

A New Face for the Humanities



IN JANUARY 2009, the North Carolina Humanities Council conducted two focus groups in order to gain some perspective on what young people are talking about now and what they would like a humanities program to look like. By April, eight members of the focus groups had already coalesced, mission in hand, as Face to Face, a new organization for “youngish” folks in Greensboro focusing on community development through conversation, enlightenment, and action.

One major impetus for the group is the overwhelming presence of the various online social networking sites. Yes, overwhelming, even for these millennials. “The consumerist culture we live in has created a trend of solipsism and individualism,” says Arthur Erickson, the group elder at thirty-six and Reference Librarian at Greensboro Public Library. “We live close to one another, everyone’s in easy contact, but we’re still retracting back into our jobs, our homes, our

computers. And now we’re actually less connected than perhaps at any other point in human history.” The group plans to change this, and they’ve constructed a multi-layered plan of action.

The first layer, “Word of Mouth,” is a FRIEND-raising event in which participants step away from their computers and engage their Greensboro neighbors in a fun, stimulating atmosphere to the backdrop of drinks, music, and other conversational catalysts which the group provides free of charge. These events serve as a safe space and means of starting conversation with citizens from different pockets of Greensboro. Here, the group is able to identify which issues are of most concern.

The second component, “Soapbox Salon Series,” an issue-based back-and-forth with the community, is a more concentrated program where participants are able to become informed about a given issue via discussion led by an identified scholar

of each issue. Be it a coffee shop or a barbershop, the public is becoming enlightened through dialogue. “Taking educated steps forward allows for much needed prudence and foresight when tackling issues of this magnitude,” says Kevin Saxton, a public school educator and youngest group member at twenty-four.

Finally, Face to Face includes “GroundUP,” an action-oriented program for positive change. With boots on the ground, this program fosters intercommunity advocacy centered on issues of critical importance to the community. “Ultimately,” asks Ashley Watkins, a twenty-seven-year-old communications associate at a Greensboro nonprofit, “what is all this for if not to directly make room for new and improved methods and ideas? We hope to actually do something about the issues and needs which we have previously researched and discussed in depth, creating tangible, transformative results.”

Face to Face members have used this “Foto Yurt” as an innovative tool to help break the ice with newcomers at events. Guests are encouraged to snap their own pictures inside the Foto Yurt — have some fun, share some conversation. Logo design and all photos by Mario Gallucci.



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