

LAURA HILL



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

Coming to the Table

By Narielle Living

Laura Hill is a soft-spoken, articulate woman with a big purpose: to bring people together. Her new chapter of *Coming to the Table* is focused on bringing people in the community together to raise awareness, talk, develop workshops and heal.

Laura is originally from St. Mary's County, Maryland. "It is a very historic area, much like Williamsburg in that it's the oldest county in Maryland," she says. And similar to Wil-

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Williamsburg, St. Mary's County was initially the capital before the capital moved to Annapolis. St. Mary's County is host to a naval air station, which is how Laura's story begins. "My father was stationed there, and my mother was from St. Mary's County," she says. Her parents met and married, and Laura ended up being a Navy brat, a kid who moved from station to station with her military family.

As a teen, Laura moved to Norfolk, Virginia. "It was my father's last duty station," she says. "He was a 26-year Navy veteran." Laura went to high school in Norfolk and graduated from Lake Taylor High School. She then went on to study at Hampton University, an experience that would shape her life.

"I studied journalism and mass communications." That is where she met her husband, Brad, who she married a few years after they graduated. Brad has a career in architecture, and that is what brought their family to this area. "His career actually brought us here in 2000. I've been here nearly 20 years now. This is the longest I've ever lived anywhere," she says with a smile. "It's interesting because when you're from a military family you want to establish roots, so this is home, and this is where my children were educated." Her children are now older. She has a 20 year old who was only one year old when they moved here. Her daughter is 16 and was born in Williamsburg. "Because they've been here all their lives they want to leave," she says. "They're the opposite of me in terms of their childhood and growing up."

Currently, Laura is using her knowledge in journalism and communications to work on a couple of things: writing a book and developing materials for *Coming to the Table*. Laura is the founder of the Williamsburg chapter, and in her current role with the group, she leads the meetings, plans their activities and events and helps determine if there are any classes or outreach workshops she might be able to facilitate.

Coming to the Table is national organization with more than 30 chapters. Initially the group began in response to racial healing that occurred during family reunions. Co-founder Will Hunt Hairston's family was one of the largest slave owning families in the Antebellum South. The family has both white and black members. The other co-founder, Sue Hutchison, is a descendant of President Thomas Jefferson. When Jefferson's descendants came together for a family reunion they acknowledged and embraced family members who were descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, an enslaved African woman that Jefferson owned. Out of the desire to serve as models for racial reconciliation, *Coming to the Table* was born, an organization that seeks to repair the harm that racism has done to people and communities nationwide and to dismantle systems of racial injustice and oppression.

As a group leader, Laura sets tables and chairs up at the Jamestown Christian Fellowship Church in preparation for the meetings. "You would show up. You might be invited to come out or you'll read about it and decide to check us out. We begin our meetings, we have tables set up and we light a candle. We acknowledge those who have come before us, so we acknowledge the first peoples, the Powhatan Indians, the African Americans and the abolitionists. We understand that the abolishment of slavery was the result of abolitionists who opened their hearts and homes to enslaved Africans who were running away to resist

slavery.”

After the candle is lit, the meeting continues with introductions, a meal and dialogue. After that they discuss community engagement and how they might reach out to others who would benefit from their activities. Laura’s role is to facilitate the discussion and outline the conversation topics that would best allow the group to express their ideas and experiences.

Laura has spent much time, thought and prayer deciding which direction her life should take. When she began investigating racial reconciliation groups, she found *Coming to the Table*. “When I contacted the national office, they told me they didn’t have a group here, and the closest was Richmond. So, I asked how to get a group started here.” She was given a very specific set of guidelines and she knew she had the resources of the organization to call upon should she have any questions. “This is my focus,” she says.

So far, her experience has been positive. “We are the newest chapter of the *Coming to the Table* group. Our first meeting had a total of 16 people,” she says. The best thing about it was the diversity of people who came to the first meeting. “We had eight African Americans and eight Caucasians. We had six men and ten women, and we had 15 baby boomers and one millennial.”

The values that *Coming to the Table* try to embody as a group are simple: inclusion, respect, honesty, transparency, justice, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, love, peace and reconciliation. Laura encourages members to research their past and talk about it with others. “We work together to heal; there has to be healing.”

One of the driving forces behind Laura deciding to take a role with the *Coming to the Table* organization was the constant stream of media coverage about the breaking down of race relations. “In January, Virginia governor Ralph Northam declared that 2019 was the year of reconciliation and civility. I thought, what can I do to help usher in racial reconciliation in the Historic Triangle.” She has experienced the cruelty and harm of racism and felt called to help others understand the history of racism and how to work together to “right the wrongs.”

One of the things the people with *Coming to the Table* work on is projects to engage the community and spark civil conversation. “Our first project is to commemorate the arrival of the first Africans in Virginia. We have planned a special weekend event. *Coming to the Table* members nationwide are coming to Williamsburg the weekend of August 16th -18th for a meeting, where the co-founder, Will Hunt Hairston, will address the group. On August 17th we will spend the day at Historic Jamestown for a day of special programming commemorating the first Africans in Virginia. On August 18th we will come together for breakfast, a worship service and visit to local attractions.

We are really excited about this opportunity for a once-in-a-lifetime experience in the Historic Triangle.

One of the things that Laura Hill and *Coming to the Table* stress is that great things can happen for the Historic Triangle as a result of racial reconciliation. “We have the responsibility to make our world better for future generations. Through reconciliation efforts, we can educate our community and help people heal from racial wounds.” 

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Arc client, Elliott Sun, and several other members of the Williamsburg Area Bicyclists (WAB) were at the 2019 Bike Virginia Tour bicycling festival June 21-26 in Woodstock and Harrisonburg. Elliott and his bicycling friend, Charlie Hart (a long time Arc benefactor and volunteer), served together as full-time volunteers each day at the Hospitality tent, which was the information center for the 1,500 bicyclists. These two volunteers gave directions; answered questions about the event, services, and routes; and sold cold drinks. The two “dined” together at the food trucks for most of their meals, and they slipped away from Hospitality two mornings and went bicycling together.

Elliott is 26 and joined The Arc about three years ago. He enjoys bowling, the dances, and the Spring Carnival at William & Mary. He will also volunteer at The Arc’s 10th annual Williamsburg Landing 5k on October 5. Elliott’s brother, Matt, age 32, is also an active member of The Arc and added that he also enjoys meeting new people.

Elliott (and Matt) Sun are The Arc.

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