

I am an American We are One Nation

TO GET RESULTS, GET PEOPLE TALKING

Community activist sees how holding get-togethers forms and strengthens ties

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LAUREN PETRACCA/USA TODAY NETWORK

Marlanda Dekine is executive director of Speaking Down Barriers in Spartanburg, S.C.

Location: Spartanburg, South Carolina **Age:** 30 **Profession:** Executive director, Speaking Down Barriers, poet, licensed master social worker

Mission: To transform our life together across our differences by facilitating community dialogue, training, performances and consultation.

SPARTANBURG, S.C. - Marlanda Dekine is pretty sure the root of her formal activism was the day she had to tell a 6-year-old that he would never return home to his parents. Dekine had been a social worker for nearly five years, mostly doing forensic evaluations and therapy for children who had been victims of abuse. But the meeting that day brought her emotions to a head.

She sat across from the little boy and couldn't speak.

"He's 6," Dekine says, reflecting.

"He's 6. I could have all the training in the world; there are no words for how you say that."

All Dekine could think to do was to write. And so as the little boy played beside her, she penned a poem.

"... Sometimes, my masters level degree cannot make sense out of what doesn't make sense," Dekine wrote.

"These children, they are tried on like new shoes. If you don't like what you see, keep it moving ..."

Today, Dekine is working to foster honest dialogue across racial, religious, gender identity, ethnic and socioeconomic differences. Her organization, Speaking Down Barriers, which she cofounded with Scott Neely in 2013, began as an artistic space that brought spoken word poetry into local churches to open conversation about issues.

The group, partly funded by a grant from the South Carolina Endowment for Arts and Humanities, holds multiple monthly gatherings, from book discussions to larger events.

At Speaking Down Barriers' first community meeting, Dekine recalls watching a multimillionaire discuss class with a person who'd just been released from prison.

"It's a way of building community on the ground," Dekine says.

The work is slow, Dekine admits, but she and her team have seen results. People who have met through SDB events have branched off to create things such as community gardens and artist groups. "I think the essence of transformative community building is consciousness," she says. "I am not sure you can have effective community building without it."

Q& A WITH MARLANDA

What does it mean to you to be an American?

It means, for me, living in a space that is still learning to love, and to even love who I am. And it means loving it enough back to expect more of it.

What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?

That was right after (the killing of black youth) Trayvon Martin. That was right in the midst of a time when those things were much more in our awareness, and us wanting there to be a space to pull it out. It all came back to this is something people don't like to talk about, but it's always coming up. It's not just Florida, Ferguson. If it's there, it's here.

I think we all had pieces and ideas for what we wanted this space to be, but the spark, I'd say, was the idea from Scott (Neely), what would it be like to do poetry in this space. Then it just took off from there.

What gives you hope, or what concerns you?

Children give me a lot of hope, and I think that's because a lot of the work that I've done is with survivors of child abuse. I think there is a way that the most terrible thing (happens) and you witness the most amazing resilience, and that's where hope comes in for me, our ability for resilience.

Concern? I think the deep fears that we carry about being our authentic selves, about doing authentic work. The way that we just put things off to the side when really we need to look at the full list. Let's look at ourselves and not run from ourselves, essentially. And I think my concern is most of us would rather run.

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

I hope to clearly see myself. So what I mean is, while the goal is community building, I don't believe I myself build community. But I think the more I wrestle here (hands on heart), the more I live here deeply, the more that what I share with the world helps to transform the community.

So I hope for my own self a constant growth, no matter how hard. I never want to ask someone to do something I'm not willing to do myself.