GOT PHILOSOPHY? COLLEGE OF COMPLEXES DISHES DEBATE FOR $3, DINNER EXTRA

Big topics for small tabs
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Special to Inside

In a back room of the Lincoln Restaurant on March 11, thirty citizens debated perceived flaws of American democracy. A welcoming, white haired man named Brom moderated the discussion. He established simple rules: No talking out of turn. No verbal attacks against others. No profanity. Some people broke the rules, Brom kept the discussion on track. Weekly meetings at the College of Complexes uphold free speech, within reason. “Dialogue is something that TV can’t really replace,” said participant Bob Lichtenbert. “You have a living human in front of you, a back and forth, to see their honesty and truthfulness. That’s a rare human gift. I value that part of the interaction.”

The College of Complexes began in 1951 as one table of guys chatting in various Chicago restaurants. It evolved into the only public, long running philosophy and debate group that meets regularly on Chicago’s North side. After 2,751 meetings and twelve years at the Lincoln Restaurant, the College of Complexes fills a niche as the oldest of a handful of similar groups in Chicago.

Three dollars, a $5.50 restaurant tab and an open mind admit anyone to the group for the evening. Invited March speakers include: activist and researcher Michael Brennan on March 18 and the Social Justice Committee of the Unitarian-Universalist Church on March 25. Brennan is scheduled to speak about “Seven Documented Ways the President has Failed to Protect Us.” The scheduled Unitarian-Universalist Church presentation, “Corporate Personhood and the Rise of Corporations,” includes PowerPoint slides. All meetings are scheduled for 8pm, with dinner beforehand.

Program coordinator Charles Paidock attends most Saturdays, as he has for fifteen years. Paidock, whom regulars call “Charlie,” dressed in a monochrome palette of neutrals except for a baseball cap adorned with colorful political buttons. “No one is free while others are oppressed,” one states. He leaned forward and listened for the better part of three hours to speaker Steven Searle and rebuttals from the audience.

Searle, an aspiring 2008 presidential candidate, spoke on the topic, “The Illegal State of West Virginia: Reflections on the Arrogance of the Judiciary.” Searle works in media services at Northeastern Illinois University. His lecture analyzed the recent appointments of justices Samuel Alito and John Roberts to the Supreme Court. He discussed the influence of income on access to the judicial system.

Paidock puffed Kool cigarettes at the bar before he asked Searle a rebuttal question. “What kind of a judicial system do we have here?” he said.

Searle answered, gripping the microphone and gesturing as he spoke. “There’s a disparity here we have to address,” he said. “You can’t have justice if you can’t afford justice. People don’t have the resources to afford to struggle.”

Paidock works as a government librarian by day. His dimples flashed as he wisecracked about his age, which he confirmed as “56 or 57, I don’t remember.” All kidding aside, he’s serious about philosophy. He said the Saturday meetings attract an equal mix of regulars, newbies who become regulars and first time visitors who never again attend.

Paidock said that attendance fluctuates because philosophy can be difficult for the average person to grasp, let alone to discuss with other people. Most attendees come by word of mouth, but flyers, occasional publicity and notices in local newspapers boost numbers.
He described the discipline of philosophy as “arcane.” Philosophy typically addresses two areas, the meaning of life and the meaning of knowledge. Paidock said the College of Complexes addresses a wide range of questions and topics concerning both areas of philosophy, as well as a variety of non-philosophical topics.

Lichtenbert leads several philosophy groups affiliated with the College of Complexes. He also teaches philosophy as an adjunct at local colleges. This term, he teaches courses in ethics at Triton and the philosophy of art at Purdue Calumet in Hammond. He calls his approach “applied philosophy,” because he integrates academic philosophy with the concerns of daily life. He said that applied philosophy encourages people to make the most out of their lives and to contribute the most good to society.

“We do need something to give us individual answers today to our quest and tell us what we ought to do as individuals,” said Lichtenbert. “Each person should have his own philosophy that deals with truth, justice, goodness and beauty in their daily lives.”

Chicagoans discuss philosophy both informally in groups like the College of Complexes and in formal university programs. The Philosophy Department at University of Illinois at Chicago ranks in the top 50 programs nationwide, according to Philosophicalgourmet.com.

Prof. Marya Schectman teaches philosophy in the department. She said her study of personal identity closely relates to many philosophy topics the average person might consider.

“I was interested in these topics long before I formally studied philosophy,” Schectman said. “I do think people ask abstract questions, but there is a progression of abstraction.”

Shectman’s colleague, Prof. Lisa Downing said students in her classes regularly consider abstract questions such as, “what is justice?” and “what is morality?”

“‘It can be stimulating to realize that these questions are there to be asked,” said Downing.

Paidock said that the College of Complexes stimulates people to ask the big questions, even though easy, right or wrong answers may not readily appear.

“Every single time I leave this place here or the philosophy group I encounter some new knowledge and a new perspective or new ideas,” he said.

Lichtenbert said that public discussion of diverse viewpoints supports democracy. “I think it’s very important for individuals to have something to say about all the issues of the day and to express their views publicly,” he said. “A true democracy is one that the people implement themselves. It starts out in an intimate way by talking about it publicly. The next step has to be change and action.”