

History of OrangeBand

In February of 2003, a small group of friends at James Madison University were sitting around at lunch talking about the lack of quality conversations exhibited on their campus - there didn't seem to be a lot of conversations about things that mattered most. Without knowing what they were getting into, these students came up with an idea to try to get their campus to engage in a meaningful discussion about an important contemporary issue. To begin, they chose to focus on creating a dialogue about the then-pending war with Iraq in hopes to promote discussion from many perspectives about the issues surrounding the conflict. Not a protest. Not a rally. Just a community-wide conversation. {no-combomax}

The students began developing the details for a project aimed at creating dialogue about the pending war. For one week, they planned to hand out orange strips of fabric and hold educational forums. The "OrangeBands" could be taken and personalized by anyone interested in talking about how they felt about the war. If they were supportive of it, great. If not, fine. Not sure? OK. The OrangeBands were an invitation for discussion. The team thought if a large enough group of individuals wore bands, they would bring attention to the forums and get people talking. By working with existing student organizations, the fledgling group coordinated a schedule of diverse speakers, debates, and panels - the first OrangeBand Action Campaign.

Five weeks after that initial lunch conversation, The OrangeBand Initiative launched its first campaign. In one week, over 2,000 students, professors, and community members of all persuasions chose to wear OrangeBands, attend the educational forums, and/or discuss their views. The campaign drew positive attention from area universities, high schools, and media. Most importantly, the effort sparked constructive conversations about differing perspectives between parties that may not have otherwise spoken with each other. The student steering committee received overwhelming support and praise from their peers and professors for initiating an accessible, constructive method to discuss a sensitive, controversial, and important issue.

The successful campaign signaled that OrangeBand was fulfilling a need for open dialogue in general, not just the Iraq situation. A group came back together in the fall of 2003 and decided OrangeBand should continue by coordinating another campaign, but one that focused simultaneously on a local, national, and international topic. All of the Action Campaign forums would relate to these core topics, but individuals had the option to have their own OrangeBand represent any issue they personally would like to discuss. Thus the question, "What's YOUR OrangeBand Today?"

After a year of functioning successfully with grassroots volunteerism and receiving overwhelming support and thanks, the steering committee saw a potential to fill community needs by bringing the OrangeBand model to other communities. In February 2004, The OrangeBand Initiative, Inc., organized as a nonprofit in the Commonwealth of Virginia and obtained federal 501(c)(3) status. This process was completed in July 2004.

By July 2006, OrangeBand coordinated six more Action Campaigns, complete with over 8,000 band-wearers and 100 forums co-sponsored with 50 student and community organizations. Students and faculty from 40 different majors joined community members to actively support the initiative. A second OrangeBand chapter started at Eastern Mennonite University for a semester or two and many more campuses have interest in the model.

Along the way, the staff has gained an appreciation for what it is they tapped into: an intersection between concepts of civil discourse, social capital, and civic engagement.

{no-combomax}