Community

What it really means to 'cross the bridge'

By KAYLA TUCKER Grand Haven Tribune
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A recent pilot program is working to address the cultural divide between Muskegon and Grand Haven — two communities that are separated by less than 15 miles but with vastly different demographics.

Two groups of community leaders spent a weekend culturally immersed — one group from the Grand Haven area visiting Muskegon, and vice versa. What they found is, despite their differences, the two communities have much in common.

Visiting Muskegon

As the sun was rising early on a Friday morning, a group of Tri-Cities leaders — including a former mayor, local government employees and a candidate running for office — met at the Clarion Hotel on Seaway Drive. They were led by program organizers Barbara Van Horssen, of The Momentum Center, and Ken James from Muskegon Community College.

“There’s a lot of things here I’m familiar with and a lot of things I’m not,” Spring Lake Village Manager Chris Burns during the first morning’s reflection.

Each trip was packed with a tight schedule, taking participants to local restaurants, historic sites and area-specific experiences. In addition, each group met with law enforcement leaders and attended church services.

At the first breakfast stop, a couple group members overheard a server question the safety of the area surrounding the hotel — “not a great part of town,” the server said. That interaction, and a handful of others throughout the two weekends, fueled conversations about how people view certain communities.
In downtown Muskegon, the group toured MCC’s tech center, the 93-year-old Frauenthal Center theater and Baker College's Culinary Institute, and ate lunch at the student-run Courses restaurant. The group also had an insightful meeting with the Muskegon, Muskegon Heights and Muskegon County police and the Muskegon County prosecutor.

On Friday night, the group attended the Muskegon Big Reds' Homecoming football game at Hackley Stadium.

One of the most stark cultural differences for the Tri-Cities folks might have been the church service they attended Sunday morning at New Light Baptist Church in Muskegon Heights, with a mostly Black congregation.

“That was an interesting thing to observe,” Christine Baker said after the service, which was energetic, musical and vocal, reflective of a Baptist church.

Baker, 70, is currently running for Michigan's House of Representatives to represent District 88, which covers parts of Muskegon and Ottawa counties. Baker said she grew up in a church that she described as “not interactive,” and engaged in a conversation about that with other group members. “The church service was so different from the church I grew up to know,” said Grand Haven City Manager Ashley Latsch. “Maybe church would have been more appealing,” she added with a laugh.

The group spread out in the pews, but stood out being the only white people in attendance that morning. Nonetheless, the group participated in musical worship, listened to the sermon and, after the service, mingled with church members who hugged and welcomed each visitor, thanking them for attending. Latsch is originally from Muskegon and went to school in Holton, where her mother is an administrator.

Recently, those who spent the weekend in Muskegon met up to reflect on the trip.

“I'm still thinking about the experience,” Baker said nearly two weeks later. “I think I knew enough on the surface that I felt knowledgable, but I didn't really understand the depth of the co
Visiting Grand Haven/Spring Lake

The group from Muskegon met Friday morning at a large home on Grand Haven’s North Shore, a stark difference from the accommodations at the Clarion Hotel in Muskegon. The group sat in the living room, which featured a magnificent view of Lake Michigan.

As the group chatted amongst themselves, an interesting observation was made.

Rebecca St. Clair, a Muskegon city commissioner and a white woman, was talking to the group about tracing her ancestor’s genealogy back to the 1400s.

“You’re lucky you can trace it all the way back,” remarked Jen Ross, city clerk for Muskegon Heights. “I can only go back to 1875.”

Similar conversations were had as they immersed into the almost all-white community for the weekend. Contessa Hood, economic development coordinator for the Greater Muskegon Economic Development, reflected after the trip about discerning between perceived and actual judgment.

“There were times as we were going into restaurants and I’m seeing people look me up and down, look our group up and down,” Hood said. “Is it me feeling that way or is it just them looking at us because we’re a big group? That really resonated with me.”

In the Tri-Cities, the group visited the Lilley Mansion, Love in Action and Smith’s Bayou. They golfed at the Spring Lake Country Club, hiked the Rosy Mound Natural Area and boated on Spring Lake. The group also met with the Ottawa County sheriff, Grand Haven Department of Public Safety and the Ottawa County prosecutor.

The group ended the weekend on a boat, cruising past the expansive homes that surround Spring Lake.

“I was really quiet on the boat,” Ross said. “I just was looking a’
The two groups met on Friday to debrief and talk about their next steps in sharing their experiences and connecting the two communities more.

*Follow the Tribune in the coming weeks for more coverage of the program, diving into the topics of socioeconomics, policing and more.*