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# In Cambridge, an inspiring reason to hold hands



DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

**Greg and Hannah Vazzana of Florida try out a bench that is part of a series of art installations at Cambridge Common. When two people sit — holding hands and touching an attachment on the bench’s armrests — they complete an electrical circuit that prompts a speaker to play inspirational sayings.**

By [Dugan Arnett](#) | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 02, 2017

The piece seemed to pop up out of nowhere.

A speaker was erected, two heart-shaped medallions were installed, and an ordinary bench in Cambridge Common — near the bustling sidewalks of Harvard Square — was transformed into a piece of public art.

When two people sit together, holding hands and each touching an attachment on the bench's armrests — they complete an electrical circuit that prompts a nearby speaker to begin playing — broadcasting a collection of inspirational quotes voiced by children.

*“Love casts out fear.”*

*“Compassion is a spiritual technology.”*

*“Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.”*

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The bench is part of a project called “Common Exchange,” a series of art installations, exhibitions, and performances that runs through September and will include the commissioned work of 10 artists. The project addresses themes of “connectivity in the public realm,” according to Lillian Hsu, director of public art and exhibitions for Cambridge Arts. It also serves as a celebration of the recently renovated Cambridge Common, a place deeply embedded in the city's history.

“I think that the Common means different things to different people,” says Hsu. “It was at the heart of the city when it began as a town, and it has a number of institutions surrounding it. It’s so close to Harvard Square. It has a different feeling because of that.”

The bench installation, titled “We Complete” and produced by Julianne Swartz of Kingston, N.Y., is one of three pieces on display in the park.

Cambridge artist Kelly Sherman collected real-life stories about the park, then turned them into banners featuring the stories in poetic form. New York-based artist Paul Ramirez Jonas’s piece is a cork board embedded into a boulder, where visitors can pin their own messages.

On Friday morning, pedestrians strolling through the Common were drawn to the interesting look of the bench.

Having heard about it a day earlier, in fact, Natalie Dean had biked over from Inman Square with her 3-year-old daughter, Joya Goldenson, for the sole purpose of trying it out.

“I’m not a Facebook person, but I happened to go on last night [and see it], and I was like, ‘This looks fun,’” said Dean, who described the piece as “beautiful.”

Hannah and Greg Vazzana, who were in town from Florida for a Harvard Business School

reunion along with their young son, happened upon the bench during a stroll through the Common and, for a few minutes, the couple sat together, listening to the messages that spilled from the speaker as they held hands.

“As someone who lived here and moved away, it’s nice to see that some things haven’t changed — the spirit and the people,” said Hannah.

Added Greg, “There’s still a lot of character left in the park.”

As for the experience of using personal touch to spark an electrical connection?

“There’s no shock or anything,” said Greg, looking at his wife. “But she did send my heart aflutter.”

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