



FEATURE STORIES

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## In East Tennessee

# Sharing a Vision to Bridge Rural and Urban Views

BY JENNIFER KIBBY

At first blush, it didn't seem like it could possibly work: A community leadership training built on a small, local scale in Appalachian Tennessee; sixty-two participants, spanning four generations and several races – some from urban Knoxville, others from rural east Tennessee; a day of sessions optimistically entitled, “Using Communication to Build Communities,” when one could only wonder what such apparently dissimilar people could possibly have to communicate about.

By day's end, however, it was unmistakably apparent that this variation of Neighborhood Reinvestment's Community Leadership Institute (CLI) model was wonderfully powerful and enormously helpful for all who attended.

For the past two years, **Knox Housing Partnership** (KHP) and the **Housing Development Corporation of the Clinch Valley** (HDC) have skillfully transformed the standard CLI format into one uniquely fitted to smaller, regional sessions. They have done so by addressing both the common problems and different circumstances of their combined audiences.

CLIs normally are weekend-long regional training events designed to provide skills-building training and networking opportunities for emerging resident leaders of the NeighborWorks® network. They are a partnership among Neighborhood Reinvestment districts, the Training Department, and the NeighborWorks® Resident Leadership Initiative.

In Tennessee, the two

NeighborWorks® organizations are only 25 miles apart, but they serve distinctly different constituencies. KHP's, in Knoxville, are primarily urban, while HDC's, in Oak Ridge, are predominantly rural. Therefore, KHP executive director Corky Neale and marketing coordinator Carolyn Bryant joined HDC executive director Steve Murray and community relations specialist Carlotta Spurling in carefully adapting a CLI's format.

### Key Areas

What they did was concentrate on three key areas: shared culture, leadership, and common issues:

- ▶ KHP and HDC magically joined their diverse constituents by repeatedly focusing on their shared Tennessee heritage. The training, for example, was held in the Museum of Appalachia, a site steeped in history and memorabilia and the perfect setting for the traditional country breakfast and a side-splitting Tennessee storyteller who started things off. Luncheon speaker Bill Landry, co-producer of the popular Heartland Series television documentary, used his stories of Appalachian events and people to remind city and country folks alike of their unique Tennessee heritage. Later, foot-stomping entertainment was provided by the Museum of Appalachia Band, with audience members joining in on popular blue grass songs.

- ▶ As the day progressed, it became

evident that big city and back country participants were connecting with each other as they discovered shared songs, stories, and Tennessee quirks.

▶ The Tennessee training honored a core CLI belief that leaders affect positive change in their communities, and demonstrated that strong leadership skills were equally necessary in both rural and urban settings. Each session, no matter what the topic, covered such basic leadership techniques as embracing diversity, conflict management, team and trust building, motivating and recruiting others, and effective listening.

Participants found that while specific problems in a rural community might differ from those in an urban neighborhood, these basic leadership skills were essential to resolving issues everywhere. As one attendee noted, “Not only are the participants coming together with one goal, but also they understand that it’s up to each individual to make a difference. They know that one person can’t do it alone. It’s a shared vision and one that can be realized with continued support and education through this kind of training.”

HDC and KHP built their curriculum around issues that are common to both urban and rural neighborhoods. Topics, for example, included organizing neighborhood associations, youth neighborhood involvement, neighborhood resources, community and government relations, absentee landlords and code enforcement.



Participants meet in an open-air class.

By developing an agenda reflecting both the common problems and varied circumstances of their constituents, the two NeighborWorks® organizations added a valuable level of conversation to the entire program. Very often, participants found that by looking at a problem from two seemingly opposing sides, they were able to develop more robust solutions than they might have on their own.

One attendee enthused, “Although people who attend the workshops come from diverse cultures and backgrounds, they each have a desire to improve their neighborhood. I think one of the best advantages this training provides is that community members can come together to network and exchange experiences. People see that they are not alone as they struggle with neighborhood conflicts and challenges to make a better place to live. They have the opportunity to hear what others have accomplished and how things have worked for them in similar situations.”

### Sharing a Vision

Perhaps there was also a fourth, hidden theme running throughout the training – the participants’ connection to something bigger. Many arrived

unfamiliar with Neighborhood Reinvestment or the NeighborWorks® network. As discussions went on throughout the day, however, it was easy to see attendees realizing that their local organizations are connected to a much larger network of similar organizations, and appreciating that they are part of something bigger and more powerful than just their organization.

Several participants later became resident leader coordinators in preparation for the combined Great Lakes and North Central district Community Leadership Institute.

The training’s continued success, according to Corky Neale of KHP, is due to “the exceptional attention Carolyn and Carlotta pay to their clientele, designing a one-day workshop that both recognizes the differences between urban and rural communities while capitalizing upon their common needs.”

One participant summed up: “[Everyone] shared a vision – that the community in which they live can achieve high standards and provide a place in society where their children and grandchildren can grow up in a safe, healthy environment.” Thanks to KHP and HDC, eastern Tennessee is closer to realizing that vision. ■

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