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Slice: Food for thought on race

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Photos by Jim Burnett/The World-Herald

Valerie Hankins, left, discussion moderator Ed Cochran, Tom and Margaret Hoarty and Janet Tilden gather around the dinner table in the Hoartys' home to share lasagna, salad, wine and ideas about race during Omaha Table Talk.

This beer summit featured wine.

White for the hostess who tossed the salad, baked the lasagna, warmed the rolls and sliced the strawberries. Red for almost everyone else here at the large table in a Benson home.

You might presume the riesling and merlot would have gone fast given the reason drawing them together: to talk frankly about race.

But this group of mostly strangers didn't seem to need liquid courage to broach a subject that remains a deep, still-fresh wound.

Of course, all eight had volunteered for the event. They were among 470 Omahans doing the same at 46 homes, churches and other sites on this cold October night. No one had forced them to come. This wasn't a workplace diversity retreat or a summons from President Barack Obama to make nice over bottles of beer in the Rose Garden.

In fact, an attorney and his wife, a nurse, were so eager to participate they had agreed to host the gathering. A health educator, the natural gas regulator and the free-lance editor, also present, all had attended the event — Omaha Table Talk — in past years. First-timers included the editor's husband, who works for a teleservices firm, a property developer whose job was to lead discussion and the developer's date, a nurse scheduler at Douglas County Medical Center.

Despite differences in career, family and ethnicity, this still was a narrower sampling than you'd find on an airliner, at Walmart or at the zoo.

They were a professional, progressive middle-aged bunch. The youngest was 47. The oldest two were 60. Three were black. Five were white and Catholic. Catholic Charities started the event five years ago with fewer than 100 people and 10 homes. This year, a new nonprofit based at the Neighborhood Center of Greater Omaha is running Table Talk.

Across Omaha and at this home in Benson, people wanted to talk race. That third-rail subject. A hot topic, like politics, religion and sex, that elicits passionate views rarely shared in mixed company.

Half an hour before anyone arrived, Tom Hoarty lit a cozy fire.

His wife, Margaret, put the casserole into the oven, spread the rolls on a cookie sheet and asked Tom to set up the coffee urn.

She put George Winston's "Winter" on the stereo, and their cavernous living room filled with mellow piano music.

Tom and Margaret have raised eight kids in this house on North 56th Street that was built in 1901 as the "country" summer home of a U.S. colonel.

Their youngest is in college in New Orleans. At age 60, they are grandparents.

Tom grew up in central Omaha's still predominantly white Ak-Sar-Ben area. Margaret grew up in northeast Omaha, went to Sacred Heart and lived on a street that had black and white neighbors.

Their oldest daughter, a social worker, had attended Table Talk and urged them to go. The Hoartys missed the registration deadline but figured that volunteering to be hosts would increase their odds of participating.

The Hoartys are Catholic, the kind to post a bumper sticker on the fridge that reads: "If you want peace, work for justice."

The first guests arrived at 6:09.

They are Ed Cochran and Valerie Hankins. Ed's in charge of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce's North Omaha Development Project, an effort to steer business, funds and attention to a part of town used to promises and not results.

He is a Chicago native; a business expert whose résumé boasts an MBA from DePaul, guest lecturer experience at Harvard and teleservices executive positions in Omaha.

Valerie is an Omaha native, the granddaughter of Mississippi sharecroppers. Laid off from her job this year, she spent four months redoing her résumé. When told during interviews that she would be bored in a position beneath her expertise, she wondered whether that was code for "We don't want you because you're black."

Now employed at the Douglas County Mental Health Center, she is thrilled at the new job and at the chance to talk about a subject that has been deeply personal in her family: Her sister married a white man, and their 5-year-old daughter recently asked "Aunt Val" if she was black or white.

Rita Bianchi was the next to arrive. The lifelong St. Pius X Catholic Church member works for Northern Natural Gas as a regulator, "pulling numbers out of a database for the lawyers to write about."

Loretté Teal then entered the Hoarty home gushing about how she had passed by just the week before and how serendipitous it was that this was the place. The 56-year-old was one of the only black students at Monroe Junior High in Benson in the mid-1960s. She spent more than a decade living in the Washington, D.C.-Baltimore area, where her encounters with white people were a lot more rare.

Going to the East Coast, where there is a much bigger black middle and upper class, was culture shock. Returning to Omaha, where there is a disproportionately poor black population, was a jolt as well.

The final guests were Janet and Tom Tilden. Janet, born in Fremont, is a freelance editor; Tom formerly taught at an inner-city school in Chicago. He now is a legal assistant.

The two, who are white, moved from Fremont to Omaha after adopting their son, now 11, who is black.

Everyone exchanged small talk until they were summoned to the table, where Ed launched into the basic ground rules: It's OK to disagree; it's not OK to be disagreeable. Keep comments brief.

He distributed a structured discussion guideline: Share your thoughts, listen openly, ask questions and participate "in the spirit in which this is intended."

Margaret hadn't sweated over the menu. The point, she was told, was to keep the dinner simple so the focus remains on the conversation. So she scooped out steaming squares of melted cheese-pasta-and-beef. Salad was passed. Wine was poured. Tealight candles twinkled atop small mirror plates.

The chat at first was sprinkled with the pregnant pauses of polite strangers waiting for the real subject.

Ed began: Why are you here?

Valerie's best friend had raved about it.

Tom Tilden and Rita said there's no real opportunity to talk about race. It's not something you do casually at work.

For Janet, it's the day-in, day-out of raising a different-race child. Janet has encountered assumptions that white parents are in it for the money or as a crusade. Just recently their son told her: "Mom, I wish you were black, like me."

When you share your experience, Lorette said, "people grow." At last year's Table Talk, she felt she had helped change one couple's stereotypes.

As for the hosts, Tom Hoarty was curious. Race remains such a pressing issue. Take Obama's beer summit a few months ago with the black Harvard professor who had to force his way into his own home after the door jammed and the white Cambridge police officer who arrested him.

Margaret, though, reflected on something more personal: how her childhood friend and next-door neighbor was black, how it was OK that they played together but spending the night at her black friend's house was off-limits.

This sparked a similar memory for Lorette. She was the black girl who invited her white friend for a sleepover in 1969. Her friend couldn't believe a black family's home could be as nice as Lorette's was.

Memories and experiences segued into larger questions.

About the degree to which the news media perpetuate racial stereotypes and the degree of demand for such conflict.

About how stereotypes play out. Valerie being told more than once that "you don't sound like you're black." Ed being told he's not black enough.

"It's probably not a whole lot different," he told the five white Catholics, "if someone asks, 'Are you Catholic? Are you really Catholic?'"

Tom Hoarty noticed who was missing at the table: Latinos.

"We just had a roof put on our house," he said. "The entire crew was Latino."

Rita pointed out that you have to go out of your way in Omaha to really mingle with other races and social classes.

"How many African-American professionals do you see?" Ed asked.

Tom Tilden reflected on his job. "There are not many. Not many. There's one, that I know of."

Valerie: "We just don't have that. When you go to Chicago ... you see African-Americans that look like me that are in power-play positions."

Take D.C. and Baltimore, said Lorette.

"I had a blast. So many people who looked like me. Black people supported one another ..."

Ed: "What's different about Omaha? ... We have (four) Fortune 500 companies and no African-Americans reporting to the CEOs."

Tom Hoarty: "I don't have an answer. ... Omaha is a very divided city."

Margaret: What happens to successful black students who graduate from college?

Valerie: "They vow never to return."

Ed asked what the two Toms would do if the police pulled them over.

Hoarty said he'd dig for his license and registration. Tilden said he'd demand to know why.

Ed said black men have been warned about making a move for the glove box or appearing mouthy to a cop.

They talked about where black people are missing in Omaha: boardrooms, the College World Series, restaurants.

"Why am I the only black person here?" Valerie said she asks herself when dining out at nicer restaurants.

Lorette got that feeling when she attended a classical music concert at the Holland Center.

They talked about blacks “dumbing down” to be acceptable. About stereotypes they wish would die, about interracial relationships.

Loretté really struggled when her nephew married a white woman, a pattern she felt played out way too frequently among black men. And yet she describes her nephew's wife as “wonderful” and as “my niece.”

Time was up at 9.

In over two hours, no one had budged from the table. Wine glasses and water glasses were empty. The coffee urn remained full.

Margaret rose to pass parfait glasses filled with vanilla ice cream, chocolate syrup and the sliced strawberries.

Everyone agreed that such informal, small-group discussions of race would go a long way toward bridging misunderstandings, even racism, if played out on a larger scale.

Loretté doubted any Ku Klux Klan members would appear at Table Talk, but she said there was value in “black people to white people, white people to black people” exchanges.

That's the idea. Organizers hope the program grows to include more people and occur more than once a year.

As a first-time participant, Margaret Hoarty saw the importance of meeting like this.

“Everybody,” she said, “has a different story to tell.”

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