

REFLECTIONS

on Making Connections

JOURNEY TO ENGAGEMENT

A first-person reflection on
how to engage residents



Garland Yates is a senior associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Site Team Leader for Denver Making Connections. This 1989 photo is in the Birmingham neighborhood of Augusta, GA., home of one of the dozens of community groups he assisted in the 1980s.

When Garland Yates talks about the role residents can and need to play in a community change process, when he talks about the process of residents overcoming uncertainty to become leaders, when he talks about the importance of giving young people opportunities, the talk doesn't just come from his head or his heart. It also comes from his life.

“I had just been thinking about the dilemma I had created for myself. I was nearly 17. I was at a dead end.”

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Making Connections is the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s long-term initiative to improve the lives of low-income children and their families living in struggling neighborhoods in 10 cities across the United States. It emphasizes the need for residents themselves to be deeply involved in the transformation process.

It has been nearly 40 years but Garland Yates still remembers the day, a warm-for-November day that would have been good for playing basketball with friends except for one problem. Most of his friends were in school. Garland had recently dropped out, for the third time.

With no one to hang out with, Garland sat in the small living room of his Petersburg, Virginia home, watching some long forgotten show. But then an ad caught his attention, an ad he will never forget. It was a recruitment ad for the brand-new Jobs Corps, one of the first War on Poverty programs. It asked, “Have you dropped out of high school?” And, “Do you want an opportunity to build your skills?”

Garland’s response: “Hell yes!” He quickly wrote down the address. He says he still asks himself, “Where was the pencil? What paper did I use?” The son of a share-cropper, paper and pencils were not as easy to find in his home as they may have been in others.

He is also still a little amazed that he managed to write a letter expressing his interest in the program, found an envelope and a stamp and put it in the mail. “That was a set of actions not part of my normal behavior.”

The fact that he had nothing else to do was one reason. A second reason was that he had just been “thinking about the dilemma I had created for myself....I was nearly 17. I was at a dead end.”

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It took several months to get a response. At the time the program was so new that there were only a handful of Jobs Corps centers running. But eventually he did get a response and it told him to go to his local employment office. He became one of the first two teenagers from Virginia to become part of the program.

He was sent to a new center in Indianapolis in May. By September, this 8th grade dropout had passed his GED test. He had the equivalent of a diploma before his high school class had gotten their diplomas.

But he got much more from the experience than a diploma. He got two sets of jobs skills that would both prove invaluable: printing and office administration.

And he got a world view. He remembers long conversations with his dorm counselor, who recommended books for him to read, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. “It was the beginning of a journey of me feeling more aware of what was going on in the world,” Garland reflects now. “I began to develop a world view about justice. I began to question the Vietnam War.” And he got “a sense that I needed to do my part.”

He used his GED to get into the Army Security Agency, but he used his intelligence and new skills to find a non-combat role for himself.

When he got out he moved to Troy, N.Y., where a sister and other family members were living. He got a

job as a printer. But it was his other Job Corps skills — the ability to administer an office — that “allowed me to build a career around my beliefs. It prepared me for career options that I just didn’t have before.” Eventually his knowledge of how to operate an office allowed him to become the director of a small community organization.

But that job came after a series of projects he took on as a volunteer, trying to “do his part.” Working with students at nearby Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), he helped turn an abandoned laundry into a teen center. When the RPI students went on to more political pursuits, he kept the center going. Seeing the kids’ need for help in school, he helped build a tutoring program, going into the schools to talk with their teachers so that the tutoring would be connected to their school work. To pay the tutors, he helped convince the city to pursue state funding.

Garland then got involved in efforts to use FHA money to develop affordable housing and to use Community Development Block Grant money to transform an even larger abandoned building, a former furniture warehouse, into a service center.

This second project helped him see the political dimension to “doing his part.” After initially pursuing the warehouse rehabilitation project, the city began to back away. Garland’s “inquisitiveness about the paperwork” caused him to find out why: requirements that the city come up with 25% of the money and agree to keep the center operating for at least 20 years were not being fully honored. He also found a rule that required a city to finish any

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projects that it had started. This discovery gave Garland and his allies the leverage they needed to get the city to put up the money to complete the building.

Garland became the vice chair of the organization set up to manage the building, into which he moved the teen center and tutoring program. Within months the center got a day care started and found space for a community room.

Residents began to see the center as a “place for people with grievances.” Garland, who by then had become the president of the center’s board, learned about other issues. The school system did not participate in the school lunch program even though the vast majority of its students would qualify. He helped get that changed. He also learned that the high school had only one African-American teacher. The school system agreed to recruit more Black teachers.

When the board decided that the center’s director was not adequately doing his job, they asked Garland to become the director. It was the beginning of his career as a professional community builder.

Residents kept coming in to complain about the lack of youth programs, the broken-down state of sidewalks and a dozen other concerns. Garland remembered what he had learned about the federal program that helped fund the rehabilitation of the old furniture warehouse, the Community Development Block Grant program (CDBG). It required that some of the money go to low income neighbor-

hoods and low income housing, that the city do a needs assessment and a formal plan, and that residents have a chance to provide input. The city hadn’t been doing any of this.

To influence how this federal money was used in Troy, 14 neighborhoods came together to form the Neighborhood Action Council of Troy, or N-ACT. Perhaps predictably, Garland became its president.

N-ACT got a law passed that required the city manager to put together a plan for the use of all of its CDBG money, including the money the city spent on its own operations. This law established the Troy Citizens Forum to review the plan. Garland became the chair. He was 25.

In 1979 Garland left Troy to go to work on these issues nationally, taking a job with something called the National Citizens Monitoring Project of the Working Group for Community Development Reform. His job was to help other communities understand the CDBG program, research how this money was being used in their communities, and push to get this money spent in ways that directly benefited low-income residents in these neighborhoods. This path led to a series of jobs that eventually landed him at the Annie E. Casey Foundation to work on its Rebuilding Communities and Making Connections initiatives.

He says now that he learned from all of these national jobs, but that “my notions about this work began to be framed by my experience in the Job Corps, growing up in the era of Jim Crow laws, and in Troy.” Indeed,

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when Garland talks about the process of residents seeing their abilities and becoming leaders, of engaging young people, of the need to build the capacity of residents and their organizations to make change, it’s obvious that it all comes out of personal experience.

He hesitates to say too much about these early experiences because he doesn’t want to play the “experience card” with people just as he doesn’t want them to play the “Ph.D. card” with him. He will say that “when theory meets practice there is always a gap. It’s not the same. That gap can be narrower and less disruptive if you are able to overlay it with experience.”

When Garland is asked about how to engage residents, develop leaders and build momentum for change, a listener can’t help but sense how grounded his thinking is in his experience. When he tells future leaders like Denver’s Candace Redshirt that she has it in her to be a leader — even though at the time she remembers she couldn’t get a word out in his presence — they hear him. When he talks about the uncertainty that a person like Candace must overcome to become a leader, he clearly speaks from experience.

He remembers that he was “caught off guard” when he was asked to take on his first staff role with a community organization. He simply had never thought of himself “as someone who could do that.” Before that, he had never thought of himself as someone who would be able to take on a leadership role on an organization’s board. It simply happened over time. “I got more and more comfortable taking on a leadership position.”

As Garland talks about his early experiences, a listener also can see parallels with his current thinking about how to engage residents and transform low income communities. In many ways his life is a manifestation of what he has come to believe about personal and community transformation.

He notes that the Job Corps came from a national consensus about the need to provide opportunities to those who had grown up in poverty, the same kind of consensus he now argues is essential to mobilize a transformation effort in a Making Connections site.

His conviction about the need to build the capacity of low income families and community groups also comes from his experiences. He knows that if Job Corps hadn’t developed his capacities at a crucial time in his life, he wouldn’t have been ready to run that community organization in Troy, the first step in his community-building career.

In his subsequent work assisting community groups across the country, he also saw first hand the crucial need to build capacity in low income communities. “I would go into these communities and meet with a group of people and talk with them about the potential of the CDBG program and there would be a lot of excitement and determination. But I’d go back six months later and not much progress had been made. I asked myself why. I came to see that the organizational part of these groups was the weakest. I began to give them more than TA about a particular funding program. I began to engage them in conversations about their organizational dynamics.”

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His appreciation of — and skepticism about — community organizing also has come directly from his experience. In Troy, the N-ACT coalition got a 3-year Campaign for Human Development grant that allowed it to hire an organizer. Garland remembers clashing with this person nearly from day one.

“I didn’t think he respected the fact that our neighborhood association was there before he was. We were going to define our work. No ideology was going to define it for us.” Indeed, Garland now believes that the first step for someone trying to start a Making Connections-like initiative is to learn as much as he or she can about the local community and its history and culture.

“This was my first brush with organizing. I thought right away, ‘This ain’t going to work here.’ I appreciated and understood organizing, but I didn’t appreciate the dogma.” He remembers one disagreement about what Garland’s role as executive director should be. In organizing, an iron-clad rule is that staff never speak for members. But what about staff who are also long-time residents? Is their role as a resident somehow no longer valid? Garland didn’t think so.

“My job was to help people get clear about what they wanted to do. They expected that, as executive director, I would represent what they wanted. This organizer was trying to put me in a box that would confuse me about my role. I didn’t buy someone from Minnesota telling us what to do.” Interestingly, this same issue came up nearly 30 years later in a retreat of Denver Making Connections, where many

residents now have staff roles. It was a heated discussion!

Garland believes that what happened to him is not unique. “Young outspoken Black and Brown men get marginalized in the organizing process by its rules and dogma.”

All this said, his experiences have also taught him that organizing is absolutely necessary. “The knowledge about how to engage and empower residents that comes out of organizing is extremely important. We need to learn from it, not marginalize it.”

As he began to try to build the capacity of community groups he came to realize that “the best thing out there about how to do this was community organizing. I saw that the places with an organizing connection were the places having the most impact.”

When he began trying to build a Making Connections Initiative he looked for ways to apply the principles and understandings that come out of organizing. He says he didn’t emphasize organizing “because he thought it was the right thing to do ideologically,” but because he believed it was right strategically.

“I’ve not seen a community able to organize itself around an agenda and make change happen without some connection to organizing and without some outside presence.” He also believes that a long-term change effort simply won’t succeed if a community can’t organize itself around an agenda, develop its capacity and build relationships

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with the institutions that control the resources coming into that community. “The sustainability of an initiative like Making Connections is only going to come from the community itself.”

He acknowledges that this is mostly theory. “We need to try it in a very intentional way and learn as much as we can from the experience.” But again, it is theory based on personal experience. He has witnessed what a motivated and organized group of people can do to bring about change, starting with his experiences in Troy. He says it is why he pushes so hard about the need to engage residents and invest in building their capacities.

“The importance of this is so clear to me that I’m sure I sound arrogant or self-righteous at times. I don’t intend it that way. It’s just that my belief is so strong because it is more than 30 years in the making.”

Beginning in the summer of 2003, Garland and many other Making Connections Site Team Leaders and/or Site Coordinators were asked 19 questions about resident engagement in their sites. It took Garland four interviews to respond to these questions. Clearly this is a topic on which he has much to say!

These interview were conducted, organized and edited by Tim Saasta, who has acted as Garland’s “diarist” since 2000.

How important is resident engagement?

I am absolutely convinced, based on 30 years of experience, that when residents get turned on or charged up about something in their neighborhood, they make change happen. The problem is they don’t have many opportunities, and too often what they’re getting charged up about is the fact that something that is supposed to be helping them is doing something that they don’t agree with.

You look at it: residents have turned whole blocks of crack houses into residential living spaces. They’ve turned whole rows of dingy nightclubs and strip bars into meaningful businesses. When they get fired up they have caused safety issues to change, reductions in crime, they have caused kids to get educated better.

If you take that energy and combine it with the institutional resources and opportunities that exist here and get them working in concert, you can get something done. I have seen what residents can do when they drive the process. It is not a matter of politics and ideology. That’s the problem: we get caught up in that. It is not ideology, it is self-interest. They live in a neighborhood, their kids are going to these schools, their children are being abused and raped, and there is lead poisoning. They have the most to gain and the most to lose, and therefore the sustainability of change is going to rely heavily on how much they own it, not just how much they participate in it. That’s common sense.

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If that is the case, then why do we keep looking at these differences around ideological and philosophical and political lines around who can make change happen? It has nothing to do with that. I don’t draw those distinctions. I just think that residents ought to have a greater say. I’ve seen that play itself out in small and big ways.

I don’t know why we ignore the evidence. For a long time Black folks accepted the lynchings, they accepted the burnings, they accepted being legally characterized as inferior citizens. But when they no longer tolerated their kids getting a poor education, they said this is going to change, and they changed it.

Women accepted being inferior, they accepted being relegated to lesser roles, accepted all that until they decided that they wanted the right to vote. Then they changed it.

If people want change — when they see that change is needed and take ownership over it — then it can work. That doesn’t mean it’s going to be peaceful. That doesn’t mean it’s not going to be messy.

If the cities believe it when they say these communities are important to their future, they got to get these people in. It will piss people off and you will be alienated a few times. But I feel so strongly about resident engagement that I accept this consequence. We need to talk about it. We need to give life to it, but that will only happen if there is someplace where the passion can come out. And CMAR [Community Mobilization for Action and Results] to me is that place. Otherwise, it’s going to be the academics of the world saying, “You

shouldn’t talk about that because I am doing a big study on it.”

Resident engagement is also important because I don’t think that there are the resources nor the political will to solve all the problems in these communities. A critical part of the answer is the strengths and assets that residents bring to it or that they can mobilize from their neighborhoods. They have to be a part of the solution. Otherwise, it’s not sustainable.

Socialism assumes that government can solve all our problems. But that’s not true. We need government, but anybody who thinks it can solve all of a community’s problems is like a client with himself as a lawyer: he’s just foolish. There needs to be a partnership of community and others to solve problems. The community should not be organized around a single point of view. There needs to be a framework for accountability that connects as many different kinds of activities and institutions and perspectives as possible.

Resident engagement is critical because the work can’t succeed without it. And I think most people out there want it, most institutions I run into want it, they just don’t know how and they’re afraid of the land mines and the histories.

Another reason is that the residents in these neighborhoods are disconnected from mainstream democracy. They feel isolated. They wonder, “What’s the use?” They don’t believe that their participation is going to make any difference. So they’re dropping out. I

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think that endangers democracy. It endangers the whole notion of “of the people, by the people, for the people.” To reconnect them means giving them a venue that they know and feel is responsible to them.

What role should residents have in Making Connections in your site?

We go back and forth here over this question of whether it should be ‘resident-driven’ or not. I think that’s an artificial framing of it. I think what the residents need is to have enough leverage to be an effective player. To make sure that their views are heard. To make sure that they have framed their accountability standards and that they are part of decision-making and thinking and evaluation, and that the whole initiative responds in part to their view of how things are and what needs to be improved.

I don’t know what the right words are. I just think that ‘resident driven’ versus ‘resident engagement’ is an artificial frame and it doesn’t serve any purpose. We want residents to be at the table in a way so that they can have an impact, can have an influence and can leverage resources. That’s the goal. We don’t care whether you call that “led” or “empowered” or whatever. People just need to be representing themselves.

I’m also saying it’s not about the words or strategies we use. It’s not about mobilizing. It isn’t about whether you do leadership development. It’s about residents being able to have their say.

They need to be strong enough players to partner with people in outside institutions. Because of the way we’ve approached these issues and done community development, the delivery systems in these neighborhoods are fragmented and splintered and disconnected. Residents need to have enough leverage to impose more connectedness among the community’s resources. They need to have much greater influence on all these issues than they have had in the past.

So why residents?

The self-interest of the system is connected to the fragmentation. The resources that flow into these communities serve the interests of particular voices or institutions, not the residents. That part of the equation has to be changed, and the people who will benefit the most from that change are the residents themselves. Conversely, the residents have the most to lose if they don’t change it. Missing is that “player” more than that “point of view.”

One of the reasons that all of these reform efforts don’t seem to work is that the residents are not engaged in some way?

That’s my point of view. The system’s reform efforts are about improving the system’s viability and its relevance rather than thinking

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about what needs to be changed so that families and residents are better off. And each system isn’t concerned about the viability of other systems, only itself. It sees itself as the solution. It’s almost incapable of really reforming itself without that kind of intervention.

Again, the group with the greatest self interest in an intervention like that is the residents. The people in Denver are beginning to experiment with the notion of “demand-driven” or “community-centered systems change,” and there’s an increasing body of knowledge around this idea.

Residents should also be a significant voice in tagging and understanding what the problems are. They should advocate that the planning and community development be grounded on a notion that there are some assets that the community can contribute. They should be involved in identifying and naming the problems, identifying and framing the potential solutions, and playing a role in setting up an accountability framework.

They should be heavily involved in who’s going to be responsible for what, when they have to do it, how many resources should be allocated to do it, how to keep it accountable and judging whether it’s been successful. Residents need to be a prominent voice in that process.

All along the way, the skills and the tools and the supports that they need to play each of these roles ought to be a part of the change process. We ought to not see it as just investing in programs and prototypes and models. We also need to invest in the residents so they

have their own point of view about whether this is working or not.

Because it’s their lives?

Yes. And there will be no solutions that are all about money and policy. It will always come down to what people are able to do for themselves.

Why is it important for residents to frame the solutions?

Let me take a few of these problems and try to break them down. Let’s take teenage pregnancy. There’s a cultural or class bias that starts to define the issue of teenage pregnancy. Different cultures see this issue differently. Some cultures say you should bear as many children as you can in your earliest years.

So it is not just a scientific or social analysis about what teenage pregnancy is, nor is it just a social analysis about what drives younger people to do it. It’s about sexual behavior, sexual mores, it’s about opportunity, it’s about love, it’s about affection, it’s about intimacy. There are a whole lot of things in there that social policy isn’t going to deal with. So sorting out what the right values are, what the acceptable mores are, is related to how the community feels about it. Any at-

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tempt to solve that problem has to make space for that. Better yet, the community has to make sure that if they give anybody permission to work on that problem in their neighborhood, that they are a part of it. Otherwise, they should resist it.

The other example is predatory lending. Many people make a judgment about predatory lending and how the two-tiered financial markets operate. They believe that if residents just were better educated about the problems with a “sub-prime” loan, this would stop predatory lending. To me there is a class judgment in that. The assumption is that people don’t know what they’re doing and they make bad choices because of a lack of knowledge.

But when I look at my own life experience — or when I try to understand and talk to people in the community about what’s going on — I find that people make what for them are very rational choices given the moment, given the need, given their financial resources. Pay-day lending and these check-cashing services have been identified as predatory. But imagine going to a bank and you’re not able to keep a minimum balance in your account. At the end of the month you find yourself with a bunch of fees on your statement. So, if you are living at the margin and you have \$8 or \$9 of service fees that cause you to be overdrawn, every transaction is going to cost you \$35. You could end up in a mess.

So a choice not to have a relationship with a bank could be made on that basis, not on the basis that people don’t understand banking. In fact, it could be that people understand very well how the banking industry operates!

Another example is if you have a minimum wage job and you haven’t been there very long and you get a used, unreliable car that breaks down on Tuesday afternoon and you’re not going to get paid until Friday. Now you know that you don’t have enough money to fix that car. But you know that if you don’t have that car, you can’t get to Friday to get paid. So you go to a pay-day lender to borrow \$500 to get your car fixed. That is not a bad choice, it’s the only choice. When Friday comes and you don’t have the money to pay that loan off, rolling it over is your only choice.

If we’re going to deal with these kinds of problems, getting people involved who are affected by these problems helps make sure that we take into consideration their reality and not be judgmental about it.

People who consider themselves well educated formally may overlook all these dynamics and leap to a place where residents could feel like they’re more about justifying their financial literacy course than they are about understanding the situation.

But financial literacy is a useless solution unless you can construct a set of alternative financial products or services that will enable people to do what they’re doing over there at the check-cashing service at a more reasonable price. People need that unsecured \$500 loan, not education about how the banks work.

Certainly that’s not to say that education isn’t important. But it shouldn’t just be education about avoiding pay-day loans. It also needs to be education about how their predicament fits into this larger issue of predatory

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lending, how they and many other people with limited incomes are victimized by predatory lending, and what they can do about it.

This is a good example of how we often start our analysis of an issue in the wrong place. The traditional analysis of predatory lending starts with the understanding that sub-prime lenders operate on the principle that these residents are bad credit risks. We respond by saying we are going to educate residents about how to better manage their finances.

Where we need to start is to acknowledge that people are in a predicament, understand it, then respond to it, not to our interpretation of their predicament. By focusing on the problem as residents experience it, I think we end up with a broader understanding of the problem and how to deal with it.

An understanding of the problems that residents need to develop as well?

This is why I think that resident engagement can’t be just about building capacity. It has to be about building power as well. That plays out in two ways. When you do the analysis of conditions, you come head to head with the notion that what’s going on in these communities is because of racial discrimination and people being poor and isolated – structural impediments. They don’t have much influence. They’re lumped together and isolated from affordable credit and usable services. Everything costs them more, and everything is further away.

Some of those structural barriers have to be changed as a part of the change process. If

we help people understand how to get better and more affordable housing, but banks won’t lend money, then that’s not going to solve the problem. So there are some structural issues.

But residents also need to be able to understand and influence the disconnected way that services and supports happen in the neighborhood. Communities have to have enough power to change how this dynamic plays out in their neighborhood. They have to be able to engage those organizations to be more accountable. Otherwise, they can never build an effective partnership with external forces. There needs to be a fundamental change in how business is done both inside and outside the neighborhood. Families need to build the power to influence those dynamics.

So how do they build the power?

They build the power through being together about what they are trying to accomplish and demonstrating that they can pull the community’s resources and assets together in support of that purpose. And then they build relationships with external forces that brings about a new definition of the residents’ role in the community.

I don’t want to say that it’s just getting people organized. What builds the power is people being together and being able to bring their own resources to bear on a problem and then building relationships with and influencing others outside the neighborhood.

A similar thing is being said about social capital. The point about building social capital

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is to tighten up the relationships and firm up the connections internally and then position yourself so that you can build relationships with the right external forces. The difference is that you have to be clear that what you need is power to influence the structural issues and policies as well as influence what goes on in the neighborhood: the way services are provided, the way schools function, the way nonprofits operate, how people spend their money. You have to mobilize a critical mass of the community’s resources around what ought to be done. That is the point of the alliances. It is to put those resources in line.

Most communities can’t put together a whole transition plan with the knowledge base that they have.

Most communities have to rely on outsiders to do that and they come and go and they tend to use the information and data for their own reasons. They also use the data and information to talk about what’s wrong in the community. Denver’s Community Learning Network gives these neighborhoods the capacity to know which data they need, to know where that data exists and, if it didn’t exist, how to create it.

You could argue that just about every movement is based on a new understanding: a new understanding of women, of blacks, of Chicanos.

I think you will find that new understanding came from the people’s ability to grow their own understanding. That is a fundamental piece of resident engagement.

Denver’s Community Learning Network has been a model for the role information can play. I’m amazed at the creativity and the innovation this group uses to inform the community — the website, creating the TA database, the neighborhood profiles, the learning journal [*The Learning Connection*], the annual report to community. We can learn a lot from what they are doing.

One issue of *The Learning Connection* focuses on the demographic shift that has caused racial tension in schools. It examines the changing demographics in the schools and how that has led to conflict and tension. Those numbers help put those conflicts into perspective. It doesn’t seem quite as arbitrary. Then you realize that the whole population has changed in a 10-year period, but the social support structures have not changed at all.

Most residents don’t know the research on these problems, so how can we expect them to come up with solutions?

They may not know the research, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have the knowledge. The difference between knowledge and research is that knowledge usually comes from years of practical experience. Research comes from trying to match variables together and trying to make bits and pieces of information and data tell a story. It’s not that either one is wrong, but you for sure don’t want to be driven exclusively by one when you’re talking about affecting somebody’s livelihood. So helping people to understand the value of their knowledge and how to organize that knowledge is important.

“The outside institutions with resources and opportunities are just waiting, chomping at the bit. The more the residents get organized, the more these institutions are willing to play around failing schools, around neighborhood revitalization, around workforce issues, around child welfare.”

And helping them understand as much as they’re willing to understand about research methods is critical. We ought to be skeptical of any research about a group of people if that group doesn’t have the opportunity and the capacity to vet it. In Making Connections that’s critical. The learning partnership is the right place for that. The learning partnership gives the opportunity [to involve residents in research]. It is how we should judge whether a local learning partnership is meeting its mandate or not.

Other roles for residents?

They ought to have enough influence to make sure a couple of things happen. First, what gets described as “volunteer” work and “professional” work should not be based on who’s credentialed and who’s not. Credentials should not determine who’s an “expert” and therefore who’s authorized to reap the economic benefits of the initiative itself. The residents ought to be able to make demands that force us to push beyond traditional boundaries to opportunities to learn and to be paid as a professional.

Also, if we’re defining long-term success as economic stability, we ought to make sure that we’re not using the same outdated standards when we employ residents. The federal poverty standard is about the most useless piece of information we have in this country. We ought to help people fashion a new framework and enable residents to demand that this framework reflects what it takes to live in the community now, not in 1930. I think that the residents have to call that question and they need to be at the table.

How has it played out? What roles are residents playing?

I’m amazed at how much I thought about this subject is actually becoming reality in Denver — many of the things that we just talked about. That residents need to be a part of the learning. They need to be an influential part in all of it. That anybody that buys into this work ought to be willing to make a commitment to make sure that the resident voice is always there. And that the residents increasingly have the capacity and the leverage to have influence across the initiative, including in their neighborhoods. And that they can do professional jobs.

The numbers are hard for me to believe. There are something like 35 people who are getting paid to do work on Making Connections in Denver. Maybe three fourths of those people are residents or were residents or were recruited from the neighborhood. All the partners who hired them use the family economic self-sufficiency standard as a barometer for their salary and benefits. The decisions they make through governing, the partnerships they make, how fast this work has spread in the neighborhoods and how compelling it is to other partners — all that has amazed me.

The notion that there would be resistance — that the people locally wouldn’t care and they wouldn’t buy into this stuff — is shattered. The outside institutions with resources

“The way people in Denver are aware of these numbers and how these numbers constantly go up is mind-boggling to me. They’re approaching 7,000 people. There are hundreds of meetings in a year. I think that’s incredible.”

and opportunities are just waiting, chomping at the bit. The more the residents get organized, the more these institutions are willing to play around failing schools, around neighborhood revitalization, around workforce issues, around child welfare.

I’m amazed at how the residents being organized has demonstrated the value of what they bring to this process in terms of thinking about and defining problems, researching them, overseeing the work and judging its success. They have just taken the local players by surprise. It’s growing so fast. There are so many residents.

The pace of engagement and involvement of residents is so critical that they set up some elaborate ways to track it and understand it. Every meeting is recorded. Every participant is recorded. They divide participants into three categories depending on how regularly someone goes to meetings.

The way they are aware of these numbers and how these numbers constantly go up is mind-boggling to me. They’re approaching somewhere in the neighborhood of 7,000 people. There are hundreds of meetings in a year. I think that’s incredible. Everybody’s getting more interested and there’s more awareness of the value of resident engagement in ways that they had not dreamed of. Everybody’s committed to it and it just keeps growing.

What strategies have you used to engage residents?

What’s interesting in Denver is the strategies for the most part have been designed by the residents themselves. And to the degree that they come out of a model or tradition, it is because their own research suggests that this is something they ought to learn from. The most graphic illustrations of that are the story circles and the different organizing approaches they are using.

Even the community organizing groups that participate in Making Connections have stretched beyond their ideological boxes. One used to be a church-based organization but now they’re organizing with parents in a school. Another might have been about going into a housing complex and organizing people building by building. Now they’re going door to door. They might have been about organizing people as individuals and now they’re talking about a coalition.

The residents themselves have made the commitment to be organized, to be a partner in this process, and they choose the strategies based on what makes sense to them.

The one thing that is a constant throughout it all is that there is no attempt to influence what they do. We try to make sure that their expectations are real. We don’t try to make people abandon their grievances that they bring to the table. We don’t try to interfere or intervene in a way that avoids conflict

“Whatever the model is in Denver, people are designing it themselves. And they’re not leaving their grievances and their histories at the door. They’re working through them and they’re forming what looks like potentially lasting relationships.”

or controversy. That’s for the people in Denver to deal with. We can’t play that role.

But what has happened is that people work it out. The best illustration involves the principals and the parents. They were at each other’s throats in these schools. Principals weren’t interested in getting the parents organized and parents weren’t interested in working with principals. They’re so used to organizing against the principals that they’re yelling at each other. In fact, there are a couple of parent groups that refused to participate in Making Connections because of that.

But when they started talking together about problems and solutions and what they wanted to see, a different set of relationships emerged. Several principals have gotten deeply involved in the community process. These partnerships are forming, and what they’ve been doing together in the Making Connections neighborhoods around education — the kind of programs and initiatives that they’ve been starting together — have spread. What was once a neighborhood school transformation initiative between parents and teachers and principals has spread throughout the city and is now called the Transforming Schools Initiative.

I think that the bonds are stronger because the principals and the parents acknowledged the existence of these grievances and didn’t try to wish them away.

A similar thing has happened between the transportation agency and the residents on the West Side. The RTD had created a light rail stop on the West Side. Then they proposed to

do a mixed-use development on the land they owned next to this stop. The residents organized against it and won. But the key was that in the process of this fight they found a way to work with each other. The residents proposed a Mercado for the site. The transportation people agreed to try it last summer. It went well. They are expanding it this year.

Whatever the model is in Denver, people are designing it themselves. And they’re not leaving their grievances and their histories at the door. They’re working through them and they’re forming what looks like potentially lasting relationships.

A good model is the Story Circle. They wanted to get to know each other in their neighborhoods. One resident was aware of a Story Circle idea being used in some Appalachian communities. They got together and researched it and located that group and invited them in and the group did some training. The residents then designed a Story Circle process, hired residents to be facilitators and wrote a Story Circle Action Guide. It’s not a family circle approach. It’s not a neighborhood circle. It’s something they designed based on what they wanted to accomplish and what they knew about.

There are no guaranteed strategies. People know what makes sense for them. If you place the resources there, they will make the best use of them. In Denver they created some new models, changed some old ones, it’s a hodgepodge, but it is their way of doing organizing.

What has made it work is that they sat down and reached agreement about what they

“What I have learned through my own experience in community change is that relationships are key. It’s a tumultuous journey. It’s not transactional. The people you are traveling with need to be respectful of each other so that the journey doesn’t turn on any one transaction.”

all saw as the core elements of organizing and what the guiding principles for organizing in Making Connections would be.

In a sense you brought a new strategy to this. It wasn’t a model of organizing, it was principles of organizing?

I brought two things that related to organizing. One was a conviction that the residents in the neighborhoods have to be significant players. And so they needed opportunities and venues and resources to bring themselves together to be able to think and act collectively.

The other thing I brought is what I have learned through my own experience in community change, which is that relationships are key. It’s a tumultuous journey. It’s not transactional. The people you are traveling that journey with need to be respectful of each other and understanding of each other to the point where the journey doesn’t turn on any one transaction.

One way I’ve seen that manifest in the change process is through community organizing. One thing I’ve learned about community organizing is the importance of talking to people and getting them to come together.

I also brought an understanding that you need to know as much as you can about a community. I learned what Denver was trying to do already to deal with these problems: what the government and philanthropy and the neighborhoods themselves were trying to do. Then I tried to learn the history of social change in this community. I learned about the

brown rights movement and the tumultuous period when the universities there were trying to expand and what impact that had on these neighborhoods. And what role the Catholic Church played in that. I learned about how a cultural commercial area had been allowed to deteriorate and how a community had catalyzed its revitalization. I learned the history of elections there.

Based on that, I started to engage with different groups of people around that knowledge. Not around what I thought ought to happen or what anybody else thought, but around that knowledge. I wanted to get people’s sense of what went wrong and where they were. And from that I wanted to identify a group of people who had demonstrated energy and interest in talking about how to move from what they had learned. I wanted to engage people into thinking about and identifying the tremendous number of opportunities that might exist to do something in many different venues.

Why did you decide to work with existing organizing groups?

They have skills, history, relationships and track records. All the prerequisites for being successful.

This is one of our basic strategies. If you start with the assumption that there is an infrastructure in place that has developed over

“All the things you need to fuel this notion of change are in the community. You have to provide an opportunity for these resources to become a part of what you’re doing. Our role is helping these folks work and think together as opposed to creating something new.”

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several decades but it’s going in a different direction than you are, then you are faced with a very simple question: Do you try to build something else?

I think a major shortcoming of comprehensive community initiatives is they all tried to build something new. Casey’s Rebuilding Communities Initiative was the first one that I am aware of that tried to work with existing resident resources.

If I have to rebuild something from the ground, I need to remember that it’s taken these people 50 years to get to where they are today. That’s going to be a real tough task and you aren’t going to get anyone’s help with that.

If you take the asset-based notion — that our approach to neighborhood revitalization is to focus on that neighborhood’s assets — then you have to look at and understand what the assets are and work with those assets. You are pushed to work with what’s there.

The other thing to remember is that these groups for the most part have survived on relationships. In their relationships there is respect, there’s integrity, there is some level of support from community and outside of the community.

So all the things you need to fuel this notion of change are, to some degree, in place. You have to provide an outlet and an opportunity for those resources to become a part of what you’re doing. Our role is helping those folks create a framework for working together and thinking together as opposed to creating something else.

If there is some infrastructure that is already on the ground doing organizing and resident engagement, we found that they have expectations about how they will grow and mature, but they don’t have resources. And the [funders] for sure don’t put the resources in them if they go against what the funders think ought to happen.

So if you have this infrastructure that has experience and some knowledge and a track record — mediocre or not — then you have to work with that. That is what we mean by asset-based community development. That was what drove me to work with these folks.

The challenges still exist. Again this is related to culture. Most of the organizing orthodoxies have developed around a particular perspective about organizing that has fostered competition, people trying to outdo each other. Essentially, they have the same general notion about how you make change happen, but the intensity with which they compete with each other often is dysfunctional.

The challenge is to work with them to find opportunities for them to work together but still remain as truthful as possible to their own orthodoxy. That’s the tricky part: it requires you to have some competencies around community organizing in order to engage people at that level. They will stretch their boundaries initially if it doesn’t feel like you’re stretching them. But then after they’ve stretched their boundaries and see themselves being successful, they stop worrying about stretching. They see it as growing.

“An immediate connection for the organizers was the notion that, in order for Making Connections to work, the community-organizing infrastructure had to be strengthened. Framing it like that piqued their interest.”

How did you approach organizers in Denver?

We saw that organizing in Denver represented many strands of thinking. Mike Kromrey and MOP were connected to one of the national networks, PICO. ACORN was there. There were several homegrown orthodoxies too. Patty Lawless comes out of the Paulo Friere notion. A lot of people in Denver come to organizing with that set of assumptions. Then there is an African American history there that is tied to the '60s civil rights notion of civic activism. You have the Annunciation church. You have some other faith-based approaches. And of course you have the Crusade for Justice.

When we looked at the history of community organizing in Denver, we found there have been times that organizing had been fairly respected. Perhaps it had been seen as trendy. It was the thing to do at the time. But that time had passed and that fad was no longer on anyone's radar screen.

Consequently, the organizing capacity that existed in Denver was in big trouble. It was very weak, very under-supported. The support it did have came mostly from national sources, not any from Denver.

An immediate connection for the organizers was the notion that, in order for MC to work, the community-organizing infrastructure had to be strengthened and supported. If we were not able to pull that off as the first step, then we were not going to have much success. Framing it like that piqued the interest of the organizers.

The scan helped us understand the different approaches in Denver and allowed us to talk about it in a way that everyone could see their self-interest.

So rather than looking at and supporting all of these isolated pieces, our strategy was to get these organizing approaches to work together to build a power base among families in the neighborhoods, a base that could have influence, that would be intelligent, that would be informed.

MOP could still be MOP, but what we wanted MOP to do was help build this powerful constituency. That might mean working with city government and others who they might not have worked with in the past, who they may have seen as the antagonist.

Also, MOP organized mostly in churches. But we're concerned about the families who may not show up in these church pews or, even if they do, nobody pays attention to them — public housing families, families who are in and out of the child welfare system, those families.

We thought about how to carry out an organizing process that protects the integrity of what each group is doing, but expands what they are doing. So rather than just look at churches, they looked at public housing complexes; rather than just look at people who showed up in the church pews, they began going door-to-door and doing one-on-ones outside their congregations.

We tried to work with them — not work for them or dictate to them — and engage them

“There are a lot of myths surrounding organizing, such as the myth that residents enjoy being confrontative. People don’t like putting themselves out like that. They don’t like being angry. They don’t like exposing themselves as rabble-rousers.”

in a thinking process that gets them invested because they see it as in their self-interest, but that also expands their notions a little.

Saying that you have these effective organizing strategies was one thing, but we wanted them to examine the power dimensions more closely and more intentionally. How much power did they really have? How much had they improved the lives of the people they were trying to empower? Now, I didn’t talk to them about power in that way. But I did talk to them about the importance of having families as a powerful constituency.

Wasn’t another part of your strategy to focus on showing what organizing could accomplish?

In order to get there, they had to get more acceptance, they had to be seen as part of the solution. That’s where the relationship building early on was very important. Working on the summits became critical because they involved building new relationships.

If people didn’t feel good, they could walk. But the summits turned out to be something everybody felt good about and it got everybody’s attention.

Organizers showed their stuff and people benefited from it. With a little effort, the city would get 50 people to their meetings. Organizers held a rally and got 75 people. In a matter of a few short weeks, we were able to put on four or five meetings or community events in neighborhoods that were turning out 200 to

300 people. Working together on events like these is what really built relationships.

How did you deal with the inevitable tensions?

There are a lot of myths surrounding organizing, such as the myth that residents only want to and enjoy being confrontative. People don’t like putting themselves out like that. They don’t like being angry. They don’t like exposing themselves as radical or rabble-rousers. That’s not something 400 or 500 people sit around and think about finding an opportunity to do.

So when people do that, it’s usually about some pent-up emotion that they feel they can’t express any other way. When you have a process where people are thinking and working collectively and constantly talking to each other, you minimize that potential. If we’re talking to the city and it’s trying to help us to plan a new traffic pattern so that kids do not get hit crossing a street, then what is there to demonstrate against? Unless the city doesn’t follow through. But the city is at the table. They know they have to do it.

Now there have been disagreements over what we call an action. We define actions as public events where people make organized presentations to a specific group of people that they think can be allies at solving a problem. It’s not picketing and marching, but it’s a community meeting about safety. We want the chief of police there. This isn’t new. Residents get up and say what their problems are and ask if the person can help them.

“We’ve seen that the potential for conflict has diminished significantly and the desire to work together has prevailed, as long as people trust and believe in each other.”

What we’ve done is create an environment where organizing means the solidifying of relationships and a commitment to something that can outweigh disagreements. This is critical. When there are disagreements, people tend to focus on working them out, not walking out.

Right now in Denver there is a sensitive issue. When the mayor — whom everyone likes — was running, he had committed to continue the local EITC. When he got in and announced his first budget, he was going to have to cut that.

Right away, the community leaders that had been working in the neighborhood and some of the churches came together and demanded a meeting with the mayor. Not a public meeting to protest, but a meeting to understand why it wasn’t in his budget. He said that the money was not there and that he was going to try and find it. The money he was initially going to use wasn’t there. So they left that meeting and thought, ok, you work on it and we’ll get back to you.

Now it may reach a point where they are going to be so upset at him that they might march on it, but first they are going to take into account the other 82 things that they are working on before they do that.

So if they are working on a Mercado, affordable housing, workforce development and the mayor has shown support, people are not going to be inclined to show up on the streets. If they were working only on this one issue,

then it’s a win or lose question. They would have no choice. But if they are working together on other things, it’s a package that they are after, not single items.

Which is counter to most organizing?

To me this is what real consensus organizing is all about, though I avoid the term because it sends the wrong signal. We’ve seen that the potential for conflict has diminished significantly and the desire and the commitment to work together is what has prevailed, as long as people trust and believe in each other. Everyone understands and everyone has bought into a common set of goals.

When that is breached, than all hell breaks loose. As long as we are in agreement with each other, that’s okay. But the minute somebody starts playing games, all hell is going to break loose.

Casey is not going to intervene to try and stop that. We’ll try to continue to encourage an environment where things can be worked out, but we’re not going to promise anyone that we can control any aspect of that.

So far that’s how it’s worked out, but as you go along, there’s no telling what’s going to happen. But the organizations know they get \$150,000 from the city and the city knows that they can’t get into a situation where they break a whole lot of promises. So far conflict has not been a question.

“Some people went into this work to help communities turn themselves around, but the institutions and the systems they got connected with never lived up to that. A lot of people see this as an opportunity to do what they came into this work to do.”

What has led the other partners to embrace organizing?

They either have a self-interest at an institutional level or at the individual level. Some people went into this work to help communities turn themselves around, but the institutions and the systems they got connected with never lived up to that. At an individual level, a lot of people see this as an opportunity to do what they came into this work to do.

At an institutional level, a lot of these organizations have policy and funding mandates to do these things. As the public increases its interest in changing these neighborhoods in specific ways, it raises the level of public scrutiny of particular programs. So to the degree that these partnerships hold promise for improvements that can reach a significant scale, that is the overlap between the institutional interest and the community interest.

The importance of the individual level is something that some organizers lose sometimes?

In Myrna Hipp’s case in Denver, she was pretty blunt about it: the potential for significant change is why she was interested [Hipp is a long-time MC partner and city official]. I think that’s why the people in DHHS [Department of Health and Human Services] were interested. I think this drove the interest of some people in the school system. Myrna said

she got into this planning and urban development stuff years ago because she wanted to make a difference. She thought this opportunity had some promise.

I believe that she was lured out of retirement in part because of the opportunity to work on changing city hall and the opportunity to make change that was created by the emergence of MC-Denver. She was looking forward to retirement and it wasn’t an easy thing to convince her to come out of retirement.

The other thing that you did was to make a conscious effort to educate funders about organizing?

We did not have enough money to significantly enhance the capacity of these groups or sustain it. So there had to be a local commitment to seeing organizing as a fundamental part of the change process. We had to help more funders see organizing as a tool and a strategy rather than an end, to see that it can be a way to get things done, a way to achieve results. To see that, to the degree that you want authentic resident engagement, organizing is a proven way to get it done.

Helping them to see and understand all this wasn’t going to happen just by us talking to and educating them. We had to talk about it and frame it in a way so that their expectations change. We had to get them involved in relationships with organizing groups early on.

That was another benefit of the summits. We had a lot of funders putting in money to

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support the organizing process for the summits. That allowed us to move critical local partners to a deeper appreciation for how organizing could help enable this work: the Piton Foundation and the city. In addition, the Rose Foundation, the United Way and the Denver Foundation supported them as well. They all had an interest in organizing but they were uncertain how it could help improve conditions or how they might play a role in this. So the city coming to the table and putting a significant amount in it was a big thing.

Later the school system put money into parent organizing and the United Way put money into youth organizing, which helped frame organizing as a means to strengthen families and improve neighborhoods. All of this began to shift some relationships between community groups and funders.

You really aim to counter the underlying unease with organizing. But it’s bigger than this. It’s also at a root level. I think it is not seeing the community as having the capacity to make and sustain change. Sometimes organizing is seen as just a bunch of people agitating with no real intent of rebuilding. After working on these initiatives, I am more convinced that that’s a dynamic that’s at work here.

It’s less that people don’t trust organizing. I think there are people who don’t believe as much in asset-based development and community-driven change as they would like to think. I’m not really sure why. My speculation is that

there is a clash between the experts’ and non-experts’ points of view.

The experts view is, “I’ve studied this, I’ve been to school for this, I get paid to work on this. These people don’t have the capacity or resources or power or knowledge to solve these problems.”

Now people will talk about the importance of partnerships and that we can’t do it without the residents and they can’t do it without us. But in practice, people feel more like, “We’re the ones who really need to do this. We have the ideas that will really make a difference.”

How do you overcome that?

That’s why you have to build power and capacity because I don’t think an outsider can overcome that. I think people have to build trust and belief in each other through working together. Sometimes it can be contentious, particularly when there is a disagreement over how to approach or define something.

People have to come into a collective understanding with each other that we’re here for this purpose. And we’re going to stay to work through it. Casey can help create that kind of environment. But in the end, the people in the community have to have the capacity and the power to get people to honor each other’s point of view.

“The neighborhood summits were important first and foremost because they gave us a set of activities that we could engage in as a way of establishing our presence. It wasn’t just us talking at people.”

What’s worked and what hasn’t worked? Why?

One thing that didn’t work quite as well as I would have liked is getting the groups that were doing resident organizing involved in this. Some did. But a couple did not take up the challenge. Some of it was related to capacity, but I think some of it was related to people not wanting to get outside their ideological boxes, their understanding of what organizing is. And they were not sure that they could rely on the foundation in that way, to be that kind of partner.

The organizations that did get involved included some well-established community organizing groups like ACORN and MOP. We needed to make sure that our resident engagement stuff didn’t get overrun with their approaches and orthodoxies. We wanted to make sure that the organizing values and principles stayed at the center. MOP and ACORN have been really good at understanding that, so I don’t see an issue there. But I think that’s a challenge that we have to face together.

We also tried to create a youth voice within Making Connections and tried to partner with some groups to help youth come together around their own notion of what should happen. That didn’t work out. I think entering into a partnership with one youth organization — which is really a good, authentic youth organization — was a little bit overwhelming. I think the leadership might have been a little worried that they would get sucked up into this relationship that they had no control over and didn’t fully understand.

That is something that we’re still trying to figure out. There are a lot of young people involved. But getting young people involved as a voice of their own, around their own issues, is what I think we’ve still got to grapple with. MOP is taking up this challenge by working with students in middle schools and high schools.

What has gone well?

Something that really jumps out at me that went well was the neighborhood summits. They exceeded my expectations. We had three neighborhood summits and two youth summits.

The summits were important first and foremost because they gave us a set of activities that we could engage in as a way of establishing our presence. It wasn’t just us talking at people. For each summit we worked with community organizing groups or youth organizing groups. So right away we were giving life to our notion of getting people to come together to talk about what was going on in their neighborhoods.

Those neighborhood summits averaged between 200 and 300 people. They were a day for thinking and talking and planning together about the issues the neighborhood was most concerned about. They had a social part too, a picnic and cook out. One place even had a Mariachi band.

Another thing that made the summits important was that we were able to discern the big issues that the neighborhoods were concerned about. We came out of those summits feeling pretty comfortable with the five or six

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priority areas that seemed to resonate across the board: education, economic development, safety, housing, services.

We started right off the bat talking about outcomes in that way. And these outcomes had authenticity because they were articulated through an organized neighborhood process. It wasn't just a survey. Those outcomes have remained the core of what we built around.

The summits were also important because, after the folks had identified the issues, they agreed to establish task forces to follow up on them. Many of these task forces have morphed into the alliances that continue today, such as the Cole Alliance and the Sun Valley Coalition.

Because of these summits we were able to hit the ground engaging residents in an organized way right away. The residents themselves identified the big outcomes they wanted to address and they organized themselves around volunteer task forces to start planning what to do. We staffed those planning groups early on.

As they started to meet, each one started to grapple with the need to get more residents. They started thinking about ways to do that. That led us to have serious, long-term conversations with the community organizing groups. We invited each neighborhood to form an organizing alliance of the key players in their neighborhoods that were doing organizing and to develop a strategy for organizing residents which they all could buy into and be accountable to. We funded the alliances, not the individual groups.

So that's how the Sun Valley coalition got created. It was the church, the elementary

school, Decatur Housing, the Sun Valley public housing residents and homeowners. They put together an alliance and asked for money and then subcontracted with MOP to do leadership and organizing training and to help them do an organizing process.

The Cole Neighborhood Alliance had three or four groups there, such as ACORN and Padres Unidas. They agreed on an organizing strategy but they had a hard time trying to get off the ground until they finally decided to contract with MOP to do training and leadership development.

Those summits provided a springboard that immediately got people committed to getting more families together, which then made it easier for us to engage other funders around the need to fund organizing as the first step in the process, including the city.

Another key early step was [Local Site Coordinator] Cec Ortiz doing about 200 or 300 one-on-one interviews. She did a report about what she was getting from those conversations. Then together we worked out an approach.

We went into this really committed to the notion that we needed to not just get people involved, we also needed to have an infrastructure that would endure. We thought that the way to do that would be to relate to the community organizing that was already on the ground. The challenge for us was to look at how that made sense in Denver. We didn't want to impose anything. We wanted to engage with people to figure out how to do this. The summits spring boarded all that forward.

“A major challenge is the way the community development field has evolved. It is all about organizations, not constituencies. That culture is what we were going against, and that’s what made it more difficult.”

As people became committed to organizing and committed to the need to have more families — particularly the families that don’t normally come out — that gave rise to things like story circles. Some churches got together a big gathering in a park of about 800 people. Some groups did block parties. Some people did clean-up campaigns to get people involved in the neighborhood. It progressed in that way.

The evolving organizing infrastructure — such as the organizing alliances in Sun Valley and Cole — provided a place for these people to latch onto and stay involved.

Organizers would say ‘yes, of course, you need to build a strong organization.’

That’s it. It’s the same notion. If you don’t then you can’t do organizing. So if we don’t have the infrastructure in place to sustain the involvement of families, then our work won’t have lasting impact.

But then how do you avoid making it all about the organization and the infrastructure?

The creation of these neighborhood organizing alliances began to demonstrate that our number one principle was that the voices of families should grow, and not necessarily through some organizational frame. We didn’t want to create any more entities; we wanted to bring together those that were there already.

But that is a major challenge because that is not the way the community development

field has evolved. It has been all about organizations, not about constituencies. That culture is what we were going against, and that’s what made it more difficult. We wanted to push through that by saying families needed to be their own voice and their own constituency.

The challenge to the people who have been talking about the importance of resident power was do they really mean that, or are they just talking about the organizational structure? That’s still a big challenge for us. There is still that dynamic and it’s not just at the community level. We know that the community-level dynamics are influenced by how resources flow. I think that’s one of the reasons why buy-in from the foundation world has not risen to the level we had hoped over time. We need many more resources than what we have now.

Your goal went beyond just getting peoples’ opinions about what needed to happen in their neighborhoods?

The main thing was to get them connecting with each other first. When we were doing the one-on-ones we found that people were isolated and separated by lots of things. They were separated by class, by language, by generations, by culture and by traditions. And it doesn’t always break out cleanly like Vietnamese vs. African Americans vs. Mexican Americans. A lot of it relates to the generational stuff among immigrant groups. There was a lot of separation. So a major goal was giving people opportunities to connect with each other. We treated it as a goal — a set of activities unto themselves that needed to be framed and measured.

“The relationship-building stuff was critical, especially on the ground. Residents got to know their neighbors and neighborhood organizations started working together. Then funders started being an intimate part of the process.”

We did several things to do that: the one-on-ones, the community meetings, the small grants program. We invited people to think about what they would do in their neighborhood to engage their neighbors and to make a contribution if they had a small grant. Some early things that came up were ESL classes, family nights so people could come out and get to know each other more. Kids started proposing projects that would improve their schools and their peers' academic performance.

We also would make small strategic investments in things that we thought were consistent with this. For example, we helped the city refine its approach to engaging residents in the city's neighborhood improvement initiative as a way of building a relationship with the city. We did the same thing with the United Way around their IDA [Individual Development Account] initiative. There was a whole set of activities that we planned and tracked related to building relationships because it was critical.

But in the neighborhoods the isolation of people from one another was a major challenge for us. It was what gave the initial fire to the story circles. When they started doing the story circles as a way of finding out what people were thinking, people started realizing that they were living right near each other and didn't know who each other was. The need to overcome that and get to know each other was what gave story circles so much energy. The relationship-building stuff was critical, especially on the ground. Residents got to know their neighbors and neighborhood organizations started working together. Then funders started being an intimate part of the process.

So why was it so critical for residents to be doing this?

We weren't getting people together just for the sake of getting them together, although I can see some value in that. We were getting people together also to raise their consciousness individually and collectively about the conditions in their neighborhood. People would understand that the things that bothered them most in the neighborhood were, by and large, things that everybody was concerned about. And that these issues were connected to a set of conditions in the neighborhood.

We also wanted to agitate, if I can say that. We wanted to encourage people to become more activist, to use the information and the new connections among themselves to commit to making change in their neighborhood. It was more intentionally around changing conditions and making things better for themselves and their children than it was simply to get them to know each other.

So how did you agitate?

We agitated by helping people understand what was going on. In the school system, for example, tension had risen between the African-Americans and the newly-arriving immigrant groups that were mostly Spanish-speaking. We helped people see that one reason for the tension was the barriers to learning that everyone faced. We helped people understand that the school systems were failing, which meant that no kids were getting educated. Now, we weren't didactic and we didn't preach at people, but we tried to use the data ware-

“But I don’t want people to hear ‘agitate’ as meaning that we preached at them and we were didactic. We just tried to help raise people’s awareness about what was going on in the neighborhood by providing data and information and opportunities for discussion.”

house and the local learning partnership to get information out to people.

This led to an amazing story involving two sisters. It was at one of those information briefings that they had heard how far behind in reading and math the students in their neighborhood were. They were inspired to do something. Working with a few teachers, they used a small grant to design a tutoring program. The Community Learning Network helped them set up some indicators to evaluate the tutoring. At the end of the year everybody was astonished at the success that this little initiative had in improving students’ scores.

This is my classic story about how you use information to agitate people to want to make a change. They had made this commitment as a result of this process of bringing people together and discussing issues and putting out data and information about the neighborhood.

But I don’t want people to hear “agitate” as meaning that we preached at them and we were didactic. That wasn’t the case. We just tried to help raise people’s consciousness and awareness about what was going on in the neighborhood by providing data and information and opportunities for discussion.

When you say “agitate” people have this image that you’re brainwashing people. That wasn’t how we meant agitate. We meant helping people understand that the issues were not between the races and classes. The issue is that no one is learning. It’s that nobody has a decent job or very few people have decent jobs and the services being provided are not adequate. Just helping people understand this

and become aware of their own history in these neighborhoods and how change had taken place. We were agitating in the sense that we were not just saying it’s a good thing for people just to be neighborly.

So the Learning Partnership was another strategy for engaging residents?

We wanted to build the capacity of residents to have their own information as a way to develop their own understanding of what’s going on in their neighborhoods, and to share that information and knowledge with the other residents. This could help them look at each other as allies. We saw that the divisions in Denver could be explosive, especially around class and culture.

They need to see the world as bigger than those things and, when they do, they are likely to see that they have more issues in common than they don’t have in common.

How the information is gathered and packaged and given to them is critical. Residents have to be able to do that for themselves rather than rely on experts so they have an independent understanding of the issues and so they can make sure the data and information relates to the things they want done, not what somebody else thinks ought to be done.

It also puts them in a better position to create an accountability framework. It helps them become a learning community, learning not just in an academic sense, but to learn to be a community and learn how to bring about the changes they want done. So the CLN is a critical part of the puzzle.

“The biggest challenge is that the community development culture is really antithetical to some of Making Connections’ basic notions. It’s all about categorical streams of money. This sets up these little islands of existence whose interest is not to collaborate and work together.”

What have been the biggest challenges other than the ones implicit in what you’ve already said?

The biggest one is that the community development culture is really antithetical to some of Making Connections’ basic notions. It’s all about categorical streams of money. It engages people around the needs of that funding stream, not around a collective sense of doing things to improve the community.

If someone is funding MOP to do church-based organizing, then that group is only for that. If somebody is funding a social service agency to do a mentoring program, then that group is for that. These kinds of funding streams end up competing with each other. Organizations emerge and thrive whether or not they have any constituency simply because they are good at getting money. This sets up these little islands of existence whose interest is not to collaborate and work together. They never think together. That’s the main challenge in getting people together.

People hold on to their residents?

For many organizations the point of having residents involved is to show funders that you have a constituency. So you hold onto people. Keeping people from thinking and working together has made attacking the most serious problems that much more difficult. It does not

give the community the flexibility to think collectively and to make the most strategic use of resources that are coming into the community. That was always our biggest challenge. How do you introduce these ideas into a culture that is going in the opposite direction, and with very little money? We couldn’t buy our way in.

Well the money did bring some people to the table, but they dropped out because there wasn’t enough money?

We had just enough money to get people out to meetings but we didn’t have anywhere near enough to keep people committed. It became clear to a lot of the people that we were not going to just make a few programmatic or categorical grants. We were going to use this money to foster new kinds of relationships and collaborations. Folks who didn’t see that as benefiting them were not going to participate. That was the main challenge and all these other challenges flowed from that: the difficulty in getting people to think and work together.

Another challenge was the failed efforts that had preceded us. There are lots of promises, lots of raised expectations almost every time there’s an initiative. But only a handful of people, if any, are seeing the benefit from these initiatives and the neighborhoods as a whole never benefited much. So you have to deal with the resulting apathy.

How do you overcome that challenge?

You don’t start by committing yourself to these unrealistic notions of what can be

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achieved. You take responsibility for achieving only what you can and right away start putting resources and decision-making into the hands of people. The organizing is set up so that it creates opportunities to partner with people around things that they’re interested in. They start coming together and saying what they want done. Then you figure out how to release your resources in ways that help these people leverage partnerships to get things done early.

That was a role that the small grants played, but it was also a role that our strategic grants played, such as the grant to the city and a couple of other places that encouraged those institutions to be open to working with residents around things that the residents came up with. You have to move right away when people articulate what they think ought to be done. You need to react to these things immediately. You can’t start talking about education reform or big systems reform and large-scale community changes. You have to start talking about things at a level that people can do something immediately.

It was there where we hit a bump in the road in terms of dealing with outcomes. When does it make sense to help people grow their aspirations and organize a set of outcomes and indicators as opposed to someone framing them for people? That became another challenge.

So that was the outcomes challenge, that Casey was framing it?

The question was whether the people on the ground had arrived at a point where they could frame what needs to be done because it

was clear that they and Casey were on the same path. The question was whether they could articulate them in partnership with Casey, or was it going to be a case where we [Casey] articulated it for them.

We didn’t necessarily worry about Casey dictating to us because we knew that wasn’t what Casey was trying to do. But it was hard getting Casey to understand the strategic significance of letting it flow in a way so that momentum was built locally from ownership of the agenda. It flows from the need to get people organized around things they own from the beginning and to make sure that they are driving the agenda and that they see the work as their work.

Does that come out of the history of past initiatives that tried to change this community but which the community didn’t control and didn’t really benefit from?

That was the value of taking the time up front to study the community and talk to lots of people. People say, “The past stuff here hasn’t worked.” The key is to engage people to talk about why it didn’t work. What about it was wrong? Those are the things that you can’t repeat. It isn’t just that it was a bad initiative and of course we’re going to do business differently. The prep time — learning how to enter a community — was incredibly important.

My biggest challenge with that – which we’re still working on to some degree – is how slowly some groups, especially nonprofits that provide direct services and do housing and

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commercial revitalization, have come around to this notion.

They have not been to the table in the early part because they are all looking for program support. And we don’t have program money. But as the priorities begin to flesh themselves out into programs and the resources start to flow toward these things, then I see a change of heart on the horizon.

It’s okay that they are slow because I see it happening in layers. I see the organizing happening first and the infrastructure and the strategic framework have to be solid.

I do believe that as affordable housing and neighborhood safety and other issues emerge, it doesn’t make sense for us to create another infrastructure of providers. We need to engage the existing ones.

tions: the school system, the juvenile court system, the police department.

In Sun Valley, you can see the city playing a more prominent role, as well as the Department of Health and Human Services and the elementary school. I see the alliances expanding as people get clear about the outcomes and indicators and position the alliances so that they can have an impact on the entire system, not just on one problem. All the alliances are beginning to grow in that way now.

I don’t see the nature of the alliances changing. I see the core leadership expanding and becoming more sophisticated and the infrastructure being put in place to make sure it continues to grow.

One of the points [CLN staff person] Terri Bailey makes about the Learning Network is you start with residents. You don’t start with academic institutions and then invite in the residents. All these alliances in Denver essentially started this way, which is a different approach.

That’s what they mean when they call Making Connections “community driven.” Not community alone, not community bossing, not community being a bully, but community being organized around setting the agenda for their neighborhood and then building alliances with the institutions and others who can help them realize those outcomes. When I say they are moving to these power alliances, that’s what they’re calling “demand-driven systems reform.” I think that’s where it’s headed.

Have your resident engagement strategies changed?

What’s happening in Denver is that these resident alliances are expanding into what they’re calling power alliances or power coalitions. We hope this will lead to the kind of system-wide changes that are needed to make these changes permanent and sustainable. For example, the Cole neighborhood alliance is changing its approach. It is expanding to include important players from the institu-

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What is your role now in resident engagement?

Our role is to resource it to the degree that we can. What I see happening on the ground is a commitment to leadership development and a commitment to replenish it with younger people.

I am now becoming more of a spectator and investing partner. Spectator may not be the right word, but I no longer see the responsibility as mine to think about strategy at that level, but to enable it and to participate in it and support it.

Have you invested in resident leadership development? What’s been the focus? Has it worked?

We’ve invested in leadership development in two ways. One is in the organic organizing process. And the resident engagement strategies were designed to encourage and support resident leadership, like the Community Learning Network. We understand that strong resident leadership is essential to sustain this work.

Our emphasis is on leadership development through doing. One lesson we got from RCI [Rebuilding Communities Initiative] is that leadership develops through opportunities to do things. It’s less about the training. The training and the support and the assistance are all relevant, but the real leadership emerges from people doing things. The Social Justice Institute — which is Denver’s main resident leadership-training effort — is based on that principle.

The small grants we supported also encouraged leadership development through doing. It was good for people to have small pots of money to do neighborhood projects to gain some momentum. These people were doing good stuff and accomplishing what they said they would accomplish, so this was helping develop a core of leaders.

In relation to training, we saw that there are issues related to community change that involve a bigger understanding of how the world works, especially the roles of race, class, culture and power. How do we help residents explore these issues as a part of their leadership development, in addition to learning planning skills and communication skills? How do we help them develop a world view of what’s going on? We decided to combine the small grants program with a leadership development curriculum. A lot of research was done in developing that curriculum, with the Chinook Fund taking the lead.

In the end this Social Justice Institute fashioned a professional development curriculum and cloaked it with an understanding of these fundamental issues. People have to apply for it, their application is reviewed by their peers, not professionals, and then they get accepted and complete the course. If they complete the course and meet certain criteria, then they are eligible to apply for a small grant to do what they want to do.

Has investing in resident development helped to promote resident leadership?

I know within MC it has. My number one example of this is Debra Johnson, the community

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staff person now at the community court. I have heard her say publicly that she was changed forever by the Social Justice Institute experience. She was always committed to working with kids in trouble, but her view of herself and how things happen in the world have been forever changed.

There have been other testimonials too, in their discovery around race. Not just black and brown people but white people as well. Many critical players in the MC work have benefited from the training.

As these leaders grow and learn and become more aware, you should expect that they will become a part of the professional infrastructure. That’s one of our principles.

What have you done to keep residents engaged?

The strategy has been to make sure there is adequate support for resident engagement: community organizing, story circles, the CLN—all those things have to be funded and have a high priority. That’s critical because that is the meat.

It all also has to be results oriented. People want to see something, produce something and share in the benefits. Not just the long-term benefits, but any benefits. If they get compensated, they want to get compensated in decent wages, not slave wages, not “com-

munity work,” where people who do it get the fewest resources.

We can’t do that. We have to make sure the families and the residents are the immediate beneficiaries, not just long-term beneficiaries. And we have to make sure that the projects they want tomorrow or next week also get on the list of priorities, not just the big long-term initiatives.

There has to be a balance on the benefit question. They have to see their stuff as reflected in the work. That there is a commitment to it. And they have to have a real strong role in the governance and decision-making.

One of the good Making Connections’ milestones is evidence that you have achieved significant resident engagement/involvement and that you have built an infrastructure capable of sustaining that over time. I think that’s the right milestone, regardless of what the political or ideological framework is.

The infrastructure being in place is key, as is the ability to sustain it. It’s why I’ve tried to recruit to the MC table stakeholders who are willing to travel the journey of learning about the question of how you get and sustain resident engagement. If you start out by bringing in a lot of powerful institutions and players who haven’t reached some common understanding about what it takes to keep resident engagement going, then their support of it relies totally on what the Casey Foundation can do. That is going to be time-limited at best. And it’s just shaky.

But if the people who first come together buy into a notion of change that embraces resi-

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dent engagement — and understand that the vision depends on sustaining that engagement to the point that they will invest in keeping this infrastructure going — that’s critical. In the past we’ve not addressed this adequately and so the support for resident engagement is never solid. It’s always shaky. It’s always the most vulnerable support. It’s always the support that survives only as long as there is a champion around it. When the champion moves on, that support is gone. That’s why it’s often not sustainable.

I’ve approached Making Connections in a way that rallies people around the importance of the residents being involved, to the point that they will support an infrastructure. That does not necessarily mean supporting a Making Connections infrastructure, but a set of things that keeps a strong resident voice alive.

That’s where community organizing comes in for me. One key is building a strong common understanding that organizing is critical, and that we don’t need to be looking at which dogma or orthodoxy is better. The key is focusing on a common set of elements related to empowering people, helping people speak for themselves, helping people plan together, investing whatever resources we can muster in these elements.

And we need to be committed to leadership development. The real sustainability of that voice — and the growing sophistication of it — will depend on how serious we are about leadership development. If you can get a long-term commitment to those two things, then you have demonstrated that there is an infrastructure in place to sustain resident engagement in that community.

The point is to help the neighborhood create the infrastructure so they can respond to whatever they need to respond to. That’s why it’s important to demonstrate how to keep it going. If you don’t do that, then it disappears or is not adequately supported.

Q And so there are lots of reasons why they have stayed engaged?

What I like is their commitment to knowing about that for themselves. So the electronic “diary” they use to track engagement is incredibly important. They strive to record who comes to every MC meeting. You don’t have to wonder if resident engagement is going up or down. You know what’s there. They are committed to it, even more committed than me.

And the evidence is that resident engagement is growing. I think people have stayed because they can see immediate benefits. Over time more than 7,000 people have been engaged on some level and a core of about 2,000 people have stayed involved consistently.

Q Have residents been paid? Have you used other incentives?

Residents have not been paid to participate. Early on, when we were trying to do these kinds of information-gathering sessions, people were given gift certificates that were solicited from a local grocery chain. I don’t like that notion for several reasons. I think you can’t pay people to be concerned about the conditions in their neighborhood. It’s artificial and self-serving to the people who are paying out the money.

“But if the people who first come together buy into a notion of change that embraces resident engagement — and understand that the vision depends on sustaining that engagement to the point that they will invest in keeping this infrastructure going — that’s critical.”

The potential benefit of participating should be judged by individual residents. If you can’t make a strong case that what you’re doing is important enough to the community for them to get involved, then you ought to take your initiative and go somewhere else. But you ought not to pay people to come to your meetings. That’s absurd to me.

I don’t think it’s absurd to the people who are paying them. I think it’s a good strategy for outsiders. But it’s a dumb strategy for residents to buy into. That probably sounds a little odd coming from a community advocate like me, but to me it’s about respect and integrity.

I do want to make sure that residents get maximum shots at any paid positions, especially the ones that require little or no formal training. If there is training required, then we are obligated to make it available.

I think we need to shift our thinking about what is valuable in terms of expertise and put more premium on experience and knowledge. And I think we need to set a standard about employing residents to do professional jobs in the initiative. As a matter of policy I have advocated for the family economic self-sufficiency standard as a guide.

The Community Learning Network paid stipends in the early days. Terri Bailey felt it was a way of concretely demonstrating that they valued resident engagement.

From her standpoint it is a good notion. To pay those people stipends is not quite the same as paying people to participate in a meeting. They

were doing a job, they were accepting a set of responsibilities that required them to do some work. I was more sensitive to that.

People could think about it from the standpoint that I get paid and if I want to show people we’re serious and value their experience and work, then we ought to pay them. That’s a good personal principle.

But we can’t pay 7,000 people a stipend, so we shouldn’t set up something that’s going to force you to make distinctions between one resident over another resident. That could be divisive. For me the key is that there are no barriers that prevent residents from participating, such as not having access to child care in the evenings.

What is the relationship between residents and professionals? Are there things professionals need to do to be better at resident engagement?

One thing we tried to do is be really consistent and very persistent around this notion that residents are expected to play a leadership role. I think being consistent about that, not letting that go, even being monotonous and sometimes a pain about that theme is important.

“One thing I observed right away is how distrustful residents are of so-called experts. They react to any little thing because they worry that they are going to be manipulated and used, especially around data. They know people use statistics to control things.”

One of the things that I observed right away is how distrustful residents are of the so-called experts. They react to any little thing because they worry that they are going to be manipulated and used, especially around data and information. They know people use numbers and statistics to control things.

On the other hand, there is a real questioning by professionals about what residents can do. They don't think residents know much about it. They think residents are driven by their emotions. They think residents are driven by their frustration and just need to lash out.

They think they aren't grounded in the issues?

That's what the experts think. Which is an irony. What makes them think that they can know more by reading and studying than people who live it every day?

With Terri and Matt in the Community Learning Network, I tried to set a tone immediately by supporting their notion of setting up a community learning network that would allow residents to screen any research and data activities in the neighborhood.

When we first convened this learning partnership, the room was packed with researchers. We said this is our learning partnership and we went about structuring it so that it was an insider group. But when we put it under the direct control of residents, the first project the researchers did the residents kicked out. They said it was inadequate, not accurate and they questioned it on professional terms.

What was that project?

We had hired two guys, both Latino, to go out and talk to families in the neighborhood and get a sense of some of the challenges these families were facing. The Learning Network would vet the information. If it was accurate and useful and told the story like they wanted it told, then it would be published.

These guys came back saying that residents were worried about such things as gentrification. They used some of the community development jargon. It didn't ring true to the residents. They killed the study and that set a tone early.

The distrust on both sides was overcome by consistently positioning the residents so that they could interact with the professionals in an equal way. By equal we meant that they should have control over information that describes them to the outside world. What the CLN has done is figure out a practical way to equalize that relationship, which has taught us a lot.

One of the things that Terri and Matt talked about was that you have to build relationships with the residents. You can't just continue to be an outsider and do this work well.

I would agree with that. And I think Terri and Matt and a couple of other people there have been good examples of that.

I remember when we did RCI, the biggest complaint about consultants was that they were

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disrespectful because they didn't try to learn the neighborhood. And so we made it a principle that a consultant didn't talk to anybody until he or she had done a deep job of learning. That is also a principle in our CMAR work.

Culturally it's really critical. In Spanish the word is *permiso*, but the translation is not just permission. It has a larger context of respect. You don't just ask somebody whether you can come in their house. You take the time to learn about them, to know them, to know their ways, to let them know you and then you get invited into their house. That's one of the biggest lessons around how to interact with communities and residents because there is a lot of distrust.

The most challenging and frustrating thing was that the funders and the government had lots of ideas about what they could do in these neighborhoods. They all acknowledged the value of residents and that communities' assets are part of the mix, but they had very few ideas about how to do it. They also were pretty fearful of the kind of political and social minefields that lay in that work. I didn't have to convince people that resident engagement was important because that was in everybody's doctrine.

The “how to do it” was where we added to the picture. How to do it within the historical context of conflict and antagonism.

Is there a strategy for learning from your resident engagement work? What have you learned?

In relation to a strategy, there are a couple of principles that Denver follows. They realized

the importance of a strong communications component early on so that they could have more control over communicating the messages they thought were important. They also have a strong documentation process that is not just about somebody taking notes, but all kinds of data gathering. They know exactly how many people have participated and it's a very impressive number.

They also decided that everything they would put out, as much as they could, would have the face of community attached to it and would be in the voices of community. They wanted to give as much life to text as they could. They used a lot of pictures and colors. They focused on what was happening at the individual family level. That's made a big difference: the profiles, the residents documenting the ideas that residents come up with like the story circle tool kit, documenting the story circles. That was a conscious strategy on their part.

Terri also asked Denver's diarist to help the Learning Network learn from its experience by conducting a series of interviews. That led to a publication on the process of building a resident-driven entity that should be very useful to anyone who wants to engage residents.

In relation to what we've learned, I've already laid out most of it. One big insight has been that engaging organizers doesn't necessarily lead to the kind of conflict some people fear. It will lead inevitably to that kind of conflict if you have somebody who doesn't know anything about it trying to make it happen. That person's challenge is to get people involved who do know how to do it.

“The funders had lots of ideas about what they could do in these neighborhoods. They all acknowledged the value of residents, but they had very few ideas about how to do it. They also feared the kind of political minefields that lay in this work.”

That is an irony for me. There isn't as much conflict as we had concluded in our infinite wisdom. We have built up a “boogeyman” attitude around this stuff. But at the ground level, it's not that intense.

Could it be that the fact this experience is in Denver has kept it from being so intense?

For me, a serious litmus test would be if there's any group in town that says under no circumstances would they work with another group, or under no circumstances are they open to trying this approach. To me that's an early sign that Making Connections would not work there. That kind of narrow-mindedness suggests that they are trying to control who participates. For me, if you get that reaction, that's a warning sign, a potential deal breaker.

Didn't you get people in the Cole neighborhood saying they wouldn't work together?

The distinction there is that they were people who were assuming a lot of power in these communities who were not necessarily from them. They often lived outside the community. I think this is why some residents said that one problem they face is that the nonprofit organizations don't feel accountable to them.

But what I'm getting at is if there's a key local institution that says it won't work with this group, or says that community organizing won't work here, or such and such won't work here. That would send up a red flag to me about the potential for working with real vulnerable families and helping them get out of their isolation.

What's surprised you about this work?

I was surprised at how open people were to the importance of having residents organized around their agenda as a basis for a partnership with the community. And I was surprised how this has played itself out in a practical, nuts-and-bolts, let's-get-it-done way in Denver. It is widely accepted that you have to have this as a part of your game plan now.

The community has already done two actions on the mayor since he's been in. They had one against his deputy the other night around economic development and jobs. But there is acceptance of this kind of relationship as a necessary part of the solution. The ease at which it's been done and how fast it has been elevated to a mainstream status in Denver has surprised me.

And it's not just Denver. When I go and talk to other sites about this, I sense that they're getting some of the same reaction: that people are not afraid of this, in fact they want it. If our job is to engage with local players and become a part of their strategy for change, I get the impression that key players in most sites would say to Casey, “You take on the mobilizing the community part and we'll provide the resources.”

The irony is that we too often still assume that somehow our value is some grandiose program idea, some undiscovered way of dealing with early childhood education, some new way of dealing with prisoner re-entry. But, as I

“The irony is that we too often still assume that somehow our value is some grandiose program. But as I look across the 10 sites, I’ll bet you that many are finding themselves edging towards this notion that a main part of their job should be helping the community mobilize.”

look across the 10 sites, I’ll bet you that better than half if not two thirds of them are finding themselves edging towards this notion that a main part of their job should be helping the community mobilize. In the sites where the community stuff is moving slowly, local people are getting very restless.

What’s happened in Denver is waiting to happen in a lot of other places. If we engage in a process of dialog with people locally and let them define what we can help them do best, most of them would probably assign that part to us. That’s interesting. I wonder if we even recognize that as a real meaningful role.

If we meant what we said — that the real resources to solve these problems are in the local community — then the local communities are saying that the way to get those resources spent differently is to get the community organized so it can be an effective partner. And they don’t oversimplify that. They understand that there’s conflict there and that it could be a little tough, but they see the rewards of having an organized community working with them as so vital that they’re willing to go through with it. That’s been my biggest surprise.

And an organized community helps keep them accountable?

Right. That’s the whole point about the significance of the results agenda that the families bring to the table. They want to see more accountability and the results focus gives them that. That’s why the results focus is so critical.

What supports would help you in this work?

A deeper intellectual appreciation for the strategic value of a mobilized community. To make it clear that it isn’t just a romantic notion about social justice; it is a vital strategic component of success.

Another support we need is a forum to express what we’re learning and to get it examined. We need an opportunity to do some collective learning on these questions at the foundation.

The other support is to know more about the kind of infrastructure that is needed by a relationship-based initiative like this. The need to learn how to do this is intense. We need opportunities for residents to take on leadership positions in this learning.

Even within our own foundation there’s still too much categorization. There are too many silos. And we have to respond to each of these silos differently to get resources from them. The word is that these silos have to demonstrate their usefulness by connecting with Making Connections. But I don’t get any calls from people saying, “I’ve got some criminal justice money,” or “I’ve got some teen pregnancy money, are you guys doing anything on that in Denver?” I always have to figure out who has that money and how I can get it. I don’t think we appreciate how silo-ed we still are. And that’s a big, big problem.

“That’s the whole point about the significance of the results agenda that the families bring to the table. They want to see more accountability and the results focus gives them that.”

The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of stories and reflections about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections Initiative. They come through The Diarist Project, a new approach the foundation is using to learn from its efforts to strengthen families and transform struggling neighborhoods.

Diarists work to capture strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. In Making Connections, the diarist works most closely with the Casey staff person who leads the work in each city, the “Site Team Leader.”

This reflection was edited by Tim Saasta, diarist to Denver Site Team Leader Garland Yates and coordinator of the Diarist Project.



Making Connections is a Casey Foundation initiative to support work that demonstrates the simple premise that kids thrive when their families are strong and their communities supportive. What began in 1999 as a demonstration project in selected neighborhoods in 22 cities is now an intricate network of people and groups committed to making strong families and neighborhoods their highest priorities.

- **The Annie E. Casey Foundation** (aecf.org)
- works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the
- United States. Its primary mission is to foster
- public policies, human service reforms and
- community supports that more effectively
- meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children
- and families.

For more information about The Diarist Project or to receive copies of its publications contact:

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