

MONDAY MORNING

'How can you hate me when you don't even know me?'

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Daryl Davis has a go-to line to summarize his commitment to building dialogue.

“When two enemies are talking, they aren’t fighting,” he says.

Davis is a talker — to friends, enemies and anyone in between. He told his story in Bloomington last week as part of the Nonviolent Civic Engagement Initiative, which has several local sponsoring groups from the city and Indiana University.

He said he’s been on a quest to answer this question since he was 10 years old:

“How can you hate me when you don’t even know me?”

The search began after an incident when he was marching with his Cub Scout pack in Massachusetts in 1968. He was the only African-American child in his Scouting group and had been picked by his Scoutmaster to carry the American flag in the front of his group. A knot of people along the parade route began yelling and throwing things at him. He was struck by a can of soda, among other things. He was confused, until his parents offered an explanation when he got home after the parade.

They explained the concept of racism to him, something they hadn’t needed to do as he lived with them in multiple countries in their work as U.S. Foreign Service officers.

“How can they hate me when they don’t even know me?” he wondered.

Davis grew from a curious and concerned 10-year-old Cub Scout into a Howard University graduate and a nationally renowned blues and jazz musician. He’s played with Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bo Diddley, The Platters, The Drifters, The Coasters

and others. He played his piano in Bloomington as part of the Bloomington Boogies event the weekend before he addressed a crowd at the Monroe County Public Library.

His search for an answer to his question led him to an unlikely meeting — a conversation with Roger Kelly, who at the time was Maryland's Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. Kelly didn't know Davis was black when he agreed to a meeting. The Klansman spewed a lot of stereotypes in their conversation, but by the end, there was an uneasy understanding that they could agree on some topics but not on others. Kelly told Davis they would never agree on racial issues; he said his Klan views on race and segregation were "cemented."

They continued to meet and talk. Kelly would go to Davis's house; Davis would go to Klan rallies and meet Kelly in restaurants. CNN did a story on their relationship and one of the newsroom anchors called it "strange."

It took a few years, Davis said, but the cement around Kelly's views "began to crack." Finally, the former Grand Dragon and Imperial Wizard quit the Klan. Davis and media reports say about 200 others quit the Klan, too, because of Davis's efforts at dialogue and education.

There is indeed a strange component to the gutsy path Davis chose. The idea of sitting across from someone who flat-out says you are inferior to him inflames all sorts of nerves and emotions. It's fair to say we're not all equipped with the patience or persistence to meet that challenge.

Davis said his efforts have convinced him of several lessons worth absorbing.

One is that ignorance breeds fear; fear breeds hatred; hatred breeds destruction. He believes in addressing the ignorance through communication and education to alleviate the fear and avoid the destruction.

Another is his belief in basic respect and the ability to listen. “Give your adversaries a chance to express their views,” he said. That will serve a dual purpose, he said: “When you are actively listening to someone else, they are passively learning about you.”

The Davis talk was supported by a handout offering tips on fostering civil discourse in settings likely to be less dramatic than a black activist facing off with a member of the Klan. The information was provided by Indiana University’s Political and Civic Engagement (PACE) Program, in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation:

- Be honest and respectful (be careful not to make assumptions).
- Listen to understand.
- It’s OK to disagree, but do so with curiosity, not hostility.
- Refrain from interrupting.
- Be brief and concise (so everyone can participate).

Davis offers an extreme example of breaking down stereotypes and changing minds. His points apply, though, to bridging divides, small and large.

Talk more; fight less. It’s a message of hope.