A Question Revisited: What’s in a Name?

By Betty Knighton

More than two decades ago, in sophomore English classes at Dunbar High School, my high school students and I had vivid conversations about the difference a name can make. Each of these discussions followed a class reading of Act II, Scene II of Romeo and Juliet. “What’s in a name?” Juliet asks in that scene, arguing that it is the Montague name and not Romeo’s nature that her parents reject.

While my 15-year-old students strongly related to many themes in the play, this one struck a particularly powerful chord. “Absolutely,” they responded to Juliet’s complaint. “She’s exactly right. Why should a name matter?”

Twenty-five years later, I find that I am still engaged in vivid conversations about the act of naming. Some of these conversations still involve high school students; most involve adults living and working together in West Virginia communities. Yet the focus remains on the difference a name can make.

These more recent conversations have focused less on the limitations of an insufficient name than on the potential of a sufficient one. They have illuminated another, more positive aspect of naming: the powerful dynamic that occurs when a name does resonate, does capture real qualities, does reflect an intended meaning. These conversations have focused on the power of naming — not in relationship to individual people, but in relationship to public issues. They have focused on the public process of describing a problem in the way people want to talk about it, in a way that shows how it affects their daily lives.

Our work here in West Virginia, and similar work in many other locations, is helping us recognize the connection between public involvement in defining a community problem and public engagement in talking and working together to address it. We are finding that when the concerns of a broad and diverse group of citizens drive the way an issue is framed for public dialogue, the issue connects to the community in ways that are both personal and public.

Recently, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life worked with a team of 14 colleagues from around the country to create a framework for discussing health care — one we hoped would resonate with Americans from all walks of life. An important part of this work has involved researching public policy initiatives and tapping into the expertise of health care professionals. But the framework has been built on the health care concerns of more than a thousand citizens who talked to us, who were willing to contribute their private experiences to a public examination of health care in this country.

All of the health care team members are involved in building networks for public deliberation in their own communities, and all involved their communities in creating this national framework on health care. Although the goal of the team has been to create a discussion guide that would be useful throughout the nation, the work of naming the issue began in local communities in ways that were intensely personal and inherently individual.

Each team member sought out community members from all walks of life. Each asked questions that would allow citizens’ concerns and insights to surface:
We heard an unemployed father of four describe his experience with the requirements of a public health program he knew was designed to help children like his: “I applied for CHIP (Children’s Health Insurance Program), but they told me I make $63 a month too much.” He would gladly return the $63 if he could, he told us.

We heard a highly skilled nurse express her frustration with navigating the health care system when her father-in-law was ill. “When he was in the hospital, he had six different doctors and was on eight different medications. No one was looking at the big picture.”

These individual experiences with naming a public issue allowed people to tap into their personal concerns and not only their professional positions. For many of them, participating in naming a public issue provided an opportunity to consider their public identity — for some of them, an initial opportunity.

As we asked questions about their own health care — and as they understood that their individual concerns would help design a framework that would benefit the community — they expressed strong interest in participating in these future public dialogues.

Our work with health care is continuing. Citizens around the country are participating in deliberative dialogue about the issue. Here in West Virginia, we are pleased to be seeing some familiar faces in community forums. We are engaging in public work with many of the same citizens whose individual insights helped inform it.

As always, we are reflecting on the work we have done and how we have done it. We still recognize the importance of questioning “What’s in a name?” But for us, the more compelling question has become, “How did that name come to be?”

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