

I am an American We are One Nation **BUILDING BRIDGES WITH NETWORKING**

When Robin Reshard gets people together to mingle, they create connections

KEVIN ROBINSON

USA TODAY NETWORK

Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who unites, rather than divides, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit onenation.usatoday.com.



For Robin Reshard, the idea behind Pensacola Network is that getting people to break out of their comfortable cocoons and just meet with new people is a great way to start a dialogue.

GREGG PACHKOWSKI/USA TODAY NETWORK

Robin Reshard's downtown Pensacola, Florida, office is steeped in history.

Yellowed newspaper clippings and grayscale photos hang above rows of books that detail everything from the Civil War to the lives of musicians performing in the Jim Crow-era Chitlin Circuit.

History is important to Reshard not just because of "what" happened, but "why" it happened. Why some denigrated others because of the color of their skin, or whom they voted for, or whom they prayed to at night.

She has found the easiest way to learn why is to talk and listen. Along with her husband, Lloyd, she's dedicated four years to creating community dialogue through Pensacola Network. The monthly event encourages people of all races, ethnicities, religions and professions to meet, mingle, learn about and forge connections with folks they wouldn't usually encounter in everyday life.

"Oftentimes we get very comfortable in the cocoon of our own experiences and our own lives and the way things were," Reshard said. "Being called to break out of those things makes us uncomfortable, and a lot of times we don't do it."

Once a month some 75 to 100 people gather at Pensacola Network to build relationships and understanding. From community activists to politicians to bankers to everyday working joes, everyone is welcome and equal.

“It’s broken down these preconceived barriers,” Reshard said. “People have connected not only in terms of person to person, but business to business. So jobs and contracts, business opportunities and information, getting volunteers, getting board members, I think it happens here.”

Reshard, 51, a former U.S. Navy cryptology maintenance instructor, is now creative director at Robert Robino Productions. Her passion is storytelling through books and documentaries and conversation, but her mission is helping people recognize the value in others.

“I think if we remember to value the goodness in others, then we can get through the bad and the ugly in others,” she said.

Robin Reshard

Location: Pensacola, Fla. **Age:** 51 **Profession:** Creative director, Robert Robino Productions **Mission:** Robin Reshard has been fostering dialogue between people of different backgrounds through a monthly social meeting called Pensacola Network.

Q& A WITH ROBIN RESHARD

What does it mean to be an American?

It means I have opportunities built on the backs of my forefathers and foremothers, folks I didn’t even know, who helped build this country. People who were coming here for more opportunity, some who were forced here, and in being forced here, they made opportunity. To be an American means you forge your way through challenges to make a new way.

What motivated you to start this effort?

I had to do my part, my husband and I; we had to do our part to help people see the value in other people.

What gives you hope, concern?

What gives me hope is that people are good. People are inherently good, I firmly believe that. People want to do the right thing. They want to do the righteous thing. They want to succeed. They want the best for themselves and their family. They want the best for their environment. They want the best for their present and their future. They want to celebrate their history and everything that went into making them who they are. That gives me a lot of hope that goodness and a whole bunch of mercy are at the core of who we are. What causes me concern is when people don’t see their innate value, the goodness in themselves. When it comes out as trying to hold somebody else down so that they can be celebrated while this other person can be

denigrated. That challenges my spirit, for people to think, “For me to shine, I have to dim your light.”

What do you hope to accomplish?

I hope that people are valued for living their purpose on this Earth. We do that through connecting people so that they can get resources. Whether that’s a word, an idea, a tip, a deed, a contract, whatever that thing is they need. You’re three people from knowing anybody in the world, so we start that connection. Then somebody else starts a connection, and it keeps going until we’re all connected.

NOMINATE AN AMERICAN

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