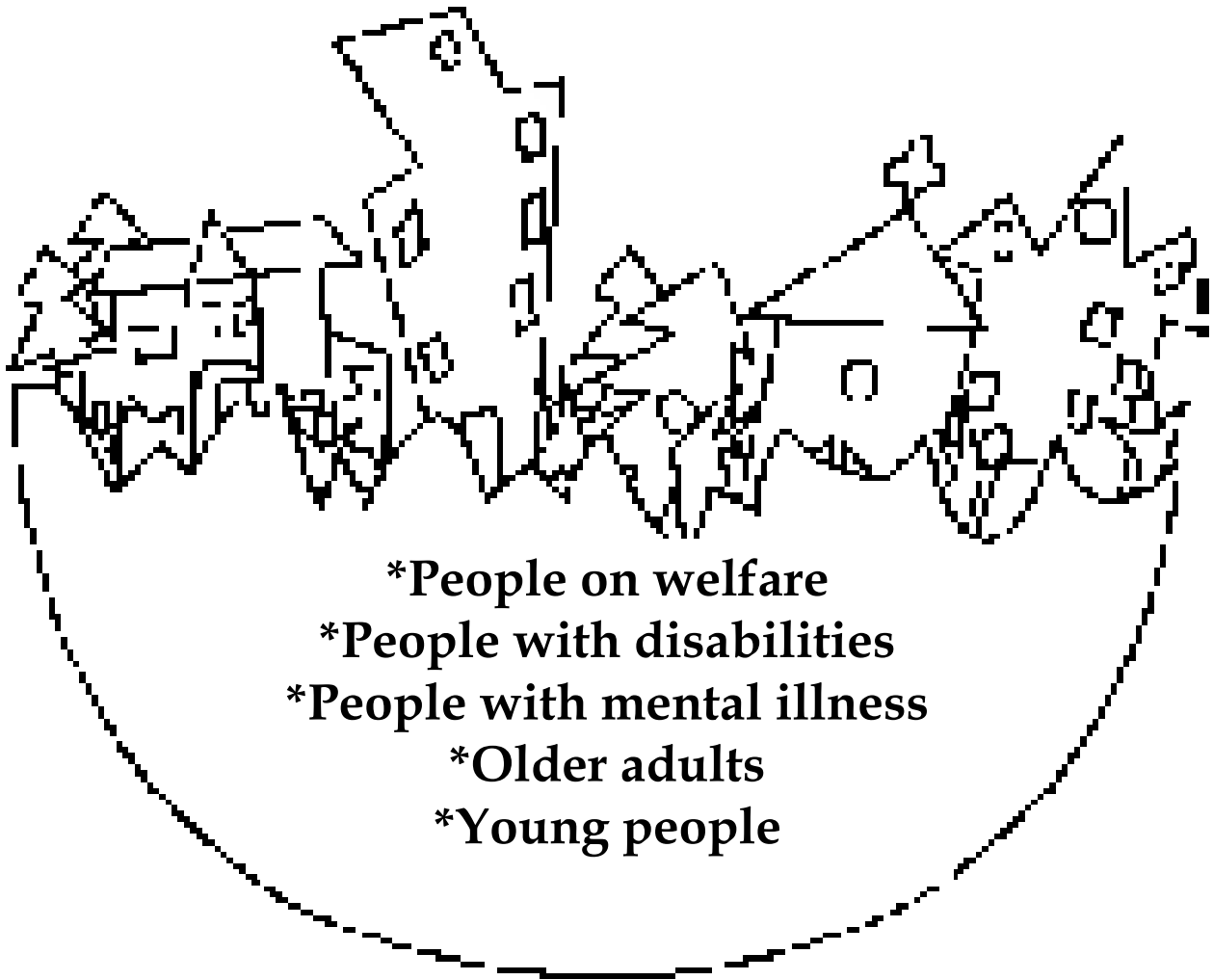


**Hidden Treasures:
Building Community Connections
by Engaging the Gifts of ***



- *People on welfare
- *People with disabilities
- *People with mental illness
- *Older adults
- *Young people

A Community Building Workbook From
The Asset Based Community Development Institute

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A Community Building Workbook
from the
Asset Based Community Development Institute
School of Education and Social Policy
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And, as always, thanks to John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann for providing the roadmap.

SAR

Introduction: Connecting Everybody

"Our purpose is not to help people. Our purpose is to build a different kind of neighborhood for us all."

It almost doesn't matter who said this; it could have been said by any of the organizations whose stories are collected here. In fact, a version of it was said by almost everyone who was interviewed. At core, a deeply connected community--a community in which every member is valued and challenged to contribute--is a strong and healthy community.

But a collection of powerful forces stand in the way of connected community. Many members of any community are moved to its edges by a series of disconnecting labels—too old, too young, too poor, mentally or physically disabled, mentally ill. Not only do these labels serve to separate those labeled from the center of community life, but systems of service professing to "help" tend instead to further isolate them.

The Walls

The process of marginalization begins early, often with a diagnosis that carries a label. Once a person is labeled autistic, or bipolar, or "at-risk", they are surrounded with professional services to help, protect, or fix them. Although well-meaning, these services and the professionals who provide them build walls that disconnect the labeled people from community life. Sometimes, those walls are physical—group homes and halfway houses. In other cases, the walls are walls of perception, but no less real—police targeting young people, poor people shunned by wealthier neighbors. Still other walls are walls of mobility—lack of transportation for seniors or people with disabilities that keep them from participating in community life.

When people are kept behind the walls of service, perception or mobility, they become invisible to their neighbors. They become strangers in the midst of community. Too often, people of good will find themselves at a loss when they think about these strangers. Too often, the service providers in a community strengthen the walls and raise barriers to participation for those they purport to serve. Too often, lack of knowledge on the part of well-intentioned neighbors leads to further isolation for those outside the center of community.

Keeping 'labeled people' behind walls of service, perception or mobility never allows them to contribute to community, to bring the gifts they have into the center of community life. And community suffers as a result. So, the challenge to those who care about community is to find ways to reconnect the disconnected. As the opening quote makes clear, this undertaking is not about "helping" the disconnected. Instead, it is about building strong communities that draw from the gifts and talents of every member.

Why Build Community?

Much has been made of the threats to community life in today's busy, impersonal world. We have been warned about the increasing isolation, disconnection and passivity of civic life. We have also been bombarded with images and stereotypes of failed communities, impoverished places, dangerous places, places without hope. If these two jeremiads are combined, it would seem the future looks awfully bleak for our communities.

But the overwhelming evidence of the stories collected here and of the hundreds of other community efforts we have encountered since 1993 is that strong communities exist everywhere. They come in all shapes and sizes, all economic levels, urban and rural—but they share in common one important understanding: they are possessed of many **assets**, which, once mobilized and connected, can make great contributions.

Asset-based community development begins with the assumption that successful community building involves rediscovering and mobilizing resources already present in any community:

- The skills and resources of its *individuals*,
- The power of voluntary *associations*, achieved through *building relationships*
- The assets present in the array of *local institutions*, the *physical infrastructure* of the community and the *local economy*.

Another way of saying this is: successful community development is *asset-based, internally-focused, and relationship-driven*. Although some resources from outside the community are often needed, the key to lasting solutions comes from within. The gifts and skills of residents and the assets of the physical community are always the starting place. No plan, solution or organization from outside the community

can duplicate what is already there. Over time, some simple but powerful tools have been developed to aid this rediscovery and mobilization, tools that have emerged from practical experience.

All communities are first composed of *individuals*, each of which has gifts she or he brings to the group. The best and most creative communities are aware of these gifts and provide opportunities for them to be given. But simply discovering and inventorying individual gifts is not enough. Asset-based community development is about finding ways in which to create connections between gifted individuals. Making these connections, *building relationships*, is the heart and soul of community building and the subject of this book.

Individuals who share common interests and goals form *associations*. Garden clubs, fraternal organizations, bowling leagues, book clubs, church groups: each brings individuals into association. Connecting individuals who have formerly been isolated to others who share their interests through community associations is the way to build long-lasting, multi-faceted relationships where none previously existed. Many of the communities described in this book have undertaken projects to make these connections.

All communities, no matter how poor, have within them a series of *institutions* that can support the gifted individuals and powerful associations found there. Asset-based community development involves local institutions in the process of community-building. Parks, schools, libraries, churches, businesses—all have a role to play. They can be involved with the local community as property owners, gathering centers, economic entities and incubators for community leadership.

Other assets include the *physical environment* of a community, its greenspaces, transportation centers and gathering places. And the *local economy* is an asset to be harnessed to build wealth and distribute benefits. Taken together, all of the assets listed provide strong bedrock upon which any community can build.

So, quite simply, finding and connecting existing assets is the most important work a community can do. And the more assets that are connected and mobilized, the stronger a community becomes. No one can be left out of the process if it is to succeed. Everyone and everything must be included.

Reconnecting

If you believe, as we do, that connecting and mobilizing existing assets is essential for building strong communities, and if there are labeled people in your community that are isolated by the walls built by those labels, what needs to happen?

Those who are marginalized need to be reconnected. Sounds simple, but of course it is not.

The stories collected in this book are stories of successful reconnections of a variety of labeled people undertaken in a variety of communities by a variety of different organizations and agencies. But we think they share **three very important things** in common.

- First, they all center on identifying the **gifts and dreams** of each individual isolated person. They do not center on the person's needs. Following from this, there are no cookie-cutter approaches in any of these stories. Each person is seen as unique and gifted.
- Second, all of these stories show the importance what we call "**citizen space**". Citizen space is the home of connections and associations. It is where neighbors interact and cooperate. Agencies and governments can and do initiate connection efforts, but the connections always exist in citizen space.
- **Connectors** are key to this process.

Connectors Connect

What makes someone a Connector? The first—and most obvious--criterion is that Connectors know lots of people. They are the kinds of people who know everyone. All of us know someone like this. But I don't think that we spend a lot of time thinking about the importance of these kinds of people. I'm not sure that most of us really believe that the kind of person who knows everyone really knows everyone. But they do.

--Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference*

All of us do know someone like this. And most of us don't often think about their importance. But to build a strong community by connecting everybody, the Connector becomes a central figure. In each of the stories collected here, a Connector or Connectors are showcased. We have come to believe that the project of reconnecting community needs Connectors as a kind of job description: 'Wanted for project to create a strong community—someone who knows everybody and is willing and able to make connections between people who might otherwise remain isolated from each other. Job requires an open mind, a big heart and a great delight in seeing people connect. Large Rolodex or PDA list a necessity.'

Unfortunately, that job category really doesn't exist. It would be hard to get a grant to hire a Connector. As we did the interviews for this book, the people we interviewed were often surprised and overjoyed to discover other people existed that made connections like they did. Maybe, if this book reaches one of Malcolm Gladwell's tipping points, there will one day be a big Connectors Conference. And the Connectors from communities all over the world could meet each other and share stories. But until that day, we hope to outline a few talents and activities for successful Connectors here, as well as post a few warnings from experienced Connectors about what could cause connections to fail.

Participation

So, what follows is a group of participation stories—stories that contain important lessons. They tell of communities that have found powerful ways to include the individual gifts of members who have been labeled and isolated. They tell of communities that have inventoried their associations and found ways in which formerly isolated people can participate in them. They tell of people labeled old, poor, mentally ill, disabled, young thugs who have become connected citizens. And finally they tell of those extraordinary people who know everyone—Connectors.

How to Read this Book

Seven short **Stories** follow. Each story highlights some of the questions asked, methods used and results attained by the community connection effort and Connectors profiled there. In addition, almost every story concerns making connections with a different labeled group. None of these stories should be seen as pointing to a “one-size-fits-all” method for others to follow.

Instead, the stories should be read as sources of insight and challenge, as examples of the ways in which connection can be made and maintained. They highlight the particular challenges encountered and try to provide suggestions, but they show that each connection is as unique as the gifted people that make them.

The Stories section is followed by a section called **The Most Important Stuff**, which makes some general conclusions that can be drawn from the highly unique stories. By highlighting the connections between the stories and by lifting up the work of Connectors, this section hopes to present a framework for the reader to use when considering a community connection effort.

At the end of the book, the reader will find an assortment of **tools** used by the organizations in the stories. These tools include philosophical reflections, survey instruments, mission statements, capacity inventories and group process tools. This mixture of material is meant to reflect the incredible variety of ways in which Connectors can and do approach the work of community building.

Finally, the book ends with an extensive **Resource** section. Names, addresses, phone numbers, websites as well as books and articles are included. All of the included storytellers are listed, as well as groups and organizations that can be contacted for further information. Sharing stories and information can build bridges between connecting groups and Connectors. It is hoped that this book will provide inspirations and practical information for those interested in connecting everybody.

Beyond Welfare

Ames, Iowa

Money, Friends and Meaning

Beyond Welfare Ames, Iowa

Money, Friends and Meaning

Story County, Iowa has a population of just over 74,000, with the majority of those folks living in Ames, the county seat and home of Iowa State University. Less than 2% of those residents are people of color. There are 8,336 households in the county with incomes under \$25,000. Nothing about those statistics stands out at first glance; Central Iowa is a mostly white place, and rural poverty is often hidden behind that homogeneity. But Story County is also home to a gathering of citizens who call themselves Beyond Welfare, an organization that brings down the walls between the hidden poor and the rest of the community.

Beyond Welfare states its goal simply: eliminate poverty in Story County by 2020. Ambitious? Maybe. But the manner in which Beyond Welfare is moving toward that goal makes its attainment seem possible. To eliminate poverty, Beyond Welfare is reweaving community; promoting a connected life filled with enough money, friends and meaning for all.

The Beyond Welfare folks call that their mantra—“we all need money, friends, and meaning”. But the inclusive implication of that mantra is startling. Poverty of life and experience can beset those who have enough money, but little meaning and few friends. So, there is something for everyone in the community built by Beyond Welfare.

“Everything We Do Is Intentional”

The founders of Beyond Welfare (BW) have thought long and hard about everything they do. There is a language and process that determines all of their actions. For example, the service-based language of “client” and “provider” has been replaced by the much more inclusive language of “participant” and “ally”. Becoming part of Beyond Welfare requires the same process for everyone, regardless of role or income.

The BW folks are careful never to stray too far from the citizen-centered heart of the endeavor. The very small BW staff is committed to

“...community engagement to build the capacity of ordinary unpaid community members to be involved in making Story County a safer, friendlier, and more supportive community for *all* its members. By engaging “consumers” and the community at large in this way, we strive to build a countywide community where all of us have enough money, healthy relationships, and a sense of purpose and meaning.

At the same time we are facilitating relationships that assist and support individual families, we are building a constituency of caring for the concerns of families at risk due to poverty and the harms associated with insufficient income, a constituency for changing attitudes, human service practice, and policies.” (What Beyond Welfare Does, Lois Smidt and Scott Miller)

BW is also governed by a local community-lead Board of Directors, constituted by at least 51% members who have been or are currently marginalized by poverty.

Based in Experience

In many ways, Beyond Welfare is the creation of the personal experience of Lois Smidt, BW co-founder, connector and guiding light. Having spent several years on welfare in the 90’s, Lois is keenly aware of the struggles and pitfalls of trying to raise a family in poverty. Isolation, suppressed anger, stereotypes—all seem to get in the way of even the most determined attempt to overcome them. “Although I certainly had many supportive relationships in my life by this time, as well as community involvement and support, I was still bombarded with patterns of worthlessness and helplessness that were reinforced by reliance on public assistance and the attitudes projected by human service providers and the general public,” she says.

Two experiences while on welfare profoundly affected her ability to leave it: one, with a Family Development Specialist from Mid-Iowa Community Action (MICA) and the other as a member of an artist’s collective of women.

The attitude of MICA and its workers was one of respect and one that stressed Lois’ strengths. No experience she previously had with the service industry came close to providing this. In addition, Cindy, the specialist, provided unwavering respect and support to Lois and her family. “It was the knowledge that there was another human being, particularly one who worked for an agency funded by government,

who was deeply interested in my development and held forth her belief in my capacity most profoundly. This provided for me feelings of worth, value, safety, and competence that had yet to be paralleled," says Lois.

Similarly, when she attended a workshop for No Limits for Women in the Arts, Lois found a creative and supportive environment that crossed race and class lines. She soon began a local support group for women artists as a part of No Limits. "I built relationships with women across class and race lines that fundamentally contradicted the feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and discouragement that are reinforced by living on welfare," she says. "I was supported and propelled into leadership. This required that I give up internalized patterns of insignificance that fuel social stereotypes about welfare moms. For two years I met with women twice a month to ask each other questions such as – 'What is your biggest vision for your art and your life? What is your next step? What is in your way? What support do you need to make sure you don't stop?' These questions were asked in the context of intentional listening and unconditional belief in our intelligence to figure things out." (This experience is echoed today in the BW practice of imagining "**dream paths**", in which participants articulate their dreams and the group brainstorms and supports a path to their realization.)

These two ideas—that relationships are essential and that respectful supportive connections can cross barriers and build leadership—became cornerstones of Lois' work and that of BW. She later encountered the concepts of Co-Counseling, or Re-Evaluation Counseling (RC), that provided her with tools and exercises that support her vision. The tools and principles of co-counseling aim to break down the barriers caused by race and class by engaging in the tough work of one-to-one listening and support.

The Train and the Brakes

Scott Miller came to MICA by a circuitous route. His privileged background had done little to prepare him for a bout of depression in his first year of college, and that experience led him to think about the relationship between mental health and connected life. He was drawn to community organizing, and found he had a special skill at initiating projects and finding creative ways to fund them.

MICA's Family Development concept, a program that went into homes with families, and assisted them to write action contracts to get out of

poverty, was radical for the social service world; Scott came to work there because of it. This was how he met Lois, who had gone to work at MICA as a Family Development Specialist with the hope of extending the same strength-based support she had received. They saw gifts in each other that would support their dreams.

Scott saw that the welfare world was changing, and he felt a new approach was needed. "TANF was coming down the pike—this was 1996. So we said why don't we try something that builds relationships to try to eliminate poverty?" says Scott. And ultimately, Beyond Welfare was born.

"Scott and I laugh about that. Our relationship, too, is grounded in reciprocity. Scott is a great visionary and initiator. I am very interested in processes that support and sustain relationships over time. We say he's the train and I'm the brakes," says Lois.

Relationships, Reciprocity and Leadership Development

In brief, here's how Beyond Welfare works. To become a **participant**, the head(s) of household is interviewed. This process welcomes participants into community, assists them in identifying their strengths as well as challenges, and introduces them to the values of relationship, reciprocity and leadership development that infuse everything that BW does.

Allies are also recruited, trained and supported for intentional friendships with BW participants that are based on common interests. The safety and stability, self-sufficiency, and well-being of the BW participant family remain at the center of these relationships. BW assists families that are particularly isolated in enlisting a **Circle of Support**, a group of 3-4 volunteers that meets monthly to understand and support the goals of the family.

On Thursday nights, BW hosts the **Community Leadership Team**, with a community meal followed by a meeting that focuses alternately on interdependent self-sufficiency and advocacy issues. On Thursdays, participants, family partners and allies all work together to support individual members' goals as well as group advocacy efforts. The value of the Thursday night meeting cannot be overstated; the coming-together of the entire community to share a meal and the joys and pains of the week has a ceremonial, if not liturgical feel to it. It is here that the tools adapted from Re-Evaluation Co-Counseling are used regularly.

“Everything we do is intentional,” says Lois. “It all serves to build reciprocal, supportive relationships.”

Removing Obstacles

BW also understands that families in poverty have obstacles that range from employment difficulties to transportation. “There are real barriers that have to be removed for people in poverty to succeed; having a car is huge, for example,” says Lois. BW provides programs to address these specific issues, but all of them have reciprocal relationships at their core.

- BW works with individual families on GED, job readiness, placement, and retention, as well as with employers to help pave the way for hiring of participants. BW also maintains a computer lab, in partnership with local faith organizations, for development of computer skills. This lab is entirely staffed by volunteers, community members at large as well as BW participants.
- **Wheels to Work**, a car donation program, engages the broader community in a concrete, meaningful way (they can donate their cars), as well as meeting a concrete need identified by participant families. Cars are provided to participants who agree to reciprocate by volunteering in other community endeavors.
- BW staff also trains Family Partners in budgeting, finance and EITC to support their participant families in maximizing their opportunities and potential.

Allies

As BW developed, it attracted a core group of people for whom the idea of building relationships to eliminate poverty made sense. One of them, Terry Pickett, speaks eloquently about his role as a Family Partner. “I now lead a much richer social life. I have a more interesting and challenging social group and I am engaged in my community in much richer ways than the average middle class white male.”

Terry, once a communications professor at ISU, is now a business consultant. About three years ago he made a commitment to semi-retire in order to spend about half of his time “in the community”. “I wanted to do the work, not be a facilitator, which is what I do for a living. I wanted to give back to those who were on the margins.” He

has been deeply involved in BW for three years, including as a member of its board.

Terry has written a piece for BW called "The Evolution of Helping", in which he tries to unpack what it is he can bring. "I won't deny my competency—I do know things that they would benefit from knowing: how to do long-range planning, how to arrange my finances." But it is about the relationship, according to Terry. And not just for the participant. "I have needs I am bringing to the relationship, too. Not around money, but around friendship. On a personal level, the relationships I have in this community (as opposed to my neighborhood, where everyone is like me) are much more vulnerable which makes them much more relaxing. I don't have to be competent at everything. And that's affected my other relationships as well."

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Steve Ainger is the current board chair, and the BW researcher. As a Political Scientist at ISU, he has the tools to produce data about BW that is necessary for foundations and other outside agencies. Personally, Steve says, "These are all my friends now. I could move, take another job, but how could I take Beyond Welfare with me?" He says that lots of theoretical literature talks about transformative, reciprocal relationship building as essential to community, but "Beyond Welfare walks the talk."

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As Pastor of Collegiate Presbyterian Church, Vicky Curtiss serves as host to the Thursday night BW gatherings. She describes her calling to social justice as beginning in her rural childhood, and carrying into her church during the sixties when she was in high school. When she grew up and discovered that not all churches had stressed the same kind of commitment to justice, she set out to try to change that.

That effort led to frustration, mostly, until she began to work with BW "because they deal with the whole person and they focus on the importance of relationships." She stressed the importance of the system approach to poverty: "It's not just about money; it understands the importance of support."

She is an ally on a Circle of Support Partner to an undocumented Guatemalan woman who has "all the issues around being undocumented in this climate". She admires her participant's resourcefulness even while she gets frustrated with recurring problems. "I like BW because we are in it for the long haul. I like

being around people who think they can eliminate poverty. And the great thing is that whatever skill is brought forward, there's always someone who needs it—participants or partners. We all gain from each other's knowledge. I really like the reciprocity."

Participants

Liz is a single mom with a teenage son. She lives on the outskirts of Ames with her mother who has Alzheimer's and requires constant care. Liz cares for her mom even though she has little money, because she is a Korean adoptee, and she credits her mom with sacrificing for her and saving her life. To pay for the care and medication needed by her mom, Liz works two restaurant jobs, often double shifts. "Some months the cost of her care is more than I make; some months we do OK," she says. "But I'd never make it if it weren't for the car."

Liz has a 1992 Nissan Sentra hatchback wagon, big enough to fold her mom's wheelchair into. The car was donated to her through BW's "Wheels to Work" program. "Without a car I had to take her on the bus to adult day care, then take the bus back to my job. That took two hours." Wheels to Work cars are not free; participants have to pay for insurance and upkeep, and they have to agree not to let anyone else borrow the car until they have had it for two years. They also have to reciprocate, a key element in BW's philosophy. "I only pay \$5 a month for the car, but I sign a paper saying I'll contribute so many hours in return." So Liz volunteers at a church child care center, tending to kids while their moms learn English. "I love kids," she says. "I look forward to that time so much." The moms are Korean, Chinese, Latino and Turkish. "Because I'm Korean, it's easy for them to trust me."

Liz provides support to many in return for the support she is given. She finds time to take two neighbors without cars to the store to shop for groceries. "We fill up the back of that car with food. I think they picked that car just for me, so I could fit all that stuff in."

Transportation is important to folks. Liz thinks. "I do know people without a home, but cars are a biggie. I know a mom who pulled her kids out of Head Start—she couldn't keep spending two hours a day on the bus, getting up at 5 AM to get the right bus, just to get her kids to school."

Liz's Circle of Support assists her with her many responsibilities. One member helps with her financial planning, helping her keep a budget and make out her checks for her bills every month. "She tells me not to give my money away—I'm always giving it away to friends and family who need it. She also keeps me from the pay loan store in the bad months."

"My mom's medication costs \$600 a month, so most of what I make goes to care for her. Some people ask me, 'Don't you get depressed? Don't you get down?' But I don't. I just keep going. My faith helps me, and my Circle of Support is there."

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A Thursday Night Meeting

Preceding the actual meeting is a communal supper. Prepared and served by BW participants and allies, the meal serves as a kind of ritual that calls the community together. Of course, it is very hard to tell who's who and that's the point. Lots of little kids are carefully watched by a bunch of teens; greetings and hugs all around; that church-basement-fellowship feeling abounds. Everyone greeted Lois upon entry—there was a sense that the proceedings could now begin.

Upstairs, the meeting took place in a large room, with chairs in a circle. Probably 30 or so folks participated, the kids stayed in another room with folks to care for them and keep an eye on them. Having time away from the kids was clearly relaxing for their parents, and that made the meeting a comfortable space.

Lois opened the meeting, reminding everyone of the rules of the meeting: confidentiality, safe space, support, listening. Then the room was circled twice: once for celebrations and once for concerns. Listening to the positives and the troubles made it a bit clearer who was who in the room, but by that time it really didn't make a difference. And the powerful honesty displayed by all who spoke was striking. Little victories brought genuine joy, and thorny problems or worries were discussed, with volunteered assistance often being the result.

As part of the meeting, everyone did a 'listening pair', a period of focused, non-judgmental listening between two people. (See Tools section for more on Listening Pairs.) Then, information was exchanged in a bulletin board format and the meeting ended with

Appreciations, a time when each person was asked to appreciate the person next to them.

Lois made it clear that some form of all of these things happen at each meeting. The ritualized nature of the whole thing is meant to be safe and comforting, so that trust can increase and become the norm. Thursday nights are central for most people, like a weekly gathering of friends that provides support, relief and safety.

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Noumoua

During the meeting, one person was articulate and passionate, and seemed extremely connected to the entire BW vision. Her name was Noumoua. She is Hmong, but her name is French. "It means 'No More'; I was the last of nine children." She is 21, and she has been involved with BW for two years. She came to Ames from California originally to help a friend living with mental illness. She soon found herself with a small child and no resources. "No one ever prepares for poverty," she says. "No one ever thinks they could be homeless one day." She saw a pamphlet for BW at a laundromat; she was skeptical.

"It said they help with job counseling and emotional support and finances and that you could get a car, and I thought 'It's a cult.'" But, it was a cult with a car program, so she took her doubts and went to a meeting. And everything about Beyond Welfare made sense to her. "It's the support you get, the friends you make, being intentional about it. We've carved this place in our lives on Thursday nights for BW. The first night when I heard the rules, I thought 'this just makes sense'."

So she got a Circle of Support and got a car and decided it might not be a cult. "At my first session with my Circle of Support, I was shocked. No one had ever asked me 'what are your dreams?' And at the time, my dream was to pay my bills, keep gas in my car, keep my daughter, find a job. I didn't even realize I had stopped dreaming."

She had never finished high school in California; she was two classes shy. Within one month, she received her high school diploma. That was March of 2002. Today, she is a full-time student, working on a degree in technical writing and communications. She plans on graduate school, "possibly law school if I want to really get suicidal."

"I feel like it wasn't an accident that I am here, and I want to spread the message of BW everywhere, to the world. I want to take it to a Third World country, to take my gifts to Asia where my roots are. I feel like I am here for a reason."

"I'm a pretty big advocate," she adds.

"You know, somebody's story needs to be told. I wasn't really keen on being a poster child for poverty, but it just worked out that way. I just happen to have a gift for public speaking, for expressing a story."

She sees it as a commitment to her daughter, a daughter she almost gave up for adoption. "Now, I'm doing this for her. To make this a better place for her." She credits her Circle of Support with helping her leave the mentality of poverty. And she describes the circle as "a big bulls-eye with you in the middle", constantly changing roles but always there. "Just like life." It was making a connection with people, as she never had a nuclear family's support, and "it was having safe people to come around my daughter."

Noumoua is fiercely protective of her daughter, having felt what lack of protection can be like. "It's important to me. She doesn't have to be the adult in this relationship." Lois and Matt, another BW ally, are her daughter's godparents. "Single parents don't have the luxury of not planning in case something goes wrong. I know she will be brought up well if something happens."

"But that is what Beyond Welfare has done for me, helped me be someone who has plans for her life, for her daughter, for school. It isn't perfect; sometimes we have to call each other out when stuff is going on. But I am comfortable with that; I am comfortable with expressing my feelings now."

Her daughter came into the room, and they embraced and laughed. Noumoua is a young woman who found her voice, her support, and a meaning for her life. Money, friends and meaning.

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‘The Three Things’: Beyond Welfare

Gifts and Dreams: Supporting and articulating the dreams of every participant is at the heart of Beyond Welfare’s practice. Beyond Welfare is very specific, almost liturgical, about this. Using dream paths, the Thursday meetings, Circles of Support, Family partners, listening pairs – all keep the focus on individual capacities and dreams.

Citizens Space: Beyond Welfare is, at its core, citizen-centered. It is very careful to maintain this commitment in all things. The “boundary” between citizens’ space and social service is fiercely guarded.

Connectors: Lois Smidt, although a peerless connector, has created an environment in which everyone connects and in which connections are the currency of building strong communities.

Additional Lessons Learned from Beyond Welfare:

- Everything done by Beyond Welfare is an **intentional discipline**; complete involvement is a serious commitment. Also, membership in Beyond Welfare is explicit; there is a sense of belonging to something. The payoff is tremendous transformation for all.
- Beyond Welfare comfortably and self-consciously **uses and improvises from other programs and practices**, especially co-counseling, but also 12-step programs.
- BW **takes marginalization seriously**—Lois, a former welfare recipient, and Scott, someone who had experienced depression, used these experiences as a touchstone in every part of Beyond Welfare.
- Beyond Welfare is very **specific about its goal** (ending poverty) **and its objectives** (money, friends, and meaning).
- All of this specificity makes the Beyond Welfare program **transportable** to other communities and **teachable**.

An important footnote: Interest in Beyond Welfare has brought about the institution of a Beyond Welfare Training component, and that component is being led by Lois Smidt. She is traveling to other states now, and is in less day-to-day contact. Lois is no longer the Connector—she creates the context for connecting, as the organizer and teacher, but the work of connecting is shared by other Beyond Welfare members.

In addition, Beyond Welfare is expanding to Des Moines, a much larger community than Ames and the state capitol. Significant funding support and institutional buy-in from the Des Moines school system has encouraged this expansion. Scott Miller is excited about the possible opportunities involved in this new project, but knows they will be challenged by it.

Dudley Street Neighborhood Association

Boston, MA

A Story within a Story

Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) Boston, MA

A Story Within A Story

One of the most inspiring and well-documented stories of neighborhood empowerment is that of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. Not only can you find the DSNI story well-told in a book (*Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood* by Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar (South End Press, 1994)), but an award-winning video, "Holding Ground" is also available. Anyone who has seen this video is familiar with the individuals who have played a significant role in the rebuilding of the Dudley community over the last twenty years. And the struggles and successes of DSNI have not only provided a framework for other communities around the world, but they have given rise to a whole new category of funding—the "comprehensive community initiative".

The DSNI story will not be retold here; the sources cited above have done an excellent job already. But throughout the DSNI story, one theme ran in the background: that of the conscious and on-going effort to include young people at all levels of participation in the 'rebirth of Dudley Street'. Because connecting young people is sometimes overlooked or considered too difficult an undertaking for neighborhood groups, it is important to revisit that aspect of the DSNI story.

Youth and Stereotypes

We too seldom regard young people as gifted members of community. We use platitudes describing them as "leaders of tomorrow", but forget to consider them "contributors of today". Left unchecked, the marginalizing of youth reaches its logical conclusion with many young people entering the juvenile justice system.

This trend is intensified in low-income communities of color. The automatic assumption of the media is that all young men of color are gangbangers, that all young girls of color are soon to be welfare moms, and that they are both dangerous by definition. These images of youth can also affect their closest neighbors. Coupled with the sometimes mysterious nature of all teenagers, these stereotypes can cause well-intentioned neighborhood groups to 'target the problems' of young people instead of inviting them into the center of community.

In this way, youth are “labeled people” just as surely as a person with disabilities or those living with mental illness.

Youth Organizing

That being said, some neighborhood organizations across the country have become involved in an effort to organize youth. Many have hired youth organizers, to work with young people to identify their own action agendas. Others have started youth advisory boards. In a few places, youth have come together to start organizations of their own.

Youth organizing does encounter challenges that differ from those of other organizing campaigns. The membership and leadership of youth organizations change rapidly. The endless meetings and slow base-building work required of organizers can be hard on young attention spans. Funding is hard to come by.

But the benefits are many, both for neighborhoods and for organizations. Young people bring new energy and creativity to the search for solutions to problems. They can hold particular institutions—the juvenile justice system, schools and child welfare agencies come to mind—accountable to the constituency those institutions are designed to serve. And youth organizing builds democratic, civic participation. Communities benefit as new leaders emerge.

DSNI has been part of this larger movement for its twenty years. And during that time, something inevitable has happened: young people have grown up.

“Half My Life”

In the video “Holding Ground”, there is a scene in which the first young people’s group introduces itself to the Board of Directors of DSNI. A young man identifies himself: “My name is Jason Webb, and I am 14 years old. I have been involved in DSNI for half my life.”

Everyone laughs at this moment, both on screen and off. But for Jason Webb, being involved in his community since he can remember has had a profound affect on his life. He grew up always wanting to become a DSNI organizer. By the time he was 14, he’d already been given an award by his neighbors for Community Service. DSNI helped him go to college.

Similarly, the Barros family plays a central role in the DSNI story. From the first marches to close the illegal dumping stations that were poisoning the community, to the election of 17 year-old John Barros as the first young person on the DSNI Board in 1991, the family is deeply involved in the community. The last we know of John Barros in both versions of the story is that he is accepted to and leaves to attend Dartmouth College.

Young men from the streets of Roxbury don't have stories like Jason's and John's, or so we are led to believe. But today, John Barros is the Executive Director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and Jason Webb is the Community Development Organizer.

"Are Young People Involved?"

Recent conversations with John Barros and Ros Everdell, longtime DSNI organizer, filled in the details of twenty years. Although no one model of youth involvement has dominated in DSNI, valuing youth involvement has always been central to every activity. "That's one of the ways we evaluate effectiveness of anything we do," says Ros. "Are young people involved? If they aren't, then there is something wrong."

As young people have changed over the years, so have the ways in which they are connected to DSNI. Some times the DSNI youth have wanted a peer group within the larger organization, one that conceives of its own actions and agendas and carries them out. Other times, young people have been integrated into all of the activities of DSNI, taking leadership roles in the various committees and working groups. According to John, there is no one way, or best way, to involve youth: "We don't include youth; we include all. This is the core of what we do, not just a program." Every DSNI activity or group values highly youth engagement. It is in the water.

Similarly, there was never a conscious 'program' to include young people. DSNI, as an organization, is very mindful of the 'clash of two models' about youth development--services to clients vs. organizing community members. The earliest youth-oriented activity of DSNI brought young people right into the community planning process. The Young Architects and Planners activity recounted in *Streets of Hope* provided local young people with a chance to design their own community center, with the help of some local architects. As Ros said then, "The young people in the neighborhood are really the ones who are going to live this revitalization much more than the adults who are

currently planning it....From one generation to another you have a sense that 'This is my community, I can make a difference and we have power.'" (*Streets of Hope*, pg. 221)

Today, a DSNI goal is to create 'successors' who will lead the organization and the community. "Young people grow older," Ros Everdell said, "So youth development is always 'a pipeline of activists', young people connecting to other young people." DSNI has established some programs to create and maintain this pipeline. Every summer there is a youth leadership camp; college graduates are mentors to high school students who want to go to college; recent college grads from the neighborhood are linked to high school kids from the neighborhood to guide them towards college.

In addition, DSNI has been thinking recently about how to work with kids who are not identified by the system as being in crisis. "We want to connect to less visible kids who are in danger of drifting out of community life," says Ros.

Everybody's Job

It is the job of all DSNI organizers, staff and members to be concerned with youth participation. "Every issue is an opportunity to involve young people," says Ros. So, there are no youth organizers at DSNI. In a sense every organizer is a youth organizer, as one test for any issue campaign is youth involvement.

Many DSNI members say that having youth organizers only working with youth can narrow the opportunity for relationships with youth and makes youth involvement unnatural. There are natural times for youth programs--like college mentoring or summer leadership or summer jobs. But at these times, adults and youth work together in a way appropriate to address the issue.

In a very organic yet self-conscious way, DSNI has continually brought young people into the center of the project of rebuilding and claiming their neighborhood over the course of twenty years. And, also in an organic way, those young people have grown into adults. These new adults are also committed to their neighborhood and to bringing young people into the center of its life.

‘The Three Things’: DSNI

Gifts and Dreams: DSNI focuses on the dreams of Dudley Street residents and the gifts they can bring to community building in every aspect of its work. No action on an immediate issue takes place without launching a ‘visioning’ session, asking participants what they see in five or ten years now that the particular issue has been won. The focus on youth connected to everything is an extension of this commitment.

Citizens (Residents) Space: Again, control of planning and community building by citizens is at the heart of everything DSNI does. A place, a space, for residents to dream, plan, organize and make decisions together.

Connectors: Moving back and forth between youth organizing and intergenerational organizing has served DSNI and the Dudley Street community well. Including young people is not a programmatic effort so much as a reality realized everyday. DSNI sees the connection of young people as an aspect of doing what it takes to build a strong community.

Additional Lessons Learned from DSNI

- Young people need to be **included in community planning** efforts at every level. It will become their community.
- The key to engaging young people is **talking and listening**.
- Relationships are best built when the scale of the group or projects are doable (**small**); larger projects can become too focused on results rather than “a pipeline for participation”.
- **Peer-to-peer groups** are sometimes useful for young people. But they should not be the only way youth are involved in neighborhood efforts. Youth benefit from developing their own opportunities and voices but they need to be integrated in the broader neighborhood effort.
- There needs to be **structured** youth leadership. For example, DSNI added youth seats on the Board of Directors and lowered the voting age to 15.
- Youth participation cannot grow unless the neighborhood effort is **rooted** in the empowerment of all residents.
- Opening the door to youth and creating an atmosphere of **respect, safety and caring** will bring in youth.
- Youth should be the ones to mobilize and speak on their own behalf **with the support** of caring and committed adults.
- Youth development and community building are not quick fixes but an **ongoing process** that spans the generations.

Project Friendship

Prince George, BC

Bridging the Gap

Project Friendship Prince George, BC

Bridging the Gap

In the city of Prince George, British Columbia, a visitor will quickly notice something quite unusual. No matter where one goes—to a restaurant, to church, into local schools—people with disabilities are involved there. They are members of local clubs and organizations; they sing in church choirs; they are part of the local arts scene. That this experience is so striking says a great deal about the ways in which people with disabilities are kept out of sight in most communities. They live behind walls of service, in institutions and group homes. In Prince George, those walls seem to have disappeared.

Prince George did not become this inclusive by accident—inclusiveness is the result of over a decade of intentional connections undertaken by a group of citizens known as Project Friendship and their remarkable connector, Sandra Nahornoff.

Some History

Project Friendship emerged from a project undertaken by AiMHi, the Prince George Association for People with Mental Handicaps in 1987. Using the work done by John McKnight, and with his assistance, AiMHi set out to try to establish a community building effort. A group of citizens was established, led by a local television personality, Bob Harkins. That group committed itself to “breaking down walls of isolation around people with mental handicaps” by connecting them to existing community associations. Within a year of its inception, the group had made the acquaintance of five people with disabilities referred by AiMHi. They used their own community connections to introduce those five people to others who shared their interests.

Sandra Nahornoff was hired to coordinate the efforts of the yet-unnamed citizens committee in 1989; Bob Harkins was doing a wonderful job bringing prominent citizens into the effort, but he needed support with the details of the connections and with the next phase of the work. The first thing Sandra did was establish the Project Friendship Society as a non-profit society, and established the loose committee as a Board of Directors. Funding could then flow to the project directly.

In 1990, John McKnight visited Prince George to work with Sandra. “John said that Project Friendship was meant to bridge the gap between people behind walls of service and the community,” she says. “So I knew I had to stir the pot in the community to bridge the gap.”

A Strong Community

The Project Friendship Society encourages the citizens of Prince George “to open their hearts and find ways to welcome isolated people with special needs into the community through local interest groups and associations.” It works to establish community connections for labeled people, connections based on their abilities, not their disabilities. These connections provide opportunities for true friendships to develop, and Project Friendship seeks to nurture these relationships for the benefit of the community.

“We are committed to building a stronger, more diverse community, a community that extends hospitality and welcomes the contribution of everyone,” says Sandra. “A strong community is where everyone contributes: young, old, disabled or otherwise. Participation creates a happier, healthier, more productive community.”

Usually, a person is referred to Project Friendship by a social service agency or provider. That person may reside with his or her family, or may be a resident of a group home. Either way, Sandra visits with the person and the folks who know that person well to discuss his or her interests and dreams. Everyone brainstorms about possible connections—perhaps to people who love to fish, or sing; or to a business that sells flowers, or fixes appliances; or to fans of the local hockey team.

That information is then used to find a community connection for the person referred. Two resources are used to provide possible connections. One is the Project Friendship Board of Directors, a group of connected citizens, people who “know everybody and everything happening in Prince George.” The importance of that group can’t be overestimated. They provide a “network”, not unlike those used by professional groups or college alumni to assist in job searches. They bridge gaps for isolated neighbors instead.

The second resource is a truly impressive outgrowth of ten years of work.

The *Prince George Connector*

When Sandra began, she and the Board brainstormed a list of about 300 clubs and associations in Prince George. But she knew that was just scratching the surface, so over time and with the help of others she gathered the names, locations and contact information for over 1000 local groups, gatherings of citizens brought together by common interest. Aware that this trove of information shouldn't be kept in-house, Sandra and Project Friendship began to publish the list in 1995.

Today, the *Prince George Connector* is over 200 pages long, filled with listings of groups, descriptions of their activities and meeting times. It also contains stories of successful community connections for people with disabilities, photos and essays. Over 300 copies at \$15 each are sold every year at locations throughout Prince George. All the information contained in the *Connector* is also available on-line at projectfriendship.com.

It took awhile to figure out how to use the inventory. "To this day, I'm not sure I use it to the fullest, but the gears have shifted," says Sandra. By the second year, when Sandra and her assistant updated the first edition, she was able to use the act of gathering the information to approach local clubs about connecting with someone. "We talk with them about making their meetings accessible to people with disabilities as well." The inventory has become the tool for engaging the community, so much so that one assistant Sandra hired to help her ran into an interesting problem. "She never got the book done—she spent all her time talking to clubs about how they should welcome people with disabilities. But that is what the inventory is about."

Stories of Connection

Once a connection is proposed, Project Friendship staff contact the individual or group and try to establish who that group's "connector" might be. "In each group there is usually at least one person who welcomes and orientates new members, so we contact them and let them know we are aware of a person who shares similar interests," says Sandra. "Once a connector is found, a meeting is set up and we ask for their help in planning the connection."

The most critical part of the planning is often transportation, a lesson learned quickly in any connection work. A person can't participate if

they can't be present. Pick-ups and drop-offs are arranged, and are sometimes hard to guarantee.

Once a connection is in place, Project Friendship tries to nurture the connection, checking in regularly at first to see how things are going and to see if the connection needs any further support. Once it is going well, Sandra and her staff host semi-annual "socials" and keep an informal contact going, but the group carries on as always, with a new member.

Stories abound, what follows are two written by Sandra.

Mary

"Connections vary the same as people and their interests vary. One of our first connections was for Mary. She was a champion hugger; you could run into Mary anywhere and she would give you a great big smile and squeeze you with the warmest of hugs. It didn't matter how frustrated you were with life, or what kind of a day you were having, all would be forgotten with a smile and a hug from Mary.

Mary was intellectually disabled—she couldn't cross the street on her own, speak more than a few words, nor could she live independently. When her parents died, she was placed in a group home where three fellows had been placed following institutional release. Due to their extreme behaviors, Mary would be kept in her room unless a caregiver was there with her.

Mary was originally connected with Art Knapp Flowerland, as she loved flowers. The Van Hage brothers, friends of Bob Harkins, welcomed Mary who would visit and help clean the flowers on Thursdays. She would return home with [me] as she could not go back to her own home until 3 PM when enough staff was on to provide for her. I became familiar with Mary's gifts and abilities. She loved to share food, and was great help preparing lunch. She was always the first to initiate the clean up, and she expected everyone to help. Mary loved to visit with [my] daughter Morgan. We found that Mary was creative and loved to color.

Mary was connected at the daycare at the local college. There are not too many children between the ages of three and five who don't need constant hugs, and we had a champion hugger. The staff appreciated Mary because she was great at helping prepare and clean up lunch. The children loved Mary because it's a very special adult who will take

time to color and play with them. Her visits to the daycare went from a couple of hours a week to everyday.

Mary passed away in 1993. Nearly two hundred people attended her funeral. They came to celebrate Mary's life and share stories about how Mary, who had been born mentally handicapped, non-verbal, and dependent on others, had touched so many lives.

If Mary had been removed from community and closeted away to keep her safe, she would never have been able to give our community her gift of happiness, one that she gave so freely. Giving her the opportunity to contribute her abilities truly touched the People of Prince George and helped to make our community stronger."

Tom

"When Tom moved to Prince George to be closer to services, the family he lived with abused him. As a result, services virtually institutionalized him with 24 hour care and protection. He became isolated and lonely, and was finally referred to Project Friendship. Tom has Down's syndrome, he speaks very little, and can't go out without support. We found out that Tom enjoyed attending church when he first moved to Prince George. Lance Morgan, the vice president of Project Friendship and pastor of First Baptist Church agreed to connect Tom with his ministry. Lance introduced Tom to a young couple, who agreed to take him to Sunday services. Tom loved going.

Unfortunately, Tom's caregivers, who worked Sundays, told the couple they weren't needed and that Tom would go to their church with them. This didn't last, as staff turnover is high. The caregivers moved on, and Tom became isolated again. So, with a little persuasion, we arranged to have Tom dropped off at First Baptist Church on his own, and picked up following the service.

This started some thirteen years ago. From the first day, people recognized Tom as a friend of Lance's and the young couple, and they welcomed him. Tom started volunteering at the church as a greeter on Sundays, and over the years he volunteered more. He folds bulletins on Fridays, which he occasionally hands out on Sundays, and he cleans the sanctuary on Mondays. Tom has developed many friends at the church, and he is no longer lonely or isolated. He is now safe in the community; the members of his church are his greatest

protection from being abused or institutionalized. Tom is a valued member of our community.”

Possible Pitfalls

Since Project Friendship has been operating for thirteen years, and has over 100 current connections like those describe above that it has maintained, it has learned a thing or two about what works. Sandra outlined a few mistakes Project Friendship has made, and some problems it has yet to resolve.

The Walls of Service

Dealing with the service providers has always been a delicate operation. Sandra talked about how Project Friendship evolved, how “we made it up as we went along.” She described the unique nature of meeting with staff at group homes. “Sometimes these folks are the only ones who know them. So I sit there and one will say ‘Oh, he loves hockey.’ And the other will say ‘No, he hates hockey, I took him to a hockey game once.’ I sit there and I smile because I know what’s happening. The one who took him to the hockey game and he loved it also loved hockey.”

“I try to create a team. After all, they referred this person. They have to be part of the work we do.” She complained that Canadian Mental Health is notorious for making a referral, then closing the file. She told the story of Ilse, who was suicidal. When Sandra went to CMH, they said they no longer had any responsibility for her. “I said ‘Oh yes you do. We’re not qualified to deal with someone who is suicidal—that’s why she ended with you in the first place.’ We stayed with her day and night. Lois, my assistant, did suicide watch, brought her home. That first year was tough, but she is fine now. She’s at the library, reading to kids, all sorts of things. But CMH just made a referral and that was it.”

She also stated that Project Friendship was not interested in “citizen advocacy”; bringing the community to the group home. With the exception of transportation arrangements—club members would pick people up at the group home—Project Friendship is always about “coming out from behind the walls of service”. “Our focus is never on what is wrong with the person,” she says. “If [the community members] walk right into the place and see all these people with disabilities, they will never focus on Jim, John, whatever... who he is inside or what he can contribute.”

Funding

Project Friendship is funded by gaming revenue in Prince George. Under Canadian Law, bingo licenses are granted to NFP's for fundraising. AiMHi contributed its bingo money to start-up Project Friendship. But, explained Sandra, because of a bureaucratic divide between people born with disabilities and people who acquire them through injury, she could only use AiMHi money for connecting people born with disabilities. Once Project Friendship incorporated as a registered charity and got its own Board, it also got its own bingo license.

"We were no longer under the wing of AiMHi, but it also meant we had to do our own administration. So it got harder, but we were freer to do whatever we felt that was needed. Soon the word got out, and people came to us from all over the community. We could help anybody and everybody."

Mentally ill, intellectually disabled, physically disabled, "dually diagnosed" people---these are the major categories that Project Friendship connections fall into. "We have only rejected one person in twelve years." And even if a person doesn't fall into these categories, perhaps an elderly person whose partner had died, Sandra always takes time to talk to them. "Maybe I go over the Prince George Connector with them, try to get to see the opportunities there are to connect with the community."

But the pitfall of this freedom is the trapdoor of fundraising. Bingo can't fund it all, and recently the regulations were changed, requiring gaming funds to be matched. "When that happened," she says, "We almost lost our whole focus as an organization."

"We made some mistakes. We tried to keep [the number of service providers on the Board] to only one liaison from AiMHi. But when Bob Harkin passed away, the executive director of AiMHi joined. Now there were two. And they brought a friend, who worked with ADHD children, and whose focus was to fix people. Now there were three, and they began to take over. We were losing our community members too. Suddenly they are half the table. Then, the funding crisis came."

The service providers saw the solution as becoming a service agency, qualifying Project Friendship for other federal funds. This caused the Board Chair to resign. Sandra began to think about quitting. But the focus of the new board was on fixing Project Friendship, not on raising

money. The Gaming Board gave them a Sept. 2003 deadline to find other funds. Tellingly but miraculously, they all quit. And the community came back, circled Project Friendship and rescued the work.

“But we learned that our funding has to come from the community and it has to be generic and it can’t have strings attached. Otherwise, you are forced to label people.”

Segregation

Another pitfall is “volunteer hours” as a funding category. Project Friendship could get more money if it counted hours of volunteers. But calling connected friends ‘volunteers’ is another category that undermines connection to community. “Mary from the Doll Club did not ‘volunteer’ to spend time with Lorena. They shared their love of dolls. There is a big difference.”

Volunteering does happen at Project Friendship in some instances, however. “Jimmy loved to sing, and he sang beautifully. But no choir in Prince George would take him because he is autistic. They said he couldn’t read music and had no choir experience.” So, she got a musician to volunteer her services, and she got a church to volunteer its space. “And we put an ad in the paper and started our own choir. It’s a mixed choir, but there are a lot of people with disabilities in it.”

A similar situation emerged with local artists. Sandra, an accomplished artist, is president of the local artists’ co-op, and she had to struggle with her colleagues to convince them to hold art classes for folks who loved art. “AiMHi had sent a whole slew of folks to the gallery before, and it was a disaster,” she said. “I said ‘No. This is different. These will be people who love art. They will come with a portfolio. They won’t just be sent on a field trip.’” Finally, the art classes began. But, they are segregated.

“There is not enough space for a mixed group. But it has been an incredible group. These people are now known as artists in the community, not as people with disabilities. It worked in a round about weird way, because people don’t see them in a segregated group—they see their art.”

They also formed a theater group for the same reason. But Sandra was quick to point out the community relationship in these projects: “Now understand: the choir is part of the First Baptist Church, the art

class is within the Artists Co-op and the theater group is part of the Serious Moonlight Productions Theater company, a professional theater in town. They are their own group within them—they are called the No Name Brand Theater Company, but they are members of Serious Moonlight.”

All of the ‘professionals’ in these arrangements are counted as volunteer hours, which count as a match in the gaming funds.

Failed Connections?

But what if things don’t work? Sandra talked about the socials, held twice a year. She uses those as informal ways to check up. “If things are going well, there’s no reason for me to visit. If I did, like if I visited Tom at the church, it would feel too much like a service agency, like I was checking up. But the social gives us a chance to find out without checking up.” Invitations are sent and follow-up calls are made; often, all the information needed is revealed in that process.

If it isn’t working, she can try another connection. She can try to help figure out a strategy. But she cautions “All of these things are living—that’s how I describe them. They are living connections and like all living things, they change.”

Often, the service mentality regarding connection is overly protective. They do security checks, police checks. They gather data before they will make a connection or allow one to be made. Sandra noted that they had had one situation that involved sexual abuse, but it was a situation in which a security check would have never found it. She added that the biggest safeguard against this reoccurring is connecting with associations, not individuals, whenever possible. “There is safety in numbers in a group, and even more, you find your own friends within any group.”

On the other side, there has only been one situation where the person connected was too scary or violent to be connected. And that was the fault of the institution he was in, which wanted him connected before he was really ready. Sandra realized through this experience that she needed to be more assertive in the interview process. “Just because the CMH has in a person’s service plan that they are to be referred to Project Friendship doesn’t mean that they should be and I need to be very specific about that.”

Language

Sandra tells a story about her own struggle with language. “When I first came into this, I knew nothing. I’d never met anyone with a disability. When John talked about ‘labeled people’, I didn’t know what he meant. And the service providers—they told me Mary had ‘inappropriate behaviors’. What is that? Turns out they meant that she was 38 years old and carried around a coloring book. To an artist, that’s not inappropriate! It was so weird for me to hear these languages.”

“Least offensive for me is ‘people with special needs’ because for me, we all have special needs,” she says. “But, when I meet people to talk about someone, I say ‘I know a person who shares your interest.’ Shared interest is a way to bridge the gap. ‘Creating opportunities for friendship to develop’ is the Mission Statement of Project Friendship.”

She then told the story of Philip. He was amazingly talented with electronics. She had asked him what his dream was and he said he wanted to go to electronics school. When she asked why he hadn’t gone, he answered ‘I’m retarded’. “Here was a man who could take scraps from his father’s repair shop and make new alarm clocks or whatever out of them. He could go to electronics school.”

So she went to the college electronics department; she knew the department chair. She told him she had a very talented friend who always wanted to go to electronics school. The professor said to bring him by.

When they walked in, the professor took one look and said, “You want the room next door.” The job-training center was next door. “I said, ‘No, this is the man I told you about who is so talented with electronics.’ He looked at Philip and said ‘Oh.’” So, he had the lab set up with devices for his students, and he took Philip around the room, asking him to identify things. No matter what it was, Philip could not only identify it, but say what it was used for, and if it was the most current design.

They gave Philip his own workstation, and he got to sit in on all the classes and help students who needed help. “But he never would’ve been allowed to show what he knew if anyone had said, ‘Of course, he’s retarded.’”

"I will tell people that they are 'awesome' at this or that. I use supportive language. I can help them get over little hurdles—they may be in a wheelchair and I need to say that to make sure it is accessible. And that may be a problem. But we can overcome it. But we can never overcome it if we can't get in the door. And you'll never get in the door if you say 'I know a person, of course he's schizophrenic, but you should meet him.'"

The Future

Project Friendship is hoping to start an education program that would develop a curriculum that can be used in 5th grade classes "that would involve children playing games and doing things to discover gifts," say Sandra. "So, we can start the concept of community building in school; that you have a gift that you must contribute when you grow up."

There would also be a high school component that would use the requirement for 'community volunteering' as a connecting strategy. "Instead of having high school kids 'spending time with disabled people', I'll bring them on, but they have to connect a disabled person to the community," she says. "They'd have to find out their interests, talk to people, and make a connection. So, when they leave, the person is connected and the connection goes on."

Sandra laments that she is doing more fundraising and proposal writing and less connecting, and she worries about keeping up the pace at which she is working. But her Board is now taking some of this workload off of Sandra.

"But we all understand that this is all about connections. Without connections we don't need funding."

‘The Three Things’: Project Friendship

Gifts and Dreams: Listening closely to isolated people and those who know them well is how the folks of Project Friendship begin the process of community connection. Sandra was very clear to distinguish this process from a “field trip” type of approach to people with disabilities.

Citizens Space: A special citizen effort is necessary to open community life to isolated people. A core group of connected citizens, like those of Project Friendship, reach out and open the doors to community, guiding the labeled people to places where they can contribute their gifts.

Connectors: Everyone in Project Friendship is involved in connecting. The traditional board/staff distinctions don’t serve them very well. The members of the board are on the board because they are well-connected citizens; Sandra Nahornoff and her staff do the legwork for each connection, but work in constant relationship to the board. In addition, the friends, family and caregivers of the labeled person are also active in the connection.

Additional Lessons Learned from Project Friendship

- **Connections should be made to groups**, not to individuals. No one can mandate a friendship, but most people can find a friend within a group. The person becomes part of the rich web of associational life. In addition, the group absorbs the connection—the formerly isolated person becomes a member, not a good deed. Finally, there is safety and permanence in numbers. Members come and go, but groups carry on. It is best that only one special needs person be connected with a group. Otherwise they become known as the disability group instead of Tom or Mary.
- **Collecting information about local associations serves several purposes.** Initially, the listing serves as a touchstone for possible connections. But the *Prince George Connector* is much more than that to the city of Prince George. It is matter of civic pride—the Connector is the result of community participation. It is also a public relations tool and a source of funding for Project Friendship.
- **Preserving the boundary between human services and community connections is essential.** When this boundary blurred during a funding crisis, Project Friendship almost folded.
- **Language is important.** Project Friendship is “a group of citizens personally involved in building a stronger community” (Ibid.). Special care must be taken to avoid the language of the human service system for the distinction to be clear.
- **Categorical funding undermines citizen-centered initiatives.** Such funding reintroduces labels and limits. Also, matching grants often lead to labeling involved citizens as “volunteers”.
- **Chasing funding is a landmine.** Connectors should be connecting, not chasing their salaries. Although this issue faces many non-profit organizations, it is especially difficult for a citizen-centered initiative like Project Friendship.

**Logan Square
Neighborhood Association
(LSNA)**

Chicago, IL

A Large Heart

Rosita De La Rosa **Logan Square Neighborhood Association**

“A Large Heart”

One of the earliest connection projects was the Community Building Project of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association. For a period of time in the 90’s, LSNA, a multi-issue community organization in Chicago’s Logan Square neighborhood, worked to bring the “strangers” in Logan Square into community life. The strangers they referred to were living in the group homes for those labeled developmentally disabled.

LSNA, a powerful community organization dedicated to confronting those in power, mobilizing citizens to action and winning victories, is extremely skilled in the techniques of community organizing. But, the work of community building also required an inclination to include everyone and a broad knowledge of the community, along with a sincere joy in being with people.

Often, organizing and community building are not mentioned in the same sentence (or the same room). But at base, the tools of community organizing are connecting tools: one-on-one conversations, relationships built over time, building strength through numbers. So there is an affinity between the organizer and the connector as described in the Introduction.

The LSNA Community Building work required such an organizer/connector with deep roots in the neighborhood. So, LSNA hired a local resident that fit the description, Rosita De La Rosa.

The results of the Community Building Project have been recounted in many ABCD publications, and the lessons learned there are at the core of ABCD work. Over time, funding for the Project disappeared, and LSNA went on to other community issues and undertakings. But Rosita De La Rosa has remained on the staff there. She now organizes Logan Square seniors, and also is the LSNA liaison to community arts initiatives and local artists.

What makes a connector and how does connecting become part of everyday work and interaction? There is no better person to help answer these questions, so we asked Rosita to talk about what she is

doing now and how she sees it being related to her connecting work and her identity as a connector.

Connecting

Rosita says she is always connecting, “Very intentionally, without anybody ever knowing about it. Especially where there are kids who have to do community service for school, or people who live alone and have trouble in the heat or the cold—I’m always asking them to look out for each other without them really knowing it.”

She says she has always looked for ways to develop relationships. “I used to spend time out in front of my house cleaning up, and people would see me and come out and clean up too. And we’d start a conversation. Or, when my daughter was a baby, I’d take her with me, and everyone would be drawn to her, and I’d start finding out about them. You do whatever it takes to build a relationship with everybody you meet, because it is so important. That person may have a story to share, a history to share, some experience to share, or resources. I can’t help it, I think about it all the time. My brain works this way.”

“I have relationships galore,” she goes on. “I have friends, acquaintances, neighbors, co-workers, family members—they are all in different categories but I utilize them in everything I do. And I try to be honest with them, I don’t take advantage. I keep them in mind and share anything I can with them.”

Because LSNA is a multi-issue organization, Rosita is always trying to find a person’s interest and connect it to the work of LSNA. “I do my one-on-one, and I try to find out what is their passion, and I try to connect them to the group of neighbors who share that passion.”

Rosita stressed the idea that the basic organizing tool of the one-on-one is also a critical component of connecting. She gets people to open up by opening up herself, by asking about their concerns, and by praising their gifts. In the outline of a one-on-one, Saul Alinsky advocated doing much the same.

She says that connecting is more in-depth, however, “because of the personal aspect.” It requires a deep knowledge of interests and skills, where organizing is to create a group that will then together decide on how to act. “Connecting also requires thinking about an introduction, how you would interest one person in another. You have to think

about that too.” She then went into a long story about getting a call from a tribune reporter looking to interview a Latina senior, who had to be over ninety, for an article about each decade of age. Rosita had to interview the reporter, Lisa, to discover something about her that she could use to get Antonia, and a 90 year-old senior she knew, to want to consent to an interview. Next, she had to talk to Antonia three times, plant the idea, follow-up, deal with her fears of being in the paper. Then she had to make the introduction. The article came out wonderfully, but “it was a lot of work for me!”

That’s the difference between connecting and organizing, for Rosita. “They are very different to me. Connecting is a personal relationship.”

Rosita is never far from her Franklin Covey organizer. She had two sections for contacts, and then she had several additional pages she had made and copied that had all the pastors in Logan Square, all the soccer league presidents, all the LSNA Board members etc. “My daughter laughs. She says I would die without this. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost it. I carry it with me everywhere.”

When asked ‘what makes a good connector’, Rosita didn’t hesitate. “Heart,” she said. “It has to be someone with a large heart that genuinely cares about making a better world.”

She talked about being motivated by her child to make a better neighborhood. She talked about making friends, using her friends to help in this work, being very intentional and being resourceful, but the most important component, she stressed, is the “large heart”.

Expanding the Connections

Rosita has been informally keeping the kind of association lists that were part of the Community Building project. “We are kind of a community 411; people call us all the time and ask for phone numbers. Those phone calls are always referred to me.” Recently, because of a comprehensive community initiative funded by LISC/Chicago and the MacArthur Foundation, there is a pool of money available for new LSNA projects. “I want to put out a new directory, one that includes everything that is now in two big boxes on the floor behind my desk. I’m gathering new information now, and I hope to include a section on Logan Square businesses.”

Long-time Logan Square businesses are struggling now that the community has become surrounded by ‘big box’ districts. “Our local

True Value has been in one family for three generations, and now they are being threatened by two Home Depots and a new Menards. I created a bilingual flyer, inviting all neighbors of Logan Square & Avondale area to visit our neighborhood True Value Hardware Store. They were contributing American Flags on the 4th of July," she relates. "The flags were donated, and had the name of the store on them. People had to come in to get them, so it really helped get people into the store. One of the best sights I saw was on the morning of the 4th of July, to see whole blocks with these flags. They were all along the parkway. That's the kind of opportunity I want our businesses to have."

Similar situations face local drug stores and tire shops, according to Rosita. "Logan Square used to have 10 tire stores, now there are only two. If you got a flat in Logan Square, where would you go to get it fixed?" So, Rosita hopes to use the new directory to connect her new constituents—Logan Square elderly—with local merchants.

'Suicide Corner'

The other side of the arrival of the "big box" stores is increased danger for shoppers without cars, like elderly folks. The big box areas in Logan Square are not at all pedestrian-friendly. "I made a map and took it to six senior's buildings to ask them to show me where they are afraid to cross the street," she says. "Some of these corners are three streets and the lights are so short and people run them all the time. There is one six-way corner that seniors call 'suicide corner' because you take your life in your hands trying to cross."

Bringing people back to the local businesses would not only help the local economy, it will increase the amount of neighborhood foot traffic. LSNA is organizing with Logan Square Walks to create a pedestrian-friendly community, and Rosita has been active in this effort with other concerned residents. "We actually took walks in small groups and made notes of all the problems for walkers. As a neighbor and an activist, I notice things all the time that make it hard for my seniors to get around. With this project, we can start to change those things." She spent seven months lobbying the Post Office to get a mailbox moved closer to a senior housing complex, so the residents wouldn't have to cross the street just to mail things. "This is important to my seniors. They want to be able to move around in the community."

Rosita is building a coalition of seniors, moms ("with kids in strollers"), people with disabilities, and bikers ("they are really active in our

community”) to make Logan Square walkable. She’s proud of this as the kind of work she is currently doing.

Block Clubs

Rosita is also building a network of block clubs in Logan Square. “Many of our seniors live in senior housing. And they feel so isolated.” Rosita works with the building managers and social service coordinators in these complexes to get involved in the community through LSNA as well as getting the rest of the community familiar with their senior neighbors. “It started small, with a clean-up campaign, but now people are coming back and getting to know neighbors on both sides.”

There are five block clubs and one garden club that she works with to connect seniors and their neighbors. She is promoting garage sales as an intergenerational project. “Everybody likes to buy and sell junk.” But the sales have a hidden motive. “They help us identify drug houses. Most drug sales go on in the alley, so a garage sale keeps them away. The garage sales are an organizing tool as well as an activity for meeting neighbors.”

Block club activities have been positives on many levels. “Lots of seniors don’t come to block club meetings, but at these activities, where there is always food, we get to hear concerns and find out what is happening. There are so many positives.”

Seniors’ Issues

As revealed in one-on-ones, many of the issues of importance to Logan Square seniors are surprising. “We talk about breast cancer. We talk about sex. We talk about prostitution, drug use—among seniors. It isn’t just grandma and grandpa in their garden.” Rosita has networks among the managers and agencies that run the senior buildings, as well as with the police, and she uses them discretely, but in the interest of “my seniors”. These kinds of discussions don’t take place unless great trust is built, and Rosita has built that kind of trust.

Our seniors need information to understand and accept using Direct Deposit for their Social Security checks. “So many of them kept money in their mattress because they are afraid to use checks—now the government requires them to use Direct Deposit because it is safer. Many of my seniors can’t write the words ‘two hundred dollars’, or they don’t know where to put decimal points.” So, she took training

from the SSA to learn how to teach seniors to use Direct Deposit. And she worked with the banks in the community to connect them to their new senior customers. “Now, 80% of my seniors are using it.”

Rosita is predisposed to connect seniors to others in the community. “Some of them suffer from depression. They have no family, or their family has left them, or they live far away. Holidays are hard. So, some of them look to me as their daughter,” she says. “But I try to make sure they are connected not just to me but to the organization. In the event that something happened to me, they would not fall back into isolation. I try to connect them to break their isolation.”

Transportation is a significant problem for breaking this isolation, and Rosita tries to get around this problem by driving herself or getting others to volunteer to drive. “But seniors are used to getting a ride, and some won’t come out unless they have a ride. So, they’ll just stay alone.” LSNA tries to subsidize transportation, but Logan Square is large and some locations are out of the way.

Intergenerational Projects with Redmoon Theater

Rosita is most excited about the intergenerational work she is doing. Redmoon Theater, one of Chicago’s most innovative arts groups, is located in Logan Square. Long known for its community-based work, Redmoon is collaborating with LSNA to do intergenerational theater production. Rosita, as liaison to local artists for LSNA, is coordinating the group of seniors and youth that are scripting and performing the Redmoon Winter Pageant.

The senior/youth collaboration actually began as part of a famous Halloween parade and production done every year by Redmoon Theater. Together, the seniors and youth made altars for those who had passed in the last year. “Sometimes it was family members, sometimes it was a singer or other famous person. Together, they gathered objects that spoke to their grief and made these shrines. And the young people and the old people explained their grief to each other. It was so important. There were tears, reflection, meditation, and storytelling.”

The Winter Pageant will have a cowboy theme: “We are all going to be named Pete. I am Smiley Pete...” They are performing their self-produced musical comedy using found objects and silhouettes.

We asked Rosita to tell us a few stories from her senior and intergenerational work, and she was happy to oblige.

Stories: Pauline Del Santos

Rosita met Pauline at a Young Old Timers Senior group at a local church. At the meeting she asked if anyone was interested in doing any Intergenerational activities with youth. Pauline called her a few days later and said she'd love to work with youth. They met a few days later, and Pauline's gift was immediately apparent "Pauline had sewing machines and all these fabrics around her house. I told her I'd try to set up something having to do with her gift, which was sewing."

Not much later, Rosita found a little money from the Red Cross, and set up a sewing group with Pauline and four teenage girls. They ended up doing a quilt together for the Red Cross, as part of "The Aids Memorial Quilt". The quilt would be a memorial for Red Cross volunteers who had died from AIDS, and Pauline helped them make the quilt after school while she taught them to sew.

"In 1996 the quilt was displayed at the Red Cross headquarters and traveled to the National Mall in Washington, D.C." said Rosita showing a picture of the quilt. "This relationship just took off. I got it started, and I took these pictures, but they made it all work. They sometimes would get together for lunch to talk—the girls lived nearby."

This got Pauline involved further in LSNA, and she became a leader on tax issues for homeowners in Logan Square. She became a fundraiser for the ad book with Rosita. "She was a great leader. She passed away three years ago. I used to call her Mom, I took it personally."

Esther and Itzel

Rosita showed another picture of a very formal lady and a teenage girl decked out like Britney Spears. "Esther was the mother of one of our Board members who came from Ecuador to live here for a year. Her daughter wanted her to do something so she didn't sit at home, so she called me up and asked me to get her involved with the Redmoon project."

Family members and Rosita picked up Esther and brought her home to make it possible for her to get there. Although she went back to Ecuador after a year, she was an immediate favorite "because she hugged everyone and blessed them, sometimes twice a meeting"

Esther was the oldest senior in the Redmoon group. She also was the only one who could get along with Itzel, “the most energetic and active girl in the group from the local middle school.” Esther would tell her to be quiet when she was loud; she would hug her and tell her she had to listen if she wanted to become an actress.

“They bonded. I don’t know what it was. They talked and respected each other. Itzel was from a pretty tough area and didn’t have much respect for adults. But she loved Itzel.”

The photograph is completely self-explanatory—the affection between the 86 year-old and the raucous 13 year old is obvious. “I had to make copies of this for everybody,” she says.

Harriet

Harriet is an elderly Polish lady who lives near Rosita. This was a hard connection for Rosita because of the proximity. Harriet is a bit of a recluse, won’t let anyone in her house. A neighbor reported her to the Department of Human Services, and they came out to determine her competence.

Rosita got some of her contacts who worked for the Chicago Streets and Sanitation Department to come and help her close up rat holes in Harriet’s yard. “She would never survive if she left her house.” So, slowly, Rosita lured Harriet out of her isolation and got her involved in several senior groups. She has begun to interact and has revealed her funny side in her role in the Redmoon Theater’s production.

“She is so grateful and so happy now,” says Rosita. “I tell this story because we need to be aware that there are people living on this kind of edge, maybe even your own neighbors. Now she has friends and is not isolated now.”

Anna

Anna had never been involved in the community, but she did want to work on art projects, so she joined the Redmoon Theater’s project. She had lost her husband five years before, and was still grieving. “She was very artistic. She loved to make things. And so she made an altar for her husband. And she talked with the group about her grief.”

“Some of the kids didn’t know about grief; they didn’t know about how it felt to have an empty space in her bed,” Rosita said. “They comforted her and learned about sharing.”

Anna has been with the Redmoon Theater’s group for four years now. She has a core group of young friends, and she has a memorial to her husband that her young friends helped her make. All of the little altars have been made a permanent part of the theater; they are hanging from the high ceiling, as stars. “Anna doesn’t know this, that the altars will be part of the Pageant. She will be surprised.”

Difficulties

Rosita talked about the difficulties she encounters in her work. One, of course, is funding. Since most funding is categorical, LSNA has some money for what she does and other parts of it have to come out of their general funds. “So I am always looking for funding sources—especially for the arts stuff.” And Rosita feels pressured to justify all her activities, when some of them are not related to the categories. “I don’t want to let go of what’s important to my seniors.”

Categorical funding brought a sad end to the Community Building project, she said. “How do you tell these people who are your friends? Now ‘we can’t pick you up anymore because we don’t have funding anymore’? It was so sad for some of them.” She pointed out that as time has passed, most of the residents of the group home have left for some reason—moved away, changed homes or passed away.” Of the original eight, I’m down to two. But the ones that are still there, I still see. They say ‘when are you going to come back and be our friend again?’ I feel like a phony.”

But she points out that she is doing almost the same thing with seniors. “I get them out of their house, out of their routine and take them out into their community. They meet each other and talk about their issues and maybe they join a club. Like with the Redmoon project, there is a sign in sheet every week. I put it in a database and made it big so they can read it. Then I asked them if it was OK to share their numbers, in case of emergency. Now, they call each other and there’s real friendship going on.”

Photo Board

Rosita has a three-panel display of photos she had taken of the last six months of her work that she shares at meetings and at the LSNA Annual Congress. Each photo tells a story of her work. These included:

Youth and seniors making panels for the AIDS quilt;

People waiting in line in the rain and snow to get on a waiting list for open apartments in a local subsidized building;

Seniors upset and disappointed at the rapid transit station about the loss of the mini-bus that used to come to their buildings to sell them discounted bus and train passes;

Seniors protesting in front of the Logan Square Post Office, due to the poor service and misedelivered Social Security checks;

Seniors at a Logan Square health fair;

A breast Cancer awareness seminar for seniors,

and more. Rosita has a real collection of stories, and a very large heart.

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‘The Three Things’: LSNA and Rosita De La Rosa

Gifts and Dreams: Just as Rosita describes herself as “always connecting”, she is also constantly tuned-in to the gifts and dreams of her neighbors. As an organizer, she finds places for those gifts to be given for the benefit of her community and her organization.

Citizens Space: LSNA is deeply committed to the model of a multi-issue citizens’ organization, a model that places neighbors at the heart of everything they do. All of Rosita’s work is part of that framework.

Connector: Rosita’s story is a ‘connector’s biography’. Anyone wishing to understand what makes a good community connector should just spend some time with Rosita.

Additional Lessons Learned from Logan Square Neighborhood Association and Rosita De La Rosa

- **Connectors are well connected.** Rosita is a person who naturally gravitates to people, has strong roots in her community, and uses her connections to make more connections. These are unique gifts, and essential to making successful connections.
- **Connecting and organizing go hand in hand.** Good connectors are also organizers; building relationships is at the heart of both activities.
- Neighborhood organizations **benefit from having a connector on staff.** Although it is not her job description, Rosita De La Rosa brings her connecting skill to all the work she does. Because of this, turn out for meetings increased; new potential Board Members were found; LSNA reached new constituencies that are not typically present, like elders, businesses and artists.
- Following from that, there is an advantage to having a **locally rooted connector.** No time is needed for that person to 'get to know' the community.
- **Connecting takes time.** Building relationships and the trust that goes along with them often doesn't show benefits right away. Rosita's stories all reflect the benefits to community that can accrue if patience is part of the equation.
- **Categorical and temporal funding is a barrier to connecting.** Logan Square Neighborhood Association is a multi-issue community organization. Most of its funding is program-related and time-limited; connecting is not a program and it takes time. Rosita De La Rosa is connecting seniors, youth, neighbors and artists because LSNA's funding imposes those limits. Imagine if she were connecting everybody.

**Capital Heights
Presbyterian Church
Denver, CO**

Companioning

Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church Denver, CO

'Companioning'

Capitol Hill is a community located just southeast of downtown Denver, in the area surrounding the state capitol. The church is located in that community and has a congregation of less than 200; Rev. Mark Meeks is the pastor there.

The community is also home to a large medical complex providing both inpatient and outpatient services to the entire city. Some parts of the community have a large number of inexpensive apartments and SRO's; others, like that around the church, are gentrifying. The combination of services and housing make Capitol Hill an attractive community for folks living with mental illnesses and the agencies that serve them; it also makes Capitol Hill an attractive community for gays and lesbians, and other residents who wish to live in a progressive community. In the center of this mix is the church, and its mission has grown organically from its surroundings.

The church never self-consciously decided to dedicate itself to providing a safe place for people living with mental illness; it seemed that as the safety was perceived, more folks admitted their struggles to their fellow congregates. Support was extended, the reputation of the church spread, the liturgical practices opened to admit this discussion and support, and the congregation continued.

Rev. Mark Meeks is certainly at the center of this congregational experience. He has a personal family experience with mental illness; he had also been involved in developing a community residential center for those living with mental illness before he came to Capitol Heights. But it is his commitment and spiritual leadership that is praised by members of the congregation as the glue that holds them together.

A Fact of Our Experience

"Our experience in church life is that the stigma that attaches to mental illness gets integrated," says Mark Meeks. "Someone takes how they are perceived externally, which reinforces all the negativity they are already experiencing, and it not only isolates them from their community but also from their sense of God. It all coalesces to be a very condemning psychic and spiritual experience."

So how did the church come to be so involved with trying to remove this stigma? Mark Meeks calls it “a fact of our experience”. Many members’ lives have been touched by mental illness, but he feels that is not unique. “It may be because we are small, and we share our experiences. But I think any community that took the time to explore that experience would find a similar degree of occurrence, because it is so much a part of American life.”

One member of the congregation lost two siblings to suicide; another elder of the congregation had lived with her mother who was severely mentally ill. “Mental illness runs in families, as you know, so if one generation had experienced it, you aren’t surprised to find it in the next.”

“I can’t identify a cause and effect for our involvement. It is just a part of our experience.” He mentioned the larger community as a home for many folks living with mental illness. The hospitals also have staff that deals regularly with mental illness, and some are church members. The local chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) is located in the church buildings at Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church. “It’s just there in our lives and the challenge for us has been to own it.”

Part of that ownership is to bridge the gap between professional services and community life. The church provides the psychiatrist who spends his days in the struggle for mental illness a chance to share his experiences from his heart with the community. The person who is living with mental illness shares the church experience with the psychiatrist, and they meet on that level. “It’s our commitment that none of this experience is devalued; that’s the beauty of church,” says Pastor Meeks.

One of the ways that gets put into practice is the church uses its Sunday mornings “11 AM Dialogue at Church” as a time for conversations with or presentations by, individual members. One time it might be someone living with schizophrenia, or it might be the psychiatrist talking about new scientific discoveries. “We learn from each other and share our life experiences in that way. We are all the same. It seems that is one of the ways to remove the stigma. That person is talking to their friends and their friends are listening to their friend.”

“We’re not always impressive, we are not always wise, but we share our lives,” says Meeks. Not all churches see church as a place to share

their passions in this way, he adds. "One of the realities of life is that strength and weakness can be hard to differentiate."

There is also a time in the Sunday service for sharing cares and concerns, something instituted before Pastor Meeks took over. That time has become a time for members to share their struggles, to talk about their hospitalization or difficulties with balancing medication. Sometimes these testimonies take up a significant amount of time. But they are not problem-solving sessions. "We are open to the mystery of experience, and we share with each other in prayer."

Creating a Culture of Understanding

Over time, the church has joined with other local churches to affirm a concern for people living with mental illness, and this ministerial alliance has worked with other community associations and agencies toward that goal. One of these associations is a unique organization of people living with mental illness called CHARG Resource Center. CHARG is run by the folks it serves, connecting those people to community and health resources. The CHARG structure consists of two boards, one made up of consumers of mental health services and one of community people who support the program. The churches support CHARG, and church members are on its board.

Another kind of outreach done by the church is a long-standing Saturday lunch for members and neighbors, which has been an opportunity to reach out to community members living with mental illness who aren't church members. The word about this event gets out through CHARG. It is small, 10 or 12 people, "and over time, we have built relationships with these people," says Pastor Meeks. They might not be in our church on Sunday, but they are in our church on Saturday. Some folks with mental illnesses have a hard time in church, but the meal gives us a different way to enjoy relationships with each other."

He goes on to explain the bedrock of these activities: "We are all the while seeking to create a "culture" of understanding, respect, patience, and encouragement. Mental illness bears profound social impact, taking a large toll on everyone close to the illness. So we seek to counter that with a social experience that limits the toll and participates in aspects of healing, or, at least, patient endurance. This "culture" is fostered by all the things we do. This culture seeks to sustain the possibility of more intimate relations, one on one, or couple by couple, where folks find understanding, listening, compassion, and

sometimes wisdom for healing. This sort of support is experienced not only by the mentally ill themselves, but also by family members who have suffered from the illness of their loved ones.”

“We will have a NAMI Sunday, to receive a message of concern and challenge from them in worship, then dialogue afterwards about opportunities. We have occasion from time to time to support or celebrate the work of other similar entities, like the CHARG Resource Center and to honor the work done in such programs by our own membership, whose experience of mental illness is becoming a source of empowerment for making things better. These connections both raise our awareness as well as strengthen our commitments and congregational life.”

“With all these practices, members of our community who have not directly experienced mental illness now know those who have. They find it common to visit with them, hear of their experiences, and relate as friends who can accept them in their struggle while striving to be helpful. That is an ongoing learning that requires a committed openness which is not defeated by the effects of the illness which are persistent and sometimes cause discouraging setbacks. For us a priority to all this is taking the vantage point of friendship to be engaged as opposed to looking for protection in our fears and isolation from the dread details of struggle.”

The Value of Being Small

The church congregation has stabilized and grown slightly over the years, due to the stabilization of the local housing stock. Potential new members are always welcome, though it does not take long for them to come to understand that this church experience might be a bit different. “We are small. You walk in, you are exposed.” Some visitors come once. Others stay, and become involved. “Those who stay have a heart for what they see,” says Mark Meeks. He admits this church might not be for everybody. “We really believe in the value of being small...in a bunch of small churches.”

Some associated with Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church talk of association with the church as being one that demonstrates the power of real relationships. Not only for those living with mental illness, but for anyone who is open to the experience of church being a place where authentic, open relationships are at the center. A conversation with several members illustrates the importance of this truth.

In and Out of the Boat

A conversation over a big pot-luck dinner brought forth many stories and personal experiences. Early on, someone compared living with mental illness to being in a boat: although you try to stay in, you sometimes fall out. If you do fall, you need to be helped back into the boat, and that's what the church does for everyone concerned.

Lillian: "I think that's a very apt way of putting it, and I also think that sometimes, you get thrown out of the boat." She went on to tell her personal story of getting suspended from school for attempting suicide (thrown out of the boat) or being rejected by members of her family who told her to try exorcism (falling out of the boat). She contrasted those experiences to be accompanied by Minnie and another church member and her pastor/father when she was first hospitalized for treatment. "These experiences were qualitatively different for me."

Mary: "In 1985, my first job as an attorney was very stressful. I felt myself getting depressed; it terrified me. I asked my boss if I could take some time off, and he said fine. "I'll allow you to jump out of the boat!" She went on to recount how she struggled with medicines, and really wasn't sure what she should do. "But through that whole time, people in this church were caring for me. Innumerable life preservers were thrown out to me. I remember people taking me to plays, holding my hand, taking me for walks. Minnie, Mark...everyone. Twenty-five people probably, during that three month time. And I slowly came out of it. It was nothing short of miraculous."

Minnie: "These experiences of 'companioning' create bonds that are so deep and so rich and so strong. They transcend the usual relationships."

David: "Mary and Mark came to visit me about five times during my last psychiatric crisis."

Sue: "I've been coming now about 20 years. When I got diagnosed schizophrenic, I didn't know what it meant. I was hearing voices, people telling me things to do that had me running around in circles." She went on to tell a compelling story of trying to find out what was happening to her, why she heard voices. A doctor told her to commit herself, so she did. They medicated her, then wouldn't release her. The voices got worse. She was so scared she figured if she didn't move they'd go away. So they diagnosed her as catatonic, and gave her more medication. And on, and on. She was only 23. "I've found a

home here, it's like a family. I got a lot to be grateful for; Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday."

Minnie: "This place is the center of my relationships, though my relationships are not limited to here. It is because of the strength of the relationships we have, and that strength carries outside of ourselves into our community. We have joined with other churches through the Capital Hill Alliance. It moves out from here."

She went on. "The faith element is important. I have a tragic sense of life. Hope isn't an innate characteristic of mine. So, faith as we live it in community with spiritual leadership eventually taught me what I call radical hope. Without that, I'm not sure how I could live. And it needs to be nurtured all the time and lived all the time."

Sue: "Minnie was my companion when I was going through a tough time. When I moved into my own apartment, I wasn't sure about it. I started to think there were people in there with me. I asked Minnie to visit me every day—I didn't want to go back to the hospital."

Minnie: "She was so intent. 'I do not want to be hospitalized. I want to live this without going back to the hospital.' I decided to try to live through this with her. We lived through that; perhaps it wasn't wise, but at the same time, she was so passionate desiring it. Since that time, I have worked as a psychiatric nurse and acquired more knowledge. But that experience was unimaginable and not always easy. But we lived through it. I came closer to understanding what Sue was experiencing than I could have in any other way."

Martha: "Minnie is the most caring person in the whole community."

To this they all begin to agree and tell Minnie stories. Finally, I asked her why she does it. She turned her head sharply, and stared at me in an almost frightening way. Tears came to her eyes and she said. "Because my mother was mentally ill, and she never had any help of any kind. It is an extraordinary privilege to be more present to that."

Sue: "I've never met any finer group of people than the ones in the church and sitting at this table."

Mark Meeks summed it up: "In these relationships, there is no program. You can only be. You get taken to a place that you don't know, and you're not sure how to get out, but you know you have someone with you and together you'll figure it out."

“The people at the table are willing to share their experiences, and that is a beautiful thing. One of the aspects of the gift of accompaniment is to diminish shame and to bring light to the darkness. It isn’t easy to share these stories, but they have told us. They have empowered us to know what works about accompaniment, and how we can better accompany them.”

Martha: “The majority of people in our church community are willing to listen, to help yes, but mostly to listen and make it clear that we care.”

Martha then went on to describe how people find the church and if they can identify with what is happening, “it doesn’t take long”. They became a part of things right away. Minnie told the story of Martha’s relatively recent arrival (1994) and how she plunged in and “gave her gifts immediately and became leaven.” Then Martha, Minnie and NAMI talked at length about the church and its unique nature of welcoming people where they are.

They all credit Mark with being a true spiritual leader. “A man of compassion and peace who attempts to apply the gospel to this world, says David. “He never discourages us,” says Minnie, “Yet he manages to put us in front of what we need to look at.”

“The simple willingness to be open to setbacks and not defeated by them emerges from our sharing for prayer and support which acknowledges the ups and downs of it all,” says Pastor Meeks. That is critical, because the illness will recur often, in acute forms, so community life must not be organized for victory alone. Compassionate engagement must take many forms and be open to many aspects of human struggle.”

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‘The Three Things’: Capitol Heights

Gifts and Dreams: Building relationships that endure and encourage is critical to members of Capitol Heights. After all, the setbacks experienced by those living with mental illness are difficult at times. “That is an ongoing learning that requires a committed openness which is not defeated by the effects of the illness which are persistent and sometimes cause discouraging setbacks,” says Pastor Meeks. “That is critical, because the illness will recur often, in acute forms, so community life must not be organized for victory alone.” His description of these relationships seen from “the vantage point of friendship to be engaged” expresses this commitment beautifully.

Citizens Space: The commitment and the vantage point of friendship together to create a culture of understanding, as described by Pastor Meeks. It permeates all the relationships and experiences of those involved, and it benefits all.

Connectors: For all of its organic nature, Capitol Heights has several organized structures that keep the community connected: the forums for teaching/learning from personal experience; the celebrations and concerns segment of the liturgy, and the Saturday meal.

Additional Lessons Learned from Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church

- The experience of the church is influenced by its **location**. The community formed in a particular place, in this case Capitol Hill, determines where, how and with whom connection takes place. This community pointed the church to a constituency of isolated people.
- **Cooperation with and celebration of other organizations** amplifies the creation of this culture of understanding mentioned above. Having the Colorado office of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill office upstairs in the church building provides resources and opportunities, as does the CHARG Resource Center and the work done in it by the church's own membership, "whose experience of mental illness is becoming a source of empowerment for making things better."
- Being **small** is important to Capitol Heights. Although the congregation has been recognized by the Presbyterian Church for its commitment and has won awards from the National Association for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), Pastor Meeks has no inclination to create a 'program' out of his ministry.
- Finally, it cannot be overstated that this is a deeply **spiritual journey** for Pastor Meeks and all involved. "The simple willingness to be open to setbacks and not defeated by them", "support which acknowledges the ups and downs of it all"—these are spiritual gifts brought about by grace and prayer in the congregational life of Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church.

Metropolitan Family Services

Blue Island, IL

*Successful Aging in Caring Communities
(SACC)*

Successful Aging in Caring Communities (SACC) Blue Island, IL

Blue Island is an aging, inner-ring suburb directly south of Chicago's Beverly neighborhood. Once working-class and exclusively white, the community is now an almost even mix of white, Latino and African American households, with Latinos holding a slight edge. Most seniors are retired industrial workers and their spouses, living on pensions. Most own their homes. Recent census data showed that the community was losing its senior population, dropping from 22% to 12% from 1990 to 2000.

Given these realities, how could Blue Island become a place that both included and celebrated its seniors, and how could seniors living in Blue Island find activities and opportunities to contribute? These are the questions that led to the project that became SACC, which started in 2000.

Institutional Support

Licensed Clinical Social Worker Dee Spiech had long been working with older adults, and the idea of recognizing seniors as community assets appealed to her. The concept of 'aging-in-place' was gaining popularity in health care and service-provision circles, but just staying home wasn't the answer, according to Dee. So, she and Jane Pirsig, a former Supervisor and Mentor, designed the project that became SACC under the auspices of Metropolitan Family Services Southwest Cook, one of the seven sites of Metropolitan Family Services, the Chicago area's largest and oldest social service agency.

Dee's intake data showed a high level of depression in south suburban seniors, something she found distressing but not surprising. "Many of these people have lost their spouse, their children have left the community, they live on fixed incomes in the homes they own, and those homes constitute most of their net worth," she says. "They can feel lonely and isolated."

Dee was supported by Metro to try a different approach to that of service provision in Blue Island, where Metropolitan Family Services has a satellite office. With funding from the Retirement Research Foundation, Dee undertook a three-year experiment in re-connecting seniors to the life of Blue Island.

Building Relationships

Instead of designing a program and bringing it to the community, Dee Spiech spent the first ten 10 months getting input from community seniors while promoting the concept of a senior-friendly community among institutional, political and business leaders. She had many one-on-one meetings with community members. She built relationships with community leaders, longtime residents, local school principals, and business owners. "They had to know and trust me first," she says. "I didn't want to come off as an outsider who had the answers." As support grew, she enlisted an advisory group of Blue Island seniors to help her design ways to create a senior-friendly town.

Dee then conducted a survey of seniors, to gauge their interest in becoming involved in their community, especially as volunteers. Over 51% of respondents to the survey said they would volunteer in the community if asked. Based on her conversations and connections, Dee and her team consisting of Metro staff, community partners, and senior adults devised three intergenerational, reciprocal connections between seniors and youth:

- *History from the Hill*, a video oral history project with the broadcasting class at Eisenhower High School,
- *Reading Buddies*, a tutoring/reading program with third grade students at two elementary schools,
- *Learn to Connect*, a computer technology class for seniors taught by middle school students.

In addition, surveys of 335 Blue Island businesses were conducted with the assistance of the Blue Island Chamber of Commerce. The attempt to create "senior-friendly businesses" led to a series of activities and programs to reconnect the seniors to the local economy.

History from the Hill

Eisenhower High School is a large, regional public school in Blue Island. The majority of its students are Latino, although the white and African American populations are not much smaller. Planning meetings held at the school between seniors and students led to the creation of the video project, which got its name from the fact that Blue Island is called "the Hill" by residents.

Students in the 8th period Broadcasting class were offered the opportunity to participate in this video history project; six of them agreed to interview local seniors on camera over the course of a school year. A three-day training was conducted by Dee, the community development assistant and a VISTA member, teaching the young people interview skills and introducing them to the lives of seniors. During the training, some of the seniors came and sat in, talking to the students about their lives.

All interviews were preceded by off-camera discussions with seniors in their homes, they were then semi-scripted and recorded in the school's broadcasting studio. The final, edited results are shown on the Blue Island community cable TV channel, which is watched by a large number of people in the town.

Thirty seniors have been interviewed by the six students, individually and in groups. The completed videos are a testimony to the power of oral history as an intergenerational teaching tool. There are stories of World War II, stories of the first black families in Blue Island, stories of Latino history in the steel mills of Southeast Chicago. Although Latino stories were harder to collect, one of the interviews was done entirely in Spanish.

“Just Like Teenagers!”

Luis, one of the student videographers, did that interview. Luis, a high school senior, is energetic and engaging, with spiked hair and a great Hawaiian shirt. In another context, seniors might have found him threatening, and at first, he said, he was hesitant to be involved. But he signed up the second year and has done seven interviews, including a group interview at a local retirement home. “Everybody knew each other there, and they were telling tales on each other and all talking at the same time,” he marveled. “I was amazed by them—they were acting like teenagers!”

Spending time with seniors has caused Luis to think about his own history in Blue Island and note changes in the community since he has lived there. “I found myself saying things like ‘I remember when that used to be a car repair store’ and then thinking ‘I sound just like the seniors.’” He also found himself to be fascinated by the stories he heard, and discovered he wanted to go back and listen to the stories of his family elders again. “I never listened to them before, really.”

"I've got a lot more respect for seniors now, and a lot more knowledge," Luis says. "I've learned more in the past year than I have in my entire life. The history that senior citizens tell you is not something that you find in textbooks, and they also tell you how they felt about it at the time. And now I see them all the time and they are happy to see me too."

The History from the Hill video project has been included in the permanent curriculum for the broadcasting class of Eisenhower High School, so interviews and interactions between seniors and teens will continue.

Reading Buddies

Lincoln Elementary School serves 600 children, K-3, in Blue Island. 75% of Lincoln's students are at poverty level or below, and most are Latino. For many, English is not the language spoken at home, and reading is a difficult subject.

Ron Young, Tom Madrigal and Lorraine Ferenczy are Blue Island seniors who have volunteered to help Lincoln students with their reading one-on-one. Each is assigned one student for the entire year, and they are that student's Reading Buddy, a name given to the program by the seniors. They tutor the child in reading, as well as encouraging the child to write about what they have read.

Reading Buddies, the second intergenerational project of SACC, serves Lincoln and another school, connecting seniors to young children. At Lincoln, twelve third graders have Reading Buddies, and seven seniors are tutors there. The children are referred to the program by their teachers.

"This is a win-win program," says Lorraine. "Things have changed since I raised my kids. Parents work now, and kids can't get the same special attention they did when mom stayed home. So this gets them help with reading and it gets us out of our houses." Lorraine has a granddaughter in third grade in Georgia, so when she saw the ad in the Blue Island paper seeking reading buddies, she thought this would be a perfect opportunity to share in her granddaughter's education. She asked for a little girl to tutor.

"My generation was raised to work in the mills," says Ron. "Children today need more education to adapt to the economy. But the schools haven't changed with the times or they can't afford it. This is one way

to help the kids get what they need.” Ron described his experience in the industrial economy. He was retired early against his will as his printing job automated, and he found himself becoming listless and depressed. “Tutoring kids gives me a sense of purpose and meaning in my life that staves off depression. They saved me from having to go on medication for depression, honestly.”

The Reading Buddies meet monthly to discuss their strategies and methods to get the kids to read and write. They share stories about the children they work with. Dee Spiech sets up speakers for them if they request it, but the group has also become an important social engagement for its members. “I learn from the people who have done this longer than I have,” says Ron. Currently, reading sessions take place during school time, but an after-school or library program would be even better, he says. “Then we don’t take them out of school, away from their education.”

Tom, a graduate of Lincoln School himself, said, “I got involved because I was a failure here, and I didn’t want to see anyone else fail. That’s what causes dropouts. I know what it feels like.” He came from a poor family and didn’t fit in school. But he was a great basketball player and began to coach when he was in seventh grade. He has been coaching at Lincoln, since 1938. He’s been a Cub Scout leader; he taught guitar. “I just love to teach. I’m not a professor, but what I know, I’ll teach you.” Tom was recruited to be a Reading Buddy at Grandparent’s Day, a school celebration of family elders supported by Metropolitan Family Services and coordinated by Spiech.

Debbie Lymon, the school reading specialist, says the program could be expanded if more Reading Buddies could be found. “The teachers tell me they see real progress in the children,” says Debbie. Debbie says the program works because of the mentoring aspect. “The kids feel ‘I have someone special, someone who is there just for me’. They don’t feel labeled; they feel they have a new friend.”

“I tell my friends about it, my friends in other towns near here. And they say they wish there was something like this where they live,” says Lorraine.

A Trip to ‘The Hill’

Donald Peloquin has been Mayor of Blue Island for 20 years. He was born and raised there, and has a sense of ‘Blue Islanders’ as those who like the ‘small town’ feeling, while being 20 minutes from

downtown Chicago. He ran through a quick history of the town—settled by successive waves of ethnic Europeans, each to work in some version of the industrial economy; joined by African Americans who ‘moved up’ from nearby Robbins, the early terminus of the train north from Mississippi; recent Latino residents expanding from the mill town of South Chicago. He spoke of industry leaving, and the need to find new ways to sell Blue Island as a desirable community. For him, the SACC projects lend themselves to making Blue Island feel like home for all.

He envisions a new senior housing community adjacent to the train station and steps from downtown. In that community, there would be adult and child day care for families who work in Chicago and take the train. Activities involving young and old folks would be scheduled there all day, intergenerational opportunities like History from the Hill or Reading Buddies. The kind of interaction these programs represent “screams community”, according to Mayor Peloquin. “Who wouldn’t want to settle in a town that values everyone?”

“Seniors remember the neighborhood”, he says. “They know it was better to know your neighbors and sit on your porch. Today they call that neo-classical community. Well, here it never got ‘neo’—we’ve always been classical. If we support these assets for strong community, people will be attracted here to live.”

The city is planning to assimilate the SACC programs at the end of the grant period. “We’ll just take the SACC Advisory Board and develop a Commission on Aging,” says City Clerk Pam Frasor, a member of that Board. “It will become the first Blue Island Commission on Aging. It is a great Board, filled with energy and ideas of how we can be a senior-friendly community.” On February 10th, 2004, the Blue Island Commission on Aging was approved by City Council.

Senior-Friendly Economy

In another office in City Hall, Eda Schrimple directs the Blue Island Chamber of Commerce. An organization of 350 member businesses, the Chamber faces the same pressure any Main Street faces in towns across America. Local businesses struggle for customers with regional malls and big boxes, and they are always looking for ways to attract new customers.

On the other hand, local seniors have needs they say aren’t met by many businesses. From accessibility to understanding service, to the

ever-popular senior discount—there are many ways to make a business “senior friendly”. In cooperation with the Chamber, SACC undertook a survey of local businesses and offered help in making them more attractive to seniors. After a period of time, 37 businesses in town were certified Senior Friendly and joined together to offer a discount on Wednesdays for seniors carrying a Senior Discount Card issued by the Chamber.

For the kick-off of the program, the Chamber solicited donations in order to provide free trolley service from store to store, and food and entertainment was provided for seniors who came. Over 100 seniors of all ethnic and racial groups came to that event, and it has been repeated each year. “We should probably do it more often,” says Eda. “The free trolley day really helps.”

The Chamber hopes to find the funds to continue the program and institute a “senior friendly business council” among its members. There are currently 37 businesses, but they’d like to expand it to 50, focusing on retail and service businesses.

Sustainable and Locally-Owned

The Blue Island SACC project was funded by the Retirement Research Foundation; its 3-year allocation of \$240,000 ended on December 31st, 2003. The City of Blue Island, its new Commission on Aging and the other SACC stakeholders are working to continue Reading Buddies and the other SACC initiatives. Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Family Services South Chicago Center is now working to proliferate the lessons learned in Blue Island, to help generate and support a caring and inclusive community for seniors in Southeast Chicago. According to Dee Spiech, for initiatives like SACC to survive and thrive in any neighborhood, they need to be locally owned.

For Ron, the kids, Luis, Mayor Peloquin and Dee Spiech, the Blue Island SACC project was a win-win experience.

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‘The Three Things’: SACC

Gifts and Dreams: At every point in the development of the project, the focus was on the valuable contributions of seniors to all segments of community. Seniors were never seen as in need of service. They were valued as living examples of the community’s history, great teachers, and economic contributors to Blue Island’s future.

Citizens Space: Although she represented a social service agency, much of Dee’s work was akin to that of a community organizer. She sought out indigenous leadership, built relationships, and transferred power to citizen initiatives.

Connector: It took Dee Spiech ten months to build strong enough relationships in Blue Island to get the elders and leaders of the community on board with SACC. This enabled “inside-out” community ownership of the project to emerge; rather than creating an “outside-in” service initiative. Also, connecting was Dee’s full-time job, not service provision.

Additional Lessons Learned from SACC in Blue Island

- **The vision of one person**, in this case Dee Spiech, can be enough to move a large agency like MFS. As an employee of a service agency, she understood the boundary between services and citizen initiatives, and she worked carefully to make SACC a benefit for MFS while protecting its citizen space.
- Dee Spiech was **given the time and freedom** to explore community connection by MFS. She used the name of the agency to gain credibility with local leaders, but she was not restricted in her activities by agency requirements. When an agency acts more like a community organization, it can succeed.
- Forming the SACC advisory board gave seniors the strongest voice in the project and **created a structure that could transfer** from MFS to the local government.
- Creating a constituency that initiated activities also made the project **sustainable** when many other projects don't outlive their funding. It also avoided the pitfall of creating another service.

Involving All Neighbors

Seattle, Washington

A Natural Vehicle for Connections

Involving All Neighbors (IAN) Seattle, Washington

Neighborhood activists often complain about government bureaucracies; city agencies are often seen as “getting in the way” of community building. Like many other service providers, city agencies are often filled with committed people that find themselves hampered by regulations, restrictions and political realities. Combining forces for the betterment of neighborhoods is usually only a noble goal, not a daily reality for neighborhood activists and government.

But in the City of Seattle, something very different is happening. There, the Department of Neighborhoods has not only become an effective partner to over 300 neighborhood organizations, but it has provided institutional and economic support for a unique network of connecting activities.

The Department of Neighborhood’s mission is “to encourage all Seattle citizens to become active in the life of their neighborhood”. If everyone is involved, neighborhoods are stronger. But involving everyone is often a challenge when it comes to persons with developmental disabilities. So, in partnership with the Washington State Division of Developmental Disabilities, the Department of Neighborhoods began a program called Involving All Neighbors (IAN).

From the beginning in 1995, IAN did things differently. They brought together everyone who might benefit: persons with developmental disabilities, their families, neighborhood activists and service providers. These folks formed the Action in Community Team (ACT) not only to provide advice but to take action in their neighborhoods. Often, advisory committees come up with great ideas, but implementation never follows. ACT was called upon to energize the business of Involving All Neighbors.

What they did and what they learned from what they did are amazing stories. But before they are told, it’s important to consider how a city bureaucracy became a crucial support for this community activity.

“A Natural Vehicle”

Carolyn Carlson works for the Department of Neighborhoods and has been the organizer for IAN from its inception. She sees a logical connection between the city department and a community connection effort. “This is the first time that a program to build neighborhood

inclusions for persons with disabilities has been housed outside the disability system,” she writes. “More importantly, IAN is strategically placed within an agency that has a mission to build community. And it makes perfect sense to build from a base that is already supposed to be fostering inclusive neighborhoods. It holds government responsible to its stated purposes.”

The Department of Neighborhoods operates 13 Neighborhood Service Centers it refers to as “little City Halls”. These centers provide support for neighborhood groups and connect people to city and neighborhood resources. The Department also provides Neighborhood Matching Funds for neighborhood-initiated projects, in which neighbors can count their volunteer efforts as in-kind contributions for the funds. Over 250 projects are undertaken yearly through this program. And the Department provides access to all of its other resources—planning resources, community garden programs and other neighborhood activities.

This rich array of opportunities provides IAN with “a natural vehicle,” says Carolyn Carlson. “IAN can capitalize on the work already being done and the relationships already established by the Department.” But the essential underlying principle is that building more inclusive neighborhoods is good for everyone who lives there. “We wanted to show that when neighbors become more neighborly with everyone—with or without disabilities—the natural ties created can genuinely eliminate isolation. We believe that a neighborhood that nurtures and supports everyone is simply a better place to live.”

Community Connectors

From the beginning, IAN was clear that successful community building was dependent on the work of “community connectors”. “Some people are natural community connectors. They are the people who look after their neighborhoods, know the people around them, and don’t mind asking other people to help out. They make things happen,” writes Carlson. IAN set out to find and support community connectors, to involve them in the effort to bring their neighbors with developmental disabilities into the middle of community life.

The Action in Community Team is comprised of some community connectors, both professional and volunteer. (Neighborhood organizers are a good example of professional community connectors.) Although connecting skills are learned as a person becomes involved

and builds relationships, IAN believes an effective community connector has a certain set of skills:

- Strongly believes that every person belongs and has contributions to make and gifts to give to the community;
- Works to build community in his or her life;
- Is always on the lookout for what's happening in the neighborhood and knows its places, events, groups and people;
- Looks for opportunities for people to connect with others and contribute their skills;
- Enjoys meeting people and bringing together people with common interests;
- Gets involved and asks others to get involved;
- Enjoys challenges and doesn't give up;
- Stays flexible, adjusts expectations, and knows that things take time;
- Focuses on one person at a time and considers how that person's interests and skills can be assets for the community;
- Finds ways for others in the community to sustain new connections;
- Finds ways to take care of and renew him- or herself;
- Believes that anything is possible.

(From *Involving All Neighbors: Building Inclusive Communities in Seattle*, by Carolyn Carlson. Published by the City of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods.)

In the end, Carolyn Carlson believes that "building relationships is what it's all about. The networking, the one-on-one relationships—that's what builds inclusive neighborhoods for everybody."

Using the 'natural vehicle' of the Department of Neighborhoods and the collected wisdom and experience of the ACT, IAN nurtured and recorded the work of dozens of successful community connectors as they brought previously isolated neighbors into the heart of community life.

Strong Stories

Carolyn Carlson has spent almost ten years 'connecting the connectors'. A champion connector herself, she says it is the individual stories that keep her going. "There is always some frustration in the process, some groups who don't or won't get it, some times when even the best intentions fail. But you have to keep the perspective of the individual stories and their strength. That's where my ability to renew myself comes from. Like the story of Joe and Lupita."

Joe, a working journalist, and Lupita, an artist who has Down syndrome and finds writing difficult, met through a neighborhood organization called Fremont Time. Fremont Time is a service-exchange system that included persons with developmental disabilities from its inception with the help of IAN. Lupita had much to say, and really desired to tell her personal story and get her message to people about the strengths of her friends with disabilities, "so they can see us do our thing in action." Joe helped her get her thoughts onto paper, and the result is a series of notebooks called *My Journal*, that has been growing for over nine years.

At first, this relationship was nurtured by Fremont Time, which provided Joe with time-bank credits for the time he spent writing with Lupita. (These credits could later be exchanged with another neighbor for window washing, or maintenance services.) But over the years the connection deepened. "Her resilience, flexibility, the scope of her focus; all these things about Lupita amaze me," he says. Contrasted to the celebrities he interviews in his job, Lupita is "an extrovert!"

In return, Lupita thinks that in a perfect neighborhood, Joe would write all the books. "It has to be a place where Joe would be around everyone," she says.

Carolyn Carlson recently visited with Joe and Lupita, who proudly announced that it was their 340th writing session. "That relationship no longer depends on Fremont Time. It is still going on. A story like that is where I get my energy to keep going on, because I know this

work builds positive relationships and thus makes better neighborhoods.”

Carolyn Carlson knows IAN has made a real change in Seattle. “I was at a meeting of District Councils, and they were talking about reaching out to diverse people in our neighborhoods. They were talking about building relationships,” she says. “Right now, there are a lot of people in Seattle focused on this.”

Strategies

One of the most important insights gained by the work of IAN is that people need “structures for participation”. It is fine to talk about the benefits of building communities that draw upon everyone’s gifts, or how necessary it is to focus on individuals, but most people need a way—a set of tools, or an activity—to make these ideas a reality.

So IAN has developed a curriculum and undertaken a series of workshops called “Get Involved in Your Neighborhood”. These workshops are for anyone who sees the value of community building but isn’t sure how to get started. “The workshops seek to encourage people to take a step, get involved, go into action,” says Carolyn Carlson. They explore interests, provide resources and give tips for participants and then do something of interest in their neighborhood.

“We built many of these tools with persons with developmental disabilities in mind, because they tend to be more isolated and neighborhood groups are less aware of how to include them. But building neighborhood inclusion is for everybody; neighborhood people understand that. The tools that bring in persons with developmental disabilities will be that much better for bringing in everybody—young people, old people, recent immigrants—everybody.”

Another ‘structure for participation’ is an innovative small fund program called “Small Sparks”. A smaller, user-friendly version of the Neighborhood Matching Funds awards, Small Sparks are meant to stimulate creative neighborhood projects or events which include people who might not otherwise be included by underwriting the nominal costs of these projects. These awards average about \$250, and are used for everything from arts events to community picnics and pet parades—any activity that can serve as a community-building vehicle. Gardening and planting projects are popular, as everyone comes together to create or enhance a common space.

IAN also sponsors “neighborhood coaches” to assist in the connecting aspects of these activities. Folks don’t need much money to accomplish great things if everybody is involved. DON (Department of Neighborhoods) provides money and support; the community does the work. “Small Sparks was designed to be as un-bureaucratic as possible, so anyone could complete the one page application and go through the process. We learned that we’d miss some really great opportunities if we didn’t make the process very simple. And the program is wildly successful because of that.”

Start Anywhere

IAN discovered there is no one way to begin to build community. Some of their stories start with just one person; others start with a neighborhood organization. Some are initiated by a neighborhood leader. Others coalesce around an existing or new neighborhood project. The focus can be broad, taking in all aspects of a neighborhood, or it can be narrow, one block or one garden.

IAN has provided useful ideas for each kind of starting point, and knows there are many ways that are still to be tried. But the core principle never wavers: Says Carolyn Carlson: “This is about participation.”

'The Three Things': IAN Seattle

Gifts and Dreams: IAN began with a commitment to the gifts and dreams of people with developmental disabilities, often most isolated in community. Connecting the most isolated people provided a toolkit that works for connecting everyone.

Citizens Space: Government can be an effective stimulant for community connection if it understands that its role is to support community initiatives. The Department of Neighborhoods and IAN provide training, small grants, locations for meetings, and connections to the resources of the city. But the neighborhood and its associations are the originators and activists for community building. The boundary is very clear.

Connectors: IAN has thought very purposefully about connectors and connections, as demonstrated by their list of qualities of connectors (reprinted in the **Tools** section of this book.)

Additional Lessons Learned from Involving All Neighbors

- **All communities have connectors**; finding and supporting them is a sure way to enhance community.
- Yet, there is **no one 'best practice'** when it comes to community connections. Flexibility and creativity are important tools.
- People need **'structures for participation'** in order to build community. Practical tools and specific supports are better than nice ideas. One leader said, "We do tree planting, not inclusion!"

The Most Important Stuff

In the Introduction and throughout the stories, we have stressed three common lessons. Let's examine them in depth, because these lessons are the most important stuff.

1. Connections should center on gifts.

Each person finds her or his place in community life through contribution. The framework for community building firmly rests on the identification and mobilization of people's gifts. A community that is growing strong does not waste people--everyone is needed; every one has something to contribute.

Every person has gifts, talents, interests to contribute. So a first step towards community contribution is to listen for and **identify gifts** a person has that she wants to offer or dreams she wants to realize. All of the preceding stories had some mechanism or special time that allowed isolated people to talk about their gifts and dreams while others listened and gave support.

Gifts and dreams are best fulfilled in places where they make sense. You would sing in the choir but not in the library. A person needs to **participate** in places where it makes sense to contribute. Out of this participation and contribution come new relationships and opportunities that lead to friends, meaning, and resources.

A person must be able to be **present** in community life to participate. A lack of accessibility or a lack of available transportation can make it impossible for a person to be a contributor to community life.

The key to moving from the edge to the center is to discover an opportunity where an isolated person can be a contributor. Three questions lead you to the "right place".

- What are the gifts and dreams?
- Where are places for participation where these gifts and dreams make sense?
- What people and resources are needed to make this connection of the person to the right place?

2. Connectors understand the nature of “citizen space”.

The bridge to community is built of relationships. The every day life of **citizens** in communities is where the relationships exist that can build this bridge for isolated people. Services from helping agencies cannot build this bridge. “People not programs” do this work.

Always connect an isolated person to “**citizen space**” that is rich in relationships with opportunities for contribution; associations, congregations, local small business, some government and non-profit agencies all can offer opportunities for relationships. The challenge is getting an isolated person (who is often a human service client) outside of the world of clients and services.

The process of relationship building can be made most effective by following a few simple rules:

- The less the person is identified as a client with a service agency the more likely that the person will be recognized as a person with gifts to offer rather than a needy person.
- People are best connected on the basis of mutuality rather than on the basis of neediness. I should join the choir because I love singing not because I am lonely. Going to an event like a movie or simply being present at the swimming pool will not lead you into relationships and towards community. Working at the movie theatre or being on the swimming team will build relationships. The person must be an active contributor in order to build relationships.
- A person will likely participate and contribute best where he or she joins the purpose of the group out of shared interest.
- Connections to groups offer more possibilities than connections to individuals. Associations, congregations, and local businesses all offer a connection to a group of people where friendships, opportunities and possibilities can arise.

The key is to find a place for participation outside services where an isolated person can be present, participate, and contribute on the basis of shared interest. All of the preceding stories showed groups going to great lengths to keep community connections in citizen space.

Another characteristic of citizen space is that it is rather **small** and always **local**. By that we don't mean that there isn't much citizen space, but that each particular group is not so large that it blurs the importance of real relationships. "Dare to Think Small!" is a good slogan for this concept. Thinking small enough to keep relationships at the center of the enterprise, or local enough to make it possible for mobility—this thinking is key to creating or locating the space for community connections.

It is like fishing: where you fish has everything to do with whether you catch a fish. If your goal is to help a person enter into community, the right place to be is where local people in small groups are actively doing things together.

3. Connectors should be valued.

A connector is a special kind of community leader who opens doors for other people. A connector is a person who is trusted, is influential, and has a wide circle of relationships. A connector believes that all people have gifts to offer. A connector believes her or his community is a good place where residents truly care about each other. A connector is always developing other people's opportunities to contribute, connecting people to new possibilities.

Building connections successfully is about connectors using their relationships effectively much more than it is about ideas, concepts, or methods. A connector can lead a person to the right group and open the door. Another connector within the group can pave the way for a person's participation to be successful. Groups of connected people who are willing to use their relationships for the purposes of building community are **very valuable** people in any community's life.

Connecting as a Job Description

In many cases, a citizen-led connection initiative raises money and hires one of its own to serve as a kind of administrator. After all, a project focused on individual gifts and dreams takes time and effort, and can become overwhelming for volunteers alone. What follows is a kind of job description for this paid connector.

- Recruit other connectors and enroll connection places.
- Carefully listen for gifts and dreams of people to be connected.
- Support connections, which may involve visiting connection places, talking with the person connected about how things are going, helping solve problems that arise, or developing needed resources for the connected person like child care or transportation.
- Handle administrative tasks, engage in fundraising and train other participating citizens.
- Be constantly involved in building relationships for the betterment of the community.

This work requires a seasoned experienced person. It is not the work for a person right out of school, new to the community, or new to community building work.

Also, connectors are rarely successful when their job is half time services and half time community connection. These are two different worlds. The connector needs to be separate from service delivery systems.

Mobilize

Whether connectors are citizen leaders acting as a group of volunteers, or persons paid to support such a group effort, they hold one common goal. Like all community organizers, connectors are working to mobilize others. Every community is an invisible landscape of motivation to act. What do people care about enough to act on? What dreams, goals, concerns, or desires to contribute will lead a person or group to connect with others?

Connectors seek to weave together all the different motivations to act in the community into a common interest. Join us. We need you. The language in every community is unique about how to describe this process of organizing care and motivation to act. Communities might say they are making connections to get stronger, to develop

friendship, to extend hospitality and welcome, or to create more participation among citizens.

Community connection is a natural activity but it will not happen naturally today—without some help. Connectors are the key to successfully building community.

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If those three lessons are the Most Important Stuff, then the following sections might be called Things That Can Get in the Way of the Most Important Stuff. That makes them pretty important stuff, too.

Rules for Institutions

An agency can invest in both services and community connection, but there must be a clear boundary between these activities. “Services to clients with needs” and “connection of contributing citizens” are very different ways of working. It is **very difficult to mix the two** efforts without undermining the connection work.

In our stories, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church and Project Friendship all were citizen-led connection efforts. They asked assistance from service agencies to make the connections successful, or maybe service agencies played a part in their founding. But they remained rooted in citizen space.

Two of our stories were of citizen initiatives that were spun off from large social service agencies. Beyond Welfare had its roots in MICA, and SACC was fostered by Metropolitan Family Services. But both became independent of the agencies that once supported them.

Involving All Neighbors is firmly placed within the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, but IAN is very clear that its role is to support neighborhood connecting initiatives with staff and money, not to initiate them.

The best way for agencies and foundations to be helpful is to ask. Connectors will know what can be helpful and what will not be helpful. But here are a few hints:

- It is generally not helpful to bring “experts” to advise the connection group about how to deal with disabilities and

symptoms. The more service-provider-to-client ways of thinking involved, the harder it is to see the gifts and dreams to be contributed. Protecting the connectors from the influence of helping systems allows the connection project to remain in citizen space.

- Community care, local wisdom, and well-connected people will make connection efforts successful. There are only a few things needed from friendly institutions to support this natural work of community. Projects need funding, a staff person, some resources, and advocacy and support for citizens making their own decisions and choosing their own action.

Rules for Funding

Connection work takes time to develop upon a foundation of local relationships. Local people have to decide what will work in their community. Leadership must come from people trusted by the community.

Funding this work is often a struggle for foundations and sponsoring agencies. For connection work to have the time and the decentralized control that it needs to be effective, funding must be non-categorical and horizontal. The work does not fit into any programmatic funding category. A few other cautions about how to invest money for connection work follow:

- A funding organization should plan on at least three years of funding being necessary to achieve real results. It takes patient funding to make connection work effective. This is not a quick fix.
- A strong local staff person who can support connectors and make connections is essential. This requires a willingness to find and support someone who is very capable and mature—not a bargain to hire for low wages.
- Connectors must find their own way. A sure way to ruin the project is to define goals for the project before building the core connector group. The local leaders need to decide their own name, their own rationale for connection, and their best way to make connections.

- Connecting can't be wholesaled; one "Mary" can never become "cases". Every individual connects from the strength of their own gifts and interests.
- Don't replicate—proliferate!

These cautions do not mean to imply that the results of connectors' work cannot be quantified; on the contrary, there are **very clear outcomes** that can be easily identified:

- Number of gifts identified
- Number of groups involved in connection
- Number of community connectors engaged
- Number of connections made

Project Friendship, for example, has a detailed database of every connection made, the group involved and particular person in the group that welcomed the new member, gifts and dreams of the person to be connected, etc. Beyond Welfare has done statistical analysis showing that relationship building works as a path out of poverty. Funding projects such as these is not a leap of faith; real results can be shown.

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Connecting everybody is important stuff. This stuff is offered as a roadmap, as a route across the bridge into community life. Connectors are the guides. Traveling this road will result in stronger, engaged communities where everyone has value and all gifts are given. What follows in the next two sections are some things to take on the journey.