



**What Would
Dorothy Richardson Say?**

Resident Leadership Development Meets Project-Creep

BY MELVYN COLON

PHOTOSHOP ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID PLIHAL

When Kelly Walters first came to Utica, New York, she was a college student. She stayed, married and became a permanent fixture in the neighborhood. Like many young couples, she and her husband wanted to buy a home. Because of the many people she had met and talked to, she and her husband soon found an opportunity to purchase a city-owned property in the heart of the Cornhill neighborhood, a once-prominent area that had come to be plagued with arson, crime and abandoned properties.

Walters immediately recognized the problems in her new neighborhood and became the leader of her block association. As block captain, she never let prostitutes, drug dealers or other undesirables intimidate her, and she created one of the strongest neighborhood groups in the



city. Meantime, she and her husband were steadily improving their home.

From there, Walters became involved in more committees, was elected to the board of the Utica NHS NeighborWorks® HomeOwnership CenterSM, and then moved into the political arena. She won election to the city council, though she considers herself more an advocate of the people in her neighborhood than a politician. She is still very much a community activist. Her city council election forced her off the HomeOwnership Center's board, though she serves as president of its advisory council.

In 2001, Walters was honored with one of Neighborhood Reinvestment's Dorothy Richardson Awards for Resident Leadership Development. Dorothy Mae Richardson, a Pittsburgh homemaker and community activist, led the way for what would become the NeighborWorks® network when in 1968 she enlisted city bankers and government officials in joining with her block club in a battle against slumlords and rats. They named the effort Neighborhood Housing Services. It was a resident-led model that would spread across the country.

Today, resident leadership continues at the heart of the NeighborWorks® system. As the Corporation's Strategic Plan proclaims, "We believe that active, skilled and committed residents are essential to sustainable community change."

Background

At the heart of the NeighborWorks® model was a commitment to ongoing leadership development. In order to activate this leadership, the original NeighborWorks® organizations routinely staffed the position of community organizer. But as revitalizing neighborhoods became more complex, and as already-formed organizations came into the network, affiliates devoted greater attention and resources to the technical aspects of housing production. This often came at the expense of resident leadership development. In many organizations, the strength and impact of the resident voice diminished.

At a recent Resident Team Coordinators training, for example, 20 resident leaders from New England were asked to summarize the mission of the organization they represented. Only two were certain that their organization endorsed the principles of resident leadership. In fact, most of the 20 endorse the value of resident leadership. However, the residents' uncertainty on this question underscores that in the day-to-day work of their organizations, other concerns have pushed leadership devel-



Salt Lake NHS residents inspect CitiFront, a 150-unit, mixed-use, mixed-income, SLNHS development.

PHOTO BY DANIEL PACHECO

opment aside.

By the early '90s, the first signs of this situation were recognized by many network leaders, who felt that long-lasting community revitalization must extend beyond bricks and mortar. Neighborhood Reinvestment responded by providing staff to coordinate specific funded initiatives such as Back to Basics, Community Corps and the HUD Multifamily VISTA project. Each provided organizers opportunities for strengthening neighborhood associations, developing resident leaders, and building capacity in communities.

As funding for these specific initiatives came to a close, feedback from NeighborWorks® organizations resulted in a national initiative on resident leadership. The Resident Leadership Initiative responds in three general areas: technical assistance, training and integrating resident leadership into Neighborhood Reinvestment programs and internal systems. Its principal programs and events are Community Leadership Institutes, the Community Organizer Symposium, and the Community Organizing Pilot. (See sidebars for details.) Thousands of residents across the United States have participated in these events and programs.

Current Practices

Today, there is a wide range of practices among network organizations in terms of resident leadership development and organizing. Some integrate it into every program activity; others don't allocate any resources to leadership development at all. This issue of *bright ideas* features selected stories from organizations that dedicate significant resources to, and derive notable benefits from, community

organizing.

In addition, many other examples could also have been cited. For example, in a small city facing a housing-affordability crunch near Boston, community organizing led to a major shift in policy as the city's administration reversed course and agreed to invest resources to keep expiring-use housing affordable. In Utica, mobilized community pressure resulted in the passage of a nuisance-abatement law.

Yet other network organizations do excellent project work but don't dedicate resources to developing the leadership of residents. "What would it contribute to the organization's or community's bottom line," these executive directors and board members ask.

One response comes from the academic literature on community development. After sifting through numerous studies on community-development corporations and community-development partnerships, Glickman and Servon found community organizing and resident-leadership development to be important aspects of programmatic capacity and political capacity of neighborhood-based development organizations.¹

More recently, Rohe, Bratt and Biswas conducted research on CDC failures, downsizing and mergers. They found that one of the six organizational factors most closely associated with these events was lack of community support.² There were 113 such events in the last three years, a few in our own network.

Our own experience also provides a response. Our Community Organizing Pilot has produced evidence that organizing is indeed good for an organization's bottom line. In numerous cities, resident organizing has led to funding for new programs. It has also led to the recruitment of volunteers to carry out significant new initiatives.

In the second phase of the pilot, we will continue to address the issue of contribution by focusing on core business activities of the selected organizations. We think we will find that our experience with **Community Housing Services Wichita/Sedgwick County** in Kansas will hold for other sites, that is, that community organizing increases inquiries, applications and loan volume when used in conjunction with home-ownership programs.

Community Leadership Institutes

BY BECKY VENNE

Held since 1995, Community Leadership Institutes (CLIs) are weekend-long regional training events designed to provide skills-building training and networking opportunities for emerging resident leaders of the NeighborWorks® network. Three CLIs are held each year, with each of the nine Neighborhood Reinvestment districts hosting a CLI every three years. CLIs are a partnership among Neighborhood Reinvestment districts, the Training Department, and the NeighborWorks® Resident Leadership Initiative. This collaborative group works to design curriculum and hands-on learning experiences that are relevant to the district. Each CLI also strives to highlight the resident leadership work being done by area network organizations and surrounding community.

Initially, CLIs were designed with a contained focus to provide skills-based training to emerging resident leaders. But over time, they have grown in scope to have a more long-term impact. NeighborWorks® organizations now register "teams" of participants, which encourages them to be strategic with their selection and find residents who, they feel, will continue to work together post-CLI and contribute to their organization. Another addition was the position of Resident Team Coordinator (RTC). The RTC is a more-experienced resident leader chosen by the NeighborWorks® organization to recruit an appropriate team for a CLI. Neighborhood Reinvestment provides training to the RTCs before the registration period to assist them with their efforts.

Another innovation was the addition of an action-planning component. CLIs build on teamwork throughout the weekend, which culminates with teams working on a specific plan of action about an issue or opportunity they want to pursue after the CLI. This provides an opportunity to put their new skills to use and continue team-building. It also provides the district with an opportunity to track successes from the CLI.

Always popular, CLIs are a concrete way for Neighborhood Reinvestment to support resident-led community development. ■

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Moreover, continued involvement by homebuyers creates lasting benefits for organizations and communities.

Conclusion

Winning wide acceptance for community organizing and resident leadership development again in the network may require more than anecdotal evidence. It may also require a cultural shift.

Many people have come to view community organizing as adversarial, unmanageable and ultimately, counter-productive. In truth, an adversarial strategy may be most appropriate in a given situation, but not necessarily in all.

Political philosophy has come to embrace dialogue as a powerful political medium. This has influenced the rise of “consensus-based organizing.” Consensus-based organizing, also predicated on forming relationships, may be more appropriate in certain circumstances.

Perhaps changing some of the language we use can also facilitate a cultural shift. For example, “activate

citizen participation” can be synonymous with resident leadership development. This linguistic alternative emphasizes that the goal is to activate and increase participation in our communities, not fashion all leaders in the molds of Martin Luther King Jr. or Cesar Chavez.

More involved residents will sustain change and work for continuous community improvement. These, after all, are our goals. ■

¹ Glickman, Norman J. and Lisa J. Servon; “More than Bricks and Sticks: Five Components of Community Development Capacity”; *Housing Policy Debate* 9(3): 497-539.

² Rohe, William M, Rachel G. Bratt and Protip Biswas; *Evolving Challenges for Community Development Corporations: the Causes and Impacts of Failures, Downsizings and Mergers: Chapel Hill; Center for Urban and Regional Studies University of North Carolina; 2003.*

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Karimah Nonyameko leads a Community Leadership Institute session.

PHOTO BY SEAN BENNETT

Additional Resources

Sherry R. Arnstein; “A Ladder of Citizen Participation;” *AIP Journal*; July 1969. Old but not outdated. A very influential article that distinguishes between token and true participation. E-mail me at mcolon@nw.org and I can mail you a copy.

Robert J. Chaskin, Prudence Brown, Sudhir Venkatesh, Avis Vidal; *Building Community Capacity*; Hawthorne, New York; Aldine De Gruyter; 2001. An excellent exploration of the topic. Highly recommended.

Ross Gittell and Avis Vidal; *Community Organizing: Building Social Capital as a Development Strategy*; California; Sage Publications; 1998.

Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar; *Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood*; Boston; *The South End Press*; 1994.

Sara E. Stoutland; “Community Development Corporations: Mission, Strategy and Accomplishments;” in Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens, eds; *Urban Problems and Community Development*.

The full text of this book can be found at:
<http://brookings.nap.edu/books/0815718756/html/193.html#pagetop> ■

Community Organizer Symposium

The Community Organizer Symposium (COS) is an annual training and networking event held for community organizers who are working in a community development context. Traditionally only available to paid staff organizers of the NeighborWorks® network, the COS has slowly been opened to include organizers who work in the same unique context but outside the network.

Community organizer is one of the most volatile positions in a community development organization, with greater turnover than other positions. In many cases organizers come to these positions with little training and no network of support in their own localities, The COS attempts to stabilize the position of organizer by providing training, opportunities to network nationally, and a peer learning group.

Held annually since 1998, the COS was conceived as a resource for network organizers who faced unique challenges that differed from other types of organizing. Given that there were no comparable resources elsewhere in the community development field to support this type of work, Neighborhood Reinvestment's Resident Leadership Initiative worked with organizers to design an event for their specific needs. This continues to be a unique facet of the COS. The Resident Leadership Initiative and the Training Department work in conjunction with a diverse group of organizers to plan the event, ensuring that it remains participant-driven.

Each year the Community Organizer Symposium is held in a different city across the country. Serving more than 150 organizers annually, the COS provides cutting-edge, skills-building courses, networking sessions, and highlights local organizing efforts through field-based courses and tours. The COS also provides unique opportunities for more-advanced organizers to enhance their skills through teaching classes. A future direction for the COS will be to bring together highly experienced organizers and those who develop community-building policy to discuss the most current concerns and policy directions for community organizing in a community development context.

Organizers remain very committed to the preservation and expansion of the COS because it is the only time they have to connect with and learn from other organizers on a large scale. The Community Organizer Symposium provides a valuable resource that cannot be found anywhere else in the community development field. ■

– Becky Venne



James Johnson of Neighborhood Reinvestment.
PHOTO BY SEAN BENNETT

Community Organizing Pilot

BY JAMES JOHNSON

The Community Organizing Pilot sponsored by Neighborhood Reinvestment's Resident Leadership Initiative is designed to increase the performance and visibility of community organizing throughout the NeighborWorks® network, as well as the field of community development.

The program is guided by this definition, developed by a group of NeighborWorks® executive directors: "Organizing is based on the belief that people have the ability to name their problem(s) and identify the additional information and resources they need to solve them. Organizing is a process that brings the talents, resources and skills of people in the community together to increase their collective power to transform themselves and their community and work for social change. Organizing is more than mobilizing and service work. It involves leadership development, building relationships and consolidating thoughts and ideas into structures creating sustainable change."

The pilot's overall goal is "resident-led community change." Throughout its first year in 2002, 20 selected organizations received training on creating and reporting data for Neighborhood Reinvestment's outcome-based collection strategy. A support team of six consultants – all seasoned organizers – have been working on-site with assigned organizations. Their work resulted in the development of organizing action plans. In collaboration with Neighborhood Reinvestment's research and information management departments, the program collects the reported data and is creating vehicles to share successful strategies with the entire network.

Results have ranged from organizations understanding the importance of creating a coherent plan of action to residents being very proactive in making key decisions that have a long-term impact on their communities. Pilot organizations have achieved policy

changes at the municipal level, developed new funding opportunities, enlisted new volunteers who have created new initiatives, and strengthened their core business programs by bringing in new residents.

For example, in Lafayette, Indiana, residents now are meeting face to face with police officers. Instead of calling to make complaints, they are regularly having proactive meetings with the police that are affecting crime in the neighborhood. "We are learning that this work is very hard and it is very real," said Pat Stevenson, executive director of Lafayette Neighborhood Housing Services. "But it is essential, and we are very optimistic about the future because we are beginning to see positive results."

At Community Housing Services Wichita/Sedgwick County, Kansas, after initial outreach efforts, 12 youth came to a board meeting and talked about what they would like to see happen in the community. Because of the success of this collaboration, one youth has been put on the board. ■

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As a community organizer, Leo Montoya has been instrumental in Salt Lake NHS acquiring several blighted properties

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SALT LAKE NHS

The Cornerstone of Success Is Resident Leadership

BY MARIA GARCIAZ

I first met Evelyn Strickland in 1978 when she knocked on my mother's door in the East Liberty Park section of Salt Lake City. She asked our family to attend a meeting to learn about an organization that would help rebuild the neighborhood.

Quiet and reserved, Evelyn had been knocking on doors for a year to talk about the increasing number of boarded-up homes in the neighborhood. This door-knocking campaign marked the beginning of Salt Lake Neighborhood Housing Services, as well as my own introduction to community organizing and the power of people coming together to take charge.

Four years later, after developing a successful track record of housing development, SLNHS prepared to relocate to a new neighborhood, the Poplar Grove Community.

Residents in the Lead

Poplar Grove residents were excited with the opportunities NHS offered in helping them rebuild the community, but they were adamant that addressing the emerging gang problems was more important than bricks and mortar. If NHS wanted to help rebuild their community, it would need to engage neighborhood youth in NHS's mission of neighborhood revitalization.

This resulted in residents creating the concept of YouthWorks, now a nationally recognized prevention program that employs neighborhood teens in affordable housing. YouthWorks was what brought me to NHS, first as a representative of juvenile court, and, later, as the SLNHS YouthWorks director. I was appointed executive director of SLNHS in 1990.

Today, SLNHS has grown from a small NHS doing home-improvement loans into an organization that has built multimillion-dollar, mixed-use developments and created a successful drug- and alcohol-prevention program.

The cornerstone of success for NHS is resident leadership. Residents have been involved in raising funds, influencing zoning, reviewing and approving proposed designs, and, more importantly, helping me guide the organization to successfully serving community needs.



Jilene Whitby of the Fairpark Community Council and Danny Aragon of the Guadalupe neighborhood exchange views in Salt Lake NHS diversity training.

PHOTO BY DANIEL PACHECO



Dana Jeffs (left) of the Jordan Meadows Community Council, with Elva Herrera (center) and Diana Martinez of the Jordan Meadows neighborhood. PHOTO BY DANIEL PACHECO

As executive director, I have learned there is an inherent value in our community organizing, even if I can't place a specific dollar value on it. Resident leadership and community organizing drive success.

Support from Neighborhood Reinvestment

Over the years, Neighborhood Reinvestment has supported our resident leadership efforts in a number of

could do. A bold, positive move, for example, which would ensure Neighborhood Reinvestment's position as innovator, would be to move the community organizing program out of the pilot phase and make the funding available to all organizations.

SLNHS exists because of Evelyn Strickland's involvement and her direct investment in knocking on doors. The value it has brought to Salt Lake communities

... SLNHS has grown from a small NHS doing home improvement loans into an organization that has built multi-million-dollar, mixed-use developments ...

ways, including funding and training. Currently, we are participating in the Community Organizing Pilot program, sponsored by Neighborhood Reinvestment's Resident Leadership Initiative.

Neighborhood Reinvestment has played an innovative role as one of the few national organizations that support resident-leadership development in community development organizations. Even so, there is still more that it

certainly can be measured in bricks and mortar, but even more important are the number of lives transformed because they were engaged in rebuilding their community. ■

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SACRAMENTO MHA

Building Community, Resident by Resident

BY RAOUL AROZ

Two quick stories of California teenagers:

Nicholas, a former resident with **Sacramento Mutual Housing Association**, a NeighborWorks® organization, turned to face his school principal and said, “I made a bad decision.” The following day, the principal rescinded Nicholas’ suspension, and told the teenager’s mother he was doing so because Nicholas had showed maturity in taking responsibility for his actions.

Kathy, a current SMHA resident, handed some papers to the community organizer where she lives, and said, “Alma, I’ve met with a group of teen residents, and I want to go over our plan for a community activity with resident children and families over spring break. We’re hitting some barriers, and we think you can help.”

Despite their differences, both Nicholas and Kathy have some very important things in common. They both have received training in leadership; they both have access to adult support; and they both have become more resilient individuals by applying what they have learned to their own lives.

Two equally quick stories of mutual housing communities:

In East Sacramento, mutual housing residents sign and publicly present a petition that lists recommendations they believe will help their new neighbor (a mobile home storage business) better promote safety and privacy, while generating community support for its business operations.

In North Sacramento, mutual housing resident leaders and service providers host a service fair to link on- and off-site service providers with neighborhood residents, while sharing a great meal and showcasing multicultural talent in dance and street theater.

The communities’ shared experiences are that all residents have access to high-quality training in leadership development; resident leaders’ core focus is on creating opportunities to promote community learning; resident councils have both adult and youth representation; and each community is supported by a community organizer, who, in turn, is supported by a team of organizers and service partners.

Reciprocity Is Key

With both individuals and communities, SMHA has made central to its approach to community organizing the concept of reciprocity. Through reciprocity, individuals and communities invest in one another, experience a direct benefit, and, as a result, create value and promote meaningful outcomes.

For example, SMHA generates results by providing residents with access to high-quality training that benefits them personally and linking that training to on-site support that helps those trained apply their learning. Reciprocity works to expand the base of community assets and generates resident-led opportunities for folk to experience community, demonstrate leadership, and promote individual and community resiliency.

In addition to reciprocity, the very heart of our community organizing work is an unshakable commitment to resident-leadership training, resident-led structures, long-term service partnerships, best-practice standards, and a focus on community building.

In the final analysis, it is through Nicholas, Kathy and countless youth like them that communities are built, enriched and sustained.

Community organizing is an opportunity to fill the gap in leadership development and generate results that directly and meaningfully benefit both individuals and communities.

If resident-led structures are lacking, then create them to focus on community building. If community organizing is experiencing drift, reset your course to provide leadership development and support to residents. If service partnerships are weak, then rebuild them to value training, best practices, and resident leadership.

SMHA knows that though there is much left to do, training resident leaders means there are many more folk to help do it. ■

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Sacramento MHA youth encounter a ropes course in leadership camp.

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LeadershipWorks!

How Do You Spell Success in L-e-a-d-e-rship Development?

BY MARTINA GUILFOIL

In its 25 years of service, **Inglewood Neighborhood Housing Services** has grown from a single neighborhood effort, focusing mainly on rehabilitation lending needs, to a multiple service organization serving the South Bay area of Los Angeles County. Its services include lending, market development education, and market support programs, including community organizing activities.

We've achieved some notable successes. We've been honored by the Social Compact and the American League of Financial Institutions, among others. And we're on track toward our 10-year goals in 2005 of having generated nearly \$23 million in economic benefits and 400 new homeowners.

In carrying out INHS's mission of building healthy neighborhoods, we have worked at both building a sound investment climate and preparing residents to manage everyday problems and issues on their blocks.

Our leadership development initiative includes three components:

- ▶ We facilitate hands-on, resident-controlled block projects, so people can work together to accomplish a goal and get to know and trust one another.
- ▶ We provide workshops and training sessions, so that

small groups of neighborhood leaders can exchange experiences, learn from professionals and become inspired to take on greater challenges.

▶ Finally, we offer an advanced leadership training series and one-on-one mentoring for residents who have taken on leadership roles and want to improve and strengthen their skills.

In 1996, based on resident requests for leadership training, INHS developed a grassroots, 10-week program called LeadershipWorks! It was open to anyone interested, and it strived for four basic outcomes: understanding the community, developing personal leadership skills, accomplishing a project, and understanding and participating effectively in groups.

Over time, INHS trained 150 residents in leadership development.

The LeadershipWorks! training was more than a 10-week activity for many of our graduates. It was a forum to assess their leadership skills, get acquainted with other people interested in becoming leaders, develop trust and understanding among different groups of people, and develop confidence to take action.

This is best highlighted, perhaps, through the District 4 Task Force. District 4 is an area of Inglewood that had little to no resident involvement until a few years ago. After taking the LeadershipWorks! training, six graduates formed the District 4 Task Force as a vehicle to address neighborhood problems.

The task force meets monthly and has had several successful events, including a graffiti paint-out and a candidates forum. One of its major accomplishments has been to get the three schools in the area to work side by side with residents on issues of mutual concern.

Some of the seeds that were planted through LeadershipWorks! will continue to sprout as time goes on. Recently, a LeadershipWorks! graduate was appointed to fill an unexpired term on the city council. Another graduate approached me at a meeting. She said she had been so motivated by the training that she ran for the Inglewood school board. She lost the election, but, even so, was



Proud graduates of LeadershipWorks!

COURTESY OF INGLEWOOD NHS

undeterred in her enthusiasm and motivation to keep her involvement going.

INHS continues to work with LeadershipWorks! graduates to further develop their skills and support them in their community work. Members are working together to develop block clubs and conduct community outreach in their neighborhoods. They are working in community organizations and serving on nonprofit boards. They are making a difference in their community and throughout the city as a result of the leadership skills they have acquired.

However, over time it became apparent that many of the people we trained were just disappearing back into the community. By definition, a leader is someone who has a following. Residents who actually use their skills by taking on neighborhood or community issues are far more effective than those with no active role.

Given INHS' limited resources, we started questioning

whether we were maximizing our impact by just training anyone who requested it. We decided that it might make more sense, instead, to begin training people as part of an ongoing strategy around a specifically identified issue.

As a result, INHS is in transition in its resident leadership work.

Its first issue-based campaign will be around the lack of after-school programs. LeadershipWorks! training will be provided to assist residents in conducting a successful campaign. Resident board members will have a clear focus on the agenda and how it relates to creating healthy neighborhoods. When this campaign is over, a new issue will be identified and new leaders recruited to lead the next campaign.

Our vision can be realized – LeadershipWorks! ■

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Our New Organizing Strategy

As a result of joining the Resident Leadership Initiative's Community Organizing Pilot, Inglewood NHS began evaluating how its organizing work corresponded with the definition of organizing created by the pilot.

The pilot defines organizing as a process that brings people together to increase their collective power to create social change.

We realized that while the LeadershipWorks! program had positively impacted individual skills and leadership, we were not building collective action around issues that would affect social change. Our role was primarily one of a technical assistance provider.

We realized that we needed to become more proactive in identifying issues where we could bring people together to build an organizing campaign. We also wanted to be able to measure our outcomes and impact.

Working Together on a Common Issue

With our new approach, INHS now can conduct leadership training in the context of working together toward a common issue that people are united in trying to resolve. This will have a measurable positive impact on the community.

The INHS board of directors, based on a recommendation from the Community Action Committee, will establish the organizing issue. The resident leadership will organize the community to solve it.

The benefit of this approach is that INHS is building its own capacity to affect social change as an organization. Individuals who want to be part of a collective action can do it through INHS. It also allows the organization to look at areas in the community that need to be changed in order for it to achieve its mission of creating healthy neighborhoods.

While the board just approved making the shift and undertaking issue organizing at its March meeting, we already are achieving success with our new model. An issue has been identified and the Community Action Committee is energized to tackle it. Several smaller issues have been identified that people also want to address, which can create early wins and boost the group's confidence.

New leadership is emerging as we build the campaign. And, Latinos and African-Americans are finding common ground as they work collectively toward the same goals. ■

– Martina Guilfoil

Organizers' Voices

Community Organizing: More Than Just a Job

BY BECKY VENNE

Community organizers are a vital component of the resident-led, community development values that undergird the NeighborWorks® network. They are highly creative folk, who work long hours with little tangible reward on identifying and developing resident leaders who can build capacity for creating change in their neighborhoods.

As the Community Organizing Pilot proclaims, organizing “involves leadership development, building relationships, and consolidating thoughts and ideas into structures creating sustainable change.”

Because organizers in community development face unique challenges, the training and resources available for other types of organizing do not always come easily or even necessarily apply. Even so, organizers in the NeighborWorks® network are showing that they are committed to growing and sustaining their work for the duration.

For example, the three NeighborWorks® organizers profiled here – Bilal Ansari of the MHA of South Central Connecticut, Jennifer Gonzalez of Alamo Area MHA, and Raphael Rosario of Oak Hill CDC – exemplify the commitment and diversity of their peers throughout the network.

They come from different backgrounds and bring different perspectives, but they share a common vision. “The real benefit of being an organizer,” Jennifer Gonzalez said, “is working with people in a way that they begin to realize what they are capable of doing.”

Bilal Ansari, MHA of South Central Connecticut New Haven, Connecticut

“I don’t think that being an organizer is a learned skill. It is a life experience that can be sharpened with skills,” said Bilal Ansari. Staff organizer with Mutual Housing Association of South Central Connecticut, a New Haven NeighborWorks® organization, Ansari is driven to pass on the legacy of community organizing he learned as a child.

While growing up in New Haven, Ansari gained great inspiration from his grandfather, Reverend Lonnie Talley of the True Light Church. A local legend, Talley was a daily embodiment of leadership in the community, despite losing both legs and the sight in one eye to diabetes.

Ansari learned from his grandfather’s example the importance of having the community take control of its own destiny. It’s a lesson that he has carried in his core, being active in social justice work at every step of his journey.

Ansari moved to the San Francisco Bay

Area to attend college. It was there that he met his wife, Adilah, and began a family, which now includes four



Bilal Ansari, at the podium

COURTESY OF BILAL ANSARI

children. But the legacy of New Haven called to him; he wanted his children to have the opportunity to be raised around his grandparents.

After moving back to New Haven in 1997, Adilah learned of new housing opportunities available through the MHA of South Central Connecticut. The family moved into an MHA unit, and Ansari quickly began his involvement by attending a residents' meeting and asking tough questions about the decision-making structure.

Ansari took note of who was attending and started interviewing them one-on-one about their wants and needs. This led to the formation of the first resident council and the start of residents taking control of their own future. Over time, Ansari held many leadership roles, such as chair of the resident council and vice president of the MHA board.

After many discussions with David Rich, MHA executive director, about the needs of the community, the idea was raised to hire a staff organizer. Ansari already had a night job, but agreed to work part-time as an organizer for the MHA.

Since then, Ansari has started to accomplish great things. Currently, a diverse group of residents is working to gain possession of a city property in order to own and operate their own daycare center.

What has helped Ansari grow as an organizer? He

credits Neighborhood Reinvestment for its unique support of organizers through the Community Organizer Symposium (COS) and the Community Organizing Pilot of the Resident Leadership Initiative. He also feels that being linked to a national movement has provided the skills and networking needed to sustain his own growth.

More importantly, Ansari credits those who have been a part of the movement as being his inspiration. "I am standing where I am," he said, "because of those who came before me, who didn't stop. I owe it to them to continue and I want my children to go even further."

Ansari credits the local community leaders as being his greatest teachers. "There are some beautiful people in this community that I've been blessed to work with," he said. "These grassroots leaders have taken me under their wing."

Ansari has been committed to social justice since he observed his grandfather working tirelessly in the community, and he shows no sign of stopping. When asked where he sees himself in the future, Ansari said he sees his work evolving to where, some day, he organizes around civic engagement on a national or international level.

"I was prepared by my grandfather," Ansari said. "Now I'm being prepared to take the mission to where it needs to go."

Jennifer Gonzalez, Alamo Area MHA San Antonio, Texas

Jennifer Gonzales (left), with board member Kathy Knott

PHOTO BY SHELLEY NAYLOR

"The real benefit of being an organizer is working with people in a way that they begin to realize what they are capable of doing," said Jennifer Gonzalez, resident services director with Alamo Area Mutual Housing Association, a San Antonio Neighbor-Works® organization. Gonzalez is one of the many community organizers who will quickly confess with a smile that she stumbled into the profession. "Until I went to the first Community Organizer Symposium in Boston in 1998," she said, "I thought that being an organizer meant being organized."

She remembers the COS' organizing course, taught by Kenneth Jones, a trainer with more than a decade's expe-



rience, and the moment when the light bulb went on. “I realized what organizing truly meant,” she said, “and that was a new beginning.”

Growing up in Texas, Gonzalez had a strong sense of how lucky she was. Despite living in a single-parent household, she had access to many extracurricular opportunities that she credits with making her who she is today.

After college, Gonzalez held jobs that showed her commitment to helping others, such as working in the oncology ward at a VA hospital and as an art therapist at a children’s shelter in San Antonio. In her career search, she began to know that her passion was to give others the same chances to grow and develop that she had had. “I owe that to my mother,” she said.

Six years ago, a job opportunity opened at Alamo MHA that allowed Gonzalez to follow her passion. She was hired as a site-based resident coordinator at the Western Hills Fourplexes, providing the types of programs she had utilized in growing up, and has been moving up the ranks ever since.

Gonzalez’s journey is an example of how, when adequately supported by an organization, professional growth is possible for community organizers. She began by providing services at Western, but soon realized that program development had been based on the teaching skills of the program director, rather than community planning.

With strong support from MHA Executive Director Sandi Williams, Gonzalez helped begin the philosophical shift from opportunity-based services to planned resident leadership. She became the resident services director for all sites, supervising five resident coordinators. She began developing system-wide community wellness and education programs, based on resident needs.

But she has never forgotten her beginnings at Western, frequently going out to the properties to stay grounded in reality. “It’s still important for me to know who everybody is,” she said.

Alamo MHA believes strongly in investing time and money in professional development. Gonzalez has benefited greatly from this opportunity and now, in turn, trains others. She has become a regular instructor at Community Leadership Institutes and the COS. She also credits her success to working for a supportive executive director. “Sandi encourages risk taking,” Gonzalez said, “and wants us to learn from trial and error.”

Looking toward the future, Gonzalez is quick to point out that she sees a continuing evolution, rather than a change away from organizing in a housing context. She sees herself working on more-systemized issues of leadership development and will continue feeding her need for creativity through teaching and mentoring others.

Gonzalez said she has no need to move on, because “I love what I do.”

Raphael Rosario, Oak Hill CDC Worcester, Massachusetts

Raphael Rosario PHOTO BY BECKY VENNE

“It took another person to see in me what I couldn’t see in myself.

“I didn’t know that I could do this kind of work, because of my past history,” said Raphael Rosario, community organizer with Oak Hill CDC of Worcester, Massachusetts, a NeighborWorks® organization.

Rosario is the first to acknowledge that there is no logical reason why he is still alive and how he has ended up as a successful community organizer. Incarcerated 22 times between 1976 and 1992, he spent the equivalent of 13 years in jail, due to dependencies on drugs and alcohol. He was stabbed twice and once hit over the head with a baseball bat. Rosario can only explain his continued presence as part of a cosmic plan to have him use his



experiences to help others.

How did this former addict go from leading a life of crime to being an honored community organizer?

In 1992, Rosario was sentenced to nine to 10 years for possession of heroin with intent to sell in a school zone. After serving the first year, he called home and got the news that finally brought him to a crossroad. His cousin, with whom he had been very close, and her friend had been brutally murdered by drug dealers and their bodies discarded behind dumpsters. Despite all the drug-related deaths Rosario had witnessed, this was his wake-up call. He decided that he did not want to die, and started the journey toward sobriety. “They say that people learn from their first mistake,” Rosario said. “I had 22. After the 22nd, I learned.”

While sober and living in a halfway house, he met the person who changed his life, Suzanne Buglione, community services director of the Henry Lee Willis Community Center. The Willis Center is a multicultural, minority-based, social service organization in Worcester.

Rosario began volunteering through the center, doing food bank distribution. Buglione noticed his voracious appetite for learning and began to see something in him that he couldn't yet see himself, eventually convincing him to get his GED. Buglione hired Rosario as a driver for the food distribution program, for 10 hours a week, which allowed him to get a start working in a nonprofit.

As the Willis Center grew, Rosario grew with it. Buglione encouraged him to run a youth program at the center and to use his life experiences to make a difference with the youth. Thus began Rosario's insatiable desire to use his experiences to help others choose better for themselves. Two years ago, he left the Willis Center and started work at Oak Hill CDC, first as a youth coordinator and then as a full-time community organizer.

With strong support from Oak Hill Executive Director Jim Cruikshank, Rosario has been an unstoppable force in the CDC's target neighborhood.

There have been many challenges along the way. First, Rosario had to make the philosophical shift from running programmatic activities to pursuing principles of community organizing, but there were lessons he enjoyed learning.

“It's not to say that anyone can put on an activity,” Rosario said, “but community organizing is really a shift from putting activities together to making sure that whatever you do is resident-led.”

He sometimes becomes frustrated with the isolation that people create for themselves, meeting residents who have lived in their neighborhood for decades but do not know their neighbors upstairs. It is a constant effort through door-knocking and activities to encourage people to come out of their homes and begin getting involved.

No matter what the frustration, however, Rosario remains dedicated to his mission of spending every day making a difference, especially in the lives of youth, who respect him because of his honesty about his own life. He doesn't want pity, nor does he seek praise. He has taken responsibility for his actions, continues to make peace with himself through his spirituality, and is dedicated to using his second chance in life to make a difference.

“I get the satisfaction of going home every night,” he said, “knowing that I did something positive that day.” He is committed to learning and is currently pursuing his associates degree. Looking ahead, he said, “I still have so much to learn. Organizing is a process; it's a learning process. And how can I teach if I don't learn?” ■

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Resident Leadership: Creating a Stronger Social Fabric *(Continued from inside front cover)*

It's good business. If residents are directly involved in setting the agenda of the organization, then the organization is providing goods and services that make sense and will be utilized. Therefore, time and money will not be spent on mismatched programs. Strong partnerships bring more revenue.

When residents work together to improve their communities, we build bonds that foster cultural and social understanding. We tear down economic and racial divisions and create a stronger social fabric.

Developing leaders extends the work of community development. Leaders can work for changes in every aspect of creating a healthy, vibrant community.

Community leaders have saved and revitalized neighborhoods across the country. Neighborhood Reinvestment is working to build on their knowledge and expand their audience. ■

Ellen Lazar is Neighborhood Reinvestment's executive director.