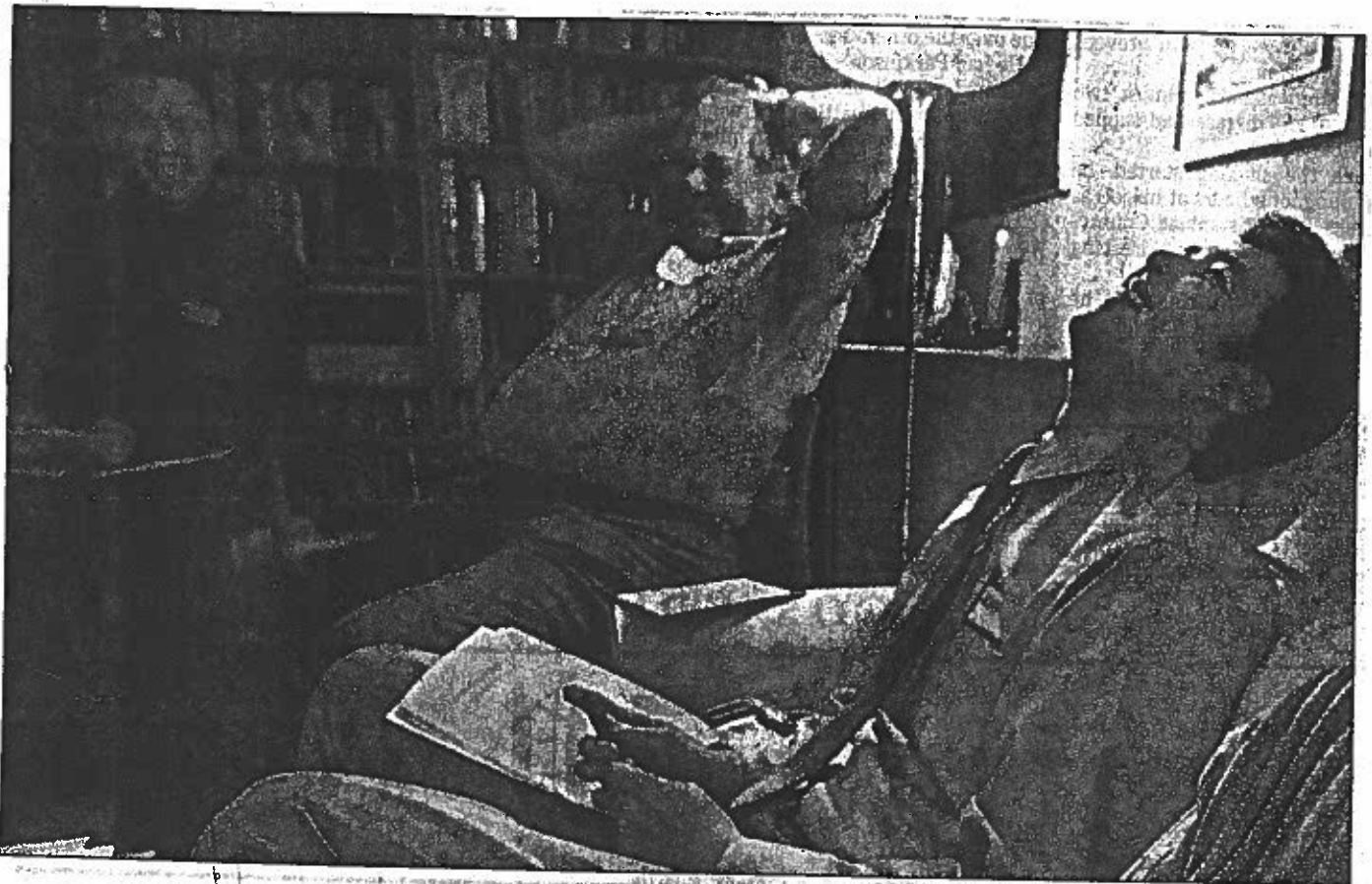


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Living-Room Diplomats



DON BARTLETT/Los Angeles Times

Henry Wyle, center, welcomes a diverse group into his living room as part of an Orange County Human Relations Council program. Danny Hall, right, is a co-facilitator. Wyle says that if enough people do the same, it might make a difference.

By SCOTT MARTELLE
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Henry Wyle began a recent evening with the jaded optimism of a lottery player who expects to lose, but plunks down his dollar anyway.

Ten people from diverse backgrounds were gathering in Wyle's Irvine living room to talk about the things that separated them—color and class, faith and family. The goal: to find a path to peace and understanding in a world skewed by hatred and intolerance.

The odds, Wyle admitted, were long.

"One series like this, in one living room, doesn't mean anything," Wyle said, a plastic cup of soda in one hand as people filtered in for the third and final "living room dialogue" he hosted with his wife, Hilda.

"But if we get hundreds of these [dialogues] in hundreds of living rooms, then maybe one hothead will stand up sometime in the future and one of his own people will say, 'Shut up and sit down,'" Wyle said. "That would be marvelous."

In the seven months since the Sept. 11 attacks, Southern California and the nation have shared a nightmare of shock, grief, anger and, in some quarters, a thirst for vengeance. These are the reactions of a family dealing with sudden loss, with emotions magnified on a national scale.

But community activists say the attacks also have unleashed people's pent-up desire to shed their cloaks of isolation and better connect with their communities and the world.

Organizers are devising strategies to capitalize on these emotions, from the "living room dialogues" arranged by the Orange County Human Relations Council to an upcoming social mixer at a Los Angeles art gallery to entice young professionals to involve themselves in community programs.

The efforts include major grant-making foundations hoping to advance tolerance of Arabs, Muslims and Sikhs.

"One of the things we wanted to do was reach into communities and

port programs that focus around reducing hate and increasing understanding—particularly understanding the culture of Arab Americans and Muslims,” said Gwen Foster, program director for the California Endowment.

This month, the endowment granted 15 organizations a total of \$2.4 million to combat intolerance.

Because the goal is to affect attitudes and beliefs, success will be hard to gauge.

“I would be looking for indications that people are coming together, that there is increased dialogue and reduced fearfulness among people,” Foster said. “How we measure that, I don’t know.”

Although some of the programs make use of existing structures, such as interfaith movements, others try new methods to draw people in.

The Wyles’ sessions involved one Egyptian American, an Indian American Sikh, two American Jews and a Japanese American Buddhist; two representatives from the gay community; and 14-year-old Anson Stewart, who runs a youth diversity program in Irvine.

The discussion covered how individuals and groups responded to the terror attacks, the role of the flag as a symbol of unity, and what steps can be taken to broaden interactions among sometimes insular groups.

“Volunteers tend to be active within their own community. This we need to change,” said participant Magdy Eleteby, chairman of the Islamic New Horizons School in Irvine. “We learned the hard way that it is not right to limit your involvement to your immediate community. We need to branch out as much as possible. The people who stood by us are the people who knew us.”

Four of the participants were from a sociology class at Orange Coast College, where students were given a choice of joining a dialogue group or writing a 10-page paper. Expecting an easy grade, some of the students said they were surprised by the intensity of the discussions, and revelations about themselves.

One, Bonnie Pak, said she considered herself to be open-minded, but the sessions forced her to confront a blind spot: homosexuality.

“Now I realize I was pretty close-minded about certain things,” she said. “I never realized how isolated I was. I was raised Christian and I always thought gays and lesbians were wrong. . . I’m trying to get a sense of awareness. I want to have an open mind.”

The beginning of such personal evolutions, organizers believe, lies in conversation. But first, they have to draw people together.

Using a two-year, \$100,000 grant, Orange County’s branch of the National Conference for Community and Justice hopes to create a Community Cousins Program, drawing families from different faiths and backgrounds to link up with Arabic and Muslim families.

The first session, to involve 30 to 40 families from several churches and temples, will be in a park; later sessions will move to family homes in hopes of establishing long-lived friendships, said William Shane, the group’s Orange County executive director.

“People will have dinner together, then maybe go to movies together. You’ll go to my kid’s Little League game and we’ll go to your kid’s play,” Shane said. “Eventually, we’ll have Thanksgiving dinner together.”

Although the program is in the planning stages, Shane said, enthusiasm has been high, driven by curiosity and the belief that one way to avoid conflict is to understand and appreciate other cultures.

“With the events of 9/11, people suddenly were confronted with the fact that they don’t know anything about major peoples of the world,” Shane said. “They aren’t on CNN. They are down the street and we want to get to know our neighbors.”

Efforts have extended beyond issues of tolerance. New York-based Action Without Borders, which operates the www.idealists.org Web site, used the weeks after the attacks to launch a long-planned international day of meetings, urging those in the nonprofit sector to devise fresh strategies for tackling local problems.

The goal: establish “help centers” worldwide through which

community groups can meet, share resources and strategies, and give would-be volunteers a place to find projects to join.

More than 200 meetings convened around the world on a day in February and one in March. They were arranged over the Internet, but held in coffee shops, community rooms and homes.

“It was pretty amazing,” said Ami Dar, founder and executive director of Action Without Borders. “We had about 2,000 people in February, in about 120 different communities in 40 countries on the same day.”

Although the idea for the meetings arose several years ago, the terror attacks helped in their launch.

“People who on Sept. 10 would have had no time for you are now listening, so from that point of view, it made it easier,” Dar said. “But it was not a direct response. We never actually mentioned 9/11 [in organizing material].”

Three groups in the Los Angeles area met, bringing together peace activists in Huntington Beach, medical-support experts in West Los Angeles and young professionals at a homeless shelter near downtown.

“We had about 15 people from a range of different professions,” said Teresa Norland, one of the founders of the 16-month-old Young Professional Group, a fund-raising arm of the Good Shepherd Center for Women. “It was amazing to see how the Internet can mobilize people.”

Co-founder R. Jennifer Gibbons said the terror attacks unleashed not only rage and grief, but benevolence, as well.

“People want to get involved; they want to change the world and feel better about themselves,” said Gibbons, who works in television production.

Hosting an idealists.org session was one step in the group’s efforts to harness those impulses. The 40-member Young Professionals Group also has scheduled a fund-raiser and social mixer May 18 at the Inshala Art Gallery, hoping to use a buffet dinner, open bar and live music to draw fresh blood.

“We did try to make the best out of the situation,” said Norland, a fund-raiser for the Los Angeles County-USC Violence Intervention Program in East Los Angeles. “We hope to raise money and exposure.”

Thomas Lash, a longtime peace activist and organizer from Huntington Beach, hosted two meetings, drawing about 15 people to the first and half that to the second. After what he said was a slow start as participants got to know each other, the group began making plans for a “help center,” and Lash is scouting out a site for such a center on Pacific Coast Highway.

“I’m totally optimistic,” said Lash, community education coordinator for the Orange County Red Cross. “The way the times are, people are thirsty for something like that. . . It’s just a different feeling between then [Sept. 11] and now. It’s a watershed event in a whole list of things that are happening right now.”

And in some quarters, the results are becoming measurable.

Wyle volunteered to host the Irvine living room dialogue as a member of the social action committee at University Synagogue.

During the final session last week, he listened intently as Eleteby from the Islamic school mapped out his desire to link groups in community actions.

The point, he said, is not to lecture each other about understanding differences, but to move beyond differences to work for communal good.

Within minutes, the Muslim and the Jew agreed to try to bring together members of their respective faiths in sessions for Second Harvest, the Orange County program that sends volunteers into already-harvested fields to gather produce left behind.

The food is then donated to soup kitchens and other facilities that feed the hungry.

“That would be great,” Eleteby said, nodding his head as he agreed to work with Wyle. “That would benefit the community at large.”

Wyle clasped his hands and settled back in his chair, his face creased with the satisfied smile of a man whose lottery ticket had just paid off.



DON BARTLETT/Los Angeles Times

Anson Stewart, 14, runs a youth diversity program in Irvine and is one of 10 people who met to talk about the things dividing people.