



Attendees talk during a meal hosted by Tom Corcoran, right, in April in California-Kirkbride. The meal was part of the Big Table, a series of gatherings around Pittsburgh to foster conversations and community building. (Alexandra Wimley/ Post-Gazette)

## Walkabout: You don't have to knock yourself out to be an agent of change

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By Diana Nelson Jones / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In April, Tom Corcoran was the host of a Big Table event at his home in California-Kirkbride on the North Side. It was one of 3,500 regional Big Table meals that Leadership Pittsburgh instigated to bring people together.

So many of the people around those tables were strangers, which was the point. Meet new people, make connections, share opinions, maybe disagree, maybe become friends or, best of all, use your networks for social change.

That last possibility was the least likely. Most of us enjoyed our meal and meeting new people, whose names we likely forgot. We felt our world expand a little, then we went home.

Marissa Klein, of Observatory Hill, and Luke West, of Swissvale, took it a step further.

During the social hour before Mr. Corcoran's big meal that included handmade pasta, Mr. West learned that Ms. Klein works for Propel Schools, where she is the scholar opportunity and alumni coordinator. She learned that he is a program manager for Global Links, the Green Tree-based distributor of medical supplies to the world.

Propel has a free store and a free clinic that serve the community at its Central North Side school, at 1800 Brighton Road. Global Links had been looking to do more local donating.

When they returned to work, Mr. West and Ms. Klein connected their pertinent colleagues to set in motion a relationship between Global Links and Propel Schools.

Global Link saves medical and health supplies from the landfill by transferring them to needy recipients, some in the United States, some in poor countries. It works with 30 hospitals in the region to divert this surplus to people who cannot afford it or whose insurance doesn't cover it, executive director Angela Garcia said.

It recycles what has been used but is in good condition — equipment and supplies that are replaced by upgrades, renovations, etc. Of 250 to 300 tons recovered a year, 90% comes from hospitals and 10% comes from consumers in the region, she said.

Global Links accepts donated crutches and wheelchairs, nebulizers, inhalers, shower seats, blood pressure monitors, unopened medical supplies but no medications. A more complete list is on [Global Links' website](#), as is a list of its drop-off sites.

“Three and a half years ago we started a domestic program to provide materials to communities,” Ms. Garcia said. “We had been looking at neighborhoods, and Propel North Side had just opened a clinic in the school.”

The first delivery to the clinic, a few weeks ago, consisted of adult briefs for incontinence, liquid nutrition (Boost/Ensure) and baby supplies.

“We will be adding more products in 2020,” Ms. Garcia said.

“The initial conversation Marissa had with Luke was about the free store,” said Sonya Toler, spokeswoman for Propel Schools. “That is housed in the Community Wellness Center, which has a health clinic in it. The grand opening was last year. It was an initiative that started as a support to our students and their families. As we were planning it, our superintendent decided to make it a center the community can use.”

The free store is open every second and fourth Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. A network of people helps collect items to fill it. The walk-in clinic operates in partnership with UPMC, and it is open to the community from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Wednesday and Friday, and from 1 to 4:30 p.m. Thursday.

Site coordinator Caroline Barmen said the staff will help people get insurance if they are not covered.

Mr. Corcoran said his motivation to host a Big Table was simply “to get people together to talk about our communities. Are there ways we can make society a little kinder, a little more accepting?”

Ms. Klein and Mr. West put their process in motion with no heavy lifting. But they had to meet first.

“I never would have met Luke without being at the Big Table,” Ms. Klein said.

“We were talking about our backgrounds and our jobs,” Mr. West said. “I connected her to my colleagues.”

This is a good example of what can come from future Big Table events or anytime we meet new people and connect the dots. You don't have to knock yourself out to be an agent of change.

The next Big Table is March 18. Details will be available at [Leadership Pittsburgh's website](#).

In the meantime, I would like to hear from past participants who took the Big Table a step further and advanced projects that are helping our communities.

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