

Make Shift Coffee House

2018 Civvy Award Comments



In 2018, Make Shift Coffee House was nominated for an American Award for Civic Collaboration, also known as a Civvy Award. We were a finalist. Below are comments that people made in support of our nomination.

The warmth, honesty and directness of the presenter helped create a respectful atmosphere in which differing opinions were offered without defensiveness or anger.
-Chris Wright

It was incredible to sit at a table with people who have a vastly different viewpoint from myself and have a conversation and find some commonalities and try to understand why and how they felt the way they do and then have them reciprocate. This is so much healthier, kinder and more productive than the usual demonizing that we do on both sides of the aisle. -Nancy Jacobson

I was fortunate to see one of the first MSCH events. It was extremely impressive to see the amount and variety of people who participated. The structure of the MSCH is phenomenally organized by bringing people with differing perspectives together in a peaceful calm social hour, inclusive of food and music. Then to gather together for a group discussion amazingly facilitated by Craig Freshley. It was one of the most impressive large gatherings that I have attended in my life time. This type of discourse is the tangible answer to anyone who does not understand other people's viewpoints and reasonings. Thank you for the experience!
-Kathryn Walker

Make Shift Coffee House is about more than just civic collaboration; it goes all the way to continued peaceful co-existence in a world that seems to want to become more tribal all the time. -John Doyle

Make Shift Coffee House facilitated a conversation for our group recently and it was a very worthwhile experience. The format and style of the conversation encouraged those with differing opinions to feel safe sharing their thoughts. After the event, our group commented that they understood each other much better and would definitely participate in other Make Shift Coffee House conversations, if given the opportunity. This is exactly the type of civic engagement and civil discourse we need to encourage in our country! -Jill Sittenauer

Experiencing a Make Shift Coffee House was powerful and meaningful! Our event included liberals, conservatives, self-proclaimed socialists, and Make-America-Great-Again-hat-wearers! I was amazed at the honesty and vulnerability that was displayed as Craig gently and kindly encouraged us to dig deeper into why we professed our deeply-held beliefs and opinions. Everyone should participate in a Make Shift Coffee House!
-Lauren Seganos Cohen

When people are talking face to face they usually are more willing to listen and respect the other person's point of view as opposed to faceless discussion on social media that often ends up in name calling and put downs. -Linda Post

Such a simple but powerful concept – people sitting down to talk to each other about differing views with civil discourse. Make Shift Coffee Houses are impacting the communities of Maine that are lucky to host them. -Amy Tolk

Make Shift Coffee House events are opportunities to bring people together in a meaningful way, and that embodies the true essence of grassroots work.

Meaningful change will not happen from the top down or in silos; rather it happens person-to-person, face-to-face. This is courageous and meticulous and takes hard work. It's the work that Make Shift Coffee House is doing. -Jane Gallagher

I attended the very first Makeshift Coffee House in Brunswick Maine and have been to several since. I'm very impressed. They have made a difference for me in how I participate in dialogue. I've had much training in dialogue with diversity. As a middle school counselor, I've taught children how to converse with each other without condemnation, judgment, or argument. Makeshift Coffee Houses do the same for adults and young people all over the state and hopefully all over the country. Polite, considerate dialogue will help us to communicate with one another as human and humane beings, avoid conflict, and find common ground to live in peace and harmony. -Deena R Weinstein

Makeshift Coffee House has taught me (and I think others as well) that real understanding comes from relating to people on common ground. The Makeshift Coffee House makes finding that common ground easy and it teaches me how to talk to people that hold views vastly different from mine in a civil and respectful way. I love it! It has made my world a better place. -Marc B

The Make Shift Coffee House experience is powerful. With the skillful and generous facilitation of Craig Freshley, people are invited to safely share their feelings and beliefs and more importantly, how they came to hold their feelings and beliefs. In the process, other folks can hear what shaped someone's world view and open their minds to see the logic behind it. MSCH encourages a much more willing and substantial look at another's experience. It is a wonderful opportunity to see the bigger picture – our common humanity with people different from ourselves. -Linda Mattson

Makeshift Coffee House is encouraging and enabling dialogue across the polarization that is a central feature of today's politics in the US. At a time when many disagree about the existing facts, (or even whether facts are important), it is enormously important to learn and practice skills for bridge-building that enable more understanding across our differences. -L. David Brown

The name, "Make Shift Coffee House" says it all. To do something in a "makeshift" fashion is to make-do with what is at hand, to do it now, imperfectly, but good enough. To "make a shift," (and isn't "shift" such a cool word?) is to move a bit. We are not making an all-out change, necessarily, just coming into a new, altered, slightly different place.

Participating in a Make Shift Coffee House is both "makeshift" and "making a shift." MSCHs bring together people who hold a variety of viewpoints. So no one knows what is going to be shared. Participants need to speak extemporaneously, from their belief sets and listen to the same from others. MSCHs offer a form and a facilitator that feels safe and encouraging and friendly. Inevitably, new perspectives arise, often in the form of connection around similar values rather than disconnection.

MSCHs are a great gift to this country and this time. I support every effort to bring them to more people in more places, more often. -Polly Shyka

Make Shift Coffee House events are exciting. I have been to many of them and perhaps I am a bit of a groupie but, they restore my faith in our country and I need to hear more clear-headed views from all sides. The Coffee Houses are exciting insofar as going into a roomful with people of all ages in Maine to talk about politics or guns can be "exhilarating". But, more importantly, these are not one-off events. I began to recruit more frustrated people to come to more events and I made friends with some of the more articulate people who hold views different than my own. Now I email these people to ask questions and we have stayed in touch. I have found my inner conservative on certain issues and new allies across the political spectrum.

I carry lessons that I have learned about civil discourse at these events into my conversations in other places. I ask more questions and more open-ended questions. My

favorite is to ask about the experiences that they had that led them to their views and to “tell me more”.

Each Coffee House creates a group of committed people in a community that put the event together and that can then move forward. For example, in our town a group of us decided to host a Make Shift Coffee House. To do so meant we had to think deeply about who was in our community and answer how we could recruit people from all viewpoints and perspectives. We strategically reached out to find people at VFW’s, coffee houses, party committees, and through friend networks. We filled the room with 80 people and learned a lot about our own community. We plan to have more events and the relationships that were started across the divide are a great bridge to build from.

Some things need to be done from the 30,000-foot level using broad policy but others must be done within 3 feet over a cup of coffee. -Sharon McDonnell

Makeshift Coffee House is a sorely needed in an era of increasing polarization. Programs like this are what is needed to bring communities together. -Winston Connorton

Make Shift Coffee House is a project that seeks to build understanding among people, and I believe that understanding is the foundation for civility and collaboration, two things our country seems to need more of lately. At a Make Shift Coffee House, people have an opportunity to ask others about their beliefs in an environment that fully encourages genuine listening. This feels like a rare opportunity these days.

After the 2016 election, my sense of fellowship with other people in America changed dramatically. I felt a distance I’d never felt before. Not just an intellectual or moral disagreement, but a great unfathomable chasm. I just couldn’t understand what others were thinking. And I didn’t know how to ask them about their beliefs without coming across as accusatory, i.e. “How can you possibly think that?”

Make Shift Coffee House models how to navigate through challenging conversations with people who think differently from me. It demonstrates that we can be curious about others’ beliefs without being “disloyal” to our own beliefs. I am so very grateful for this reminder.

Make Shift Coffee House works so well because a) it’s a brilliant idea and b) it’s brilliantly executed. Each Coffee House event is built collaboratively, with deliberate attention paid to attracting conservatives, liberals, independents, and everyone in between. The goal of each event is simple but powerful: to understand each other’s political viewpoints, and hang out. This is a critical point – the goal is to understand, not persuade. We do not get enough practice in that type of conversation in our society! Just getting dozens of diverse people in a room together with the intention to understand each other creates a meaningful shared experience. The elegant ground rules are gently enforced by a skilled facilitator so that everyone feels welcome to speak or just to listen, and so that those of us who rarely challenge ourselves to listen with suspended judgment get a chance to see this wonderful skill in action.

After the very first Make Shift Coffee House I approached a participant, a leader in a political party whose platform I am often frustrated by. I thanked him for sharing his beliefs with a room full of strangers. His reaction was “This was a really good reminder that we all care about the same thing. It’s so easy when you’re in the trenches to get into war mode with the other side. But we are all just trying to help Maine be a better place.” That was SO invigorating! I want everyone in communities all across the county to have a chance for that kind of eye-opening antidote to defeatism or vilification. -Kerri Sands

Wonderful initiative. We live better and make stronger communities with communication. Let’s try to see the issue from the others’ point of view.

In order to do that, you need to communicate to know what that point of view is. Divided we fall. -Dot Kelly

Civil civic dialogue seems to be the only thing that will bridge the Great American Divide right now, and that’s exactly the focus of the Make Shift Coffee Houses. We need more!
-Zeke Holland

During a Makeshift Coffee House in Freedom Maine, I was reminded about the power of democracy. I got to hear from my neighbors, people I have known for years, the reasons why some are more liberal or lean toward conservatism. I learned about why some value tradition above change, and why most people are trained to be blind to the fact that the rich as well as, and maybe more so than, the poor are provided with welfare from our government.

I was able to “reach across the aisle” and really have a better understanding of my neighbors, and the roots of their belief systems. I may not agree with them, but I have a new modicum of respect and love for them. Because I see that we all have a role in keeping a democracy alive.

Now is the time when we need to be able to talk to each-other, everyone is so divided these days. More Make Shift Coffee Houses, please, around the country!! -Julie M Johnson

COMMUNICATION in person is the only way for people that have different opinions to understand each other and Makeshift Coffee House meetings do that. -Frances Vigeant

In these times of increased polarization between liberals and conservatives, reds and blues, native born Americans and immigrants, we need to have conversation and dialogue. We can’t talk at “the other”, we must talk with “the other”. We must be given opportunities to see and hear each other.

Make Shift Coffee House allows for a pleasant atmosphere fused with music, food, and fellowship where people can express their own points of view. The moderator, during the more formal part of the program, sets the tone, establishes ground rules and encourages participation. Opinions are expressed and heard. Rebuttals are given and reflected upon. Dialogue happens. Rancor is minimized. Formal discussion is time limited. Back to music, food and mixing.

MSCH is the most CIVIL 2 hours of my life every time I attend, owing to the environment and subject talked about.

Thanks to Craig! -Will

The Make Shift Coffee House model is well thought out. Groups with opposing interests often co-sponsor an event. Members of each group work to get their friends and neighbors to attend. It is sometimes easier to express opinions if there is knowledge that at least some others in the audience are likely to agree. It is easier to express opinions if it is known that the moderator is not judgmental and that he/she genuinely wants to hear what one thinks. An informal beginning or mixing of attendees, both before and after the more formal discussion, encourages people to listen to one another. Food and music are universal connectors. -Eunice Stover

Craig has featured my photo on his site with Jewish yarmulke on next to 2 Muslim Somalis at Lewiston library!!! This sez it all??? He has allowed me to go on my long poetic rants & spews at sev sites uninterrupted to get my progressive civic-minded point across to the masses!!! PPL come up afterwards to compliment me & say I speak truth to power as a POET duz!!! IT is only when we r allowed to stand up to the crowd we r not cowed & bare-bones Truths we all humanly share emerge thru the person dressed only in skivvies upfront(sic) & Civvys R US is the results from any encounter if only for a minute-person who is so honored to even hold a mic these days of thought suppressions from on high...MSCH is the antidote to UN-civilization so ever-present nowadays in these dark & confusing times... MSCH; where even the offbeat kook is given the honor-seat as forum to express in the "market place of opinions"(Tom Jefferson). "Truth be Known"!!!

-George Joel Stanley

Craig Freshley rolled up his sleeves and offered a solution that does not seem to be readily available anywhere else — the chance for people to come together in a safe and relaxed environment with a trained facilitator to ensure a productive and respectful conversation. This is the hard work that needs to be done if we are going to save our democracy — it cannot be done through social media. The fact that Craig did this all in service to his country is not just admirable, but in my mind makes him an extraordinary citizen. Make Shift Coffee Houses could be easily replicated throughout the country, with other trained facilitators volunteering their time. An award such as this just might be the spark needed to start a movement. -Christina Oddleifson

I've attended four evenings. Huge fan. Craig's efforts to get people talking to lessen the tension in our state and community are wonderful! The dynamic of sitting with actual people, rather than images on a screen, is incredibly powerful and meaningful. Make Shift Coffee House provides the opportunity for people to share their life experiences, which mean far more to me than editorialized lectures from TV talking heads about faraway politicians who will never visit or help my local community.

It is possible to have solid legal structure and at the same time question and challenge it for the betterment of people. Both sides of the red/blue debate are important. Coffee House is especially valuable as an exercise because both sides "get to" share their perspective without rude interruptions, and both sides, or rather, all sides, "must" listen respectfully. This allows us to discuss issues meaningfully and with kindness, rather than retreating to slogans that don't deal with actual people and actual disputes, actual wounds and kindly solutions. -Patty Keyes

Craig does a great job listening to folks and creating an atmosphere that's safe for people to share their thoughts. -Maryann Larson

I attended a Makeshift Coffee House event at Husson College. I'm an engineer. Progressives work on emotion devoid of facts. It was entertaining to be able to state facts and watch their frantic efforts to change the subject. They think that people who know facts are simply bad people.

The presentation of facts should be available in all educational settings, elementary school through college. Illiteracy is a problem in our nation. Innumeracy is a bigger problem. I endorse Makeshift Coffee House because it makes facts available. -The Old Guide

Make Shift Coffee House is a great model to bring people of different backgrounds and perspectives together to listen. My involvement, having attended three events, has changed the way I approach dialogue with others about issues that are important to me. -Prentice Grassi

Makeshift Coffee House brings together people with different viewpoints to share thoughts/opinions/beliefs and listen to others with the help of an experienced facilitator. In our current polarized climate, it is essential that we try to understand how others arrive at their beliefs. -Natalie Charles

In these trying times, we all need every opportunity to be in conversation and talk with people who have different perspectives than our own. The Make Shift Coffee House has been the perfect mechanism to bring that kind of conversation to local communities, in

local settings and in a safe and comfortable format. The light touch stage setting and facilitation makes all the difference in assuring that this is a truly memorable and positive experience. It is well-deserving of your recognition. -Barbara Edmond

These Coffee Houses are so powerful and important. We need more of them across the State and Nation.

Wonderful way to listen and hear each other in a safe environment.

I have hosted two and hope to do more and bring into the High School in my area.
-Hillary Jackson

It was awesome hearing people's stories and differing opinions in respectful dialogue. The facilitator was wonderful and I think everyone learned something by listening to each other. It was refreshing to get away from the hyped-up media. We need more such opportunities. I hope Make Shift Coffee House will be recognized for its valuable service and will grow. -Norma Athearn

Make Shift Coffee House deserves serious attention as a model for replication. I am an elder and live in a rural Maine community. My farm neighbors have enabled me to remain on my land, despite our totally opposite political beliefs. I attended a MSCH gathering at a public library in a nearby community over a year ago. I draw strength from that exchange to this very day. Recognition for replication, please. -Suzanne McLain

Reasonableness in civic dialogue is in short supply these days. What makes the Make Shift Coffee Houses invaluable is that they provide a practical venue in which a presumption of good faith and a willingness to listen to antithetical points of view can lead to consensus or at least mutual respect for opposing ideas. Moreover, by demonstrating that such interactions are even possible we restore the notion of our society as a commonwealth in which we are all stakeholders and provide a paradigm of how such a commonwealth might function once people are willing to accept the entitlements and responsibilities implicit in all of us being on the same boat. -Nick Humez

If we are going to again become a nation where people value respect and understanding within communication, we must teach each other. Make Shift Coffee House contains all of the ingredients needed for this education. It is classless, convenient, free, fun, and successful! It multiplies well! -Judith E Simpson

I have been fortunate to attend several Make Shift Coffee Houses, and have come home from each with a better understanding of the issues discussed, and the opinions held... with a broader horizon. With the atmosphere of distrust, and division, so very pervasive in

today's society, it is a real inspiration to be a part of a group of people, from various backgrounds, and of various beliefs, speaking openly, and civilly, to the entire group, or within the smaller discussion groups of that portion of each evening; to be able to ask questions and get other perspectives, in a totally non-threatening atmosphere... to come to a better understanding of why those other ideas are held, and often, to find some merit in them, where I had assumed there could be none... to find some common ground... and with it, some hope of co-operative progress towards solutions to various issues we are all wrestling with. -Carole Sargent

I find the Make Shift Coffee House an interesting concept. The idea that people from all over the political spectrum can come together, converse and walk away without an angry word or fist-to-cuffs intrigued me. I have attended several meetings of the Make Shift Coffee House and find it refreshing to actually have a civil conversation about controversial topics with people I have been led to believe abhor my opinions and only want to stifle them. What these meetings have made me realize is that we are not all vehemently opposed to each other and we do care what others think and why they think it. The world needs more Make Shift Coffee Houses. -Donna Hutchins

I attended a "Make Shift Coffee House" and was amazed at how safe Craig made the atmosphere. People with many different points of view stood and explained their thoughts. I was especially impressed that many immigrants felt safe enough to express their opinions about coming to and living in the US. I left feeling closer to my community and hopeful that through conversations, we can understand one another and work toward common goals instead of against each other. Craig is a gifted facilitator and deserves recognition. -Wendy E Schlotterbeck

I live in Washington, DC and hear a lot of politics. So when I attended the first Make Shift Coffee House, I was expecting debate club. I was completely wrong! Two minutes in, I realized I had never really asked a Republican why they are a Republican, or why a Democrat was a Democrat.

I always assumed the answer had something to do with their views on abortion or the environment or some abstract concern about taxes and federal spending. Make Shift Coffee House was the first time in a very long time I considered how someone's childhood, their friends and neighbors, or their experiences away from home may have shaped their views. -Henry Chance

Make Shift Coffee house provides a welcoming opportunity to listen to others' beliefs and to understand that there are multiple ways to see things. Some people share their story about what lead them to their beliefs. After about five stories, one can understand the storytellers are PEOPLE with perspective and varying experiences. The participants are a diverse group who leave with a common experience of understanding; feeling good about self and other. "Silence is the voice of complicity" –unfortunately. Our country is divided by

misunderstanding and intolerance. Make Shift Coffee House is an effective means to bridging this divide. -Marilyn Bronzi

The Makeshift Coffee House movement has begun a conversation in Maine to bridge the partisan divide, facilitating honest conversations in our increasingly confrontational and polarized state.

I was amazed to see how people thrived in a safe space for sharing their heartfelt concerns and perspectives. With the facilitator's help, honest conversation was fostered and we learned why those on opposing sides feel the way they do, whether we agreed with their feelings or not, it was valuable to understand their perspective.

We need more opportunities to converse in supportive, non-confrontational, ways if we are to move beyond the polarized nation we now inhabit. -Tom Rumpf

Most of today's political discourse is so polarized and angry. Make Shift Coffee House brings people from across the spectrum into a space where it's safe to express opinions and really listen to folks. -Julia Hathaway

Having attended one Make Shift Coffee House, I found that folks with differing opinions could have conversations and learn more by having an open mind to others' experiences. It had me feel that people can work together, find middle ground, and strive for better outcomes by listening to each other. The Coffee House atmosphere allows for relaxed interactions and Craig opens the channels of discussion with thought provoking questions. -Jan Beach

I wish to vote/vouch for Craig Freshley's Make Shift Coffee House. I've been a participant at both of his events in Portland, ME. At these events, he demonstrated a strong ability to bring people together in respectful dialogue while acknowledging differences. -Peter Doyle

I have attended two Make Shift Coffee House events. They were a wonderful opportunity for me to hear the political thoughts of all sorts of people with whom under normal circumstances I would not be in touch with. It has helped me to understand how others can feel very differently than I do about many issues. -Barbara Klie

Make Shift Coffee Houses provide a safe space for sharing widely ranging perspectives. Our views are influenced by who is in our circle – typically people who agree with us. We have to bridge the divides that exist politically, socially, environmentally and economically. The longer we engage in unproductive dialogue, the longer it will take us to address our problems as a nation and seize opportunities that we are now letting lie fallow. -Jan Kearce

Make Shift Coffee House provides what is sorely needed in this country: venue and encouragement for civil discussion on critical issues. Ironically, it mirrors a church-based discussion I attend. Participants are encouraged to listen, speak how they feel, but without criticism or correction of others. Make Shift Coffee House's paradigm needs our support and recognition. -Paul Womer