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## John Breunig: No fake news here

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Greenwich First Selectman Peter Tesei and I had an offhand chat recently about how easy it is to overlook the diversity of the town.

While walking the length of Greenwich Avenue during the St. Patrick's Day Parade last Sunday, I tuned into accents like frequencies on a radio, mostly picking up stations that hail from Europe. There is considerable economic diversity in the town as well, though "Greenwich" will never shake that it is a synonym for wealth.

I sometimes overlook the breadth of Stamford's diversity, but got a welcome reminder of it Thursday evening while speaking to the current class of the Parent Leadership Training Institute. The free 20-week course guides area residents on how to become engaged in their community. Since the program started in Stamford in 1996, graduates have become civic leaders.

With 31 members, the current class is the largest ever. While I'm here to speak about "The Power of the Media," they provide the real lessons. In an attempt to take a snapshot of their causes, I take about 30 minutes to interview each of them briefly about their projects, reflections of their passions.

It's a journalism version of speed dating, which is entirely unfair to them. But they've already been trained well in the art of efficient pitches. Divine accents (and names) fill the room, which could pass for a U.N. summit. Many are recent immigrants. They came from places such as Africa, India, Guatemala, Jamaica, Poland and Peru. They also dot the map of Stamford, from North Stamford to Harbor Point to the West Side.

Thirteen foreign languages are represented. All the parents point to problems, and most suggest potential enhancements to the public schools to solve them. I'm only able to snag the headlines, which make it clear that while there is a lot to be done that can improve the city, there are also people willing to do the work.

Heloise hopes to create a bibliography of resources dealing with domestic violence. Mark recognizes

a need to better inform families about emergency preparedness. Shruti wants a security guard at Rogers International School. Renee offers advice about appropriate recycling. Angela seeks new ways for the community to celebrate its diversity. Dani, who lives near the Harbor Point development, wants a public school to be brought to the growing community so students aren't bused for several miles. Shira, who became passionate about gun safety in the wake of the Sandy Hook tragedy in 2012, sees a need for education about the issue to occur during pediatric checkups. Luci would address self-esteem issues for young students in hopes it can curtail bullying.

Sri is the first to use the word that serves as a theme for the initiatives: Connect.

"I just want to connect the dots for parents."

She says many parents dealing with language barriers flail when navigating the schools. Some can't read pamphlets sent home in their children's backpacks. Others don't know how to use the internet.

Paula, sitting next to her, finds common ground. She's amazed to see young parents struggle with email in 2017.

Winston, the next student, aims "to connect parents with online tools to learn about data science and programming."

Once the word "connect" has entered the Government Center cafeteria, it takes subliminal control. It appears in other forms, such as "bridge." Yazmin uses "cohesive," as in "Stamford has a diverse population, but I don't feel it is cohesive."

And so it goes. Gloria wants to help people struggling to grasp medical jargon at hospitals.

Jackie perceives inequality in education in the schools — particularly for special needs students — and wants to help parents who "don't know the ropes." She summons a word that reaches beyond connections. She wants to create a pyramid so families are empowered to help one another.

Lorraine hopes to create a website that will "teach parents basically what teachers are taught in special development about reading strategies and test prep."

Natalie and Poonima are intrigued by the impact of technology on developing brains. Natalie, whose focus is nutrition, points out that “Kids have all this technology at their hands, but ... they don't know what a zucchini or cucumber (is).”

Poonima, who came to the United States from India three years ago, finds that instead of giving families more time, technology instead deprives them of “happy time.”

“We all would like to help our children,” says Sushma, who also arrived from India three years ago. “We feel helpless at times.”

The projects have specific focuses, but form a bigger picture as well. During our brief time together, new perceptions of the communities around us begin forming in my mind.

As we wrap up, I'm asked about the inevitable topic de jour. The phrase “fake news” is never used, but the spirit is there. The query is about where to find the “real news.”

I blather on about the difference between professional and amateur journalists. But I smile as I inwardly concede to a different, truer answer: They just told me the real news.

*John Breunig is editorial page editor of The Advocate and Greenwich Time. [Jbreunig@scni.com](mailto:Jbreunig@scni.com); 203-964-2281; [twitter.com/johnbreunig](https://twitter.com/johnbreunig).*

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