



Camden Rotary Club Peacebuilders Host Talk About Civil Discourse in an Age of Division

CAMDEN – March 2, 2021 – Steve Becton, chief officer of equity and inclusion for [Facing History and Ourselves](#), joined a recent Camden Rotary Club meeting to speak about civil discourse as a way to break down polarization in society, resolve conflict, and build understanding. His talk was the club's first initiative as a Rotary Peacebuilder Club. This distinction reflects the club's commitment to engaging in initiatives that create infrastructures for peace within our local community.

Becton's organization uses lessons of history to challenge teachers and their students to stand up to bigotry and hate. He holds a master's degree in educational leadership and is pursuing Ph.D. research on the historical construct of race and its impact on education. He has spoken to corporations including Walmart, USAA, AAA, Allstate, and Bank of America.

Becton highlighted the necessity of talking about difficult issues by creating "brave spaces" for doing so. Such conversations call for the willingness to accept the discomfort of controversy while seeking answers with an open mind.

"If we are going to solve the issues that we face today, we have to come together across these differences and have civil discourse," Becton said. He explained that when we listen to each other and engage in civil dialogue, we humanize each other's experiences—even when we disagree with each other. "Those who perpetuate hate want to keep us from humanizing each other's experiences, and they want us not to see each other's humanity."

Noting that everyone has prejudices and makes mistakes, we need to allow each other some grace. Becton offered some strategies for engaging in civil discourse:

- Affirm others
- Share talking time
- Don't interrupt others
- Use "I" statements
- Avoid generalizations
- Challenge ideas, not people
- Work through discomfort

Becton emphasized that although difficult conversations can be uncomfortable, they should never be unsafe. He also suggested that we "grapple with the claims that we present rather than try to maintain what we already believe." Observing the human tendency to hold on to what we believe instead of struggling to understand or accept new information, he said it is essential to be curious and not think we know it all: We need to enter a conversation with the desire to learn. "It does not mean we will always agree, but we can be humble and listen."

Becton's presentation also covered the presence of bias in everyone and how to minimize it. Another theme was the importance of focusing less on national controversies and connecting more at a local

level to engage in “real conversations (not debates) with real people. We all have shared hopes and dreams; we just need to talk to each other about how to get there.”

A recording of Becton’s talk is available on [YouTube](#) or via the club’s library of recordings at www.camdenrotary.org.

The club welcomes visitors at its weekly meetings, which take place Tuesdays at noon on Zoom. Anyone who would like to attend can obtain connection details from Stephanie Griffin:

steph.griffinsg00@gmail.com.