

Lessons Learned: Justice, Humility, and the Real Deal

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35 years ago our society bubbled with ferment – the modern civil rights movement was over 10 years old and reaching some of its legislative high marks; young and old were wrestling with each other and the question of appropriateness of our nation's involvement in Viet Nam; women were asserting the coming of a new day; and communities were in turmoil – in some visible, noisy, deadly and destructive civil disturbances; in others less visible but also destructive disinvestment – red lining, withdrawal of city services, urban planner talk about triage in the inner city, writing off communities (they never talked about writing off people, but that is what was meant). And I was starting out in a specific neighborhood working with people who bore names: Juan Sierra, Father Pajak, Jack Irving, Mary Kowalski, etc.

I quickly learned that real people's issues mattered at the end of the day. When you work with real people you feel keenly the fun, the challenges and the victories – and sharp edged is the sting of defeat. This hardly needs to be said in this setting. You are the heroes doing the hard work of community development on the ground each and every day. And I salute you.

As you know I'll be stepping down as Executive Director Neighborhood Reinvestment on September 30. Its been great fun for the past 10 years as executive director – only exceeded by the years I worked in what would now be called a CDC and as a Neighborhood Reinvestment field staff member. In a moment of weakness I agreed to attempt to share some of the lessons that I think I've learned doing this work. My caution is that you have been my teachers, my mentors and my correctors – and so I'm not sure how much I can add to the discussion on my own. So if nothing else it will be short.

Lesson One: It's about justice. The folks who live in a distressed neighborhood know the deal. They know whether their lives are improving or sinking. They have dreams – specific dreams – sometimes their dreams are not what a planner, analyst, academic might suppose. Our role as community developers is to help actualize their dreams into concrete terms – to be challenged by their dreams and to challenge their dreams when the canons of justice would be violated. If we are able to help residents

of a community strengthen the portion of justice realized we are being successful. If we are not able to do that we are either a failure or part of the problem.

As community development practitioners its easy to get caught up in the art of the deal – lets do that Tax Credit project, or whatever the hot, fundable topic de jour is. The real test is whether folks who live in the community and will have to live with the result are in support. After all its they who are investing in owning a home, or renting and participating in local institutions. Does the proposed deal, the possible strategy move in the direction of their dream? Is the carefully wrought and analyzed plan likely to improve their lives as they define it? If not, we have to ask ourselves what are we doing and who are we working for. First and foremost our work is about increasing the share of justice.

From time to time I've heard it said: my organization has grown beyond its residents – we've become far too sophisticated to have residents making the decisions. For me, that's always painful. What is often meant is that the staff has confused their role as facilitator/educator/employee with ownership of the organization. It's natural for those of us who are staff to want to have professional colleagues with whom to bat around ideas. But ownership of a community based organization rests with the residents of the community.

Three side points here:

Voting counts! In Salisbury, MD, there was a woman (I could tell similar stories about other places and genders, but in this case it actually was a woman) who joined a homebuyers club, that was her dream – a home. She bought it. Then she noticed the NeighborWorks® organization offering a leadership class. She joined it in hopes of learning some public speaking skills. She did. Then she noticed a vacancy on the town council. She filed a petition to run thinking it would be a good experience at speaking. She won. She's a town councilor – and would you believe her community is gaining a fairer share of the city's resources?

Staying Community Based counts! What happens when a community based organization drifts from its base: in some cases painful reckoning. Last month the New York Times contained an article on a rather prominent community-based organization that's in conflict with the residents of the community –

some of whom live in units managed by the community-based organization. Painful conflict. The residents will win out – directly by voicing their options, voting with their feet out of the organization, maybe out of the community and/or by supporting other efforts. It may take time, but irrelevancy comes to any community-based organization that moves away from broad based resident involvement and leadership.

Community conflict hurts! What happens when there is conflict within the community – no easy answer here: its listen, challenge folks by structuring settings in which differences can be aired, sniffing out where the greater bent toward justice lies and sometimes helping both sides understand they have larger opposition than each other.

In any case the first lesson I've learned is that: It's about justice for the benefit of the existing residents: the folks who live in the community know the real deal. As community development practitioners it's our challenge to assist residents increase the portion of justice.

Lesson two: If folks who live in a community know whether their portion of justice is increasing or decreasing they often don't know the full deal.

Even in an information age, distressed communities are often operating on old assumptions, half information and missed opportunities. Part of what we as community developers can bring to the table is a broader reach of contacts, information and experiences – to help shape the future so that justice has a far greater chance of being served.

In June I was in Utica, New York – typical home price \$30,000 – and I was standing under rain cover waiting along with many, many others for the rain to clear. A young woman came up and reassuring herself of my name gave me a hug. I was startled by both the hug and the moist eyes. Then her story was simple: she had always wanted to buy and home and was thrilled to run into people who could help her – who answered every question as if it were the most important in the world, even when she later learned they were quiet common place.

Those of us who are community development practitioners bring that to the equation – our knowledge, skills and contacts to fill in the spaces that might not be known by others.

Lesson three: If folks who live in the community know the real deal, but not the full deal and we bring some of the missing knowledge, we don't bring it all. One of the marvelous characteristics of this field is the opportunity, nay requirement, to learn each and every day. Humility is not a nice to have trait – it's an essential trait. Time and time again I've seen solutions to challenges that went far beyond the original schemes and thoughts of the community and its organizations.

Let me bore you with two Neighborhood Reinvestment examples. In 1993 20 NeighborWorks® organizations banded together to increase the number homeowners and increase their visibility. They hoped to put 10,000 families over five years into ownership. Now in the summer of 2000 that group has grown in number by over 6 fold and their average homeowner generation per organization has more than tripled. As a consequence now they are putting 10,000 families into ownership each year alone!

I was there in 1993 when we sat around speculating on possibilities – don't let the myth makers fool you – no one could have guessed. Its what makes me so resistant to conspiracy theories – its hard enough to accomplish something when everyone is in on the deal, let alone when its in secret and opposed by many.

In 1992 Neighborhood Reinvestment wrote a grant to HUD to gain access to a FHA foreclosed rental property in a suburban Denver location. We wanted to start a mutual housing association – organize the residents who lived in the property, create an organization, acquire the property, rehabilitate it and add some more units. No one would have thought that 8 years later Rocky Mountain Mutual would own XXX units, be sponsoring homeownership classes, running computer labs and employing dozen of people who were also residents of the units.

This business provides the opportunity to learn every day, the requirement to learn every day and the humility to cheer marvelous, beyond your expectation, outcomes.

Lesson Four: If folks who live in the neighborhood know the real deal, but not the full deal and we practitioners bring some but not all the missing knowledge -- you'd better believe the folks in Washington, name your state capital, don't know half the deal. In fact they usually know far, far less than ½ the deal. Effective, long term solutions are local, require local leadership, locally directed flexible capital and local organizations. It can't be said enough – residents, in local partnerships, backed up by skilled community development practitioners if given the resources will be far, far more effective at solving their problems, reaching their dreams than attempts to prescribe solutions from afar. Fight for the right to make the key strategy decisions locally.

Final Lesson, number five: Partnerships count! Local partnerships – even regional or national partnerships if mediated through a local source count in turning around a distressed community. If folks who live in a disinvested place seek its improvement their investment must be more than matched by the investment of partners. Residents know the real deal. Partners can bring missing pieces to the table. Partners should be found locally. This room is filled with partners, potential partners and the stories of partnering. Neighborhood Reinvestment has built its 25year plus record on forging partnerships – some of them quite unlikely. I was tempted to single out a couple of unusual partner examples – however that can only get me into hot water. I think each of us has our own bar room list of incredible unlikely partners – institutions and/or individuals who have turned out against all expectations to be wonder partners. It's been one of my great joys to see these training institutes become terrific meeting grounds for those of us working day in and day out in intensely local situations. Yes we can take the classes and sharpen skills, more importantly after and before class we can build connections, bridges to each others' information, and make new partners.

You would have thought I could have learned more during this time. Maybe I have and just can't remember it. At bottom it's the residents who own their community. Residents know the portion of justice that they are receiving. They know the real deal, they don't often know (nor do any of us) the full deal. After two decades in the land of fruit and nuts (inside the beltway/Washington DC) I can assure you they don't. With partners, strong committed partners; with residents willing to keep investing in their communities; with community development practitioners willing to listen, work along side, forge partnerships and share experiences we can increase the portion of justice for all. I've seen it being done. You are doing it each and every day – and I salute you for it. Thank you.