

Bridgebuilding Case Study: Conneaut Public Library



This case study was developed by [IREX](#) as an example of a "bridgebuilding" activity. IREX defines bridgebuilding as engaging across differences in ways that respect identities, foster mutual relationships, seek a common good, and promote a commitment to civic engagement, thereby contributing to increased social capital and strengthened civic infrastructure, and ultimately, a stronger democracy.

Background/context of the library

The Conneaut Public Library's [mission](#) is to provide "materials and services to assist patrons of all ages to obtain information to meet their personal, educational, cultural and professional needs."

What bridging initiatives/programs has the library offered?

While they do not run formal bridging programs, the Conneaut Public Library facilitates community conversations as the need arises to help heal divides between different groups of people. For example, after observing some disagreements across different groups of businesses in the community, they invited members of the business community to come to the library for a private conversation to promote productive and safe conversations around differences of perspective and opinion that had been dividing the community. The library facilitated the initial meetings, showing the groups how to have productive conversations, and provided a space to hold those conversations.

Why was a bridging initiative needed in the community?

The library observed conflict in the community—specifically on social media—between old businesses that have existed in the community for the last 20–30 years and new businesses that saw opportunities in the growing number of shop vacancies in the tourist area of Conneaut. There was a lot of discontent in the community because of this conflict. New businesses and old businesses refused to share parking spaces and dumpsters, and they did not get along with each other. Library staff saw this conflict, reached out to the businesses to invite them into the library, and asked what they could do to help.

What were the signs of success?

The library knew that the conversations were successful because after a while, people were showing up and meeting with each other and having conversations without the library organizing or conducting the meeting. They also observed that the conflicts that were playing out on social

Library details

- Library name: Conneaut Public Library
- City, State: Conneaut, Ohio
- Size of library system: 1 location
- Contact for bridging information: Kathy Zappitello, Executive Director, kathy.zappitello@conneaut.lib.oh.us

Use this case study to learn:

- how you can bring together members in the community for private conversations to heal division.
- how to address issues in the community around old and new businesses.
- alternative ways to measure impact that do not involve participant surveys.

media and throughout the community had stopped. The old and new businesses created a more formal group, started a market together, and started to share spaces and resources. They also purchased a full-page ad in a local magazine to promote all of the businesses together.



What was learned?

The library was able to observe the impact of the conversations they facilitated by observing changes on social media and throughout the community. They noted that other means of data collection like recording videos of the conversations or administering surveys to the businesses would be difficult because of the proprietary nature of some of the conversations.

A critical challenge—specifically for a library in a small community—is that the library often steps in to provide community services when there are gaps in services and support for the community. However, staff at small libraries often do not have the time or resources to meet all the needs. In small communities, where there can often be no other place to turn, libraries are usually viewed as a trusted resource and partner. When an organization or an individual approaches the library, the library doesn't want to refuse to help, even if there are only a few people on staff.

Photo courtesy [Conneaut Public Library](#) on Facebook