

ESSENTIAL PARTNERS DONOR NEWSLETTER



A QUARTERLY UPDATE FOR OUR ESSENTIAL PARTNERS | **SPRING 2022**

ENVISIONING STRONGER COMMUNITIES



**A NOTE FROM
EP'S DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR,
DAMIEN LALLY**

For 33 years EP has supported individuals, communities, civic and faith organizations, schools, and workplaces as they envision and shape shared futures—founded in belonging and trust.

We have some exciting new projects to share with you, including Boston-area dialogues on race, class, and equity, inspired by the new documentary *A Reckoning in Boston*; a major new grant supporting image-based storytelling and dialogue programs in 12 communities around the U.S.; and so much more.

Thousands of people will turn to EP this year for expert guidance, training, and resources. Donors like you make it possible for us to equip them with tools they need to build stronger communities.

Thank you for your support.



FEATURED STORY:

**EP USES FILM TO JUMPSTART
DIALOGUES ON RACE, HOUSING &
INEQUALITY IN GREATER BOSTON**

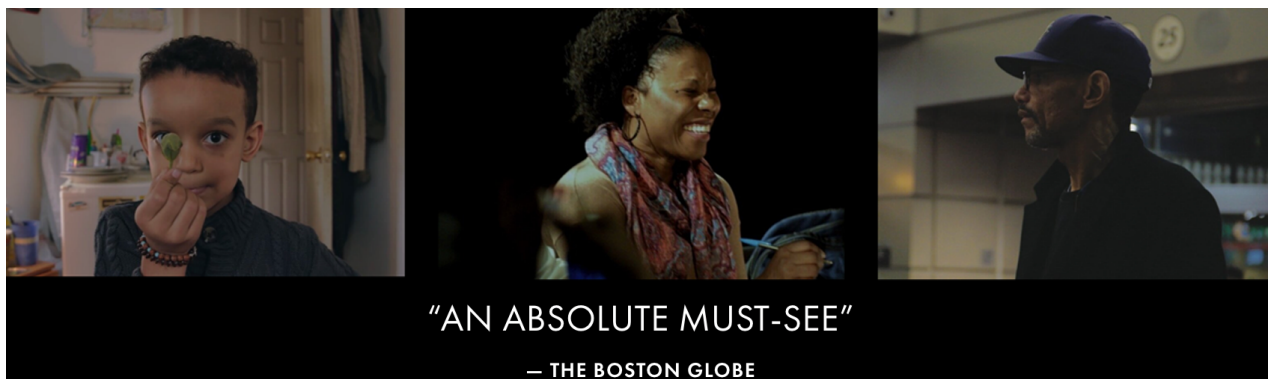
ALSO IN THIS NEWSLETTER

Tips for Investing in a Healthier Democracy

EP-Trained Student Facilitators Take the Lead

Special Announcement: Major Grant for EP

Recent News & Upcoming Projects



FEATURED STORY

EP USES FILM TO JUMPSTART DIALOGUES ON RACE, HOUSING, AND INEQUALITY IN GREATER BOSTON

BY DAMIEN LALLY

EP DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

On January 17, 2022—Martin Luther King, Jr. Day—the acclaimed documentary *A Reckoning in Boston* made its national debut on the PBS show Independent Lens. The film explores topics of racism, housing, food access, as well as justice, belonging, and community through the lives of two Boston residents, Kafi Dixon and Carl Chandler.

As part of the premiere event, Essential Partners facilitated a virtual public dialogue for viewers of the film in the Greater Boston area. Also joining us was the film's director, James Rutenbeck.

A Reckoning in Boston tells the story of James' relationship with Carl and Kafi, who had enrolled in a rigorous night course in the humanities at a Dorchester community center. This program, called the Clemente Course, empowers people who have experienced homelessness, transitioned out of incarceration, or faced barriers to college education, in order to help them become fuller and freer citizens.

Still images from James Rutenbeck's acclaimed documentary film A Reckoning in Boston (2021).

James initially hoped to document their journey through the Clemente Course program, but over time he is forced to come to terms with a flawed film premise and his own complicity in racist structures.

As he spends more time with Carl and Kafi, he becomes more alert of the violence, racism and gentrification that threaten their lives and communities. James enlists Kafi and Carl as collaborators and producers, with shares in the film revenues. Five years on, despite many obstacles, Kafi, Carl, and James each arrive at surprising new places in their lives.

The production team hoped that the film would inspire deep reflection on and meaningful dialogue about the complex issues it raises. In 2021, they asked Essential Partners to create a dialogue guide for the film, which has now been used in communities across the country.

On January 18, one day after the film's PBS premier, dozens of Boston residents joined a virtual dialogue hosted by Essential Partners for a rich conversation about race and class, gentrification, and other themes. For some, the film was an eye-opening experience.

"Seeing the movie, hearing the filmmaker talk about his evolution, and talking about our own

experiences and intentions [in small groups] was thought-provoking, and hopefully will lend a push to my own plans to take action," one participant said following the film discussion. "I was grateful for the structure [of the dialogue]," said another participant. "It helped me feel safe and able to participate in meaningful ways."

The *Reckoning in Boston* film dialogue is just one example of how people can come together for courageous conversations about race, class, and equity in their communities. EP is proud to support opportunities like these, in Boston and beyond.

"EP didn't charge a fee for our services, but volunteered our support in creating the film guide and facilitating small group dialogues," said EP Co-Executive Director, John Sarrouf. "It's thanks to the generosity of our donors that we can help more and more people have these kinds of conversations as they re-examine the history of race and class structures at play in their communities, and shape more equitable futures together."

John added that EP received an overwhelmingly positive response to the event from participants, and plans to offer more free and open public dialogues like it in the coming year, thanks to EP's donor community.

GIVE TO SUPPORT FREE PROGRAMS

For readers who were not able to participate in the *Reckoning* screening and discussion, or who live outside the Greater Boston area, EP has made the film dialogue guide available on our website, free of charge. This way, anyone can watch the film on their own and lead their own small group dialogue. To read more about the film and to download the dialogue guide, please [visit our website here](#). ■



RELATED PROJECT

SUPPORTING INNOVATIONS IN COMMUNITY FILMMAKING

This spring, with support from Essential Partners, a grassroots collaboration in the community of Malden, MA, will empower local residents to produce short films about social justice and the increasing diversification of their community.

EP joins **Filmbuilding**, a nonprofit that "curates discovery-based filmmaking experiences to promote cross-cultural exchange", and **Unite Malden**, a city-wide initiative to address uncertainties and advance social justice through partnership and collaboration.

EP will provide expert consultation as well as invaluable coaching and training to community participants, program advisory board members, and team mentors. Together, we will *show* people the power of a community that is connected by difference and strengthened by trust.

THREE TIPS FOR INVESTING IN A HEALTHIER DEMOCRACY

FROM KATIE HYTEN, EP's CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The following is an abridged excerpt from Katie's recent op-ed, titled "To Stop Another January 6, We Have to Disagree," featured in The Fulcrum. [Click here to read her article in its entirety.](#)

The violent insurrection that took place on January 6, 2021, was not just an attempt to halt the peaceful transfer of power. It represented a collective failure in the practice of our democracy, a warning that we have failed to keep alive those fundamental democratic methods in our social relationships.

We should work like hell to turn back the tide, repair our social fabric, heal our communities and snuff out the threat of political violence on a larger scale.

At Essential Partners, we equip communities, schools, congregations and institutions to build a more perfect union, one founded on trust and belonging. We envision an America where we can belong no matter our identities or beliefs, where we can be heard even if we're in the minority, where we can vigorously disagree without violence.

If you want to be a part of real and lasting change for our country, we need to invest in the health of the communities where we live and work—to heal the broken relationships and mend the frayed trust.

Here are three things you can do right away:

1 Talk to the people you love about the issues that matter most with honesty, curiosity and compassion. Politics, religion and social issues can no longer be off limits. Extremism takes root in isolation and loneliness. Work within your trusted communities to make space for difficult conversations. Practice disagreeing with people you love and care for. Practice holding onto those relationships even when you differ. If you need support and tools, browse [EP's resources](#), join us for a [workshop](#), or schedule a free [consultation](#).

2 Foster a culture around you of collective discernment and collaborative decision-making. In your workplaces, schools, congregations and institutions, invite people to think about what they need to be a lone voice, to share a minority view, to offer a perspective that may be hard for others to hear. Find out what people need to be resilient together, to care for themselves, and to disagree in ways that do not diminish people's experiences and identities. Our lives are intertwined. We share responsibility for the health of the whole community.

3 Search for seeds of hope in your community. You cannot do the hard work of hope when your heart is depleted. Hope is vital. You can find it when neighbors of different faiths share food on a holiday. It's there when people on opposite sides of the political divide enjoy a high school basketball game together. And when you lose hope, let someone else come forward, someone who can carry on while you replenish yourself.

You are not alone in this work. There are thousands of people around the country who are changing the way we talk about politics, shared values and identities. I am convinced that the bonds we forge in compassion will be stronger than the forces tearing this country apart. ■

A DIALOGIC GENERATION TAKES THE LEAD

BY NADIYA BROCK

EP ASSOCIATE & PROGRAM MANAGER

For the past five years, EP has partnered with Cary Academy, a secondary school in North Carolina, to build capacity for courageous conversations across differences and to prepare their high school students as leaders in a diverse, interconnected world.

In my role as a program manager and Associate working with EP's school partners, I have witnessed Cary's student facilitators model empathy, curiosity, and inclusivity in facilitating dialogues among their peers. So when a new school partner asked EP to help train their own student facilitators this year, I saw an opportunity.

In collaboration with both schools, student facilitators from Cary Academy have served as mentors to students in grades 9-12 at the Mount Vernon School in Atlanta, Georgia. While helping those students in their first-year training, Cary's more experienced students will also have the chance to practice their skills as *trainers as well as facilitators*.

Early in February 2022, Cary students led a pilot series of dialogues about stress, mental health, and student well-being for their new peers at Mount Vernon.

"The dialogue today was incredibly fruitful, and we're so glad we had the opportunity to help facilitate it and meet MVS students," said one Cary Academy student facilitator. "They were super engaged, especially in asking questions of genuine curiosity. Overall, it was a wonderful dialogue and we're so grateful we had the opportunity to facilitate it!"



Secondary school students in EP dialogues.

The dialogue facilitators from Cary enjoyed the new challenge of planning the dialogue with students from another school. The Mount Vernon students were engaged and attentive, learning from their peers while engaging in a meaningful conversation about something that was important to all of them.

"Our facilitator did a very good job of laying out the guidelines and instructions for the dialogue, so that I felt very prepared for the conversation and knew what was going to happen," said an MVS facilitator-in-training.

Another participant wrote that their facilitator "was very easy to talk to and not intimidating—which helped us open up about past experiences."

As we collaborate with more and more schools, we will see more collaborations like this forming between them, constituting a new community of practice among youth and student leaders.

By preparing these young people to lead with empathy and curiosity, and giving them the skills to bring people together in courageous conversations, we're equipping them to make our future more open, inclusive, and democratic. ■



Small group conversations during a Photovoice project hosted at a mosque in Grand Rapids, MI. Photo courtesy of Roman R. Williams.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

EP RECEIVES MAJOR \$330K GRANT TO REDUCE PREJUDICE AND INCREASE BELONGING IN 12 U.S. COMMUNITIES

Essential Partners has received its largest grant in nearly two decades: a \$330,880 award from the Fetzer Institute, to reduce bias and increase belonging in twelve U.S. communities.

The grant project will empower a network of community builders with an innovative fusion of EP's Reflective Structured Dialogue framework and a visual narrative approach known as Intergroup Photovoice.

Sharif Azami, Fetzer's Senior Program Officer, notes that "a fusion of EP's deep, relationship-focused dialogue methodology with Photovoice's spiritually-grounded and innovative, image-based approach to narrative will provide local communities with a rare opportunity to kindle new connections across differences while experiencing belonging and forming the bonds of trust that hold people and communities together."

"Visual media has always been an important dimension of our pedagogy at EP," said EP Co-Executive Director John Sarrouf, who serves as the lead researcher for the grant. "This

collaboration with Intergroup Photovoice lets our trained network bring the dynamic power of visual storytelling out into their communities, where it can supercharge transformations in the way people communicate, understand, and relate to one another."

The first six teams led by trained members of EP's global Community of Practice have been selected to participate in this experiment in culture transformation. Each team will represent one community in the first phase of the grant.

EP experts, along with visual sociologist Roman Williams, will support the teams as they lead inclusive community engagements that explore differences of identities, perspectives, lived experiences, shared concerns, hopes, and opportunities.

Together, community participants will create inclusive visions of the common good for each community. The projects will also build local skills and capacities to reduce bias and encourage a more resilient sense of belonging.

The Fetzer Institute is helping to build the spiritual foundation for a loving world. It works with thought leaders to develop programs, research projects, and issues grants in the sectors of faith, spirituality, democracy, education, and organizational culture. To learn more, visit their website at [fetzer.org](https://www.fetzer.org). Our thanks go out to them!

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:



FIS Global is a U.S. financial services company with more than 55,000 employees. EP has supported their Inclusion & Diversity program in creating a shared language and toolset for dialogue across differences, as well as training staff leaders as facilitators.

“*In the wake of the social unrest we experienced in 2020, our leaders and colleagues were grappling with how to have important conversations on topics like equity, inclusion, and belonging within the workplace. We recognized that as a company, we needed to not only create a safe space for courageous and meaningful dialogue; but that we also needed to equip our leaders and colleagues with the rights skills to ensure that these discussions allowed for everyone's voice to be heard respectfully. **Essential Partners**, their approach, tools, and resources has been critical in enabling this journey for us to greater awareness and understanding across the organization on the perspectives and experiences of our colleagues.*”



JENNIFER FRASIER
Vice President for Inclusion & Diversity, FIS Global

RECENT NEWS

Rural Communities Encounter History and the Arts:

Together with Mass Humanities, EP has been training facilitators in six rural communities across Massachusetts as part of the Smithsonian-funded Museums on Main Street program (MoMS). MoMS engages small-town audiences through traveling exhibitions and partnerships with local museums, libraries, and other organizations. EP trainees will lead public discussions about the past, present, and future of their towns under the theme of “Changes in Rural America”. [Click here to read more.](#)

Shaping New Journalism in the South:

Together with Bridge Alabama, EP is engaging young Alabama residents (aged 40 or under) in conversations about their hopes and concerns for the future of their state. Fellow partner Cortico will use cutting-edge AI technology to identify central concerns, perspectives, and themes from these dialogues, empowering local journalists to tell new stories that raise up the concerns and hopes of younger residents. Dialogue participants will also receive resources and guides to support healthier civic conversations. To learn more about Bridge Alabama and our partnership, [visit their website.](#)

On The Question of Freedom: This Spring, EP-trained facilitators at the University of Scranton (PA) will lead a public dialogue on the concepts of freedom and equality in America—from our nation's founding to the present day—as part of a grant-funded partnership with the National Endowment for the Humanities. [Click here to read more about it.](#)

ONE LAST THING...

Many of the stories you read about in this newsletter were made possible through the extraordinary generosity of EP's donors. To support our work with a gift, [please click here](#) or reach out to EP's Director of Development, Damien Lally, at damien@whatisessential.org to discuss how a major gift can impact the communities we serve.

Thank you for reading, and thank you for your support!