

INFO and the Institute for Education

Boosting Civility One Discussion at a Time

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

Two decades ago, Kathy Kemper was coaching a slew of Washington bigwigs on the tennis court when her husband suggested she put that access to use.

“He said, ‘You teach all these big shots tennis, why don’t you invite them to meet some of the people I do business with? We can exchange ideas and it’ll be an interesting collaboration,’” she remembered recently.

The fruit of that suggestion was on display one evening last month at the Belgian ambassador’s residence on Foxhall Road. Kemper, husband James Valentine, and a dedicated group of allies—including more than 20 ambassadors, several senators and congressmen, and Supreme Court Justice Breyer—were on hand to celebrate the 20th anniversary of a roundtable whose sole objective is to promote civility and cooperation in Washington.

Things have changed, of course. The dialogue, now called INFO public policy roundtable, has been formalized and become something of a Washington institution. It’s the main program of the Institute for Education, a nonprofit that was established some 15 years ago to support the talks.

But at heart, INFO remains a bit of an odd bird, at least for Washington. The discussions, which occur maybe ten times a year, aren’t aimed at furthering a particular public policy agenda. Nor are they geared at garnering media attention. At heart, they’re still about bringing people together in the hope that those who sit next to each other in a low-key setting will find it just a little harder to jab at each other in public.

“I think it’s really important to laugh and have fun, [but] it’s pretty hard to do that when you’re all around the table having a high-powered dialogue,” said Kemper, whose colleagues refer to her simply as ‘Coach.’ “Usually people’s closest allies are the ones they spend time with—not just in the boardroom and meetings, but actually recreating together.”

She should know. A former professional tennis player and coach for Georgetown University’s women’s tennis team, Kemper taught the game on White House, congressional, and diplomatic courts through five presidential administrations—and subsequently saw a very different side of some of the city’s most powerful people. “A coach and student have a real special relationship,” explained Kemper. “If you’re someone’s tennis coach and you ask them to do something, it’s pretty easy to get them to say yes.”

Which means her students barely hesitated when she suggested they join her and other movers and shakers to talk about current issues. And thus the discussion series was born. The first speaker was Les



James Valentine and Kathy Kemper with General Michael Hayden and his wife Jeanine Carrier at INFO’s 20th anniversary party. (credit: Kyle Samperton)

Afton, Chairman of the Armed Services at the time and later Secretary of Defense. Five or six people sat in the audience and peppered Afton with questions once he finished talking. “People who attended loved it, and said, ‘Do it again!’” said Kemper.

For the first year, the event remained informal, but gradually Kemper and her allies developed an invitation list. The mix includes a very senior group of academics, policymakers, diplomats, and journalists who generally meet for breakfast to discuss local, national, and international issues. More than 200 people have addressed the group; they include the Egyptian ambassador while news of the Arab Spring was breaking earlier this year, and General Michael Hayden, former director of the CIA and NSA, just days after Osama Bin Laden was killed.

But one of the group’s biggest accomplishments has been on the local front, according to Marci Robinson, chairwoman of IFE’s Board of Stewards. While in power, Mayor Anthony Williams gave eight State of the City addresses to the organization, providing an overview of where the city was headed that year. The group also convened a regional summit that brought together lawmakers from Virginia and

Maryland for the first time.

Around 1996, the Institute for Education was founded and incorporated as a 501(c)3 to support the roundtable. As a result of INFO’s success, the organization now has several spinoff roundtables focusing on media and technology, emerging markets, and the next generation, as well as exchange programs that bring together people from different backgrounds.

But INFO remains the group’s flagship program, valiantly striving to maintain a collegial environment where big ideas can be freely discussed in a climate that some observers say is characterized by more hostility—politically, at least—than ever.

“It’s a worthwhile cause and certainly does make inroads; [INFO] has had an impact locally and to some extent nationally and internationally,” said Juliet Eilperin, a Washington Post reporter who attended the 20th anniversary celebration last month and visited China last year on an IFE exchange program. “But this is a time of political polarization, and it’s tough to foster civility in that context.”

For more information on INFO and the Institute for Education, go to www.instituteforeducation.org. ★