

Experience Klatsch

I felt energized as I stepped out into the night. I had just experienced *klatch*, or connection.

Forty minutes earlier

The two people across from me were familiar faces, but the moment I began to ask my first question, I realized just how little I knew about them.

She sat closest to me, sandy blonde hair framing her soft, kind expression. He glanced at her occasionally, his mildly stern look disappearing, replaced with a hearty smile.

Pastor David and Cinda Sitler met at a Sabbath potluck in their late twenties.

“She sat down and said, ‘How many children do you want to have?’” he remembered, chuckling. “Basically, she says, ‘Look, I’m old, and I’m not messing around no more.’”

Both had almost given up on dating at the time and expressed having been “burned” before. However, Cinda’s church family was not about to give up on their matchmaking efforts. They had begun a campaign to “help Cinda” and arranged for her to meet two suitors. One came to church in an outfit that appeared to be taken straight out of the dirty laundry pile. The other arrived in a “really nice suit” smelling of French cologne. The man in the suit was Pastor David.

By their second date at Olive Garden, the couple knew they wanted to marry.

“She was what I was looking for, praying for,” he said.

They wed on Dec. 19, 1993, in Michigan. Pastor David had completed seminary, and Cinda was teaching at Andrews University.

Six years later on May 14, their son Nehemiah was born. Today, he works in HR at Adventist Health headquarters in Roseville, California.

The couple has been actively involved in Christian ministry their whole marriage, according to Cinda. They are trained facilitators for Prepare-Enrich, a marriage-prep course, and have conducted premarital counseling with young couples. Currently, they are working on a new seminar curriculum called Fishbowl Marriage, which focuses on marriage within the context of ministry.

In September 2018, they moved to Collegedale, Tennessee, where Pastor David became pastor at Standifer Gap Church.

Now in their sixties, the couple has invited young adults, mostly Southern students, to their house every Friday night from 8 to 11 p.m. for the past six years. This gathering is called Klatsch.

The name was coined after Cinda listened to a sermon on connection, went home and felt impressed to search the thesaurus for synonyms of the word. Klatsch appeared as a “fellowship or gathering around food or coffee.”

“It kind of fit our vibe,” she said.

Cinda’s inspiration for Klatsch was sparked while she was still in school. One of the teachers would invite students over on Friday nights.

“She would open up the door, and you literally felt like you were the only person in the whole world,” she remembered.

In August 2019, Pastor David and Cinda found themselves hosting their own version of these gatherings for the first time. They advertised by handing out cards in the church foyer to passing students. Pastor David prayed for 30 people to come, and Cinda prayed for 50.

Fifty students showed up at the house on Friday night. They sat in a circle downstairs and began a lively discussion on why they felt the church pushes away young people. Meanwhile, Cinda stood pressed against the wall, observing them.

“I was scared to death,” she said. “I’m like, ‘Oh my goodness, all these people came to my house! What are we going to do with the rest of the time here?’”

After two weeks of not interacting with the students, Cinda thought, “They all came, and they’re sitting all over *my* house. They’re dirtying *my* house up and eating my food. So I guess I’m just going to go sit down.”

She perched at the end of the couch next to a group of girls. As she began talking with them, she realized, “Oh, they’re like really normal people.”

After that encounter, seeing the students making themselves at home “didn’t seem so rude” to Cinda.

Klatsch has greatly expanded since then, according to Pastor David. There have been up to 235 students on some nights.

The couple is grateful for this, but they miss being able to get personal with everyone who comes by and want Klatsch to be more than just a place where students can eat.

Pastor David said that although he realizes food was always a part of Jesus’ ministry, Klatsch is “not just another food service.”

Cinda expressed that, in her heart, she desires to be able to take a break from constantly putting food out.

“I want to hear people’s story,” she said. “I want to hear how your life is going, and if there’s stuff you’re thinking about, or struggling with or interested in.”

“That’s why we really do Klatsch,” said Pastor David.

In the past weeks, the couple *has* been able to take a break and sit with students. This is partly due to their LifeGroup, where students are invited to help prepare for and run Klatsch.

“Klatsch happens because people participate,” said Pastor David. “No one is paid to do anything. As everybody owns it, then God can do something with it.”

Arionna Haakenson, a psychology premed major, has helped out in the past.

“They [Pastor David and Cinda] kind of inspire me, because I think this type of ministry is so beautiful,” she said. “A lot of times, there’s not even enough help, so they’re working overtime.”

The dream, according to Pastor David and Cinda, is to see many other Klatsch houses in the area. Pastor David suggested that there should be Klatsch houses for those who prefer smaller groups as well. He believes that if other people began hosting students too, it could bridge a generational divide.

“I really think the older generation is scared of your generation,” he said. “Your generation doesn’t know what to do with the older generation. Everybody thinks the other one doesn’t like them, and it’s kind of this wall of separation. That’s not the way to do it. God doesn’t”

As the conversation came to a close, Cinda offered parting words of advice to young people.

“Don’t be afraid to try new things. If God’s calling you to do something, just do it,” she said. “If He’s calling you to go as a student missionary, just go. If He’s calling you to start a ministry, just go. You won’t know if you don’t try.”