

Reports from the Field

Kitchen Conversations: Democracy in Action at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum

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Abstract: This article describes the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's ongoing public dialogue on immigration, the first in the United States. As she joins facilitators in reflecting on the importance of dialogue in a democracy, museum president Ruth J. Abram explains how and why the program was initiated, the obstacles that had to be overcome, and the public reaction to it. Kitchen Conversations represents the museum's commitment to the proposition that historic sites must function as places of civic engagement, using the history they interpret as a starting place for dialogue on related contemporary issues.

Key words: Tenement Museum, civic engagement, dialogue for democracy, immigration, using history today

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

—United States Bill of Rights, First Amendment

"I couldn't buy a tomato. Those people don't even know the English words for the food they're selling. If they insist on living all together with other Chinese people, they'll never learn English. If they don't want to be part of us, why did they come?" This exasperated outburst from "Fran" (participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy), a visitor to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, who had walked through Manhattan's Chinatown to get to the museum, precipitated a vigorous discussion. And it was welcome.

Since the fall of 2004, the Tenement Museum has offered visitors an opportunity to deepen their experience at the museum by participating in a dialogue program immediately following their tour of historic immigrant apartments. The objectives of this program are (1) to engage visitors in a dialogue using stories from the tour as a starting point for them to share their own related experiences and challenge their assumptions and beliefs about larger contemporary immigration issues, (2) to help participants gain new perspectives on contemporary questions by looking at how they were answered in the past, (3) to develop in visitors a heightened awareness of their own involvement with contemporary immigration issues, and (4) to inspire visitors to become more active in learning about contemporary immigration issues.

Several of the dozen people sharing the table with Fran shook their heads in agreement. Others shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. What would happen next? This could end up in a bad place.

It had started out well enough. After introducing herself, the facilitator had invited members of the group to read aloud the discussion ground rules:

1. Sharing and Hearing. Share your thoughts honestly but be aware that others need to be heard, as well. Allow others to finish speaking before you jump in.
2. Spirit of Inquiry. Seek to learn how other people view an issue rather than trying to persuade others to accept your view. Make an effort to suspend your own judgment as you listen to others.
3. Diversity and Individuality. Honor the diversity of opinions that is likely to exist around the table. When you speak, we invite you to use "I" statements to represent your own experiences and ideas; you are not responsible for representing the experiences of an entire group of people.

Participants introduced themselves by first name and answered the facilitator's question: "When someone asks 'where are you from?' what do you say?" They were from all over—New York City, of course, but also other states and towns big and small in the United States and from other countries. Many of the Americans named their families' place of origin: Africa, Belgium, Croatia, England, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Mexico, and Scotland, to name a few.

And then this outburst. Fran seemed downright angry.

The facilitator wasn't fazed. "Did anyone else have the same experience as Fran?" she asked. Another participant had. Silence. The facilitator continued, "Does anyone here have a family member who never learned to speak En-

glish?" Two hands shot up. "My grandmother only spoke Italian," said one. "Mine only spoke Yiddish," said another. "Where did they live?" asked the facilitator. Not surprisingly, these grandmothers had lived in neighborhoods where their language was dominant. "Did they work?" the facilitator pressed. Both had worked—before they had married—in jobs where the boss and workers spoke their language. The participants grabbed cookies and refilled their glasses. They were in this for the long haul. "Did their children learn English?" "Of course," both participants asserted.

"So why," asked the facilitator, scanning the faces round the enamel-topped table ("Just like in my grandmother's house," many said), would Betty and Maria's grandmothers have chosen to live in immigrant enclaves, where people spoke their languages?

Wheels turned. "They needed to make a living, and they needed jobs where their lack of English wouldn't matter," opined one participant. "They needed to negotiate their situation right away, and it was easier to shop and make friends and get help—be understood—in a neighborhood where people spoke their language," offered another. The facilitator reminded the group that it is likely that Natalie Gumpertz, the German immigrant they'd met on their tour of her 1878 apartment, never spoke English. Her clientele and her neighbors were all German speakers. Indeed, had the Lower East Side then been a city unto itself, it would have been the fifth largest German-speaking city in the world.

Faces relaxed. Miraculously, the original gnawing suspicion that immigrants congregate together in foreign-language enclaves in rejection of American ways and values gave way to a realization that this behavior could be understood as a strategy for gaining a quicker foothold in America to benefit the immigrants' children and grandchildren. It was a comforting discovery. No one likes to feel invaded by people who don't appreciate their community or value its offerings. But Fran wasn't satisfied. "Why," she persisted, "didn't they even try to learn English?" "Why do you think?" The facilitator asked the other participants. "My grandmother told me she had tried, but just couldn't," explained Maria. "I think by the time she had time to attend English classes, she was already older. It was hard for her." "Well, just think about it," said another. "Look what we saw here at the museum. They're working ten- twelve-hour days, six days a week. Then there are family chores." "Don't forget," chimed in another, "They also work at home after dinner." Participants rushed in with thoughts. "When would they have time for English lessons?" "And, since they're not only supporting themselves, but also sending money back home to support family there, where's the money to pay for them?" "I'm not sure I could do it." Assenting nods all around.

When facilitator Alex Narvaez, whose parents migrated from Puerto Rico, asked his group if there was an immigrant population in any of their neighborhoods, a woman responded that the immigrants in her area *refused* to learn English and had no desire to assimilate. Another participant countered saying, "My Sicilian mother lived here for forty years and did not know a lick of English, but she worked hard and loved this country for the opportunities it

gave her children.” The man’s Puerto Rican wife pointed out how difficult it is to pick up a new language, especially for an adult with the responsibility of putting food on the table. “Afterwards,” remembered Narvaez, “a Canadian couple approached me and apologized for the ‘tough crowd.’ I told them I thought it was great, the very kind of discussion we hope for. They thanked me for the conversation.” Some, such as Donna from Wisconsin, believe it’s simply in immigrants’ own self-interest to learn English. Others view the mastery of English as evidence of immigrants’ loyalty to America. “The new immigrants,” charged Marge from Minneapolis, “are clinging to their ethnic backgrounds. Chinese kids are sent to Chinese schools, but they should melt into American society. We should print voter cards in English only.” Walter from Phoenix saw it differently. “If you want people to participate in American democracy, you have to make it easy for them. Why not print the ballots in their languages? They pay taxes, fight for us, serve as police, etc.” Walter’s comment emboldened another participant, who said, “If you’re blind and don’t want to be left out, you need braille. If you’re deaf, you need sign language. If you don’t speak English, you need the information in your language so you can participate.” Her comments fell like new snow in the room. The reasoning seemed so light a touch, so easy, so unthreatening, so right. “My grandmother never learned English,” reported Estelle. Hilary chimed in, “Growing up on the Lower East Side, I knew a lot of people who never learned English. My husband’s grandfather worked as a shoe salesman and never learned English. He did okay.” “Maybe,” Harry opined, “your husband’s grandfather didn’t need English to do his job.” Hilary agreed. Then, Abby had still another take on the situation, saying, “A lot of my friends’ parents refused to teach them their native language, wanting them to learn English only.” “Still,” Hillary said, not wanting to lose her main point, “we need a *lingua franca*.” “But,” said a sociology student from the Virgin Islands, “with so many Spanish-speaking people now in America, we all need to learn Spanish.” “But should immigrants be required to speak English?” facilitator Mari Brown pressed. “Yes, to be a citizen,” responded Mark. “But not to be an immigrant,” Jolie added.

That exchange led to the questions on the citizenship exam. “Forget about that,” said Jeremy, there with his girlfriend, “I’m ashamed to say I can’t recall the main articles in the Bill of Rights. This admission prompted me to tell the group that the museum had distributed questions from the U.S. Citizenship exam to visitors on a July 4th weekend, offering free membership to anyone receiving a 100% score on the test. Before the day was out, the winning score had to be dropped to 70% before anyone could “win.” “Who does decide what immigrants should know?” asked a visitor, “and on what basis?” No one knew.

The History of Kitchen Conversations

The impetus for “Kitchen Conversations” grew from several sources. First, there were the overheard visitor remarks. Emerging from the restored dark,

cramped 325-square-foot tenement apartments, where immigrants lived from 1863 until 1935, some visitors commented, “But those were the good immigrants. They came here for freedom. They worked hard, very hard. They didn’t ask for anything. They learned English. They wanted to be Americans. Today, those people are just coming for the welfare. They don’t want to work. They don’t care about learning English or being American.”

For staff at the Tenement Museum, which offers a regular series of English classes for immigrants, affords immigrant artists venues for their work, and hires many immigrant educators, this view of immigrants as lazy, dependent, and disloyal ran counter to first-hand knowledge and experience. And from the museum’s continuing education program, staff were also well aware that immigrants then and now have come to America for the same reasons, and for the overwhelming majority, those reasons include the prospect of making a good living. How could we address the ignorance which limited the perspective of so many visitors?

I hadn’t expected this to happen. In founding the museum in 1988, I had hoped to give Americans an opportunity to “meet” their immigrant forebears at a time before they were economically comfortable, before they spoke the language or knew the customs of their adopted land. I thought that once connected to the depth and breadth of the courage of their immigrant ancestors, contemporary Americans would draw connections between the forebears they admired and the newest arrivals. But it wasn’t happening, at least not routinely.

By the time we began to develop our Kitchen Conversation program, the museum had already experienced the power of dialogue. In 1996, the museum assembled immigrants from diverse nations to find out whether by sharing their immigration stories, they would discover a common bond. They did. Indeed, one participant described a real eye opener. “Before this experience, I thought that my troubles came because I was Dominican. Now, after hearing that people from other countries have experienced the same thing, I realize it’s just because we are immigrants.”

Starting in 2003, members of the Lower East Side Community Preservation Project, a coalition of neighborhood groups organized by the Tenement Museum, met every few months to identify and interpret historic sites in their neighborhood and to discuss the relationship between the stories told at those historic sites and contemporary issues. This group’s first project had been the restoration and interpretation of the slave gallery in St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church. The only slave gallery still existing in a New York City church, this mean attic space, for decades part of the physical backdrop for an African American congregation, had been studiously ignored. “There was a feeling it was *our* shame,” explained a congregant. After participating in the museum’s dialogues with immigrants, the church elders began to see the slave gallery as a potential powerful force for community building. This was confirmed at the opening ceremonies. “My people,” explained a representative of a Latino organization, “didn’t experience slavery, but we have been marginalized and the objects of discrimination.” A Chinese representative told of being segregated



97 Orchard Street, the heart of the Tenement Museum, is the first homestead of urban, working-class and poor immigrant people preserved and interpreted in the United States. (Photograph courtesy of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum)

in Chinatown. Thus was initiated a community-wide dialogue on prejudice. A historic space provided the impetus and the common ground.

We had also tried offering the museum as a neutral space for representatives from disputing sides of an issue. In February 2002, representatives from all sectors of the garment industry toured the museum's sweatshop apartment. Afterward, they gathered for a facilitated dialogue on how each sector could participate in addressing abuses in the industry. Following the discussion, a clothing manufacturer said, "The museum provides an ideal neutral environment that facilitates discussion among people in conflict." A Union representative acknowledged, "The environment here puts everyone a little off-balance, in a way that really opens discussion. It provides a wonderful opportunity for us to look at all these issues together."

Perhaps the most significant push for the establishment of an ongoing dialogue program came from another project organized by the Tenement Museum. In 1998, seeking to expand support for its view that historic sites should be places of civic engagement, the museum organized a meeting of historic sites from around the world. At the conclusion of this meeting, funded by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations and the Trust for Mutual Understanding, the participants (directors of the District Six Museum, South Africa; Gulag Museum, Russia; Liberation War Museum, Bangladesh; Lower East Side Tenement Museum, USA; Maison des Esclaves, Senegal; National Park Service Northeast Region, USA; Memoria Abierta, Argentina; Terezín Memorial, Czech Republic; The Workhouse, England) formed the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience (www.sitesofconscience.org) and issued this statement:

We hold in common the belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our site and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values as a primary function.

Now the Tenement Museum was on record as valuing dialogue above all else. The gauntlet had been thrown down. Liz Sevchenko, who had assisted me in organizing the coalition and is now its director, was named interpretive director of the museum, charged with insuring that the museum was meeting the coalition's objectives in all its programs.

Overcoming Obstacles

There were obstacles to establishing a public dialogue program. Staff were concerned that a public unaccustomed to having a discussion at a museum would hesitate to participate. A survey of visitors found that this lack of experience rendered them hesitant to pay for it in any case. Many staff had never themselves participated in a facilitated dialogue and therefore couldn't understand the potential value of such a program. Other staff, who had partici-

pated, nevertheless expressed doubt that a facilitated dialogue would add value to the museum experience. Some had even had bad prior experiences with organized discussion. To acquaint staff with the process of facilitated dialogue, we brought in a professional team and conducted dialogues during staff meetings. We decided to raise all ticket prices to subsidize the added cost of the dialogue program. We discussed a name for the program.” Dialogue” struck many as academic and potentially off putting. “Kitchen Conversations” was chosen with the thought that it might call in mind talking around the kitchen table—something anyone might have experienced and enjoyed. It was also associated with food, so we decided to provide refreshments at every program.

At first, as staff predicted, it was very difficult to convince visitors to stay for the dialogue portion of the program. Fears about talking to strangers or having opinions different from others and lack of experience or familiarity with any similar program made them hesitant. Then too, educators had to experience the program in order to sell it, and even then, it was often hard for them to find the appropriate way to describe it. As of this writing, though many dialogues attract many more, and the number is steadily growing, the average number of participants in a conversation is just over seven (out of four groups of fifteen, the size limited by New York City fire codes).

Press, which one might think is a natural ally in getting the word out about such a program, has thus far been uninterested. One reporter did come, but was upset that the museum’s facilitator insisted on maintaining a neutral position in the face of what the reporter felt were anti-immigrant statements made by some dialogue participants.

Training Dialogue Facilitators

There was still a lot of work had to be done. First, we needed to train staff in dialogue facilitation. Facilitators had to be taught how not to take a stand and to understand their primary commitment not to a particular point of view but rather to supporting an open and productive dialogue. They needed to learn how to respond to questions by turning the question out to the group, how to handle conflict, and how to be sure everyone felt free to speak. The training is divided into several parts:

1. Review the museum’s mission and program and observe three different dialogue facilitators in action.
2. Pilot a dialogue with a trained facilitator in the room followed by a verbal evaluation.
3. Start leading dialogues. After two weeks, a more senior facilitator will sit in and evaluate again.
4. Ongoing training at monthly facilitator brown bag lunches.



Levine Kitchen. Harris and Jennie Levine and their three children lived and worked in this 1897 tenement sweatshop, which visitors see as part of the museum's "Piecing It Together" tour. (Photograph courtesy of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum)

Revising the Tours to Illuminate Contemporary Issues and Encourage Visitor Participation

It became clear that in order to be able to draw connections, for instance, between assistance offered nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigrants and that available today, visitors had to know something about that assistance then and now. To compare and contrast the conditions in the garment industry past and present, visitors needed information on the conditions in both periods. Consequently, tours were restructured. Today, the museum's "Getting By" tour, which presents a German Jewish family weathering the terrible economic depression of 1873 and a Sicilian Catholic Family confronting the later Great Depression, includes discussion of what sort of assistance was available for each and opportunities for visitors to comment on where they would and could go for help should such a disaster befall them. The "Piecing It Together," tour, which contrasts the garment industry in 1897, when immigrants sewed in their tenement apartments, and 1918, when the industry had moved to factories, begins with a recording of people in all sectors of the industry discussing present conditions from their various vantage points.

Then the public had to be trained! Accustomed to museum tours led by "experts," who impart their knowledge of the "facts," most visitors had no thought of or experience in adding their own opinions. To change that, the tour structure had to be transformed from the standard lecture format to an "inquiry-based" tour, in which the educators invite visitors to contribute their own

knowledge and experience. Museum educators were instructed in how to form “open ended questions.” Seeking neither “right” nor “wrong” answers, facilitators invite responses that stem from visitors’ experience and common sense. For example, an educator may ask: “If you were a reformer visiting this sweatshop in the Levine family’s tenement apartment, what would you point out to buttress your argument that the conditions were unsafe?” “If you suddenly lost your home or your job, to whom would you turn for help?” These and similarly open-ended questions prompt terrific conversations among visitors.

Topics

Comparing notes, facilitators discovered that while the range of topics brought up by visitors is wide and far ranging, some issues repeatedly arise. Should immigrants be forced to learn English? What should be done about illegal immigration? Should immigrants receive benefits? What is the impact of immigrants on the American economy? Sarah Blannett, who directs the Kitchen Conversation program, says the topics are also heavily influenced by current events. For instance, when immigrants took to the streets to express their opposition to stricter enforcement of immigration laws, the conversation veered to visitors’ reaction to the protests and the messages. Similarly, President Bush’s announcement that he would beef up border security was fodder for numerous conversations. Since 9–11, national security looms large. Visitors are asking serious questions: How do we balance being a nation of immigrants with the challenges we face in keeping our country safe? Should we lock down our borders in order to bar those who might harm the country? Is racial profiling excusable in times like these? Is racial profiling the same as having racial quotas we have had and since rejected?

The dialogues often make visitors aware of the tangle of issues surrounding immigration. In her evaluation, Shana of Brooklyn, New York wrote, “I was reminded of the complexity of immigration and the conflict between freedom of movement and drains on resources of a country.” When facilitator Mari Brown asked, “What’s the responsibility of government toward new immigrants,” Jeremy blurted out, “Immigrants should get all the rights.” That was followed by Lulu, a self-described “mixed breed” (from Lithuania, Japan, and Africa and married to a Haitian), who said excitedly, “I wish we had free education, health care, adequate housing and health care.”

The Importance of the Rules of Engagement

The rules visitors are asked to read at the outset of each discussion have come in handy—especially when the discussion gets heated. In one session, Heidi Karst recalled a Canadian-American man who argued that racial tensions did not exist in the United States as they did elsewhere. Turning to a



Tenement Museum educator and Kitchen Conversation facilitator Thom Perry leads a lively dialogue on immigration with visitors from the United Kingdom, Texas, Ohio, and Massachusetts, among other places. (Photograph courtesy of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum)

participant from Switzerland, he said, “No offense to you, but [in Switzerland] people just don’t interact with racial minority groups. There’s a lot of racism going on and a lot of minorities aren’t getting decent jobs.” When the Swiss tried to respond, the Canadian cut him off. Before Karst could jump in, two other participants reminded the Canadian-American of the “agreements” posted on the wall, and asked him to respect the Swiss man’s “air time.” The discussion ended with the Swiss and Canadian men agreeing to disagree, and the Swiss extended an invitation to the Canadian to visit his country again, this time with enough time to really learn about the situation.

An Outsider’s Perspective

The museum’s visitors hail from all fifty states and from thirty-four nations. Blannett reports that foreign visitors often express amazement over what they regard as Americans’ generally liberal views of immigrants and immigration policy. Responding to an online survey, a Brit expressed satisfaction over having heard American opinions directly, saying “What comes to the UK in the news is often different.” On the other hand, after his dialogue, Ray from Minneapolis wrote, “I was unaware of such harsh feelings towards America’s newest immigrants.” Americans have also learned from their exchange with foreign visitors. “I was surprised,” admitted Ken from Freehold, New Jersey, “to hear that immigration was such an international issue.”

How Many Is Too Many?

"But how much room is there?" asked Joan from Manhattan's Upper East Side. "My California friends say immigrants have overtaxed the health-care system." Joan's comments encouraged a participant to suggest that the states where the sheer numbers of immigrants had posed a difficult challenge should not bear the burden alone. "It's really a national problem," he said. A Kentuckian replied, "No one's calculated whether immigration is a net loss or net plus for the economy. But it's a net plus for immigrants and their nations of origin. As long as they contribute, work, they are welcome as far as I'm concerned." "Sure," Mark responded, "we don't need criminals. But what about people willing to work? We seem to need them. We hire them."

The Tensions

Sarah Blannett outlined several tensions which facilitators have brought to the regular debriefings. "First," she said, "there's the museum's mission: *To promote tolerance*. Some staff ask whether that is compatible with the museum's insistence that the facilitators remain neutral. Another issue for many staff is whether it is "moral" to remain neutral—especially in the face of rabid anti-immigrant diatribes or negative statements aimed at a particular group of people. Eva Raison laid out the dilemma, saying, "I continually ask myself: What is the role of a facilitator when the . . . dialogues uncover deep feelings of anxiety, racism, and blame toward contemporary immigration?" Still, Eva Raison takes some comfort in interpreting the museum's stated commitment to tolerance as a commitment to allow for "diversity of opinions around the table."

Smart, nuanced, and committed to the concept of dialogue, it is not surprising that so many of the museum's facilitators struggle with these kinds of questions. But instructed and trained to maintain neutrality and knowing their performance is judged in large measure on their ability to do so, they make every effort. Hundreds of visitor surveys report that they succeed beautifully.

Prompted by a question from a reviewer of this article, I asked facilitators whether they felt the museum had a "hidden agenda" for these dialogues. They were uniform in their response, saying they understood that the museum's agenda was to host an open dialogue. Lillian Paulina's response was representative. "I try to challenge any prevailing opinion in a dialogue, regardless of the view, to encourage participants to examine the origins of their shared notions and also provide context and weight to the very valid opposing viewpoint." Pointing out that she's guided many dialogues in which participants expressed opposing (she said "often frustratingly different") opinions from her own, Paulina prides herself on exercising the discipline it requires to take no stand.

The Impact of Inviting Visitors' Own Immigration Stories

In any given group, someone will inevitably reveal that their ancestors have included illegal immigrants, people who never mastered English or adopted American customs or who barely made ends meet. My own family is a case in point. In 1883, my maternal great great grandfather, Elias Epstein, a Prussian immigrant, recorded his July visit to our Shapiro relatives on the Lower East Side. "They live," Epstein reported, "in a miserable hole, have a dirty, dirty unbelievable grocery store behind which are two rooms. The first has no window, [in] the second, which is a kitchen, sitting and dining and bedroom . . . are piled together husband, wife and 8 children. The Schiff's . . . narrow strip of a . . . store . . . looks as though it is not cleaned but once in a year or two. The ceiling is the color of coals; the walls are ragged; the paper torn. One bed is occupied by four boys—14, 10, 8, and six years old, the other by girls. They habituate like animals . . . Mrs. Schiff goes about dirtily dressed and her children in such an unsightly condition, that I hesitate to give them my hand." Epstein hesitated, but America did not.

New York City resident John drew a lesson from his and others' stories of their immigrant past. "All of us were at one time immigrants," He pointed out. "A generation later, people who have been immigrants or their children denigrate and deny recent immigrants. It's hypocritical to employ illegal immigrants and then say you are against illegal immigrants."

For immigrant visitors, the impact is often profound. When asked whether her experience had been anything like that of the immigrants who lived in the museum's tenement, Margarita from the Dominican Republic said, "Yes, [when we came here] it was almost the same. We lived in two bedrooms." Long-rooted Americans and facilitators alike find it especially interesting when immigrants participate in the dialogue. In late April, an American couple of Russian Jewish heritage discovered numerous connections with recent Russian immigrants in Lena Richardson's group. Lena reported that "stories of then and now evolved organically. They discussed anti-Semitism in Russia and the American Dream and how hard things are for immigrants here." The presence of immigrants can also serve as a check. "Often," Sarah Blannett told me, "if an American makes what could be taken as an anti-immigrant statement and an immigrant participant identifies him or herself, the speaker qualifies, saying, 'I didn't mean you,' but the obvious follow-up question is, 'well, who do you mean?'"

Learning from Disagreements

Mari Brown recalled a disagreement between a grandson and grandmother from Arizona of European heritage. Their group included a couple from Texas—she of European and he of Mexican origin, and a history professor of

African heritage who said he specialized in oppression. Brown invited the participants to read an article on border patrol which had appeared that day in the *New York Times*. “Most of the people, including the professor who was particularly eloquent,” reported Brown, “were appalled that the U.S. was considering turning citizens into minutemen, and expressed sympathy for the Mexicans trying to reach the U.S.” Mari continued:

A small but vocal contingent believed the problem of broken borders to be so dire that the extreme measures described in the article were necessary. The grandmother said, “This country needs to protect itself from these people who want to take away our jobs and force everyone to speak Spanish. The language of America is English! I completely support the government signing citizens up—if I could sign up, I would do it.” Her grandson, who was about 13, blurted out, “But grandma, that’s insane! These people don’t want to hurt anyone, and you shouldn’t give angry strangers guns to kill them! They didn’t do anything wrong.” The grandmother turned to him and said, “You don’t understand, dear, it’s necessary. It’s what this country has to do.” Frustrated by his inability to advance his position, the grandson kept mumbling under his breath, “It’s insane.” In the midst of palpable discomfort on the part of the other participants, the Mexican American man broke his silence, saying in belabored English, “I feel I have to say something. I know what you think. You think immigrants aren’t trying hard, don’t want to learn English, don’t want to give, only want to take. But I want you to know that when I came to this country and married my wife, I had to struggle so much to survive. I had to work three jobs just to make ends meet. I didn’t have time to learn English. It took me years to be able to get to where I wanted to be. And I give my work and my money to this country. I love this country. It is my home now. You need to stop seeing things the way you see them for a minute and see things the way I am telling you I lived them. It is not as easy as you think.” The grandmother stared at this man for a minute. Finally she said, “You’re right. I haven’t lived what you’ve lived. I haven’t seen what you’ve seen. I may be wrong.” Then she said, “Listen, I may not agree with everything you say, but I want to thank you for making me think.”

At the same time, immigrants are by no means uniform in their beliefs. Miriam Bader was disquieted one day when a man in her group, who had only ten years earlier emigrated from Pakistan, forcefully argued that immigrants who were not “quality” people should be barred from America. “It was the first time,” Bader explained, “I heard a contemporary immigrant be anti-immigration.” Members of the group concurred with the Pakistani-American, singling out for special censure immigrants who took advantage of the system and did not assimilate. “Feeling keenly aware of my responsibility to foster a safe space where all views are tolerated,” recalled Miriam, “I asked the group what other views people had on the topic. No one shared a counter perspective; many began to make strong anti-immigrant, specifically anti-Mexican statements. Finding it increasingly difficult to stay neutral, but determined to do so, I asked, ‘What does assimilation mean to you?’ [It turned out] everyone had different ideas about that.”

Like so many of the museum’s facilitators, Bader strives to learn from every

encounter, especially difficult ones, and can be quite self-critical. “I have thought a lot about that discussion and how I handled it,” she wrote me. “In the sense that participants felt comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences, the dialogue was a large success. Nevertheless, as a facilitator, I think that I was not able to perform as successfully as I would hope to.”

Shortly after he was awarded American citizenship, Hong Kong-born facilitator Lokki Chan asked the members of his group whether today’s immigrants have an easier time getting by than immigrants in the past. Chan recalled:

A California social worker said that today’s immigrants struggle as much if not more than immigrants then. A businessperson from the same state charged that immigrants were taking jobs away from Americans and were making the streets of America look bad. The social worker thought we should help immigrants more, the businessperson thought we should help them less. This started a conversation about our different perceptions of quality of life. The Americans were jealous of the Canadians, who have free health care, and the Canadians insisted, “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be; we pay high taxes for it.” The conversation moved to desperate living situations. We read a *New York Times* article about a house in Farmingville where sixty-six single immigrant men were living. The home owner charged \$200 per person per week. The men took turns sleeping in bunk beds—some slept in the day; some at night. When the reporter asked the landlord, “why do you do this?” the landlord replied, “I’m providing a service to these people—otherwise, they would have no place to live.” It was obvious that some participants were being exposed to a different side of the story for the first time. I was struck that this was a very peaceful and civilized conversation to be having about such a controversial issue: What is a good quality of life? I liked that people were really listening to each other. Each was forthcoming with his or her opinion, but actually asked people who expressed an opposite opinion, “How did you come to feel that way?”

When members of a group seem to be of the same mind, facilitators often challenge their views. In the spring of 2006, Jessica Ticktin led a group that “shared a fairly conservative view of immigration.” In an effort to energize the conversation, Jessica asked questions such as: Who should help immigrants settle into their new surroundings—neighbors, community groups, government? Should English instruction be provided free of charge? When immigrants come to the U.S., what do they lose, what do they gain?

Measuring the Success of a Dialogue

In their responses to the museum’s post-dialogue survey, almost all participants say they would return for another dialogue. But for the facilitators, while complimentary, that is insufficient evidence that the dialogues are achieving their stated goals.

Lena Richardson feels she has had a successful dialogue when “the par-

ticipants feel there is some opening (or shift) in the conversation.” She recognizes that in the hour devoted to the dialogue, it’s hard to get opinions to shift. “But what can happen,” says Richardson, “is that visitors feel they’ve been heard and they’ve listened.” Lillian Paulina echoed Richardson’s perspective, saying, “When my dialogues conclude with a consensus such as that immigration is spurred by diverse motives, [that it often] puts people in difficult situations and . . . in ways participants considered good and bad both in the past and in the present I’m satisfied.”

“The most successful discussions,” cautioned Naemeh Shirazi, “don’t necessarily get the highest [visitor] ratings, because those moments of changed or challenged attitudes are not so comfortable. Re-evaluation is often uncomfortable.” Lena Richardson agreed, saying, “When people get to places of discomfort, they try to leave. I try to keep them in the room for a bit longer . . . usually with a question around visions of what they would like to see around immigration issues in their community.” Shirazi reported, “I enjoy the dialogues. Sometimes I feel disappointed because there isn’t that huge turnaround I’m hoping for.” But the fact is, many visitors report important new insights. Daniel of Richland, Washington left feeling that “today’s [immigration] issues are quite similar and analogous to those of the 1880s.” Drew, from Birmingham, England, became suddenly aware of “the loneliness you may feel after leaving your homeland.” New York City resident Janet was struck by the question: “What does it mean to ‘feel’ American?” Arnie, from Chesterfield County, Virginia, was shocked by the “length of time it takes [for an immigrant] to get legal documentation.” Sag Harbor resident Abe admitted, “I never knew that garment industries still have horrible conditions.”

Characterizing his goals for the dialogues he leads as “modest,” Thomas Parry aims to help visitors draw connections between the past and present immigrant experience. “I’m pretty satisfied,” he reports, “when visitors consider what’s behind the views that clash with their own.”

Miriam Bader feels confident that because the structured nature of the museum’s dialogue fosters “an environment where multiple perspectives can be heard, at the very least, it makes participants aware that views different from their own—whether sympathetic to or suspect of immigrants also exist.”

Why Does Dialogue Matter?

Shirazi views the dialogues as a “seed.” She said, “We don’t know if it grows and in what direction. It’s important for the museum to do. It’s an hour of reflection, and it advances the museum’s mission. I’m proud to have participated in this program in light of all the anti-immigrant legislation.”

Lena Richardson concurred, saying, “The issue of immigration is so huge and divisive. At the Tenement Museum we offer a place of reflection, and people who might otherwise not come together do that, voicing their own perspective and hearing others. There’s not much public space that’s not co-opted,

dominated by some other voice.” Eva Raison agreed, pointing out that through their interaction with media, visitors are usually aware of the conflicting views on immigration. “However,” Raison continues, “they are rarely asked to engage with those different perspectives as they are in the dialogues. I’ve begun to see our work at the museum as an open space where visitors that do not usually engage with others of different opinions have the opportunity to articulate and frame them in different ways.”

“Why is it important to talk?” Richardson thinks a moment. “In a democratic society, people need to engage. On a human level, there is something empowering as a human being about having a place where you reflect upon your country and its history. The lack of such space is dehumanizing. If we create this space for people who might not have it or even seek it, they may demand other opportunities.” In her post-dialogue evaluation, Lori, an Italian American from Queens, wrote, “It is my wish that communities throughout the U.S. can have these types of open discussions to brainstorm solutions.” Richardson recalled a discussion that got heated after a man said that today’s immigrants felt a sense of entitlement. This morphed into a discussion about why Americans fear immigrants. The depth and tone of the conversation led participants to tell Lena that this kind of conversation “just wasn’t going on elsewhere and needed to.” One man, who worked in restaurants, an immigrant-heavy industry, said he “believed in workers’ rights and that he hadn’t had such a discussion since he left college, and there was no opportunity to speak about the issues.” Heidi Karst feels the program is important because “it gives total strangers a safe space to discuss very sensitive, oftentimes personal and political topics they wouldn’t normally discuss amongst their own family members, let alone with strangers. The structure of the sessions is informal enough to naturally bring that out in visitors, yet formal in the sense that it offers context, direction and rules whereby everyone’s opinion is respected.” For everyone, the conversations represented a rare opportunity to stop and reflect. Renee of Atlanta, Georgia said simply, “I liked the slow time.” For families, whose time for discussion is pitted against time devoted to scheduled activities, TV, and the Internet, the Kitchen Conversation provides a unique opportunity to listen to one another. “I liked hearing the children’s views,” said Martin of LaGrange, Illinois. One of those children, Bryan from Plymouth, Minnesota, said the discussion was “cool,” and added, “I never really thought about the poor people.” New York City resident Seema marveled, “Hearing my twelve-year-old son tell his ideas to people he didn’t know was fascinating.”

Mari Brown suggested that participants around that kitchen table articulate, maybe for the first time, to another person, and maybe, for the first time, to themselves, opinions and beliefs that they did not realize they had. That can be life-changing. The participants’ fears are always palpable—fear to express oneself, fear to disagree with another person, fear to be disliked or even hated by the people in the room. Facilitators have a real challenge. We ask people to face those fears and move beyond them in an hour. I’ve seen people

move beyond what I imagine to be pretty powerful fears and share a part of themselves with a stranger—who, at the end of the conversation, is not a stranger anymore. People have walked out of the kitchen and exchanged phone numbers. They often walk over to each other and shake hands and say, “good to talk to you,” or “that was a good conversation.” It’s something they would not have done an hour earlier, before they had this conversation.

A week after he returned home to Massachusetts, Brian responded to an online survey from the museum, writing:

The Kitchen Conversation was truly extraordinary. People visit museums and often leave with little reflection about the experience. Your innovative idea cultivated conversation and reflection and made the topic of immigration immediate. Many around our table were both articulate and sensitive. The facilitator asked pointed questions that provoked thought without being threatening or insisting on a particular viewpoint. When I made a comment about the difficulties of learning a new language, she asked me if I thought the government should make documents available so people could communicate in their language. I said at the time that I wasn’t sure. Thinking about it after, I came to the stance that insofar as the government can summon the resources to support any group of immigrants, it ought to. Let this little bit of thinking be evidence that your museum was an experience that went beyond the time of the visit and made a deep impression.

RUTH J. ABRAM, an activist turned historian, is president of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, which she founded with the assistance of Anita Jacobson in 1988. The museum’s mission is “to promote tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a gateway to America.” Author of numerous articles and speeches on the meaning and use of history, Abram’s work has been widely covered in the media including *The New York Times*, *World News Tonight* with Peter Jennings, and the PBS (public television) series on the history of New York. The Tenement Museum is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Institute for Museum and Library Services Leadership Award for its work with contemporary immigrants.