

### **Talking *The Talk*: A Performance Based Approach to Community**

***The Talk*** is a one-man performance by **Dr. Sonny Kelly** that draws on the voices of ancestors, elders, youths, and intellectuals to engage in the difficult conversations that we must have with our children as we prepare them to survive and thrive in a divided America. *The Talk* was born of a painful conversation that Dr. Sonny Kelly had with his young son to prepare him to face a world that is often divided and dangerous. Dr. Kelly



humanizes the often racialized politics of issues like police brutality, America's Civil War, "stop and frisk," "zero tolerance" school policies, and the "School to Prison Pipeline." This eclectic theatrical experience weaves together storytelling, interactive theater, literature, a dynamic embodied performance, and a multi-media production. This performance runs 80 minutes. This performance lasts 80 minutes, and can be adjusted according to the needs of your community. The performance is followed by a 30 to 60 minute talk-back (community conversation).

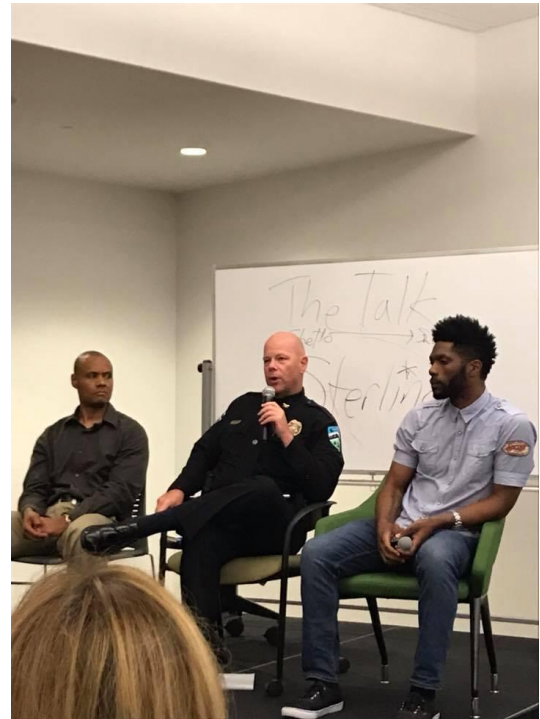
**The Talking *The Talk* Workshop** starts with this talk-back, and leads audiences through the performance process to consider their own sense of self, community, and agency. As we learn to express ourselves more clearly, we also learn to listen more actively and compassionately to our fellow community members. From here, we move to *Walking The Talk*, where we work collaboratively through facilitated open dialogue to develop courses of action for more equitable, inclusive, and loving communities.

#### **The Talking *The Talk* Workshop has three objectives:**

- To connect to audiences in a way that will bring history to life while honoring the sanctity of familial relationships, human dignity, love, and community.
- To enrich audience members' perspectives, inciting a more equitable, inclusive, and collective understanding of our past and our present.
- To develop courses of action toward building and maintaining more equitable, inclusive, and connected communities.

Dr. Kelly performs *The Talk* and facilitates community discussions and workshops about equity, inclusion, conflict management, intercultural communication, and creative self-expression at schools, universities, military installations, community centers, places of worship, and theaters around the world. Learn more at [www.sonnykelly.com](http://www.sonnykelly.com)

**Talking The Talk** is an interactive workshop experience that Dr. Kelly has designed to complement performances of *The Talk*. Depending on the community, talk-backs may be between Dr. Kelly and the audience, or they may include a panel of local stakeholders and a moderator who will pose and field poignant questions about equity, inclusion, community building, interracial communication, intercultural communication, and conflict resolution. Dr. Kelly has designed a one-to-two-hour performance-based workshop that helps community members to further digest this experience and to engage these issues in a lasting and transformative way. With this work, Dr. Kelly invites participants into a complicated, but loving, family space where participants are called in and not called out. This workshop opens up a space within diverse communities that Augusto Boal (1995) calls "the therapeutic stage," where we are all encouraged to speak up, listen closely, and imagine new possibilities together.



**The Talking The Talk Workshop Process** (DURATION: 60 minutes to 120 minutes)

- Dr. Kelly leads participants in a series of theater games and embodied warm-up exercises based upon Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* model and Sonny's 30-year experience with theatrical performance. Participants will get to know and see themselves and each other in new and dynamic ways.
- Dr. Kelly leads participants in simple exercises of personal reflection using haiku, creative writing, storytelling, and speaking exercises.
- Participants will address stereotypes, facts vs. truths, active listening, and assertive communication.
- Participants will learn and share how we can better listen to and learn about each other. We will press into the embodied work of enacting reconciliation and relationship building.
- Dr. Kelly will facilitate a process by which participants express their understanding of the issues that concern them most, and work collaboratively toward local solutions. The result will be a draft an action plan that lays out practical steps that participants can take to address those issues going forward.

### **Why a Performance-Based Workshop?**

Critical performance practitioner Augusto Boal (1995) privileges performance spaces as “spaces of liberty where people can free their memories, emotions, imaginations, thinking of their past, in the present, and where they can invent their future instead of waiting for it” (p. 5). From the beginning, Dr. Kelly’s goal has been to actualized Augusto Boal’s belief that performance can create spaces for positive collective growth and change (Boal, 1979).

### **The Power of Dialogue**

My use of the term dialogue is also based upon David Bohm’s (1994) definition of dialogue as an open, empathetic, collective, coherent, iterative, and reflexive sharing of unique perspectives, ideas, and ideals between participants that comprises a “stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us” (p. 7). The kind of dialogue that *The Talk* pursues is what Lisa Schirch and David Camppt (2007) conceptualize in their work on “dialogue for difficult subjects” as an open and continuous mutual learning process that “aims to build relationships between people as they address a common concern” (p. 6). It is through the episteme of critical dialogic performance and performance-making that I seek to facilitate intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogue that can reframe and reclaim a positive, dignified, and agential sense of self for, and with diverse community members.

### **About Dr. Sonny Kelly**

Dr. Sonny Kelly is a professional performer, storyteller, motivator, speaker, and scholar. Currently a full time professor of Communication at Fayetteville Technical Community College, Dr. Kelly holds a PhD in Communication from UNC Chapel Hill. He is a graduate of St. Mary’s University (MA, Communication Studies, '08) and Stanford University (BA, International Relations, '98). Dr. Kelly has been a professional actor on stage and television for over 25 years. He has served our nation as a U.S. Air Force officer, and his community as a non-profit organization program director, a youth worker and church minister. Dr. Kelly has worked with the United Way of Cumberland County, schools and non-profits across the nation, Beasley Broadcasting, the North Carolina Juvenile Services Association, the National Association of Black Storytellers and the Black Storytellers’ Alliance to share his love for others through storytelling. He volunteers as an Artist in Residence with Fayetteville Urban Ministry’s Find-A-Friend youth program in Fayetteville, NC and Boomerang Youth, Inc’s alternative to suspension program in Chapel Hill, NC.

**To learn more, please visit [www.sonnykelly.com](http://www.sonnykelly.com)**

### **Works Cited**

- Boal, Augusto (1979). *Theater of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Urizen Books.  
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Schirch, L. & Camppt, D. (2007). *The little book of dialogue for difficult subjects: A practical, hands on guide*. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing.