A CULTURE OF LISTENING
RESTORING CIVIC DIALOGUE
WHERE LIVES INTERSECT
ON THE LAND

BY PETER FORBES and AMY SCOTT
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AMY’S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not be possible without the generous support of The Betterment Fund and the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation. My deep appreciation goes out to the staff and trustees of both foundations for supporting BANC in exploring new ways to work in our community. I also want to thank the Bethel community members who graciously committed their time to interviews with Peter as well as to the dialogues, and who shared their perspectives with honesty and candor.

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INTRODUCTION

Our purpose in writing this paper is to share our experience with an approach to community engagement that helped to bridge divides in western Maine at a time when our state feels especially polarized. Conventional approaches to community engagement often begin by identifying the values that are shared in a community and thereby unintentionally identify people with similar stories and experiences, who look and think like the organizers. We decided to start our process from a different entry point and explicitly identify the fundamental differences in our community and respect them by making them more plainly visible and understandable. By giving our differences—especially our fundamental tension between production and consumption—an honest account we created the conditions for people to be seen and heard. Shared here, in the spirit of learning together with you, is the story of this experiment from our perspectives as the organizer and the facilitator. All communities are different and what works in one place may not work in another. The Bethel community benefits from several active nonprofits and a history of philanthropy, but also struggles to provide good jobs for residents. The free and reduced lunch rate is over 56%, and rising, in a school district with just over 700 students. The unique culture, demographics and history of each community impacts the kinds of conversations that are needed as well as the conditions that will make for productive dialogue. Despite the different approaches that each us of may need to take, connecting through differences, not similarities may be a common thread in working for positive community change. We hope the story shared here opens some new possibilities for all who seek to bridge community divides.

— Peter and Amy
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*By Peter Forbes and Amy Scott*
CHAPTER ONE

Trying on the Boots

*Restoring civic dialogue where lives intersect on the land*

Timber prices were low, wood was piled up on landings. Winter snow was almost nothing, which was bad for skiers and bad for loggers, too. And then the summer came along dry and hot, which put the pressure on farmers. Lots of folks were feeling some pressure. I heard a second-hand story about a neighbor who pulled a rifle out on another neighbor around a difficult conversation about who got to cross their land. In fact, that story (true or false) might have been the reason I was invited to Bethel. I do know those were strained times when I began work in 2014.

This is a story about how certain conversations can change the dynamics of a relationship forever. I do know this: two people who were arguing with a gun between them were later sitting in a group talking about the future of the land. I also know this: when rural Maine was pulled apart by a divisive presidential election, there was a group of reds and blues that kept talking and working together largely because of how their lives intersected around the land. At the exact time when many are saying that it’s getting harder and harder to talk with one another, here was a group in rural western Maine where the talking and the listening and the work was actually getting easier. Here’s a story about what happened.
This is a story about the work of a small group of 25 land-owners, tourism business owners, farmers, land trust people, logging truck drivers, hikers, hunters, all folks connected to the land but representing the very different dimensions of production and consumption. They are owners of land and users of land, neighbors with different levels of privilege and access, and with different definitions of wealth, and very different amounts of actual wealth, all living together in the very real community in a part of Maine that’s lost 13 mills in the last 50 years and that has been making the transition from an economy based on bringing wood out of the forests to one based upon bringing people up from the cities. Buried in the heart of that transition are significant questions and potential for conflict, such as: do we want to be organized for production or consumption? How do you balance the values and goals of different economies and definitions of wealth? In what ways are we willing to share our home with others? What’s the relative value to our community of someone who was born here and someone who will arrive here tomorrow? This is also a contemporary New England story about many communities’ struggle to understand and transcend the urban/rural divide.

Before our work began, Amy Scott told me she was committed to helping create a “culture of listening” in her community. There’s genius to this because listening is the foundation of relationship, and relationships within a community are the foundation of resilience. Resilient communities are diverse and connected communities. *Hey do you have a few minutes? I know you’re angry with me, can we talk?*  

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1 *Every italicized sentence is a direct quotation from a participant in the Try on the Boots dialogues collected in one-on-one interviews or during the dialogues themselves.*
Many places seek to answer this question: how do we create and sustain the community we want? That’s a profoundly simple question that leads often to many different opinions. One might find consensus among the business community, or among the farmers, or among the newcomers, or among the folks in the trailer park, or among the klatch down at the hardware store, but consensus is hard when voices are brought together, say in one large room on Town Meeting day. It’s the smaller, less public, day-to-day conversations around different opinions that might matter more to a community’s collective ability to go beyond “getting along” to become something closer to “working things out.” Resilient communities are ones that figure out how to hear the differences, carry them like a pile of wood, wrestle with the complexity, and come up with something that has far more winners than losers. Elements of democracy and community life that we take for granted and don’t practice become weak muscles. When you don’t regularly connect outside of your social circle it becomes easy to diminish inclusivity, equity, relationships to place, and to each other. These aspects of community life and democracy don’t come (or stay) without effort, skill, and practice.

Are you planning on staying here? Then we’ve got to talk. Living in any community is just like running a family business: we don’t always agree but we do agree to stay in relationship. You have to talk to get things done. You have to stay in relationship to get things done.

Every community needs these democratic conversations that seek different opinions in order to hear our best arguments and to make our best contributions. This is learning how to talk together in ways that open us to being our best selves. Creating a space for these democratic conversations is what the Bethel Area Nonprofit Collaborative (BANC)
explicitly set out to do in 2014. Here are some principles of this work:

- Courage to have a different conversation and to sustain it.
- Honoring differences within a community by setting a table for difference and recruiting people to take their seats. This is not “overcoming” our differences but honoring them by making them plainly visible. We are different, we are not the same, how do we move forward with our differences? What does that actually ask of all of us?
- Listening over selling.
- Willing to explore history and the conditions that have created divides.
- Sharing a story to cultivate trust and empathy.
- Sustaining the dialogue and applying it to agreements around specific projects.

The first meeting we had at the mountain lodge was jammed with residents; Amy said it was a crowd that rarely came together including members from the schools, the ski areas, nonprofits, business and town government. Energy was high, and people were actively engaged. More telling information is revealed, however, when it’s separated into sectors, subgroups or social circles who are more comfortable—and perhaps honest—when talking with one another. What do these smaller groups see as the issues? What are their questions? How comfortable are they exchanging their ideas with other social circles? What do they need from one another and do they have the skills to express that respectfully to each other? We did an exercise called the Whole Communities Exchange that made visible within 45 minutes some of the essential questions and conflicts that Try on the Boots would attempt to address over the next two years.
The first step in civic dialogue is to set a table for the dialogue that leaves few out. BANC thought intentionally about who is visible and less visible to them on many issues in their community. Who’s often at the table, and who’s rarely at the table? I asked them to work with a group of neighbors to fill out a chart that would help them see more clearly the differences within their own community.

We agreed on the importance of convening a small group of people oriented toward the land but divided by profession, privileges, and power. Though we did not recognize it immediately, there was also a division between these worlds on whether or not they were primarily oriented toward production or consumption, which is the fundamental question that this area has wrestled with for 50 years.

BANC then reached out to very different individuals within these two quadrants with a compelling and provocative set of questions: Do you care for your land? Do you work for your land? Is your work appreciated? Are your rights protected? Is the future of land management a concern to you? If any of these questions raise concern, then come talk about it with your friends and neighbors.
A foundational step of civic dialogue is better understanding the land-and-people history and the social dynamics that have resulted from that history and, ultimately, to make those personal experiences more visible. Based upon where someone stands within that history, parts of the story may be well-known and other parts unknown. Making visible to more people that which is often invisible to some people is opening the door of participation to a greater diversity of people. Exploring and revealing history demonstrates active awareness of something that is real in another person’s experience, and that’s essential to creating a welcoming context for civic dialogue. And, most importantly, examining past history is the only way to understand how that history may still be present today. Examining and making visible the land-and-people history is a way of saying, “I’m trying to see you.” Often, revealing more of the land-and-people history is done through research, publishing or through educational workshops. In our case, time and resources were short, and we accomplished some of the benefits by interviewing participants, and then sharing unattributed quotes at the very beginning of the dialogue to bring enough of that story front and center. By revealing the “800-pound gorilla” clearly to the room, we enabled some in the room to feel more seen and heard, which also made it more possible to talk honestly about what the community wanted and needed.
In Bethel, Maine, that 800-pound gorilla in the room is a story about how socio-economic differences have been baked into 100 years of lives working in the woods versus 100 years of lives recreating in the woods. There is much that these worlds share, and much that also can divide them. We could not begin to contemplate what is shared until we first explored what divided them.

Here are some of the statements that I heard in the first round of interviews and projected onto the wall during the first hour of the second meeting:

- There are deep wounds here that need healing. The land, the wildlife and private landowners need protection from the onslaught of inconsiderate human use.
- When I was a kid they used to say, “If you don’t do well in school you’ll end up working in the mill.” And that attitude contributed to a community without any mills. Some kids would love to work in a mill and others would love to work in the service industry. Can we be more respectful of what all of us need?
- People come here from away and it becomes Us versus Them. They leave their cars and block our logging roads. Their good time makes our livelihoods hard.
- New folks coming here feeling sorry for old timers is insulting. Folks who have been living here longer tend to have all the service jobs. This has to be understood against the context that 25 years ago, there were 13 mills that provided good year-round jobs with benefits to a lot of people. Too many folks now look down their noses at what was actually a pretty good thing.
- Why should an older woman on a fixed income be asked to subsidize
the tourism industry? I honestly hope to die before more ridgeline is developed. Seeing houses up there kills me. But zoning is a hard thing and I’m not in favor of it. Here’s why: it’s too late for zoning. Doing zoning now primarily benefits the people moving in, but not the locals who have been here. That’s not fair.”

- I’m worried that my son won’t be able to hunt here, find a job, raise a family here. Joe came later but his son can do all those things.
- The people who have lived here for a long time have lost things: power, jobs, income, even land.
- I have a logging crew and I often come out looking like a bad guy. It’s always the logger who gets the blame.
- Frankly, I’m not willing to jump in with both feet because I don’t see how things get done here. We don’t have a transparent way to organize, get behind ideas, and move things forward.
- Access to my land is a privilege, not a right.
- I want to put up this sign: “If your land is posted then so is mine.”
- Landowners are expected to provide their land for other people’s entertainment. They expect us to provide the land and pay for all the costs.
- Don’t tell me what to do with my land, but don’t assume that I don’t feel a real responsibility to my neighbors to share it. I want to be respected for paying the taxes and doing right by this land. Let’s start here: It’s my land not anyone else’s.
- 74% of households in Greenwood are owned by people from away. All these folks come here from away to play; I don’t have the time or money to play.

It was hard to project these quotes on the screen and to read them aloud to the group, but as I did I felt a tension leave the room. There were some “amens” just barely audible, and some moments when people
laughed out loud, and times when people nervously scratched their chairs on the floor, and other moments when there wasn’t a sound. Some people heard things for the first time, and others felt heard for the first time. When my presentation was over, I turned to the group to ask what they thought and felt; our project began in that moment.

I have two other clear memories of that day: a man\(^2\) wearing farm work clothes arrived an hour after the meeting started and when I welcomed him in front of the group and asked him to introduce himself he said nothing and sat down in the back row outside of our circle. At the end of that day, he introduced himself—I remembered his name from being interviewed the week before—and then he quickly and softly said thank you for helping him to feel comfortable in that circle, which was his own community. The significance of such words, from a someone who had raised a family there, has not left me. Toward the end of the day, an elder statesman in the group—a business owner who listened hard and spoke little—told us: “My father told me that the most important lesson in life came from trying on another man’s boots and walking in them for a while. We need to try on each other’s boots.” Right then, he named the project for us.

\(^2\)No one was anonymous in this project, but we are choosing not to include any individual’s names in this report to protect their privacy.
CHAPTER THREE

Making Arrangements

Making arrangements to keep talking

So much happened in our past and I acknowledge how much of it is still here. Our goal now is to sustain a conversation that is real and long term—and practical about the future we want.

Sustaining a real dialogue among people who haven’t had much conversation together requires first making agreements for how to do that. By the end of the first day this group was able to articulate and affirm agreements which took two forms: a big picture set of agreements around the importance of keeping balance in their world between production and consumption—and then a very specific set of agreements about how to talk to one another and stay in relationship. We would refer back to these agreements at every meeting, and the agreements accelerated our progress.

Here’s what I began to hear from the group in our second dialogue:

- *I get the sense that our community feels that tourism is growing and that the forest products industry is dying. Is that really good for us? Don’t we need both? Can’t we work toward keeping both?*
- *How about this for a principle: We won’t accept a tourism industry that hurts logging, or a logging industry that hurts our tourism. Why*
can’t we commit to doing both well? What would that take? How do we pay our respects better? It’s easy to blame the folks driving the Volvos and wearing the pattagucci clothes, but the truth is that we need all 3 facets: forest products, farmers, and tourists.

- We need to have a real collaboration between the Volvo folks and the Chevy folks.
- There are young families moving who seem truly dedicated to creating a better community, but how will they stay when the only year-round jobs are in government or at the post office?
- I think the primary issue facing all of us is trying to understand one another better.
- Let’s do an exchange where the recreationists get on skidders and get their man juices going, and get the loggers on a really well built ATV trail.
- There’s got to be a certain amount of live and let live.

The Parable of: Who Pulls Over for Whom in Our Community?

- “The new local pulls up behind the tractor, honks, and zooms around him.”

- “The logging truck comes up behind the tractor, and the tractor will pull over.”

- “When my truck is going down a road fully loaded and I come upon a group of bikers, they don’t get off the road and it scares the crap out of me. It’s not right.”
Respect each other’s boundaries

In the second round of interviews, conducted before our third dialogue, I was told a story by a logging truck driver that wouldn’t have been shared unless we had already spent an hour talking together. The experience scared him deeply and he wanted me to understand why.

The fall before, he was driving a fully loaded logging truck on a private road transporting wood to a buyer. He was coming down a hill into a gradual turn when he saw the stretch of road ahead of him was filled across with mountain bikers moving slower than him. He shared with me the fear he felt about hurting someone, and his confusion that they didn’t immediately get off the road. The mountain bikers likely had no idea how hard it was for him to stop that truck or how much distance that would take. He was overwhelmed in that moment by confusion: this simply shouldn’t be happening. “Anyone else would know to pull over immediately or not to be there in the first place.” And the mountain bikers may have seen him and his truck as a thoughtless, dangerous intrusion into their outdoor experience. Everyone was impacted by the clash of cultures, though no one was physically hurt that time.

My sharing of that story in our next meeting invited other stories about
roads, trucks, cars, and rural etiquette (see “The story of Who pulls Over for Whom”) that brought nervous laughter and deeper understanding about the practical need for more respect. That word RESPECT, which literally means to look again at someone or something, was mentioned a great deal in the interviews. It was beginning to become clear that the core challenge of keeping a balance between old values and new, between old-timers and newcomers, between production and consumption, between land-owners and land-users, was the need to intentionally and visibly rekindle respect.

The following spring the conflict between trucks and bikes had become so numerous and visible that the mountain bike team from a local academy participated in a very practical demonstration of “Try on the Boots” by spending an afternoon climbing inside the cabs of logging trucks to understand what braking distances and visibility are like. Everyone involved agreed that it had helped enormously to build respect and understanding.

Later, in our own “Try on the Boots” dialogues, a participant shared a story that reflected the challenges of lack of respect. This man’s family owns a great deal of land on which they prefer to allow neighbors to hunt and to hike. It was late on a fall day, light was going fast, and they...
got a call from a stranger who had shot a moose at a very remote place with no access. The hunter had no help and no way to move the moose. He hadn’t thought things through, but he had pulled the trigger. The landowner mobilized gear and helped long into the night. I wasn’t about to let a moose rot so we helped him out, but that guy had no idea how much help he got from us. This guy wasn’t respecting us and he wasn’t respecting the moose. There’s just a big difference in values out in the woods right now. So, that’s why we don’t allow access to just anybody.

The biggest challenge facing tourism in our valley is about respecting each other’s boundaries. Here’s the places that are just for us; don’t tell anyone about them. Don’t make money off them. They’re for us. And over there are the places that we can invite others to come and have their fun. Those two boundaries are what we need to figure out.

It was a poignant moment, a clash between generations and ways of seeing the land. I heard someone who wanted to be seen and respected for the enormous care and attention they give the land that puts them into difficult conditions and conflict with their values. It would be easier, for sure, to just say no.

These are the core questions facing Bethel and, I imagine, facing most rural communities in New England and even the nation. How does a community welcome new people in and convey the need for respect? Bethel is now experimenting with practical answers like a publication to visitors that conveys their values, and signage on land that suggests how
best to respect people and place, but we learned over the last two years that nothing is more important than finding ways to have honest, empathetic dialogue on matters of consequence to their lives.

_They bring experience and time—and love of this place. But I wish they could understand that they already have theirs, and I don’t yet have mine. I may need to develop some land to have mine but that doesn’t make me a bad person. A lady often rides her horse on my land and I never really mind. Sometimes she stops me and asks me if I’m going to develop the place, but she’s never once asked me permission to ride her horse._

### Requests of Each Other to Keep Relationships Strong

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<th>Requests made to recreationists and tourism:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Educate your clients about their responsibilities.</td>
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<td>• Be more organized.</td>
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<td>• Know the carrying capacity of our region.</td>
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<td>• Don’t surrender our uniqueness.</td>
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<td>• Show us you understand the true costs of the public using our land.</td>
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<th>Requests made to land owners and the forest producers:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Stay in dialogue with us.</td>
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<td>• Give us access to your land when we deserve it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Tell us how best to engage with you.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Respect what we bring to this community.</td>
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This land you just hauled off your Christmas tree from is not wild land. I pay taxes on it. I care for it. I may be very willing to give you that tree but I want to be respected.

I believe in common courtesy. I really appreciate the folks who have come here to retire.

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<th>Principles for Keeping Balance in Our Community</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Show respect, listen, and judge each other less. Try on someone else’s boots.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Check our egos at the door and recognize that a lot is at stake.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We commit to learning from our differences. Our two worlds come from different life experiences and perspectives that are valuable to our future</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Meet more often with intention. Stay engaged. Talk to each other in a language both can understand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Seek to have the people most affected involved and at the table. We will meet people in their space in their time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The relationships between our sectors have to be maintained even when one says “No” to the other. We are willing to agree to disagree.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We’re human. We’ll make mistakes. Let’s forgive and stay in relationship.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Don’t leave things unsaid. Ask questions. We want to work together to adapt to change.</td>
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<td>• Let’s build from where we can agree. We may be able to express a shared vision of who we want our community to become while disagreeing over strategies like zoning.</td>
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When I reflect back on my last four and a half years as the Network Facilitator for BANC, I am struck by how fortunate I feel to be part of such an innovative community-based experiment. The collaborative is a group of nonprofit organizations in the Western Maine towns of Bethel, Newry, Greenwood, Woodstock and surrounding townships that has invested in building relationships among organizations, community members, businesses, and municipalities. Relationship building is so often seen as a nice secondary outcome to a project but is rarely supported on its own or seen as a valuable tool for re-envisioning what’s possible in a community. BANC’s purpose is to build quality of place in this region. From our perspective, quality of place encompasses the region’s natural and built environment, the quality of human relationships, the level of vibrancy and activity around the community, and cultural and civic traditions. To strengthen all of these assets, we find that establishing trusting connections among people is foundational and is a critical piece of the work. Since this is not a typical model for community development, we are learning as we go, taking risks, sometimes failing, and sometimes moving forward. Community building is challenging work no matter how you approach it, and it’s a privilege to be able to try different approaches and to take the long view. Perhaps our story can offer some insights to other northern New England communities
working to improve quality of place, especially those that are equally
challenged by today’s demographics, economy and the changing rela-
tionship between people and the land.

It began in 2008. About eight nonprofit leaders from the Bethel Area
Chamber of Commerce and other groups came together for practical
reasons—to coordinate calendars and pool resources for common
needs. They inventoried the community and were surprised to find
about 85 local not-for-profit groups. For a region of 5000 people, this is
astounding. This number speaks volumes about this community’s cul-
ture of volunteerism, service, creativity and giving. But it also speaks to
the depth of community need, and the difficulty faced by many to earn
a living and provide for their families. For about a year, with facilitation
support from the Institute for Civic Leadership, this group of nonprof-
it leaders worked to better understand these organizations and their
needs, and then began to put some pieces into place to better support
and connect all these groups. This was the genesis of BANC.

In 2010, the core group held a community forum, also supported by
the Institute, and the flood gates opened. With so many opportunities
for connection, coordination and creativity bubbling up, and so many
needs to fill, it was clearly time to hire a staff person to keep things
moving and organized. The Quality of Place Initiative, through the
Environmental Funders Network, took a risk and funded operations of
the newly formed BANC for two years: 2011 and 2012. Because BANC
involved organizations from diverse sectors including the arts, envi-
ronment, recreation, health, economic development and education, it
was unlike any of the other collaboratives popping up around the state.
BANC was testing out the possibility that our diversity would make
us better able to respond to community needs, develop more creative solutions, and build our organizational capacities.

I entered the BANC scene first as a community member involved with a local foods group, and then as staff, hired on as the Network Facilitator in 2013. At this point, BANC was still defining itself and figuring out what it means to “improve quality of place.” As I settled into my role, I felt and observed all kinds of tensions and questions around this concept: How do we build community? Who are we building it for and for what purpose? How do the land and the people together play into “place?” Who gets to choose what happens to the landscape? How do we define “quality?” And who exactly is “we?” Whose voices are we not hearing? How do we find ways to talk to each other? And what about me? Will I be judged for being a “newcomer?” Will my voice matter?

As I dove into the work those first few months, I was reminded of two personal experiences. On a stunning fall day in 2003, I stopped in to visit my husband at his worksite up in the Sunday River Valley and then headed out for a jog on nearby dirt roads. After a short while, I saw a man on an ATV. I smiled as we passed and commented on the gorgeous weather. He stopped. With a look of disgust, he asked me pointed questions about where I lived and where I was from. Surprised and confused, I simply answered: over the ridge there, to the East; and, I grew up in Connecticut. Clearly unhappy with my answers, he disabused me of my assumption that I had the right to enjoy that road as much as he did. As he sped off, I could only assume that his judgements of me were far from positive. As a woman in my late twenties, fairly new to the area, I felt vulnerable and upset. In that man’s eyes, I automatically fit a stereotype that I didn’t even understand. I was not welcome.
in that valley.

For hours and days following that incident, I assembled all the quick-witted replies and arguments that I “should” have made that afternoon. “We are on public land here. Don’t you know that all of us white people are from away? You know nothing about me, my family, my upbringing. Why are you judging me?” The list went on.

Six or seven years later, I was home with my young children on my own little patch of land in Greenwood. One mid-winter day, I set off into the woods with friends skiing right out the back door. Well into our journey, we came upon an older couple, also on skis. I stopped to say hello. After a moment, they figured out that I had bought the land where their deer stand had been. They huffed off in anger, uninterested in anything I had to say about hunting access on my land or in the area. Again, for days following that encounter my head filled with all my unsaid responses. “I only own 5.5 acres. I worked for years to be able to buy that land and build my house. I don’t own the land we’re skiing on right now, and neither do you. You didn’t own the land with the deer stand. Do you own any land? Did anyone ever hunt on your land?” Again, the list went on.

As I learned more about issues in the community, I reflected on these encounters. In the eyes of the ATVer and the older couple skiing, did I represent some terrible new reality for the community? None of them wished to engage in a conversation with me. Can I change that? What if we could have talked and heard each other out? I discovered that my experience was not unique. Relationships were strained all over the community, particularly around differing uses of the land, the loss of
several lumber mills, and the rise of the tourist based economy.

In 2010, my husband participated in a Whole Thinking Retreat at the Center for Whole Communities, a Vermont-based organization co-founded by Peter Forbes. Inspired by the value my husband took away from that experience, I began to explore Peter’s writing. I read his essay, *What is a Whole Community?*, and then one of his books, *The Great Remembering*. I then discovered his vast experience helping communities wrestle with the very same struggles playing out in our region. The essay makes the argument that for communities to find adequate solutions to today’s problems, they must identify connections among all community members, alike and different, and intentionally nurture those relationships. I was working primarily with staff and volunteers from the nonprofit organizations involved in BANC, but reading these materials made me aware of how many people we were not working with or reaching out to.

That first year as BANC staff I was also interested in finding meaningful ways to measure success for our collaboration and was intrigued to find that the Center produced a tool called, “Whole Measures: Transforming Our Vision for Success.” I began exposing our members to the concept of “whole communities,” and using the tool to challenge us to consider whether or not our organizations were truly taking into account the interrelationships among people, the land and water, and the cultural history of this region. After all, these were the elements of “quality of place” that we were collectively trying to address. People began to ask questions like: Is our conserved land doing anything to better the lives of families trying to survive here? Are our tourism-related businesses portraying our local logging industry with respect, or as a nuisance?
Who are we forgetting to connect with in our community? Who can actually access and use these new recreational trails? Are we truly using each other as assets in order to do the very best we can for our youth, our neighbors, our land?

In support of and complementary to the “whole communities” concept, BANC intentionally set out to build a culture of listening, or at least to start down the path of this very long-term endeavor. We began working with the newly developed Oxford County Wellness Collaborative to help shape and spread the model of holding “conversations that matter,” discussions that give equal voice to each participant, emphasize hospitality, and include supports to reduce barriers to participation. We facilitated discussions among boards of directors and nonprofit leaders in ways that focused on listening to each other, and listening for the outcomes that focused on the good of the whole rather than any one group. We brought together local businesses, town managers, and organizations to consider the future of some undeveloped, somewhat controversial land in the center of town. Then, in the fall of 2013, I was invited to participate in a workshop for western Maine land trusts, provided by the Maine Land Trust Network and facilitated by Peter, who was working with several lands trusts in Maine at the time. After that full day experience, I reached out to Peter and asked if he would come and help me. I was just getting started with this work with BANC, so the time was right to bring someone here with a lot of experience to share with our community. As our local land trust was interested in having Peter speak at their annual meeting, we joined forces and brought Peter here to give a presentation, and then to lead a one-day workshop.
Our local land trust director, some volunteers, Peter and I worked for months to design this workshop for about 40 people representing the BANC membership. While this was an exciting process, the work of holding the container of the collaborative and building it into something meaningful often felt like molasses—slow moving, perfectly opaque, slightly bitter. Sometimes it still feels this way. It takes a lot of time for people to build trust with each other. It takes intentional thought and energy to build something—anything—that’s different from business-as-usual. It takes time to demonstrate integrity and value. It’s not easy, or even compelling at first glance to say to people that we don’t know what the outcome will be, but that we’ll never even know what might be possible unless we try something different, unless we come together, enter into relationship, and think beyond the four walls of our own organizations.

Trying a new approach means taking a risk. To some, BANC was, and sometimes still is, viewed with skepticism and even fear. Concerns about competition for time, money, donors, volunteers and attention are very real among groups, especially in a small community. Loyalties to certain organizations or to ways of doing things are strong. Culturally, we are conditioned to focus on gaining immediate outcomes, and BANC is focused on the long haul, which often means that we can’t point directly at satisfying, measurable outcomes. Some individuals in the community also have doubts about the value of BANC—as it’s not necessarily tangible and it’s definitely not the norm.
Even amidst these challenges, in October of 2014, 40 people from 23 organizations, towns, a school district, and businesses gathered at a mountain lodge for a workshop with Peter that set out to offer participants:

- **Tools to meaningfully and effectively integrate their work with others in the community.**
- **Understanding of how the health of the land is dependent on the health of the people.**
- **Clarity on the role we each play in building a whole community.**
- **Opportunities to celebrate and leverage our differences.**

The workshop day was full and rewarding. The energy of the day was high. The evaluations were positive. Overall, this was a step in the right direction. The purpose of BANC felt clearer to some. We needed to keep pushing organizations to work with one another and face into the challenge of stretching beyond our nonprofit groups and into the wider community. Our work to break the nonprofit groups out of their silos and pay attention to each other was gaining momentum. That momentum needed to push us to confront the realities of the people and groups that we were not yet reaching in our towns, schools, and neighborhoods.
CHAPTER SIX

Setting up Dialogues

Two realities: Opportunity for listening

The exercises that Peter led us through at the workshop clearly pointed out two realities in our community. First, the place where people in our community are all mixed together is the schools. People with and without privilege, of different political views, with different perspectives on the community, are all served by the same schools. Second, there are very clear groups of producers (landowners, loggers, gravel extractors) and consumers (outdoor recreationists, conservationists) who have serious issues with each other and do not benefit from productive dialogue. The issues surrounding reality #2 hold a lot of weight for the future of the community; these groups represent the two primary economic drivers in the region. Locally, people’s livelihoods, the rise or fall of the school-aged population, availability of social services, access to recreational assets, aspirations for young people, environmental quality and resilience, and other issues in many ways depend on the direction that these two sectors take. In debriefing the workshop with Peter, we discussed the dynamics between the producers and the consumers, the weight of those relationships, and the potential for addressing the deep tensions found there. He recommended that we seed a dialogue among people in these groups and pressed the importance of starting by holding a day-long session. Could we get people to agree to this, to show up to a dialogue, and commit the time?
I would never have ventured to bring this group of individuals together on my own. For starters, I couldn’t have made the invitation list myself. I had to trust the instincts and knowledge of my colleagues who were in the thick of it, who understood and experienced the tensions first-hand and who knew who the players were. For help, I first turned to Gabe Perkins, Executive Director of the local trails organization and chair of a town committee at the time. He grew up in the community and happens to be very outgoing. He could talk with just about anyone locally with an ease that I felt I could never carry. I also turned to Jim Mitchell, Executive Director of the local land trust. In his line of work he deals with a lot of landowners, loggers and farmers. He is direct, polite and to the point. He knew who the key players were in the community. The three of us formed an invitation list and started making calls. I didn’t know most of the people on the list, the majority of whom were men. While I called the people I knew and felt comfortable with, I felt that Gabe and Jim would be much more successful calling everyone else. We were making an usual ask of these individuals and we had no idea if anyone would say yes.

The process of setting up this dialogue, which would be several hours in length, facilitated by Peter, that brings people together who never come together in this way, and with no specific outcome, felt very risky. I wondered if anyone would agree to come or even take this seriously. Gabe’s and Jim’s ability to make the case to potential participants that this conversation was needed and that it had the potential to be productive was put to the test, as was my trust in Gabe and Jim. I also put my trust in Peter and his ability to both craft an agenda that would bring people into the dialogue and facilitate what would likely be a difficult series of conversations. To put the right amount of energy into this pro-
cess also meant that I had to let go of any expectations for a particular outcome; there was no way to predetermine what was going to happen. I also had to be prepared to report bad news to my funders if indeed no one participated, or if people did not find value in the dialogue, or if any number of other possible outcomes happened. I even had to accept that the process and dialogue could make things worse in the community if it went poorly. It could lead to increased tensions between people, or could backfire. Any of these outcomes would have reflected poorly on me and on BANC, and could potentially have had a negative impact on the community.

While I was fully aware of these risks, I believed in the possibility that the outcome would be positive and forward moving. Peter had seen this work in other places. He had facilitated dialogues like this before, and had described to me what can happen and what’s possible. Based on his experience, my instincts and on what I had learned so far in my work with BANC, I felt that this was the right step to take. This was one way to penetrate more deeply and reach beyond the borders of our nonprofit organizations, a critical element to working toward real, tangible changes in the community that would benefit local people. BANC needed to listen to people who think differently; to learn from business people who see the world differently than nonprofit people; to pay attention to the realities of class differences that segregate people; to accept that there are many things that we simply do not understand about other people’s lives, because we are only experts of our own experience. To do any of this, we actually have to create opportunities to meet and listen to different groups of people as it just doesn’t happen on its own. For all these reasons, the risk felt justified.
On the day of the first dialogue people began trickling into our meeting space in an old barn. The lovely fire in the 200-year-old fireplace warmed up the atmosphere. The coffee and donuts were appreciated. While I had seen the list of RSVP’s, I was still a little shocked that people took time out of their day to show up. Most people’s faces were tentative, as if to say, “I’m not totally sure why I’m here, but I was personally invited, and I agreed to give it a shot.” Those personal phone calls and face-to-face visits from Jim, Gabe and myself held a lot of weight, and I think made a big difference for people in deciding whether or not to show up. As a 40-year-old woman, I was the minority in the room (most participants were older men). I recalled my run-in with the ATVVer and the skiing couple: I wondered, “Am I fitting into their stereotype right now? Does everyone here trust that my intentions are genuine, that I’m doing this for the good of the community and not for a targeted outcome? Or, am I seen as a threat, an idea to be squashed, a naive girl?” Regardless of anyone’s judgements or perspective on this, I felt completely secure in my personal and professional reasons for making this happen. My own life experience demonstrated to me many times over that when I listened to someone very different from myself, most of the time I learned something significant, and experienced an internal shift on how I perceive and approach the world. This day was all about playing this out in a deliberate way with an invited group of people. This day took chance out of the picture by creating that opportunity for listening among people different from each other.

While the room filled up, I still wondered if anyone would have come if I had invited them, versus my colleagues. That will remain an unanswered question—and perhaps it doesn’t matter. To ask people to step out of their comfort zone is a big ask. Having someone familiar make
that ask is important.

When assembling the list of invitees I noticed that it was primarily men, which didn’t surprise me. Many of the larger landowners, farmers, and resource extractors are men. Locally, I don’t know any female loggers or gravel pit operators. Still, while in the room with this group, I felt highly aware that I, as a younger woman working in the nonprofit world, didn’t have the same kind of stake in our local land use issues that the owners of large tracts of land and fairly large-scale operations have. One of the large landowners in the group is a woman, but she is also a strong conservationist. She straddles both worlds, yet encounters many of the same problems as other large landowners. The ski area representatives, land trust and trails group directors, and National Wildlife Refuge manager were also all men. We didn’t overlook local female leaders from these two sectors; this composition of people reflected the roles men and women typically play in rural, New England communities. Had we pulled together the social service, education, and health sectors, the room would have been filled with women who hold many of those leadership positions. Had we tried to balance the group by gender and age, I feel sure that we would not have brought the right group of people together. For this conversation to lead to changed relationships, participants had to be chosen because of the role they play in the community and not for any other reason.

Throughout the first and subsequent dialogues, I heard people speak with candor and sincerity. There were plenty of disagreements, but none of them were paralyzing. The discussion continued; people asked questions of each other. The fact that people continued to show up, to share their time with Peter doing interviews in between sessions, and agreed
to work together on a brochure project tells me that this endeavor was worth doing. The experience changed relationships among several people. Perhaps it will also change the ways in which each person interacts with others in the community. Perhaps it will stir people to approach tense or controversial situations differently. The group stated that they would like to continue holding dialogues a couple of times a year, and they are still working together to create a public product. I feel good about what happened in each of the four sessions. The comments and evaluations that I heard and read, and the interactions I observed among people prove to me that when invited to be heard with respect, people will respond and, in turn, respectfully share their own concerns.
I imagine that this type of dialogue among groups of people from sectors similar to or different from ours could be useful in many communities. While it will never play out exactly the same way from one community to the next, there are aspects to the process that would apply to most situations. First and foremost, these dialogues cannot be successful without a local leader, or group of leaders, taking the initiative to make it happen. An outsider cannot walk into a community and identify the points of tension that, if relieved, could contribute positively toward community development issues. Someone needs to intimately know the community and the players in order to assemble an invitation list, make personal invitations, and craft a compelling case for people to set aside time out of their busy lives to participate.

Another piece that applies broadly is having an outside facilitator run the dialogues. Peter brought his experience and expertise as a facilitator to our community without bringing any baggage at all. No one had any experience with him except the land trust folks in the room, and me. He came with no real stake in the process. BANC hired him to facilitate the dialogues regardless of the outcome. Participants knew that he was not trying to work any angles, or sway the group a certain way. He was neutral, bringing only the belief that conversations held in this way
could improve relationships, and that improved relationships could lead towards better outcomes for the community. An outsider can shed light on a community in a way that an insider cannot. For example, Peter interviewed participants in between sessions and shared several unattributed quotes from those interviews with the group during each session. Someone from inside the community would not likely have gotten the same level of honesty or candor from the interviewees. This sharing was significant. The stories revealed in the interviews made crystal clear why some of the tensions existed in the community in the first place.

A final piece, equally significant, is that these dialogues took place in a private setting with a small group of people. These are not public meetings where minutes are taken, where participants are often positioning themselves, where everyone is watching and judging the whole time. Public meetings often involve decision making and people are under pressure. That setting does not nurture relationships, nor create space for people to understand each other’s perspectives. They do not shed light on what’s really going on in a community and what the underlying issues are. To be successful these dialogues must be held in a place where people feel comfortable, where only the group is listening to itself. The dialogues need to be a safe space where people can speak freely.

BANC invited people to dialogue with each other with no guarantee that the results would be positive. We went out on a limb. Here, we’ve shared what we know contributed to the success and revealed some of the risks. This whole story will play out differently community by community, and in our own community, the story is not complete. Relationships stay strong only when tended and nurtured. We can’t
simply say, job well done, and move on. But there is a fine line between providing opportunities for interaction and asking too much of people: we are working to maintain that balance. This part of the story will also play out differently community by community. Here, we have a strong network of nonprofit groups that are continuously working to collaborate, to better the community. When that central hub doesn’t exist in a community, sparking and maintaining a series of dialogues may be much more difficult. We also cannot forget that there are many, many other people and groups that our BANC members could and should connect with. Even a community as small as ours is rich, dynamic, and complex. We have more work to do to provide the opportunity for people to listen to each other. As I said before, it simply doesn’t happen unless we create the space for it to happen. It’s more comfortable and takes less energy for people to stay in their natural social groups. To continue building a culture of listening, we will continue to take risks, try new approaches, and always to ask questions.
A CULTURE OF LISTENING

RESTORING CIVIC DIALOGUE WHERE LIVES INTERSECT ON THE LAND

BY PETER FORBES and AMY SCOTT