

A Feast of Ideas

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[Image Gallery](#)

Photo by Mike Dvorak

The dining room windows are foggy with conversation. Every seat, nearly every piece of floor space in Marnita Schroedl's modest three-bedroom house in Minneapolis is occupied. Patio furniture has been pressed into February service. Guests perch on radiators and test the limits of the pet-weary sofa, juggling paper plates, plastic wine glasses, and animated discussions.

Although space is tight, the more than 50 people who have crunched through fresh snow to get here tonight don't seem to care. They've come to meet six international doctors who specialize in HIV/AIDS and to meet each other. All of them have some connection to the disease. Over the next four hours, they swap stories about how it has changed their lives and their communities and grope for new strategies and answers.

Some of them have met before, but many are strangers. A teenager who was born HIV-positive chats with a sales representative for an AIDS drug manufacturer. A big donor to an HIV/AIDS organization pitches in on kitchen duty alongside someone from a needle exchange program. Occasionally, a melodic hooting rises above the hubbub, signaling that members of a support group for older HIV-positive women have heard something they agree with.

As the evening winds down, a ritual that is familiar to anyone who has attended Marnita's Table, as Schroedl's dinners are known, begins: Each person takes the floor to share something about the evening's topic and how it intersects with his or her life.

One after another, three young people rise to speak, and the hush in the room solidifies into rapt silence as they describe what it's been like to grow up HIV-positive: the stigma, the fear of being found out, the relentless regimen

of medications, and the endless appointments with often brusque and impersonal doctors. It is the first time two of them have spoken publicly about HIV.

“It was such a moving experience, because these teens were talking from their heart about their experience being HIV-positive,” recalls Lisa Rudquist, who sells AIDS drugs for Abbott Laboratories. “Before hearing them talk, I’d heard of the stigma and the judgment and those types of things, but you don’t really understand the gravity of that until you hear from these teens what it’s actually been like.”

At 23, Lisel Christian is already a veteran at sharing her HIV story with others. For the past several years she has been an advocate for Camp Heartland, a camp for children living with HIV. But that night, Christian says, something different happened: “It showed me that there’s this whole other group of people that I didn’t know cared, like doctors and medical personnel . . . they actually care and they’re passionate about it.”

It’s breakthrough moments of clarity like this that keep people coming back to Marnita’s Table, a four-year-old experiment in building social capital through food, fellowship, and cross-cultural communication. Part salon and part dinner party, Marnita’s Table is a place where the high and mighty nosh next to the just folks—often as many as can squeeze in the door.

There are no name tags, and few rules: Eat. Talk. Move. Don’t stay long in the same chair or in the same conversation. Civility is expected, but there are no sacred cows as all manner of topics are served up for examination over steaming bowls of Asian hot pot, savory plates of Mexican mole, Argentine mixed grill, or thick Irish stew.

“It arouses many points in your mind that make you think,” says Cecil Gassis, a 27-year-old immigrant from Sudan who attended a May table on immigration. “It basically all comes to one point, which is making where you live a better place.”

In a society seemingly famished for authentic interaction, Marnita’s Table is a place for stick-to-your-ribs conversation on issues like the Iraq War, affordable housing, immigration, and AIDS. But Schroedl and her husband, Carl Goldstein, say their mission isn’t just to nourish a few select people’s need for stimulating conversation; it’s to build a model for social change that others can replicate.

At the base of Marnita’s Table is the idea that social networking is fundamental to social change. Who we know shapes everything from who we hire to who we vote for to who we choose to live next door to. And in our increasingly self-selecting society, those networks are becoming smaller, more insular, and less welcoming. Breaking bread together helps strangers find common ground with “the other.”

“It’s not going to do any good to seat people in a room and tell them to like someone who’s different,” Schroedl says. “But if I’m a white person living in [a suburb] and you’re a black person living in [the inner city] and we have something in common, now we have a way to talk. Now maybe I’m going to your neighborhood, you’re going to mine, and maybe it’s easier for me to see why I should fund the schools on your block.”

Schroedl and Goldstein are themselves a study in difference. Short and round with a head of close-cropped black curls, Schroedl exudes energy and personality. She talks with her hands, laughs freely, and has the in-your-face directness that comes from parenting teenagers.

Her biological father was of African American and Latin descent, her mother a Danish Jew, but she was adopted as a toddler by a white couple and grew up the only black-skinned person in a small town in rural Washington.

“My family was great,” she says, but “it was not a very happy childhood” in terms of community acceptance. “When my family brought me home when I was 2, the town had a meeting about ‘we don’t want those people in our town.’”

As a teenager, she moved to Portland, Oregon, to live with her older sister and tried to integrate herself into the black community, only to find out that black teens saw her as too white. “I was never an ‘us,’ always a ‘them,’” she says.

At 17 she left Oregon with five dollars in her pocket and a deep sense of alienation. She was determined that her life would be different. “I decided I’d never felt welcomed anywhere, so I was always going to make room at my table. For anybody who came and behaved civilly, there would always be a space. We’d just keep adding cups of water to the soup and more chairs to the table.”

She embarked on a career in publicity that eventually brought her to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, where in 2000 she met Goldstein, a freelance journalist who had grown up in Ohio and worked for years in Southeast Asia. Both recently divorced, they bonded over their kids and their shared feeling of isolation. The Twin Cities seemed an insular community, closed to anyone who wasn’t a native-born Minnesotan. It wasn’t long after they moved in together that Schroedl began to reach out to other transplants and to communities of color. Goldstein, who is much less social, was horrified when a New Year’s Day brunch mushroomed into a party for more than 50 people. Although he had asked Schroedl “not to do anything embarrassing,” she couldn’t resist ending the evening on a touchy-feely note. She gave guests candles and asked each of them to share their wishes for the new year.

One by one, they voiced their hopes and dreams as they touched candle to flame. That same sharing ceremony closes each dinner at Marnita’s Table; it is a ritual that Goldstein now embraces.

In 2002 Schroedl and Goldstein were asked to host a meal for the visiting ambassador from Argentina through the Minnesota International Center. It had originally been conceived as a formal sit-down for 12 to 14, but the guest list had mushroomed to 45 by the day before. Schroedl and Goldstein improvised, rearranging the furniture and the menu, replacing linen and china with paper and plastic. They decided to make the event more than just a staid state dinner. Schroedl researched Argentine food and music, while Goldstein put together information on the country’s current political and economic issues.

The Argentine ambassador canceled at the last minute, but the number two official arrived in his stead, and no one seemed to mind. Conversation flowed late into the night as guests savored the food and fellowship.

A few weeks later, the couple hosted a dinner and dialogue to discuss a local author’s new book. Word spread. Over the next couple of years they blew through their savings hosting dinners to feed their need for connection and conversation.

Then a nonprofit philanthropic organization asked them to design an event to help its mostly white board members connect better with those it helps, most of whom are people of color. It was their first paid event, and the first time they began to think of Marnita’s Table as a business. Now, in addition to social networking dinners, they organize corporate team-building events and host dinners to introduce newly hired people of color to the community.

After the original HIV/AIDS discussion, DIVA Minnesota, a fund-raising and grant-making organization, asked Schroedl and Goldstein to convene three dinner conversations focused on community-based solutions for stemming the alarming spread of HIV/AIDS among women of color, who in 2006 represented 68 percent of the state’s new HIV infections.

The dinners took place over six weeks, and within a few months 60 individuals from 27 organizations had joined together and signed the DIVA Collaborative, a plan to reach out to and educate women of color about HIV/AIDS.

Despite the size and complexity of the group, the experience was intensely personal, says DIVA’s Mike Cassidy, “because you’re in a very intimate atmosphere, and people are interested in what *you* think, not what your organization thinks.”

The result, says Peter Carr, head of the Minnesota Health Department's sexually transmitted diseases and HIV section, was a surprising spirit of collaboration and cooperation. Too often, he says, organizations trying to work together end up competing as each tries to protect its interests and its turf.

"It was wonderful, a really refreshing perspective," Carr marvels.

One key to their success, say Goldstein and Schroedl, is cultivating participants from across the economic, political, and cultural spectrum.

"It's about making sure that you're really inclusive and inviting the right players, not just people you know," Schroedl says.

Specifically, they try to make sure that at least half the participants are people of color and half are people living below the poverty line. This is important, Goldstein says, "because if you have 30 white people and 5 black people or other people of color, that's an entirely different experience. . . . In fact, for whites to be in a room where they are in the minority is a very powerful experience."

"Very rare and very powerful," Schroedl adds.

Cecil Gassis, who came to the United States from Sudan in 2003 and now oversees a YWCA program for new immigrants, says Marnita's Table offers the kind of conversation many immigrants long for. "We wish we could stop somebody in the street and say, 'I have some questions that I would like to get answers for.'"

But it was her conversations with other immigrants at Marnita's Table that have really stayed with her, she says: "At Marnita's Table there were people who looked different [yet] that did not stop them being successful and helping other people. . . . It was very encouraging, because I always thought that I had to find a way to be, if not normal, close to normal, close to the standards here."

Just what constitutes "normal" can often become a thorny conversation, and debate over issues like immigration sometimes get heated, but only once, say Schroedl and Goldstein, have things threatened to spiral out of control. A dinner in April 2005 organized around some visiting Iraqi religious leaders who were touring the United States with the State Department nearly turned explosive over the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Also at dinner that night were a former military adviser to Saddam Hussein, an Iraqi American academic prominent in the anti-Saddam movement, and several people who had experienced war in their home countries of Croatia, Syria, and Lebanon.

The dialogue between the academic and the general grew so heated that they separated themselves to "honor the spirit of welcome and respect" at the table, Goldstein says. Later, they took the discussion into a corner and kept at it until some kind of understanding was reached.

"By the end of the evening," Goldstein says, "they were laughing with their arms around each other."