With a goal of helping our community find the strengths to cope with difficulties, Ashland is United developed and organized two connected “Curious Community” events. Using a “tree of life” as a visual anchor, AiU aimed at reimagining our connection to the community – as individual trees in a diverse yet interconnected community – where aspects of oneself shaped by the past help us actively cultivate the kind of person we want to be moving forward.

The first event was titled “Curious Community: Building Bridges One Story at a Time. About 20 participants, through a moderated discussion, shared personal stories rooted in their family and/or culture. These stories helped us see commonalities, but also learn about experiences different from our own. It is interesting to note that participants came from varied backgrounds such as Canada, England, Italy, Ukraine, Zambia, India, Uganda, and various regions of the US including the Appalachian heartland. Values culled through the responses and deep story-telling by participants were tallied and added to a “Tree of Life” diagram. These values form the roots of the tree.

The second follow-up event was titled “Curious Community Discussion: Building Stronger Roots for Tough Times.” The Tree of Life diagram was shared with the values from the first event prepopulated. In facilitated breakout sessions, participants reflected in discussion, and additional shared values were added to the diagram. Each group was then provided two sets of questions to help participants think about their aspirations for the future and the inspirations that help them feel positive and motivated. Themes from these discussions were plotted on the trunk (Aspirations) and leaves (Inspirations) of the tree.

Respondents expressed how the young are inspiring, especially their strength and resilience. Participants also found inspiration in people such as grassroots-level activists who are working for change. As a community, advocating the path to equity, and “speaking truth to power” were potent goals. Looking at the whole tree, we see that a strong base can help us find culturally-consistent solutions to problems. For example, family traditions of active community involvement and a strong work ethic give rise to the aspiration to have empathy for all and to work for equity. Spurred by recent events, there seemed to be a widespread call for truth and trust. Honoring nature, finding calm within, and the need for spaces created for reflection also appear throughout the tree. As we move ahead, our Curious Community conversations encourage us all to focus on active community involvement, opportunities for new life and growth, and the comfort that laughter, nature, and the arts can bring.