



Donna Dahl, left, and Andrea McCaskey. Photo: Kathy Boswell.

Healing History

A conversation between two Alabamians on how examining the past can help us build community in the present.

AHA's Healing History initiative aims to strengthen our communities, workplaces, and relationships by bringing Alabamians together. We do so across race, religion, politics, and all the supposed dividing lines that could keep us apart. The goal is to build trust, foster empathy, and grow community through conversations about our history and the sharing of our own stories with one another.

In the conversation below, two Healing History participants-turned-facilitators share about the bonds they've established — and the hope they've cultivated.

In 2025, Donna Dahl and Andrea McCaskey became members of AHA's second inaugural Healing History cohort — an extended (eight-month) version of AHA's half-day Healing Circle sessions that help Alabamians to connect, share, and learn across differences. Both Donna and Andrea had recently retired when they entered the cohort. Donna did so after many years as an English Language Learning teacher in a variety of states and countries; Andrea after a career in human resources and leadership development.

Andrea McCaskey: I think we were drawn to the experience for much the same reason: to build community by discovering common ground.

Donna Dahl: I define common ground as the idea that we are one with many unique experiences, languages, backgrounds and races. But it always comes back to the fact that we are one. We both came to the sessions with the belief that humans are designed to live in community with one another.

Andrea: It is the African word *ubuntu* that comes to mind — I am because we are. We both share a desire to be a part of creating a community of diverse individuals who can laugh together and talk about tough subjects and continue to love one another.

At the first session Andrea and Donna attended, the cohort talked about the difference between *willing* and *want*. We may want the world to be different but not be willing to engage in actions that will make it different. Participants were asked what they were willing to do to create common ground in our cohort community. Answers included: take risks, be uncomfortable, suspend judgment. During one of the exercises in that first session, Andrea and Donna were paired together for the first time.

Donna: I shared that I want a better world for my grandchildren, who are biracial.

Andrea: Her voice was pretty thick with emotion at that point. I wanted to respond with empathy, of course. But our facilitators explained that while the person was speaking, the listener was to remain silent, our faces void of expressions of affirmation or question. If the speaker finished before the allotted time was up, we were to both remain silent. Again, with no emotion showing on our faces. The goal was to learn to listen better. Listen, not prepare to respond, not lament or rejoice — just listen.



Members of AHA's current Healing History cohort for 2026. Photo: Alma Anthony.

Donna: It was much harder than it sounds. It is like holding a mirror up to your face. But as the months went by, each time we were asked to listen and not respond became easier.

Andrea: Our takeaways from the time with our cohort were similar and affirmed our beliefs about being created to be in community. We found some common ground and realized that it was just a starting point. Building community takes time and intention. We learned to move first to curiosity rather than judgment.

Donna: While we knew this, the cohort gave us the opportunity to practice it and keep it top of mind and heart when in conversation with others. Especially those we may have differences of opinions with.

The experience inspired Andrea and Donna to become facilitators themselves, trained to lead other groups in one-day versions of the Healing History cohort. They also learned to lead an accompanying simulation called Past Forward. The participatory experience walks participants through 150-plus years of federal policies, illustrating how decisions made in the past can carry forward — directly affecting our lives, livelihoods, relationships, and communities today. It's a starting point for reflection and conversation.

Andrea: My decision to become a facilitator likely comes from the fact that I spent a large portion of my corporate career in learning and development, leading and facilitating workshops. I enjoy watching folks come to new insight and understanding. This particular work is important to me because I firmly believe the more

we share with one another, the more likely we are to understand one another.

Donna: My motivation for becoming a facilitator goes back to my grandchildren and wanting the world they grow up in to be a better place. We don't really have a concept of justice on our planet that includes every person and I'd like to be a part of changing that. At the end of my life, I want to know I've done all I can to impact the world for the better. Healing History opened my eyes to where my skills can be used for our common good.

Andrea: I think our shared hope for the future lies in the fact that people continue to be engaged in this work. They are willing and courageous enough to engage in conversations that can be uncomfortable, for the purpose of moving our state, our city, our local communities forward.

Donna: Our time with our cohort gave us hope, trust, and love for people who were mostly strangers when we first met.

Andrea: As facilitators, if we can instill that same sense of caring with each group we meet with, the ripple effect can be the change we wish to see in the world. Fingers crossed, good juju sent into the universe, and prayers said that it will come to pass.

To learn how you can engage with Healing History, visit alabamahumanities.org/healing-history. Our thanks to the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham for its lead support of this initiative.