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## Club offers philosophizing for everyone

Article by: NANCY CROTTI , Special to the Star Tribune

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The members of Cafe Philo have been meeting weekly for 12 years for thoughtful discussion on sticky topics.

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Roland Brandt held his cup of coffee as he discusses poverty with John Baird, center, Bill McDonald and several others at a Cafe Philo meeting at the Bayport Public Library. The group was founded by a retired educator who was inspired by similar gatherings that began in France in the 1990s.

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The topic of the day was poverty.

The group of men (and one woman) meeting at the Bayport Public Library engaged in orderly discussion -- decidedly anti-cable news show -- with members opining about the definition and root causes of poverty and offering ideas about how to alleviate it. A few attendees recalled growing up on farms during the Great Depression, realizing only in hindsight that they had been poor.

"I was still a happy kid," said Jerry Larson, a retired Ph.D. chemist who spent his nickel-a-week childhood allowance on a Saturday night Snickers bar. "I remember eating a lot of toast and cream. Not meat every day, but we got by and we were generally satisfied."

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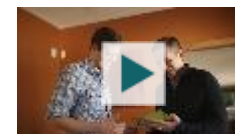
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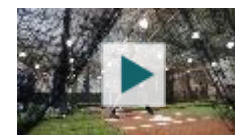
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On this morning at the library, gathered around two tables pushed together in an upstairs meeting room, sit members of Cafe Philo. For 12 years, retired chemists and scientists -- mostly from [3M](#) -- educators and salespeople have met weekly to talk about the world's problems.

They may not solve them, but it's not for lack of discussion.

Retired educator Floyd Keller founded the local group, inspired by similar gatherings that began in France in 1992. Known as Café Philosophique, the French version consisted of grassroots groups founded by philosopher Marc Sautet. Bayport's Café Philo meets every Friday from 10:15 to 11:45 a.m.

The group, open to anyone, can be as large as nearly two dozen in the summer, and shrinks in winter when some flee to warmer climes. Of the 15 there this particular Friday, most consider themselves liberals; a couple were more conservative; one identified as a libertarian. Some have been attending since the beginning.

Back to the poverty discussion. Larson turned to Lee Salisbury, a former pastor who has also worked in commercial real estate. Salisbury had earlier talked about meeting a couple he thought was living in poverty. Larson asked if the couple seemed satisfied with their life. Salisbury reported that the couple, who have three children, seem happy.

"The word 'poverty' is absolutely meaningless," chimed in Al Taylor, a retired 3M physicist who, like others in the group, has traveled the world. "When you think of poverty, what do you think of? Everybody thinks of something different."

Some argued that the federal government should reinstitute Depression-era programs such as the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, and the Civilian Conservation Corps, also known as the CCC. These New Deal programs put unemployed Americans to work on infrastructure and in the national parks. The WPA did a good job, but it was woefully inefficient and scorned, said Bill McDonald, a retired physicist.

"The WPA to most people was, 'We Poke Along,'" he recalled.

Larson pooh-poohed the idea that allowing the rich to pay lower taxes creates jobs.


"I sort of defy anyone to tell me that if a man or a woman wants to



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start a company, the purpose is to provide jobs," Larson said. "I think the purpose is to provide money for the person who starts the company."

Others posited that education and job opportunities are the highways out of poverty.

Mary-Clare Holst, a native Australian and a retired 3M scientist, said that those in attendance were repeating many of the myths about poverty that the group read in a shared article before convening. She wondered why Americans mistrust the poor and hold them in so much disdain.

"People are not wanting to live in poverty," she said. "They would like to have a good job. The fact of the matter is that there are so many jobs that don't pay enough. They don't pay a living wage."

The conversation went on until some promptly stood up to leave 11:45. Poverty would not be solved in a day.

Some attendees, who've known each other for 40 years, go out for lunch after their meetings.

"We really like each other," said former legislator and retired educator Chuck Hoffman.

Salisbury said he attends because the meetings offer "good fellowship, good conversation and a variety of perspectives."

That's the idea, Keller said.

"We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are," he wrote in a brief history of the group, quoting the Talmud. "We get a better grasp on our reality if we share our perceptions with one another."

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