

Making connections

In Lawrence, a CDC builds more than homes and businesses

BY ROBERT PREER

On most evenings, the offices of Lawrence CommunityWorks bustle with activity. The sprawling former mill building that houses the nonprofit community development corporation is divided into many small spaces, which get steady use for meetings of all kinds.

In one room, a group could be meeting to talk about a new zoning plan that is supposed to attract development to the city. In another, a group of activists could be analyzing the city budget. Elsewhere in the building are classes in computers and in English. A sewing club meets regularly, as do seminars in managing personal finances and buying a home. For teens, programs include SAT preparation, essay writing, and fashion design. Day care is always available for younger children. Outside the building, in the adjacent North Common neighborhood, volunteers for Lawrence CommunityWorks host community suppers three times a month, inviting eight to 10 families to their homes for food and conversation.

“There are basically people bumping into each other a lot,” says Bill Traynor, the president, founder, and guiding light of Lawrence CommunityWorks.

The more encounters the better. To Traynor, the most important thing CommunityWorks can do for Lawrence is not building homes or jump-starting businesses or even creating jobs. It is fostering connections among people in the community.

Thus, all of these meetings and classes and other get-togethers taking place under the Lawrence CommunityWorks roof have a not-so-hidden agenda. Traynor wants a person taking a language class to find out about the city budget review. He wants someone at a community supper to find out about the homeownership class. He wants a mother who is taking a computer course to bring along her teenager, who will find out about how to apply to college.

“In other places, you take a computer class downtown and then you go home,” says Traynor, 48, a Lawrence High grad who received degrees from the University of Massachusetts–Lowell and Brandeis University and earned a fellowship at Harvard. “We look at all of these things as doors into the network.” And the network—a structure of residents sufficiently connected to each other



CommunityWorks's Bill Traynor has a not-so-hidden agenda.

and to the powers-that-be to make a difference in the old mill city—is, more than anything else, what Traynor and his six-year-old organization are building.

DOING GOOD WORKS

Lawrence CommunityWorks was created in 1999 by Traynor and three young women who were graduating from a master's program in urban studies and planning at MIT. The organization has grown rapidly and now has a staff of 21, a governing board of 17, and a rank-and-file membership of about a thousand. And the development-through-networking approach preached by Traynor and practiced by CommunityWorks has won over many community leaders.

“Instead of doing things to people and for people, they do things with people,” says state Sen. Susan Tucker, an Andover Democrat who represents Lawrence.

“You can't get any more grass-roots than what Lawrence CommunityWorks is doing,” says Lawrence native and

BankNorth vice president Pedro Arce.

What Lawrence CommunityWorks is doing covers quite a range. The organization crafted a mixed-use zoning plan for the historic mill district and North Common neighborhood, then lobbied the City Council and won its passage last year. The group has taken on litter, organizing neighborhood cleanups and a march for better trash collection. The Poder (“power” in Spanish) Leadership Institute trains individuals for roles as leaders in the community. One recent graduate is planning a bid for city council this fall. Several hundred people have taken advantage of the training, education, and life skills programs.

And, like community development organizations all

“Everybody won,” says McManus. “We retained a great employee, and she gained ownership of a home in a new building.”

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Network theory is a hot topic in many fields, from computer science and mathematics to business and politics. The basic idea is that networks, no matter what they are made out of—molecules, e-mail addresses, people—obey certain rules of structure and growth.

The power of human networks was brought home on September 11, 2001, when a shadowy group known as Al Qaeda stunned America with its attacks. Social scientists

rushed to uncover the secrets of this loosely organized yet devastating assemblage of terrorists. A spate of books on networks soon followed.

Network theories found further expression in Moveon.org’s electronic network of activists in the 2004 presidential election and in groups, both political and nonpolitical, organized through Meetup.com. Businesses also began using these principles. But nonprofit organizations working in poor neighborhoods were slow to catch on, some observers say.

“Thinking about networks intentionally hasn’t really filtered down to the nonprofit sector,” says Marion Kane, executive director of the Boston-based Barr Foundation. She finds this odd. “If you are dealing with low-income people, everyone knows that what they have been missing all along is access to networks,” she says.

Traynor created his blueprint for Lawrence CommunityWorks partly from network theory and partly from two decades of experience as a community organizer. At one point in his career, he was working as a consultant to a community group in St. Paul, Minn. A woman who had



Ana Rodriguez, Tamar Kotelchuk, and Jessica Andors of CommunityWorks.

across Massachusetts, CommunityWorks has built some things too. A distressed block on Summer Street in the North Common neighborhood has been transformed with four new two-family homes and a playground. Elsewhere in the North Common area, the organization built 17 units of rental housing, which it now leases to low-income residents, and it is in the process of converting a long-closed elementary school into a community center. The organization is eyeing other properties to develop in the North Common section, a neighborhood particularly beset by the poverty that Lawrence has become known for.

Joseph McManus, president of Lawrence General Hospital, relates how a Lawrence CommunityWorks housing initiative helped his institution. A nursing assistant employed by the hospital recently was on the verge of leaving her job and the city when she won a lottery to buy one of the CommunityWorks homes. She decided to stay.

Traynor had a revelation about the power of networks.

been a leader in the group dropped out and was working as a distributor for Amway, which markets its products through individuals who sell to people they either know or have connections to. He went to see her in her apartment and had a revelation about the power of networks.

“She had two phones and all these lists of people—family, friends—and a spreadsheet up on the wall,”

Traynor recalls. The woman was using her ordinary connections to become a success in business. "I was really struck by it," says Traynor. "I had been reading about network theory, and things just clicked. It made me think about how ill-equipped and poorly set up our community groups are."

It was by a circuitous route that Traynor eventually got to apply his network theory for community organizations in his hometown. The son of a house painter, Traynor grew up during a time of traumatic change in Lawrence. During his youth, the mills were closing and jobs were disappearing. Much of the white population fled and was replaced by Latinos and other minorities.

"There was a lot of tension," says Traynor of Lawrence High School in the 1970s. "We had scuffles in the high school. Some people called them riots. It's a little melodramatic, but there was a lot of prejudice and hatred in the air."

Even then, he sensed a void in the city's leadership. "I always had this feeling there was something fundamentally wrong. No one was in charge. 'Who is leading us? Where are the adults?'"

After graduating from college, Traynor did a stint as an organizer for Massachusetts Fair Share, the now-defunct

community organization that had chapters around the state at that time, then went to Brandeis, where he received a master's degree in management of human services. He worked for six years for a Lowell community development corporation, where he met his wife, Debra Fox. They eventually formed a consulting firm, Neighborhood Partners, offering their expertise to nonprofit organizations across the country.

In 1998, Traynor won a two-year, expenses-paid fellowship at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. One day, while attending a symposium at MIT, he met Tamar Kotelchuck, one of three women who had been doing field work in Lawrence as part of their master's studies at MIT, which they were finishing up.

He talked to Kotelchuck about his ideas on networking and community development. They talked about Lawrence, her experiences in the city, and his hopes for his childhood home. "I always wanted to come back," he says. "I always kept my eye on things there."

Soon, he met with the other two students, Kristen Harol and Jessica Andors. All three of the women spoke Spanish and voiced an interest in working in Lawrence.

"We had fallen in love with Lawrence, but we didn't really know anything about it," says Harol.

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A NETWORK TAKES ROOT

Traynor did. Lawrence was then the poorest city in Massachusetts, battered by crime, violence, and drugs. Two economic booms had bypassed the city even though it was right off I-495, a short hop away from the state's high-tech heartland. In the heavily Latino North Common neighborhood, between 30 and 40 percent of properties were vacant. The homeownership rate was 9 percent, and per-capita income was \$11,000.

Traynor and the three graduate students hatched a plan to take over a failing community development corporation, Lawrence Planning and Neighborhood Development Corp., which by that time had only one employee and had lost its state and city funding. They presented their plan to the CDC's board of directors, offering their services at no cost until they could secure funding. The board took the deal.

Traynor provided the blueprint and directed the operation, while the three women fanned out across the city, knocking on doors, meeting with community people, and doing anything else they could think of to turn their plan into action. Traynor helped them overcome their insecurities about being white, privileged academics in a gritty urban neighborhood.

"I would say, 'You guys are who you are. Just go out and be yourself,'" says Traynor. "And of course, the people loved them. Who wouldn't? They were energetic, joyful, and very respectful."

Their initial goal was to do something about the vacant lots and buildings that scarred the neighborhood and were magnets for drugs and other criminal activities—classic community-organizing targets. Yet, in their conversations in the neighborhoods, the women found little enthusiasm for tackling the vacant lots.

"People kept saying—and we finally heard it—"There is nothing for our kids to do," Harol recalls. So the MIT-trained community planners put their original plans aside and organized a full slate of summer youth activities.

"We spent the summer going to the zoo, playing baseball on [the] vacant lots," says Harol. "We got people from MIT to come up and play ball with us."

And the networks started to grow. Parents, wary of leaving their kids alone with these strangers from MIT, started coming along for field trips or joining in the games. The neighborhood residents did finally agree to a building plan for a vacant lot—not housing, but a small playground for young children.

Meanwhile, Traynor was rustling up money to keep

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the operation going. With Sen. Tucker by his side, he went to the state Department of Housing and Community Development and convinced officials there to restore the organization's funding. Grants from private foundations started to come in, and, as the organization gained a track record, more funding arrived. Last year, the Bank of America Foundation awarded Lawrence CommunityWorks a \$200,000 grant.

"There was something about Bill that made me believe in him," says Tucker. "I didn't know him, but I felt Lawrence needed another shot."

SOME LIKE IT HOT

About 20 people, young and old, mostly Latino with a few white faces, are gathered in a conference room at Lawrence CommunityWorks one Friday night in the spring. Architect Bruce Hampton and Kotelchuck explain their proposed plan in general terms: Take a shuttered Catholic elementary school that had been a blight in the neighborhood and turn it into a community center. The architect and the planner then throw the meeting open to discussion about how the building should be designed, including layout of rooms



Admirers in the business sector include BankNorth's Pedro Arce.

and configuration of the grounds.

A young man suggests a basketball hoop in the parking lot, an idea that is met with widespread approval, as long as sufficient parking spaces can be found elsewhere. When Hampton suggests an atrium on the first floor,



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Koavanny Holguin, a young woman, says, "It's pretty cool, but what kind of glass is it going to be? Is it bulletproof? Is it brickproof?"

"It's a good question," says Kotelchuck. "Can you have a glass wall on the ground floor in a neighborhood in Lawrence?"

Mary Young, a long-time resident of the neighborhood, opines that the glass would make the room nice and cozy for senior citizens who might gather there. "We want it hot," she says.

The discussion lasts two hours. A consensus is reached on having rooms that are versatile enough to be used by different groups for classes, performances, or meetings. The question of an atrium will be explored by the architect and discussed further at the next gathering.

Kotelchuck is pleased. She acknowledges that the process would go a lot faster if the architect and staff made these decisions themselves, but that would defeat the purpose.

"Our idea is that if you only build a building, you are shortchanging yourself," says Kotelchuck. "We are not just building a building. We are building a community."

Success could make CommunityWorks a little less necessary in the future.

At times, Lawrence CommunityWorks seems to speak a language of its own. The classes it offers, whether in computers or language skills, are called "adult learning clubs." The dinner discussions are NeighborCircles. The volunteers who run the NeighborCircles are called "weavers." The language is about empowerment as well as connections—connections that could make CommunityWorks a little less necessary in the future.

"Bill is absolutely clear about what he wants, which is to be on the sidelines cheering while [Lawrence residents] take charge of their own lives," says one of Traynor's mentors, Jim Stockard, curator of the Loeb Fellowship at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. "It's a little like parenting. The best parents know when to let their kids go."

"We're a good organization. We're effective," says Traynor. "But we are not going to turn the city around. The city is going to turn around when there are thousands of people involved in this city and asking questions."

That has already started to happen, according to Ana Rodriguez, a longtime Lawrence activist and chairman of the board of Lawrence CommunityWorks. "I see people really having ownership of what they want to see happen," she says. "It's not only the North Common area but all over Lawrence." ■