities.
- "Organize, support, publicize and attend a Community Party" scheduled in Framingham Nov. 17.

The ideas and the participants ran the gamut. The arts people connected with the schools people, the corporate types with the political types, the nonprofit folks with the young activists. Business cards and e-mail addresses were exchanged. Plans were made to get together again.

And connections were made. The woman who had worked on the battered women's shelter said that the shelter was under new management, and that she had been left in charge of the bank balance. Her goal was to find a way to put that money back in the service of women in crisis. Across the table, two women who work with the Crossroads Foundation were more than happy to help. The newspaper guy at the table - that would be me - offered to publicize whatever they came up with.

So it was at each of 45 tables: introductions, followed by inspiration, ideas and making connections. The excited buzz that filled the ballroom was the sound of civic engagement.

Civic engagement is a newly fashionable phrase, but it's much more than a buzzword. It is the means by which communities are built and sustained. It is neighbors, needs and organizations coming together.

A hundred years ago, when people didn't move around so much, when towns were smaller and families were larger, building and sustaining communities came naturally. Now it takes a special effort, and special institutions, like Leadership MetroWest, which hosted the "Engaging Conversations" breakfast at the Sheraton.

Leadership MetroWest was founded 21 years ago for just this purpose. MetroWest was growing at a furious pace, faster than its small-town leadership infrastructure could handle. It was attracting plenty of talented people, but they were disconnected from their new hometowns.

The MetroWest Leadership Academy, originally a project of the MetroWest Chamber of Commerce, provides this connection. Each year, a class of current or future leaders spends one day a month learning about the region's people, institutions and challenges. Each class completes a community service project, and its members go forth, their good intentions now backed up by knowledge of the region and the connections to get things done.

So the crowd at the Sheraton was already primed for civic engagement. There are now more than 500 Leadership Academy alumni, busy making their communities better places to live. They serve on elected boards and help run local institutions, and they were scattered around the ballroom, making civic engagement happen.

Gov. Deval Patrick, who put building civic engagement at the heart of his campaign and hopes to make it a key component of better government, spoke to the crowd. He invoked the name of one of his earliest supporters, who would surely have been in the room that day if she could have been: state Rep. Debby Blumer, who died last fall.

In her honor, Leadership MetroWest has created the Deborah Blumer Fund for Civic Engagement, a fitting legacy to a woman who was engaged in her community with an energy few could match.

"Decisions aren't made by the passionate few, but by the disengaged in the middle," her son, Adam Blumer, told the gathering, so the task at hand is to get more people engaged. Sometimes, he said, people are just waiting for someone to ask them to help.

The engaged civic leadership of MetroWest is asking, and is showing the way to make our cities and towns more than just a home address.

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