



# Great Conversations

**NOVEMBER 15, 2023**

GREAT NORTHERN CONFERENCE CENTER

**CONNECT. SHARE. DELIGHT IN CONVERSATION.**

AN EVENING OF INVIGORATING DISCUSSION BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE **HELENA EDUCATION FOUNDATION**



PLEASE JOIN US  
FOR DINNER AND A

# GREAT CONVERSATION!

WEDNESDAY,  
NOVEMBER 15, 2023

GREAT NORTHERN CONFERENCE CENTER

5:30 p.m. Reception



6:30 p.m. Dinner

Brought to you by the  
Helena Education Foundation

Proceeds and donations offset the cost of  
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continue to benefit the Helena community.

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2. Complete the form on page 10, including names, **four different topic choices**, and email addresses for each attendee. You are guaranteed placement at one of your four choices.
3. Mail your reservation, or register online at [hefmt.org](https://hefmt.org). **We must receive your registration and payment by Thursday, November 9, 2023.**
4. Reservations and topics are first-come, first-served and are not processed until payment is received. Book early to save your spot! **Call us for student discount information: (406) 443-2545.**

We kindly request your email address so that we can confirm your reservation AND keep you informed about future Helena Education Foundation events.

## CREATURES, CLIMATE, AND CHANGING TECHNOLOGIES

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**1. It's Not Easy Being Green** Amphibian populations have declined worldwide over the last several decades. Disappearing frogs, salamanders and caecilians are a global concern because amphibians are important members of their ecosystems. One factor contributing to declines is a fungal skin infection caused by the amphibian chytrid fungus *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* (Bd). [Brandon Sheafor](#), Professor of Biology and James J. Manion Distinguished Endowed Chair at Carroll College, and his colleagues have spent several decades examining how amphibians defend themselves against Bd and whether mitigation is feasible in threatened populations.

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**2. Leviathan Brains and the Curiosities of Whale Culture** [Larry Taylor](#), biology instructor at Helena College and avid wildlife photographer, says his fascination with whales took off as he wrote his dissertation reconstructing the migration paths of prehistoric whale populations. In research circles and in the news, whale species from orca to the giant baleen whale continue to emerge as complex creatures with behaviors and traits that can reasonably be called “culture.” Join Larry to give these intelligent giants of the sea the credit they deserve.

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**3. Wild About Raptors** Montana WILD's Wildlife Center rehabilitates over 100 animals per year and does outreach for school children, veterans recovering from PTSD and substance use disorders, and members of the public. [Art Compton](#) trained his first raptor as a boy and continued as a cadet falconer at the U.S. Air Force Academy. After a career flying fighter jets, working for the Montana DEQ, and coaching youth soccer, Art now volunteers his time rehabilitating injured eagles, hawks, falcons, and owls. Join Art to learn about these fascinating animals, and the impact they have on all who encounter them.

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**4. Get to the Meat of Sustainable Agriculture** What is the role of meat in the food system? [Cole Mannix](#) will guide guests in a meaty conversation about ethics and the treatment of animals, ecological and climate implications of a carnivorous diet, human nutrition, and food sovereignty. Cole is part of a family that has ranched near Helmsville, Montana since 1882. After working as Director of Operations for Ranchers Original and later as Associate Director of the Western Landowners Alliance, today Cole leads Old Salt Co-op, a Helena-based Montana meat company focused on animal-based agriculture and conservation.

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**5. Coping with Climate Change in Montana** Join University of Montana Regents Professor Emeritus, [Steve Running](#), to discuss living with a changing Montana climate. From renewable energy options to electric vehicles, you'll have the chance to cover it with this expert in global ecology, climatology, and carbon cycles (who also shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 as a chapter Lead Author for the 4th Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change!).

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**6. A Clean and Held-ful Environment** The recent triumph of Montana youth over the Montana State government in *Held v. State* has the feel of David defeating Goliath. **Barbara Chilcott**, senior attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center, served on the legal team defending the youth plaintiffs. Talk with her about the implications of the Court's order that Montana's Constitution's right to "a clean and healthful environment" includes the right to a safe climate. How will this ruling hold the government accountable for recognizing climate change impacts of fossil fuel projects and policies, and what are next steps for the state's renewable energy transition?

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**7. The Novice's Guide to ChatGPT** Everyone is talking about generative artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT, Bard, and DALL-E. A common feature of sci-fi dystopias, artificial intelligence isn't new, but these latest technologies and their abilities have inspired both wonder and fear. Is this just another incremental advancement or the beginning of a truly revolutionary disruption in how we learn, create, and work? Join the multifaceted **Steffen Rasile**—entrepreneur, techie at Tempest Technologies, and founder of SRA Design Studios—in an interactive exploration of what these tools allow us to do and what opportunities and challenges the future of AI brings.

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## CARETAKING: OURSELVES, OUR KIDS, OUR COMMUNITIES

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**8. Mentors Matter** Director Steven Spielberg said "The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves." **Gabrielle (Gabe) Rowley** is the executive director at the non-profit American Jobs for America's Youth Montana (AJAY MT), an organization working to build life and work skills in young employees. Dine with her to discuss the value of mentorships for both mentee and mentor, learn the elements of mentoring best practices, reflect on mentors in your life, and consider ways that you could foster mentorship relationships in your work.

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**9. Meeting Students Where They Are: Adolescent Mental Health** What are the risk factors for mental illness in students? What does data show about Montana students specifically? What school programming and safety measures help young people to feel supported? Consider the gaps in our systems and strategies to build capacity for systemic change with **Meghan Peel**, Bureau Chief for the Children's Mental Health Bureau within the Department of Public Health and Human Services. During her tenure, Meghan has focused on increasing access to care, particularly in schools, and increasing family engagement and voice around youth mental health treatment.

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**10. Herbs of the Plains Indian** Learn the powers of the plants that populate the open plains. **Linda Kinsey**, Native Connections Director at the Helena Indian Alliance, is a lifelong member of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation Ahaanii (White Clay). Explore with her examples of herbs used by Plains Indians for teas, herbs used for wellness, and herbs used for ceremonial purposes. If you loved *Braiding Sweetgrass*, or have been meaning to read it, take a seat at Linda's table!

**11. Are our Skulls Out-evolving Us?** Ever wondered why we don't have room for our wisdom teeth any more? Did you know that crowded teeth, overbites, narrowed jaws, and impaired breathing are modern phenomena? Join Helena dentist [Chris Mast](#) to explore possible explanations for our shrinking human skulls and how current early childhood development is affecting the formation of our faces and the ways we breathe. Chris is a graduate of Carroll College and University of Minnesota Dental school, a local business owner, and an outdoor enthusiast.

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**12. Blessing or a Curse? Kids and Phones** Join Rossiter principal [Wynn Randall](#) and UM Elementary Education student [Hannah Muszkiewicz](#) to discuss emerging dependency on technology, how intertwined social media is with social connection, and the ways in which phones can be beneficial or detrimental to students' development. Hannah has worked in public schools for the last two years and has a passion for mental health awareness. Wynn has 24 years of service in public education, as an administrator in every level from Kindergarten through 12th grade, including at the alternative high school. He has witnessed firsthand the impact on students and implemented creative responses.

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**13. Opportunities for the Incarcerated** Incarcerated people who participate in a prison education program have a 43% lower rate of reoffending. In fact, research from the Rand Corporation shows that taxpayers save \$5 that would otherwise be spent on re-incarceration for every dollar spent on education for the incarcerated. Learn more about benefits, challenges, and best practices for educating a prison population from [Scott Eychner](#), the Rehabilitation and Programs Chief for the Montana Department of Corrections. He and his team are working to build a cohesive and consistent network of programs, services, and second-chance opportunities for individuals in the Montana correctional system.

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**14. Clowning in Refugee Camps, Conflict Zones and Sites of Natural Disaster** "Before the clowns came, the children played war. Now they play clown," says a beneficiary of [Naomi Shafer's](#) work. Naomi is a clown, a producer, and the Executive Director of Clowns Without Borders USA. She uses humor, playfulness, and physical storytelling to make sure that where other resources are scarce, laughter can be abundant. Come discuss the ability of play to turn power dynamics upside down and learn about CWB's work to defend the right to play for children who experience displacement and are both uniquely in need of play and uniquely distant from play opportunities.

## *CONNECTING TO OUR PAST*

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**15. Mud and Water** Archaeologist [Steven Aaberg](#) has been busy extracting fact from lore. Come hear about his research into two post-civil war Montana characters: Alonzo S. Reed and Johnson J. Bowles who at once were cast as villains and heroes, murderers and saviors, and drunks and lionhearts. Archaeological excavations of Reed and Bowles' post (1874-1880) led to inquiries into their lives and events at their lair on



Big Spring Creek near Lewistown. Excavating the soil of the archaeological site turned out to be far easier than removing the dust of fable that covered the real story of Reed and Bowles.

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**16. The Story of Us: The Women Who Shaped Montana** **Crystal Alegria** and **Kimberly Hogberg** co-produced a documentary *The Story of Us: The Women Who Shaped Montana* that premiered on Montana PBS in 2022. Join them for a conversation about historic women of Montana, filmmaking in Montana, making a historical documentary, and how to pick which stories to tell. Crystal is the director and co-founder of The Extreme History Project in Bozeman, MT; she has worked in public history for twenty years, highlighting the stories of those that have been marginalized. Kimberly is an Emmy-award winning producer.

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**17. Mansfield of Montana: A Giant of the Senate** During the contentious 1960s, Montana Senator Mike Mansfield and Senator Dirksen (Ill-R) developed an incredibly constructive bipartisan relationship that allowed passage of historic legislation, including the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, and Medicare. Mansfield remains the longest serving majority leader in Senate history and modeled behavior all too rare in politics: civility, modesty, absolute candor and above all bipartisanship. **Marc Johnson**, author of three books on political history, including a new book— *Mansfield and Dirksen: Bipartisan Giants of the Senate*, will lead a conversation about Mansfield's accomplishments and his legacy in today's political climate.

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**18. So You Think You Can Book Club?** Are you a proud member of a book club? Looking to start one? Or wondering how to whip your delinquent group into shape? Whatever your experience, the Fortnightly Book Club of Helena will inspire! The club was started in Helena by a group of women in the late 1800s. Since then, some rules and the demographics have changed, but the Fortnightly Book Club continues. **Jan White**, current secretary, is a Montana native who returned “home” after 20 years. She has researched the Fortnightly Book Club at the Montana Historical Society and will bring this chapter of Helena history to life.

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**19. Presidents Through the Lens of History** How do historians judge whether a president was a success or a failure? What are some notable examples of “Great” and “Failed” presidencies? How and why have the historical memories of various presidents changed over time? How might future developments alter the conventional wisdom about significant presidents and their legacies? **Dane Cash** earned his Ph.D. in History from Boston University and is currently an Associate Professor of American history at Carroll College. Dr. Cash is the author of a forthcoming book, *The Forgotten Debate: Political Opinion Journals, the Korean War, and the Roots of America's Ideological Divisions*.



## Celebrating The Last Best Place

**20. The Right to Be Let Alone** “The right of individual privacy is essential to the well-being of a free society and shall not be infringed without the showing of a compelling state interest.” Montana is one of only 11 states to explicitly guarantee a right to privacy. **Jim Nelson** engaged in the general practice of law for nearly 20 years, and served as justice on Montana’s Supreme Court for nearly 20 years. Jim will lead the group to consider the importance of the right of individual privacy, which areas are impacted by this right, and what threats loom on the horizon.

**21. What Did We “Ordain and Establish?”** Montana’s Constitution is one of only a handful of state constitutions written in the modern era. It embraces individual rights and liberties and common values including the majesty of our environment, minors’ rights, and transparency in government operations. **Rylee Sommers-Flanagan** will facilitate a discussion about the judiciary’s independence in interpreting the constitution which is essential to its ability to safeguard individual liberties, protect against ideological power grabs, and declare laws beyond the constitutional pale. Rylee is the founder and executive director of Upper Seven Law, a nonprofit law firm whose mission is to hold the powerful accountable.

**22. Preserving the Past, Securing the Future** **Jason Small** is a Northern Cheyenne Tribal Member, a sitting Montana Senator, Executive Secretary of the Montana AFL-CIO, and Chairman of Montana State Tribal Relations Committee. Join him to hear news from around the state about the issues Montana tribes face and the progress they’re making to address them—from regaining water rights, to developing paths toward home ownership, to ensuring food sovereignty, to decreasing the cost of energy and becoming co-managers of a National Park.

**23. Butte, Montana from the Perspective of a Geriatric Coach (aka watching your mother-in-law go over a cliff in your brand new Cadillac)** Montana Tech’s former coach **Bob Green** is known for the 24 years he led the Oredigger football team, but also for his analogies. Some went viral. Whether you love to talk football, Butte history, idiomatic expressions or all of the above, Bob will have a unique perspective to share. Raised in Nebraska, Bob is also a US Marine and Vietnam Veteran and coached for a total of 40 years at the college and high school levels. He’s gathered 37 years worth of observations of the Mining City.



GREAT  
Conversations



## CURRENT AND COLLECTIVE CONUNDRUMS

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**24. How Real Is the China Threat?** Republicans and Democrats agree on one thing: the threat of China. This table will tease out the nature of that perceived threat, issues that weaken China, and prospects for improved relations. **Terry Weidner**, former director of the Mansfield Center and professor emeritus of Chinese politics at the University of Montana, will outline China's rise and the impact of the Tiananmen incident, which he followed as a political officer at the Beijing embassy. Trained as a Chinese historian before converting to a government analyst, Weidner has seen China's rise from the Cultural Revolution to emergence as an impressive economic and political power.

**25. Reading the Tea Leaves: Russia and the Russian People** With the almost total obliteration of independent media and free speech in Russia, divining what the Russian government is doing is difficult. Understanding the attitudes of the Russian people is even harder. We'll discuss the Russian government's moves towards totalitarianism, describe the structure in which 'public opinion' exists in Russia, consider how we empathize with people who are trying to learn, think, and express opinions in a more totalitarian state, and touch upon the implications for world affairs and the war in Ukraine. **Dean Pavlakis** is Associate Professor of Modern European and Sub-Saharan African History at Carroll College.

**26. Are Good Politics Still Possible?** We are living during a time of intense partisan division. We see conflict all around us and it's so difficult to get along. So, let's talk about it and see if there is a new way. **Jessi Bennion** believes that we can choose our communities over partisanship, ethics over power-grabbing, and hope over cynicism. An expert in American politics and governance, Jessi teaches at Montana State University and Carroll College. She loves teaching and there is nothing more fulfilling to her than guiding and inspiring leaders to work in their own communities.

**27. Political Violence and Hero Fallacy Paradox** **Dr. Paul Pope**, professor of Political Science with MSU Billings, analyzed the language of the January 6th court documents for clues about what motivates ordinary people to take part in political violence. His findings are informed by the narrative structure of the literary hero's journey. Join him for a discussion about how villains can believe themselves to be heroes, how online platforms perpetuate these beliefs, and how recognizing them could help us spot future threats. Dr. Pope specializes in the US Constitution, Political Linguistics and Public Policy.

**28. Public Libraries in the Headlines** If you google "Montana Public Libraries", hits including phrases like "culture wars", "obscenity law", and "intellectual freedom" abound. Yet public libraries have long been points of pride in our communities. What is happening? Free and public libraries were foundational to our forebears' push for education and the desire to share knowledge. Helenan **Bruce Newell** is a retired librarian who served on the State Library Commission from 2014 to 2022 and currently serves on the board of the Trust for Montana Libraries. Join Bruce to explore how this shift in public perception has occurred and where it might lead.

**29. The Property Tax Puzzle** By November 15th you'll probably know what this reappraisal will mean for you in dollars and cents, but we bet you'll still have questions. How does reappraisal work? What the heck is a "mill" and how do mills float? How do I read my property tax bill? **Eric Dale** is currently the Director of Tax Policy and Research (TPR) with the Montana Dept. of Revenue and he has answers for you! Previously, he worked as an Economist in TPR and as a unit manager in the Property Assessment Division at the Dept. of Revenue.

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*CONSUMABLES: YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT  
(AND READ, DRINK, WATCH, OR LISTEN TO)*

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**30. For God's Sake, Stop Watching Yellowstone!** Overwhelmed trying to navigate the limitless content of streaming? Talk movie picks with the guy who picks movies! **Benji Cosgrove**, a professional screenwriter, lover of movies, and movie programmer for Helena's Myrna Loy, also hopes to talk about TV and limited series, about the future of Hollywood and movie theaters, and why movie theaters will never die. For proof of his impeccable taste in film, check out the line-up at the Myrna and his reviews: #BenjisPics.

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**31. The Gift of Swift: Bonding over Eras** Tickets to Taylor Swift concerts are pricey, but making lasting memories with your teenage daughter is priceless. Swift's Eras Tour is a love story for daughters and moms—a soundtrack of our lives. Over the summer, mother-daughter duo **Melissa** and **Aila Romano** traveled to Minneapolis for the Taylor Swift Eras tour creating a lifetime of girl power energy. Join Melissa, a passionate advocate for students, teachers, and quality education, and her daughter, Aila, an avid cross country runner and junior at CHS, for a conversation about how Swift's music connects across the generations.

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**32. What Should I Read Next? Ask a Book Nerd!** This table is reserved for people who love books. Whether it's fiction, nonfiction, classics, or something from an indie publisher, your fellow guests will want to talk and hear about it. **Tara Rice** is a lawyer, a past Director of the Montana Department of Commerce, and past staffer on the White House Rural Council for rural economic policy. First and foremost, she is a lover of books and an omnivorous reader with interests ranging from ancient history to modern field guides.

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**33. Sakè: A Tradition born from Scarcity** Exports of sakè from Japan to the US more than doubled between 2021 and 2022. As this Japanese rice wine becomes more mainstream in the states, here is an opportunity to learn about the culture, customs, and ceremony of sakè, the stages of sakè's journey from rice to glass, and everyday drinking of sakè. [Olivia McManus](#) is the Key Account Manager at George's Distributing, specializing in wine, beer, cider, and NA beverage sales to major national accounts. She'll be your guide in tasting a variety of sakès. Olivia's passion lies in sustainable, small craft production.

**34. Analog Synthesis and the Science of Sound** How is sound made? How does it even exist? Pianist and composer [Phil Aaberg](#) will offer you hands-on experience with the Prophet 6, a classic analog synthesizer, so you can discover some answers for yourself. Analog synthesizers are having a resurgence in the age of AI. Learn more about this phenomenon while dining with Aaberg, a native of Montana's Hilene who earned a music degree from Harvard, an honorary doctorate from Montana State University, the Governor's Award in both the Arts and the Humanities, and Grammy and Emmy nominations.

**35. Are you buying your daughter a Barbie for Christmas?** [Nisan Burbridge](#) never owned a Barbie, but she had a hot pink bedroom and a strong interest in the different expectations for her sisters and her vs her brothers. She might dig out her pink leather pants to lead this conversation on the themes and laugh-out-loud moments of *Barbie*. Bring thoughts on traditional and weird Barbie, feminism, existentialism, women and movies, fashion, and The Monologue! Nisan has over twenty years of professional experience connecting people with careers and the existential exploration that comes with that work. So does *Barbie's* existence buoy all women (and Kens), or simply resuscitate Mattel?

**36. Travel to Southern Italy, Wales, and England** Scratch the travel itch over dinner with [Shaun](#) and [Lin Deola](#), world travelers and avid outdoor enthusiasts. Their most recent trip had them hiking in Wales and the Channel Islands, sightseeing in London, and most assuredly consuming something tasty in Sicily and Matera, Italy. They'll share highlights, photos, and travel tips. Shaun is a retired Social Studies teacher from CHS, and Lin is a practicing lawyer with Morrison, Sherwood, Wilson and Deola.



The Helena Education Foundation enhances the experiences of public education students and educators in Montana's capital city. HEF sponsors a wide array of events: *Issues Institutes* for students, teachers, and community; *Great Ideas Grants* and *Spark Grants*; the *Celebration of Excellence* for graduating seniors and their Distinguished Educators; *Trading Places* for learning and collaboration among school administrators and community leaders; *Great Conversations* for civil discussion and life-long learning; *Fabulous Firsts* providing books to first graders; the community celebration *Carnival Classic* and more.

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- ☐ Please check here if you would like to be seated at the same table.

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