

Civil discourse that doesn't taste like broccoli

Facts or civic duty alone won't make people reexamine their positions. It takes friendship – and irreverence.

By Liz Joyner

TALLAHASSEE, FLA.

In the early 1800s, things weren't looking particularly good for the American experiment in self-governance. Coming to Washington with differences of opinion natural to a vast new land, early legislators lived and ate in boarding houses that became entrenched voting blocs. Thomas Jefferson wrote that these men came to work "in a spirit of avowed misunderstanding, without the smallest wish to agree."

Apparently neither human nature nor legislatures have changed much since.

Jefferson's solution was to bring lawmakers to the White House in diverse groups for good dinner and conversation. Two hundred years later, The Village Square takes a page from his book when we invite politically diverse citizens to break bread at our "Dinner at the Square" series or "Take-out Tuesday" town meetings.

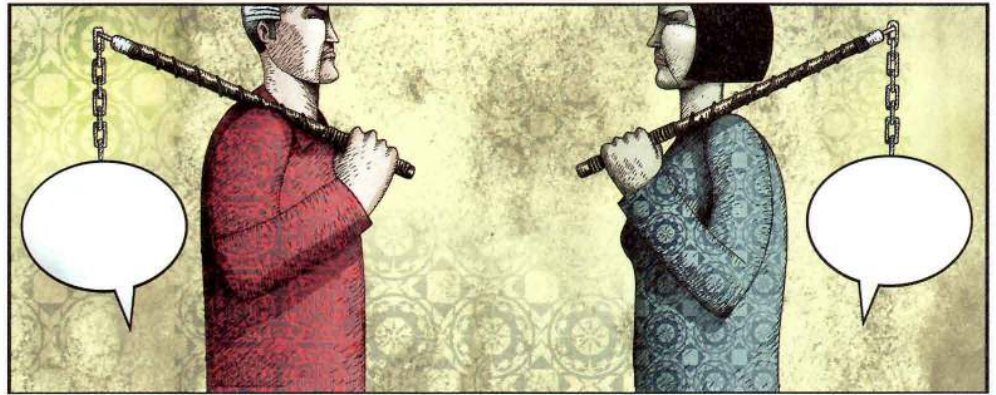
The Village Square was formed in 2006 by good friends Allan Katz, then a Tallahassee city commissioner, and Bill Law, then-Tallahassee Community College president, who found themselves on opposite sides of a contentious referendum on a proposed coal plant. Given the sour and partisan tone of the ensuing debate, they lamented the lack of a shared civic space where people could air their differences of opinion. So they created one.

The village square is hardly a new idea; it's as old as the republic. America's Founders built a country on the notion that political foes must become reluctant partners in engaging conflicting ideas to govern. From this sprang the quintessentially American town hall, where neighbors advance the broad range of thinking that is the lifeblood of healthy democracy.

Technology and the rise of tribalism

Fast-forward a couple centuries of breathtaking technological innovation, which has created a world of information literally at our fingertips, and we're increasingly choosing to associate only with our "tribe" rather than bravely disagree face to face. Bunkered up at home with information sources that serve as a virtual amen chorus for everything we want to believe, we can't seem to tolerate the people we used to share town meetings with.

In "The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart," Bill



PAUL LACHINE

Bishop documents how, in nearly all aspects of life, we've become less connected to those who don't share our views – in the churches we go to, the clubs we join, the neighborhoods we live in.

With neighbors no longer engaging across the aisle with neighbors, there's little to mitigate the human tendency toward tribalism. Once we've demonized each other, the simple act of talking is tantamount to negotiating with evil.

Breaking bread to break barriers

To counter the trend, The Village Square engages people socially around civic issues – bringing neighbors back in relationship with each other across ideological difference. People aren't built to reexamine the basics of their positions unless they feel some sense of friendship and common purpose with those suggesting they do so. (A skim of anonymous comments

online shows how we behave when no relationship exists.)

This central premise of ours is supported by compelling experimental evidence

gathered by Jonathan Haidt in his book "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion."

Unfortunately, asking citizens to engage personally in the civic life of their community is like asking them to eat their broccoli. We know it's good for us, but we'd rather have a slice of chocolate cake – the televised 24/7 partisan smackdowns a remote click away.

How it works

To address this challenge, our irreverently named programs are part civic forum, part entertainment. Each event is casual (the stage is set up to feel like the facilitator's living room) and involves sharing food. As we begin, we give out two "civility bells," ask that the audience avoid tribal "team clapping," and share a quote to inspire our better angels. We welcome fluid audience participation and always try to laugh.

From here our formats vary widely – ranging from huge community dinners with a panel

and social time, to 20 elected officials moving from table to table in "Speed Date Your Local Leader," to a barbecue competition between a Republican and Democratic commissioner.

On the 10th anniversary of the 2000 presidential ballot recount in Florida, we hosted Florida Supreme Court justices and both attorneys who represented candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush in "Florida Recount Reunion: Same Month, Same State, Same City, Same People. Friendlier." We have a series called "Faith, Food, Friday: Improbable Conversations for People of Faith and No Faith at All (because talking politics wasn't hard enough)." And we've given a set of "angry villager" toy figurines as a door prize.

Democracy reclaimed

The ultimate measure of our success is in the potential of good relationships formed – the Planned Parenthood and Roman Catholic Church leaders who became friends, the liberal rabbi and conservative pastor who don't agree on much but now stay in touch, the 175 guests who may approach future interactions differently after 30 Muslim families unexpectedly brought a beautiful spread of food to one of our catered events. When we host elected leaders at our forums, they can feel the wind has shifted and the bar is set higher.

This fall, Village Squares in Sacramento, Calif; Kansas City, Mo.; and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., will join current Florida locations in Tallahassee and St. Petersburg.

Since we first imagined The Village Square, we have repeatedly returned to the same conclusion: We can't wait around for Washington to lead on this. It's in our hometowns, where we carpool to softball games and borrow cups of sugar, where we can most easily have the conversations democracy requires of us.

■ Liz Joyner is cofounder and executive director of The Village Square, a nonprofit devoted to civil discourse across the partisan divide on matters of local, state, and national importance. Learn more at www.tothevillagesquare.org.

Common Ground
Common Good