

Walking *The Talk*: A Performance Based Approach to Community Building

The Talk is a one-man performance by **Dr. Sonny Kelly** that draws on the voices of ancestors, elders, youths, and intellectuals to engage in the difficult conversations that we must have with our children as we prepare them to survive and thrive in a divided America. *The Talk* was born of a painful conversation that Dr. Sonny Kelly had with his young son to prepare him to face a world that is often divided and dangerous. Dr. Kelly humanizes the often racialized politics of issues like police brutality, America's Civil War, "stop and frisk," "zero tolerance" school policies, and the "School to Prison Pipeline." This eclectic theatrical experience weaves together storytelling, interactive theater, literature, a dynamic embodied performance, and a multi-media production. This performance runs 80 minutes. This performance lasts 80 minutes, and can be adjusted according to the needs of your community. The performance is followed by a 30 to 60 minute talk-back (community conversation).

The Walking *The Talk* Workshop starts with this talk-back, and leads audiences through the process of developing a collaborative plan of action for community and team building. Dr. Kelly and participants will engage collectively through facilitated open dialogue to develop courses of action for building more equitable, inclusive, and connected communities. The result is a game plan that participants can use in their professional and personal lives to build community and a deeper understanding of themselves and others.



The Walking *The Talk* Workshop has three objectives:

- To connect participants to each other in a way that builds their sense of mutual trust and their appreciation for their collective diversity.
- To empower participants to engage in the collaborative process of defining unique working definitions for key terms like equality, equity, diversity, inclusion, courageous conversations, and connection.
- To begin to develop courses of action toward building and maintaining more equitable, inclusive, and connected communities.

Dr. Kelly performs *The Talk* and facilitates community discussions and workshops about equity, inclusion, conflict management, intercultural communication, and creative self-expression at schools, universities, military installations, community centers, places of worship, and theaters around the world. **Learn more at www.sonnykelly.com**

Walking The Talk is an interactive workshop experience that Dr. Kelly has designed to complement performances of *The Talk*. Dr. Kelly has designed this two hour performance-based workshop in order to help community members to further digest this experience and to engage these issues in a lasting and transformative way. With this work, Dr. Kelly invites participants into a complicated, but loving, family space where participants are called in and called to personal and collective action. This workshop opens up a space within diverse communities that Augusto Boal (1995) calls “the therapeutic stage,” where we are all encouraged to speak up, listen closely, and enact transformation together.



The Walking The Talk Workshop Process (DURATION: 120 minutes to 150 minutes)

- Participants will receive a link to view an 80 minute video production of Sonny Kelly’s performance of *The Talk* beforehand or as a live watch party.
- Dr. Kelly also performs a 10 minute excerpt of *The Talk*, then leads participants in a series of theater games and embodied warm-up exercises based upon Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* model and Dr. Kelly’s 30-year experience with theatrical performance. Participants will get to know and see themselves and each other in new and dynamic ways.
- Dr. Kelly will facilitate a process by which participants express their understanding of the issues that concern them most.
- Participants will address stereotypes, facts vs. truths, active listening vs. hearing, and assertive vs. aggressive communication.
- Participants will work collaboratively to develop working definitions for the issues that are most pressing for their communities.
- Participants will work collaboratively to develop local solutions to these pressing issues. The result will be a working draft of an action plan that lays out practical steps that participants can take to address those issues going forward.

Why a Performance-Based Workshop?

Critical performance practitioner Augusto Boal (1995) privileges performance spaces as “spaces of liberty where people can free their memories, emotions, imaginations, thinking of their past, in the present, and where they can invent their future instead of waiting for it” (p. 5). From the beginning, Dr. Kelly's goal has been to actualized Augusto Boal's belief that performance can create spaces for positive collective growth and change (Boal, 1979).

The Power of Dialogue

My use of the term dialogue is also based upon David Bohm's (1994) definition of dialogue as an open, empathetic, collective, coherent, iterative, and reflexive sharing of unique perspectives, ideas, and ideals between participants that comprises a “stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us” (p. 7). The kind of dialogue that *The Talk* pursues is what Lisa Schirch and David Campt (2007) conceptualize in their work on “dialogue for difficult subjects” as an open and continuous mutual learning process that “aims to build relationships between people as they address a common concern” (p. 6). It is through the episteme of critical dialogic performance and performance-making that I seek to facilitate intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogue that can reframe and reclaim a positive, dignified, and agential sense of self for, and with diverse community members.

About Dr. Sonny Kelly

Dr. Sonny Kelly is a professional performer, storyteller, motivator, speaker, and scholar. Currently a full time professor of Communication at Fayetteville Technical Community College, Dr. Kelly holds a PhD in Communication from UNC Chapel Hill. He is a graduate of St. Mary's University (MA, Communication Studies, '08) and Stanford University (BA, International Relations, '98). Dr. Kelly has been a professional actor on stage and television for over 25 years. He has served our nation as a U.S. Air Force officer, and his community as a non-profit organization program director, a youth worker and church minister. Dr. Kelly has worked with the United Way of Cumberland County, schools and non-profits across the nation, Beasley Broadcasting, the North Carolina Juvenile Services Association, the National Association of Black, and several youth organizations to share his love for others through storytelling. **To learn more, please visit www.sonnykelly.com**

Workshop Fee: \$10,000 (+ travel and lodging) for face to face sessions, \$6,000 for virtual sessions (this fee is negotiable for non-profits, schools, and other civic organizations)

Works Cited

- Boal, Augusto (1979). *Theater of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Urizen Books.
Boal, Augusto (1995). *The rainbow of desire*. New York, NY: Routledge.
Bohm, D. (1990). *On dialogue*. New York, NY: Routeledge.
Schirch, L. & Campt, D. (2007). *The little book of dialogue for difficult subjects: A practical, hands on guide*. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing.