



Photos: Susan Bein

# Starting a Conversation

*By Katy Kinsolving*

## Putting Good Intentions Into Action

On a blustery day in February 2013, Kathleen Biggins came in from the train station, put her bags by the kitchen table and sat down to do some research. She had just returned home to Princeton, NJ from the annual GCA National Affairs and Legislation (NAL) conference in Washington, DC. She was a changed woman, newly determined to make a difference in her children's future.

"Up until the 2013 GCA conference, I had heard about climate change, and I understood that it was an issue. But what I learned in Washington that year helped me to understand the urgency of the situation. I finally realized that the quality of our children's lives is in



**Kathleen Biggins**

peril on a profound level unless we act decisively now", says Kathleen. "After leaving NAL, I wanted to *do* something about all that I had heard."

Kathleen immersed herself in the topic, learning about the opportunities and limitations of wind, solar and hydropower, the pros and cons of natural gas and nuclear power and the economic theories behind the carbon tax. She also read about why it was so hard to move people on the issue and how much misinformation there is among the general public. As Kathleen researched climate change, she discovered another surprise.



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## **Starting a Conversation**, Continued

“Not all of the news out there is doom and gloom! There are tremendous economic opportunities to be found in tackling climate change.” Armed with her passion, her newly found knowledge and the drive to articulate both she looked around for a way to convey the information to her community.

“All the research shows that people are most likely to have their minds changed on an issue—any issue—by someone they know, someone they think is like them—a member of their ‘tribe,” says Biggins, a former journalist and a current member of the Garden Club of Princeton. “Many members of my ‘tribe’ tend to be conservative, well-educated, affluent professionals, and I had to think carefully about how to reach out to them, since this was such a politically charged issue.”

To begin with, Kathleen sought out other garden club members in the area who had also been to NAL, including Pam Mount, a founder of *Sustainable Jersey*, from Garden Club of Princeton, as well as Carrie Dyckman and myself both from

Stony Brook Garden Club. Sophie Glovier from the Garden Club of Princeton, and Harriette Brainard have recently joined the team.

We began our efforts by hosting a few focus groups to discover what people in our community wanted to know about climate change. We quickly learned that our friends and peers welcomed information if it was presented in a non-partisan, credible way and wrapped together with a social situation.

Our response was to create *C-Change Conversations*, a volunteer-run organization that offers two programs: Lunch and Learn, and Conversations, a speaker series with cocktails.

**T**he Lunch and Learn program features Climate Change 101, a 30-minute primer on climate change that we developed in conjunction with a Science Master from a local educational institution and scientists from *Climate*



**Central**, a non-profit that analyzes reports on climate science. We offer this presentation to people in the community who are willing to host a small lunch, tea or supper in their house. They invite their friends over for a meal, and we show up to present a basic slide show on the scientific understanding of climate change and how it is expected to impact all of us. These intimate settings give people the chance to ask questions that they might not venture to pose in a larger lecture hall. It starts a civil conversation about climate change. We also offer this presentation to GCA garden clubs and other local groups or businesses.

**O**ur Conversations program offers lectures by experts in the field following a brief wine and cheese social gathering. These events are by invitation only so that we can control the tone of the event and provide the social interaction that attendees welcome. Typically, we hold them on a Sunday or Thursday evening – they have become so successful, that the last few have been over-subscribed, with more than 100 people signing up. In just two years we have presented eight of these Conversations, with plans to present three more in the coming academic year.

To accomplish all of this we have leveraged every contact we have. We contacted a local non-profit—**The Stony Brook Millstone Watershed Association**—that agreed to give us space to hold our Conversations. They were delighted with the free programming. We pooled our address books to create a database for invitations, we talked to everyone we knew—business people, teachers,

journalists, and other parents—about who would be a good speaker for this group. Although we are fortunate enough to live in a university town, we have found most of our speakers from the community, rather than the university. Our hope is that other Garden Club members across the country will pick up the baton, and start a conversation in their community. Thanks to Kathleen, we've started one in ours.

**Our Conversations Speaker Series** has included the following:

- An entrepreneur who invented a financing model helping large companies, like Walmart, move to solar energy
- A national science writer discussed challenges of writing about climate change
- A scientist from Woods Hole Research Center who studies the carbon from thawing permafrost in the Arctic and advises the State Department
- A panel of investment advisors discussing how climate change impacts the investment community's decisions.
- A Washington DC lobbyist, who talked to us about the political past, present and future of this issue
- A former government official who created an institute promoting smart coastal and harbor infrastructure development and design
- The former CEO of a local energy company
- A scholar who studies the correlation between extreme weather events and climate change, who also spoke to the group about the pros and cons of natural gas



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## HOW TO START A CLIMATE CHANGE CONVERSATION GROUP IN YOUR AREA

- Find a group of people with varied talents to work on the project with you.
- Meet often, initially. Follow an agenda.
- Pool your address books to create a database. Google Docs or DropBox are great for sharing information on a project like this.
- Know your audience! Have small focus groups with specific questions about what they would like to learn.
- Talk to everyone you know about what you are doing to get leads for speakers. Don't hesitate to ask people you don't know to speak.
- Once you find a speaker, try to find a date that does not coincide with other big events in your area. This can be challenging!
- We use Mailchimp to send out invitations to our events. It is free and relatively easy to use. We are happy to share a copy of our invitation template with you to get you started.
- Please feel free to **contact us** if you would like to use our Climate Change 101 Primer at an event.
- Start small, with one or two events. Our first event was in Kathleen's home and about 40 people came.

- Identify local non-profit organizations with compatible missions that might offer free program space in exchange for letting their members attend.
- Collect as many new emails addresses as you can at every event.
- Send a brief summary of each speaker's remarks out to your mailing list to keep everyone informed and engaged.
- We found that most people in this field will speak to small groups for free, because they are so aware of the urgency of getting the word out.
- Don't hesitate to charge a modest fee to help defray the cost of expenses.

Please feel free to contact us with any questions or challenges that you need help resolving. Make the events special, with nice food, decent wine... and don't forget the flowers!

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### ***Katy Kinsolving***

*Stony Brook Garden Club, Princeton, New Jersey, Zone IV  
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