



Great Conversations

Wednesday, November 19, 2025

GREAT NORTHERN CONFERENCE CENTER

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

Please join us for dinner and

Great Conversations

Wednesday, November 19, 2025

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 this event and ensure this program will continue to benefit the Helena community.

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1. Review the exciting list of Great Conversations on this invitation, or at hefmt.org, and select four different conversations as your top choices.
2. Complete the form on page 11, 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. We must receive your registration and payment by Thursday, November 13, 2025.
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.



Love, Listening and Literature

1. Head Over Heels for Romance Novels The modern Romance novel has exploded with mainstream popularity in recent years. Discuss this dynamic genre and its rich history with two industry experts. We'll talk about the latest trends, how they both reflect and challenge society's attitudes, as well as the negative stereotypes surrounding the genre. **Allison Carroll** has worked as a Romance editor for multiple publishers and is an executive editor at Audible Originals. **Heather Waters** is a director of marketing at Simon & Schuster with deep roots in the Romance genre. Together they founded the Helena Romance Book Club.

2. Your Brain on Art: Flexing Your Creative Muscles How do we keep our creative muscles in shape—and allow them to grow? In this conversation, we'll explore the ways art engages the brain and how creative practice strengthens problem-solving, expression, and innovation in everyday life. Together, participants will consider the creative power we all carry and how to nurture it. **Seth Roby**, instructor of art at Helena College, received his MFA from New Mexico State University in 2010 and has dedicated his career to teaching, mentoring, and cultivating creative communities.

3. Podcasts—What Are You Listening To? With over 5 million podcasts to choose from, curating a feed that delights and surprises you can be daunting. So...what are you listening to? Join us for a conversation about the podcasts that are opening our eyes, making us laugh, sparking our imaginations, and keeping us company in tumultuous times. **Katie Loveland** is a facilitator and strategic planner with a passion for building community and supporting public health in Montana. As a lifelong nerd, podcasts scratch her itch to delve deeply into the bizarre, esoteric, and gossipy corners of life.

4. Your Era, Your Story Taylor Swift's music is divided into eras, each with a story of growth, love, loss, and reinvention. At this table, we'll explore the eras of our own lives, share the songs and lyrics that resonate with us, and discover how storytelling helps us see ourselves more clearly. Led by **Kimberly Cook**, Capital High School art teacher, artist, mom, wife, and lover of music and anything that sparks imagination, this conversation invites creativity and reflection through music and story.

5. From *Love Medicine* to *The Mighty Red*: A Conversation on Louise Erdrich For over four decades, Louise Erdrich's novels have won the hearts and minds of countless readers as well as critical acclaim. What's the key to Erdrich's storytelling magic? How have her novels impacted you? Which novels or characters are your favorites—or non-favorites? **Kay Satre** is a retired Carroll English professor who taught courses in women's literature and narrative empathy. Snag a seat at this table to discuss our experiences with and questions about Erdrich and her work.

Palates, Protected Places and Pantheras

6. American Single Malt: a New Category for an Old Style Single malt whisky is the oldest documented whisky type with over 500 years of history. Today, distillers in every hemisphere produce single malts, and domestic distilleries have been producing them since the 90s. Yet the style did not gain federal recognition until this year. **Tyrrell Hibbard** has been a student of whisky since he enrolled in unrelated coursework at the University of Edinburgh in 2000. As co-owner of Gulch Distillers, he has years of first-hand experience in every stage of spirit production, but he continues to be fascinated by the humble malt whisky.

7. Tiger, Tiger, Tiger: Tales from India Join world travelers **Ron and Ann Waterman** on a journey through India, from the bustling streets of New Delhi to three central-game preserves. Experience stunning wildlife encounters, from elusive tigers to four species of deer, playful monkeys, and the rare one-horned rhino. Through captivating photos and fascinating facts, discover the diversity of India's wildlife and get inspired to explore these incredible landscapes yourself. Ron, a retired attorney, and Ann, an international fabric designer, share stories and insights from their adventure.

8. Sip the Coast: California Wine Uncorked Many people know Napa Valley, but fewer are familiar with Sonoma Coast and Santa Rita Hills. The wine regions of California are nearby gems, boasting novelties like a winery named for the obsidian rocks on the vineyard. **Chelsey George** has been the president of George's Distributing for the last 23 years. She employs 125 people around Montana to sell wine and beer to all accounts that purchase alcohol, from Costco and liquor stores to wine bars and restaurants. She looks forward to introducing you to some of the best Golden State wines!

9. Preserving America's Best Idea—Our National Parks During a time of significant change, how do we preserve America's best idea? Drawing on experiences in Glacier National Park, and his board work on the National Park Friends Alliance, **Doug Mitchell** will curate a conversation about the history of support for our parks as well as the challenges and opportunities of the current moment. Doug Mitchell serves as the Executive Director of the Glacier National Park Conservancy, the park's official philanthropic partner. He also serves as a founding member of the Board of Directors of the National Park Friends Alliance.

10. Big Sky Bites: Taste the Treasure State **Jon Bennion** is neither an amateur nor a pro in the kitchen—he is @intermediatechef on Instagram and writes a food column every other week in the *Montana Free Press*. Join Jon for a delicious conversation about Montana's culinary scene. From favorite local restaurants to must-try dishes and the cuisines we wish Helena or the state offered, Jon will guide you through the flavors of Big Sky Country. Share your own culinary tips, favorite meals, and home-grown recipes that use Montana ingredients.

Weather, Wildlife and Wilderness

11. The Ecology of the Sky Aero-ecology is the ecology of the sky, which includes birds, bats, viruses and insects. The most important aspects of aero ecology research now are how ‘skyglow’, or artificial light at night, affects birds, as well as efforts to prevent growing numbers of bird and bat collisions with wind turbines. Conversation at this table will be based on **Jim Robbins’** new article in *Smithsonian Magazine* and will include other bird related topics.

12. Bats, Beavers, and the Balance of Nature When one population rises or falls, the entire food web feels the ripple—up, down, and all around. From bats to beavers, every species shift affects the balance of ecosystems. But where do humans fit? Are we part of nature, separate, or both? Join science educator **Rick Henry**, a former federal employee and Peace Corps volunteer with 30 years teaching experience from middle school to college, to explore these cascading effects—and consider how our actions can leave the world better than we found it.

13. Caught in the Storm: Share Your Extreme Weather Stories When **Aaron Ofseyer** was 10-years-old, lightning struck a pecan tree next to his home. The lightning ultimately destroyed the pecan tree. The power and unpredictability of the storm sparked an interest in weather that continues to this day. Aaron is a recovering broadcast meteorologist with almost 15 years in television including a stint at KTVH in Helena. For the past three years, he’s been working as an Air Quality Meteorologist with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. Join his table to share your extreme weather stories and how they’ve shaped you!

14. From Feathers to Flight, Exploring Montana Birds **Corie Bowditch** is the program manager for Montana WILD, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks’ education center in Helena. She helps to develop and curate conservation education programs for the public, deliver those programs to visiting school groups, and to maintain the center as an engaging place for families to come and learn together. Join her table to explore feathers, skulls, and bones to see how unique adaptations help birds fly, hunt, and survive. Learn about local bird research, including banding projects that track migration and protect our feathered neighbors.

15. Public Lands in Peril “Public lands in public hands” has become a rallying cry in Montana, appealing to people across the social and political spectrum. We share an unease about the future of public lands while passionately disagreeing about how to manage these places. Let’s discuss the many ways that public lands connect Montanans, and tools for influencing what happens to our shared landscapes. **Hilary Eisen** has worked on federal public land management and policy for state, regional, and national conservation organizations since 2008. She is currently federal policy director for Wild Montana.

Votes, Values and Vision

16. Civics, Division, and America's Future Former U.S. Senator **Jon Tester** brings decades of public service and a deep Montana perspective to questions of democracy, civics, and America's role in the world. A third-generation farmer and former teacher, Tester served in the Senate from 2007–2025, earning a reputation for pragmatic leadership and advocacy for rural communities, veterans, and democratic institutions. He now continues these conversations on his podcast, *Grounded*, where he digs into the challenges and possibilities facing our democracy today.

17. The Montana Plan: Our Ballot Initiative to Undo Citizens United The Transparent Election Initiative is working to place The Montana Plan on the November 2026 ballot, aiming to remove corporate and dark money from Montana elections. This approach focuses on eliminating the power to spend in elections while ensuring full disclosure of candidate and issue spending under Montana's existing framework. **Jeff Mangan**, former Montana Commissioner of Political Practices (2017–2023), also served in the Montana Legislature (1999–2006). In 2024, he launched a Montana nonpartisan election observation program with the Carter Center & Mansfield Center.

18. Supplement, Not Supplant When government funding falls short, community needs go unmet. Join **Lisa Cordingley** to define where individuals and nonprofits should fill the gaps and where stepping in might let the government off the hook. Lisa recently retired as executive director of the Helena Education Foundation, which she helped to found. Lisa has served on numerous non-profit and advisory boards. She is also active in local political and ballot issues—most recently serving as chair of the Yes! For Helena Schools committee.

19. "America First": Historical Aberration? To what extent is the history of American foreign policy the story of isolation from or engagement with the rest of the world? How have internationalism and isolationism ebbed and flowed over time? How can American history help inform our understanding of the current administration's "America First" foreign policy? Discuss these and other questions of American foreign relations with **Dane J. Cash**, Associate Professor of History at Carroll College. Dane teaches broadly in American history and is author of the forthcoming book, *The Forgotten Debate: The Korean War and the Roots of America's Ideological Divisions*.

20. Protecting Nonpartisan Courts in Montana Montanans choose their judges through nonpartisan elections—but legislators and the governor have proposed requiring judges to identify with a political party. Next year, Montanans will get to decide whether to protect our nonpartisan elections for judges. Join **Raph Graybill**, legal counsel for the Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts ballot initiative, to discuss why keeping partisanship out of the courtroom matters and how the proposed initiative works. In his private practice, Raph represents individual Montanans, nonprofits, and small businesses pursuing justice in claims against national corporations and the government.

Mind, Meaning and Mortality

21. Information vs. Intuition: Reclaiming Our Inner Intelligence In a world overflowing with information, we prize logic, data, and cognitive processing. Yet this flood of knowledge often leaves us with a sense that something is missing. Join **Rena Satre Meloy** to explore the intelligence many hesitate to trust—your own intuition. In this conversation, you'll discover how to balance logic and gut instinct, reconnect with your body, and navigate modern life with groundedness. Rena, mindfulness teacher and co-founder of Pause, blends 18 years of practice with neuroscience, psychology, and wisdom traditions to make mindfulness practical and deeply human.

22. No One Gets Out Alive: End of Life Support and Preparation **Grace Prior's** work as a death doula is to take the mystery—and stress—out of end-of-life planning. Join Grace for an open, honest, and surprisingly uplifting conversation about choices for your death, your choices when it comes to your remains, and the six essential end-of-life documents. Learn how planning ahead can actually heal your relationship with death, dying, and grief. Grace, founder of Bathing Breath and a certified Birth and Death Doula, lives in rural Alberton, MT where she helps build community through workshops, wellness, and holistic support.

23. It's a Disability Not a Quirk! Join **Brine Quimby** for this conversation about what being neurodivergent means, how it falls under the invisible disabilities category, how internalized ableism impacts quality of life, and how we can better advocate for the neurodivergent community. Brine (he/they) is a Transmasc, neurodivergent individual from Vermont who moved to Montana in 2018 after studying Anthropology in college. He's an Independent Living Specialist at Summit, though when they're not working they're being a cat dad, getting outside, writing poetry, and going to see live music.

24. Restless Nation: Confronting our Troubles with Sleep Inadequate sleep is a hidden health epidemic. From kids to adults, most of us aren't getting enough! Join in conversation as we explore barriers to healthy sleep, effective treatments for insomnia, and practical family strategies to support this crucial area of wellness. **Kyrie Russ** is a cognitive-behavioral therapist and founder of the Montana CBT Conference. She provides specialized, evidence-based treatments for a range of concerns and is passionate about expanding access to high-quality mental health care in rural areas. Her podcast, *Practical Psych*, delivers mental health education to a broad audience.



GREAT SCHOOLS ARE EVERYONES' BUSINESS

Helena Education Foundation works to enrich education in the Helena Public Schools through consistent community investment of time, talent, funding, and other resources, providing students, staff, and the community with unparalleled educational opportunities and experiences.

Heritage, History and Humanity

25. The True Story of America 250 Learn about “the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians” as MT law requires! Join Métis storyteller and Montana Poet Laureate **Chris La Tray**, a descendent of the Pembina Band of the Red River and a citizen of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, to discuss the truth of Native experience under centuries of US occupation. “What better time than in 2026, when millions are burnishing the false image of American exceptionalism?” asks Chris, author of the newsletter “An Irritable Métis” and three books including *Becoming Little Shell: A Landless Indian’s Journey Home*.

26. Becoming Superfluous: Hannah Arendt, Refugees, and the Lessons of Mass Displacement Hannah Arendt’s concept of being “superfluous”—stripped of citizenship and the “right to have rights”—was shaped by her experience as a refugee. Join **Abe Elias** to explore Arendt’s insights in the context of today’s global refugee crises and mass migrations. Together, we’ll examine how displacement and statelessness challenge our ideas of community, responsibility, and belonging. What can we learn from these histories for our own time? Abe, a German-born physician and medical geneticist, is Chief Medical Officer at Shodair Children’s Hospital and teaches at the University of Montana and University of Utah.

27. Black History in Montana and the West A little over a century ago, Montana was one of the most ethnically and racially diverse states in the nation. Black Montanans contributed immeasurably to local life, culture, and politics. Yet, the growth of the Black population coincided with the end of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow. Join **Anthony Wood**, a historian who wrote *Black Montana: Settler Colonialism and the Erosion of the Racial Frontier*, to learn why Montana’s Black History is a fantastic way to learn local history and deepen our understanding of belonging and the meaning of “home.”

28. Politics and the Pulpit People avoid talking about politics in church because they know that people on both sides of the political divide worship together. But faith is inherently political, or at least, we have made it so. We must acknowledge that our faith influences our politics, and that our politics are an expression of our faith. **Charles Wei** was born and raised in Southern California. Montana is the only other state where he has lived, and he loves it! He is an artist, a writer, a baker and cook, a gamer and game designer, and a dreamer.

29. Creating Community in the Midst of Conflict Efforts to create and maintain inclusive and welcoming spaces mean acknowledging, but also entering into, conflict. **Chelsia Rice**, co-owner of Montana Book Company, invites discussion on how to manage inclusive public and community space while prioritizing colleagues and safety. Montana Book Company has been in downtown Helena since 1978 and was purchased by Chelsia and her spouse, Charlie Crawford, in 2018. Their mission is to build community and defend equal rights through social justice advocacy and giving while creating an inclusive space for folks to find stories that reflect their experience.

Technology, Teaching and Tomorrow's Trailblazers

30. Tales from the 4-Leaf Clover Patch: Empowering Kids through 4-H

Over 100 years old, and more than 6 million strong, 4-H is America's largest youth development program. Today's 4-H is much more than raising cattle and baking bread! Join local graphic artist and longtime 4-H volunteer **Luke Duran** to learn about the national 4-H initiative that seeks to address challenges facing today's youth, like loneliness, chronic absenteeism, and academic and career readiness. Share your 4-H stories, learn about Helena's historic connection to the founding of 4-H, and leave inspired to grow clovers!

31. At AI's Fork: Will AI Amplify Your Mind or Melt It Down?

We'll unpack real-life scenarios for K–12 teachers and lifelong learners, showing how AI can turbocharge learning, critical thinking, personalized study paths, and ongoing growth—or leave us drowning in “brain rot.” **Dr. Jason Neiffer** is the Executive Director of Montana Digital Academy and co-convener of MTDA's Frontier Learning Lab. For over 28 years, Jason has sought innovative ways to combine pedagogy, technology, and a bit of performance art to make learning engaging.

32. Indigenous Education in Urban Communities

How are Montana educators delivering Indigenous cultural knowledge to students, both Native and Non-Native, living in urban settings? **Dugan Coburn** is Director of Indigenous Education for Great Falls Public Schools, and guided the Helena School District in its first Bison Harvest in the fall of 2024. Come learn about how schools are developing resources and community support while fostering understanding of our Indigenous Families' pasts through Bison Harvests, Naming Ceremonies, Pipe Ceremonies, cultural classes and more.

33. Inside Montana's School Funding Commission

Montana's constitution guarantees a “basic system of free quality public elementary and secondary schools.” Every ten years, the state reviews school funding to ensure this constitutional guarantee. Join **Rep. Luke Muszkiewicz** to explore how the School Funding Interim Commission examines Montana's K–12 funding and identifies potential changes. Luke represents HD 79 in Helena, serves on the Commission, previously chaired the Helena Public Schools board, was president of the Montana School Boards Association, and in his first session served on House Appropriations and sponsored two school funding bills that became law.

34. Electrification of Everything: Meeting Energy Demands in the 21st Century

As energy demand is increasingly electrified and new loads like data centers to power AI come online, the question arises: How will we as a country power these new loads? Learn about historical, current, and projected electricity demands and explore impacts to the environment and consumers. **Dan Lloyd** has worked in the energy development and energy policy space in Montana since 2008. He currently connects the Eastern and Western Interconnects—come to the conversation to learn what that means—for an electric transmission line developer to improve the efficiency of the modern grid.



Reserve your Conversation
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