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Community-building dinner planned to honor Bruce Dahmen, strengthen cultural relationships

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March 12, 2014 9:00 am • JESSIE OPOIEN | The Capital Times | jopoien@madison.com | [@jessieopie](https://twitter.com/@jessieopie) (1) Comments

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Madison Memorial principal Bruce Dahmen.

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Before a community can solve its problems, its people must first get to know one another. That’s what Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, believes, and it’s an idea he and Madison School Board president **Ed Hughes** plan to put into practice.

The two are partnering to plan a community dinner in honor of former **Memorial High School principal Bruce Dahmen**, who died of an apparent heart attack in February.

Following the Cap Times publication of Johnson’s personal essay, “**Driven to Act**” — in which he recalled a searing episode of racial hazing and reflected on how Madison can move forward on race relations — some conversation took place on his Facebook page regarding next steps for the community.

That talk circled to community meals, and a Memorial parent suggested that a community-building dinner would also be a good way to honor Dahmen.

“He certainly was someone who dedicated a lot of work to building community in the school and in the broader community, so it’s something that seems like a natural way to honor his work,” Hughes said.

There is no date set for the dinner yet, but Hughes said it will likely be on a Sunday afternoon, and Johnson said they’re hoping for sometime in April or May. They’ve also spoken with superintendent **Jennifer Cheatham**, and the **Rev. Alex Gee**, with whom Johnson serves on **a coalition dedicated to addressing Madison’s racial disparities**.



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The dinner will be held at Memorial High School.

“The whole purpose is for us to get to know each other,” Johnson said. “I firmly believe that we can’t solve our biggest community issues if we don’t get to know each other and get to fellowship with one another.”

Johnson said he hopes they’ll be able to have a few larger dinners at schools, and some smaller, more intimate ones at people’s homes, as well.

The dinner at Memorial will be a potluck, and Johnson said they probably won’t plan a rigid agenda. They might pose a few questions, such as, “What does race mean to you?” and “What can we do as a community to create action?,” he said.

“What we have in mind is a community potluck where folks are able to bring a dish to pass, that’s a family recipe that reflects their heritage in some way,” Hughes said. “An opportunity for people to get together, talk to someone they don’t know, expand their circle of acquaintances — get a little more interaction among various folks in Madison.”

Johnson said when a community tries to tackle complex issues like homelessness and the achievement gap, if the people involved in the discussion don’t start with a common foundation, it can be easy to attack others’ ideas — and for those attacks to feel personal.

“We’re trying to bring people together,” Johnson said. “Let’s try to get to know each other; let’s have a conversation. Until we do that, it’s going to be harder to address some of these issues collectively as a community. I don’t think you can create a plan and do it in a vacuum and ask people to get behind it. I think you have to start by having the fellowship first.”

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