

HEALTHY KIDS, HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

LEADER PROFILES

**Healthy Kids,
Healthy Communities**

Supporting Community Action to
Prevent Childhood Obesity

Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is helping dozens of communities across the country to reshape their environments to support healthy living and prevent childhood obesity.



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Introduction from the Director



Sarah Strunk
Director
Active Living By Design
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Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation whose primary goal is to implement healthy eating and active living initiatives that can support healthier communities for children and families across the United States. The program places special emphasis on reaching children who are at highest risk for obesity on the basis of race/ethnicity, income and/or geographic location.

Within the HKHC grant period (2008-2013), 49 community partnerships have developed and implemented well over 1,000 policy and environmental changes to expand access to affordable healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity. Hundreds of new farmers' markets and community gardens were developed, with special emphasis on increasing accessibility for low-income families. Nearly 200 policies and environmental changes related to complete streets were enacted. Improvements to healthy food retail and safe, accessible parks were also seen.

None of these incredible accomplishments would have been possible without the commitment of thousands of community residents, partners and leaders who worked together to ensure a healthier future for all. Many of these partnerships are still going strong. Successful collaborative efforts are also fed by the personal passions of individuals who believe in the work. During the past four years, we have published these personal journeys of HKHC Project Directors, Project Coordinators and partners to showcase the impressive grassroots leadership present in HKHC. Now, as the grant program comes to a close, we have assembled them in one place. Collectively, they paint a picture of the leadership strength present in the healthy communities' movement today.

It is our pleasure to present this document, which showcases 30 of the dozens of dedicated HKHC leaders who have helped strengthen relationships, transform environments and change the norms of their communities. I would like to personally thank each one of them for bringing their trueselves to these interviews and for allowing their personal stories to be shared with others.

They have inspired our team. We believe they will inspire you, too.

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Strunk'.

Sarah Strunk
Director, Active Living By Design

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Niiobli Armah

Community: Houston, TX

Originally Published:

September 2011



When Niiobli Armah was born, the bar for his life was already high. You could say he was destined for great work.

He grew up with his mother and sisters in the Southwest part of Houston, a diverse suburban area. His mother instilled in him a strong sense of connection to family and community and a deep spiritual foundation for life. His father is from Ghana and imbued in Niiobli strong values around health and their West African culture. His traditional name even means “Chief of Warriors,” something his family did not take lightly. “A name that starts with Ni is a great distinction and means you had royalty in your family...don’t think I didn’t use that in grade school,” he laughed. And then, more seriously, “Because of who I am, I have to do good work, and that comes from both of my parents. It’s almost like a family standard. Why would I not be doing this type of work?”

Niiobli is the program coordinator for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Houston, TX. He works for Children and Neighborhoods Defeat Obesity (CAN DO), housed in the Center for Research on Minority Health at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. And while his upbringing strongly influenced him personally, other pivotal moments influenced his career.

PERSPECTIVE GAINS FROM TWO VANTAGE POINTS

Hurricane Katrina hit while Niiobli was attending Southern University in Baton Rouge. Shortly after the storm, Niiobli began working as a policy intern for then Governor Kathleen Blanco. “I saw firsthand how policy affects people,” he said. “It was amazing to be in the state capital then,” he said. “People had to make split decisions that affected people’s lives. It was a good lesson for me about how government can drive the fate of its people.” In addition, Southern University was a first response site, so its gymnasium was filled with hurricane survivors. “I was talking to people, experiencing the initial reaction of folks who had just lost everything. They had such looks of desperation. And to see how organizations and institutions responded to people who have nothing was a call to social action. I thought, ‘If this is the best we can do, something is wrong.’ I realized this was an arena I needed to be in.”

After graduation, Niiobli returned to Houston to be part of City Hall Fellows (CHF), a type of national service corps in Houston and San Francisco. CHF provides recent college graduates an opportunity to experience local government through specific projects and training on how cities work and the impact of local policy. During that time Niiobli worked for the Houston Parks and Recreation Department and created neighborhood wellness teams. Residents drafted wellness plans for their communities, and Niiobli found resources to help them succeed. “If they wanted a walking club, I located the nearest track and staff to facilitate it, for example,” he said. He spent a lot of time meeting people, ranging from legislators to CEOs to neighborhood activists. Not unlike his dual perspectives in Louisiana, where he saw things from both the State Capital and the gymnasium, he noticed something striking in Houston. “When I was downtown in a tall building, the urban neighborhoods looked so far away, and from the neighborhoods the downtown looked far away. It was symbolic for the massive divide between those who have (access and resources) and those who don’t, and it’s getting wider.”

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“This [work] is part of who I am because health disparities are not just an academic term to me, it’s an actual occurrence in my family. Healthy living is not a sound bite or a hobby.”

TYING THE TWO TOGETHER

Those experiences made Niiobli more determined to work on issues of access for people who don’t typically have a voice in the political process. Not an easy task in Houston, the fourth largest city in the country with two million residents representing a diverse mix of ethnicities, races and nationalities, and challenging environments. The city is spread over 634 square miles and has less parkland per resident than the national average. Public transportation is limited, and many neighborhoods lack adequate access to healthy food.

The city is divided into 88 “super neighborhoods,” and the HKHC partnership currently works with three pilot communities. In time, they will scale up efforts while simultaneously looking at citywide policies to improve quality of life for all Houstonians.

CANDO Houston’s model is to work with residents to identify their challenges and desired solutions and to coordinate resources from within the city, schools and local businesses to improve their situation. One of their early wins was with Lyons Elementary in the Northside Neighborhood. “We’ve made a huge change in the environment there. Lyons doesn’t look the same as it did a year ago in terms of opportunities for active living and healthy eating. Now there’s a school garden, a track and a wellness room.” They have leveraged this success into discussions with the City and school districts about implementing joint use agreements.

IT’S PERSONAL

“It’s interesting to me that I do this work because it’s not like a job. This is part of who I am because health disparities are not just an academic term to me, it’s an actual occurrence in my family. Healthy living is not a sound bite or a hobby. I take these things home with me every day and have the same conversations with my mom and siblings.” And he is determined to change the social norms in his community as well.

“When Beverly Gor [the HKHC Project Director] and I spoke at the National Association of Black Public Administrators meeting, I said, ‘Every Sunday we go to church and the first thing is the prayer list. If you pay attention, it’s almost always health concerns, and they tend to be lifestyle related diseases. We’re so used to hearing them it’s not an alarm. Let’s stop listing off the prayer list and start addressing them as a congregation, as a movement.’”

While Niiobli is still early in his career, he’s already learned a lot about community change work from experience and from mentors. “There have been people who have spent significant amount of time pouring into me, people I’ve intentionally sought out and followed. I have a mentor in DC and an aunt in Ghana who always speak words of wisdom to me. And I’ve had valuable mentorship from simply watching people. I look for something I can take that’s positive and applicable to what I’m doing. In that way I’ve been mentored by hundreds of people by watching and listening.”

SHOWING UP, NOT OFF

One important lesson he’s learned is to relax. “When I first started, I went into neighborhoods and did a lot more talking than I do now. Now I like to go out and literally just chill. HKHC has taught me not to take the professional jargon to the community. I leave that at the office. When I go out it’s about everyday conversations. I’m not asking them assessment questions, I’m asking, ‘Where do you get your food? Tell me your grocery store story.’ I was trained to show up as a professional in slacks and with a PowerPoint

and handouts. Now I just meet people where they are and build on that.”

And he keeps showing up. “One day I made three trips to a neighborhood in the hot Texas sun to meet with a PE teacher and two other teachers about their issues. I stayed until 8 p.m. I will show up on Saturday or at 7 a.m. or 8 p.m. I’m not afraid to show up. To me that’s half the work.”

And that ambition is sometimes a challenge for Niiobli because he also wants to find balance. “I don’t have competing interests against my work so I’m entrenched in it. I’m passionate about this work and I want everyone to show up, play well with others and do good work. I sometimes fall short in being realistic about what can be done given the complex dynamics at play. I’m working on growing into a level of maturity to focus on doing whatever we do really well by concentrating on the most important things first.” One thing’s for certain, he’ll figure it out. It’s in his blood.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Houston partnership visit tinyurl.com/k5lwm6q

Ned Barrett

Community: Spartanburg County, SC

Originally Published:

March 2013



After Ned Barrett went through a divorce and quit his 18-year career as a high school history and English teacher, he experienced depression at being nearly 45 and starting over.

"I realized I wasn't doing my best for the students anymore and it was the right thing to do," he said. "But finding where I belonged after that was hard."

Author Jeannette Walls is quoted as saying "Sometimes you need a little crisis to get your adrenaline flowing and help you realize your potential." If quitting his job didn't get the adrenaline pumping, it came quite naturally when he started working with a 6,000-pound rhinoceros named Tank.

A ZOO SABBATICAL

"I had two students who grew up in this zoo. I'll never forget the day one of them said she didn't have her paper because she was up all night birthing a tiger. Anyway, when I left teaching, they said, 'there's always work at the zoo.' I basically worked for charity, but it was hard manual labor, which I needed right then."

Ned worked with many animals, but Tank was his favorite. "I won a prize for an essay I wrote about giving Tank a bath," he said. Having to be vigilant all the time—Tank was loving but his size made him dangerous—was helpful too. "I couldn't just space out," he said. And, the fact that he met his current wife there was also a plus. "She trained me. I was the young Padawan and she was the Jedi Warrior," he joked.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Ned is now the Partnership Coordinator for Partners for Active Living, the lead agency for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Spartanburg County, SC. While he didn't take a traditional path to this work, it seemed destined. First, for the last 30 years, Ned has explored every place he's lived with a close-up lens as a runner and bicycle commuter.

He also grew up with a community activist. His mother was involved in many issues in Huntington, WV, especially homelessness. She and her "radical friends" researched and realized there was a growing homeless population there and they connected with a local church to provide services. Their work evolved into a formal shelter, dental clinic, job and GED training, and more. "Seeing that gave me a sense that this work develops over time, and you just keep trying to meet needs -- some anticipated, some not. It's dynamic," he said.

His training and years as a teacher has also been an asset. "Essentially, I conducted five community meetings a day in the classroom for 18 years," he said. "It's easy for me to create an atmosphere where people can be comfortable with different, controversial subjects."

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On community design and health, Ned says, “There’s a lot of arguing your angle, trying to respond to different perspectives and addressing concerns. That’s right up my alley.”

IMPROVISING WITH SUCCESS

After working in the zoo, Ned joined Upstate Forever (Spartanburg office), a nonprofit organization that focuses on sustainable communities and advocates for policies and regulations that encourage active living in Spartanburg County. It was new work, but he was willing to learn. “I took a big pay cut, but I knew it was important to start at the bottom and be immersed in the work.”

As Ned moved to his current position, he loved the intellectual aspect of learning the interplay between community design and health. He’s also been re-energized by this style of teaching. “There’s a lot of arguing your angle, trying to respond to different perspectives and addressing concerns. That’s right up my alley.” Being self-taught, Ned thinks of Jane Jacobs (an American–Canadian author and activist best known for her influence on urban studies) as a hero. “She wasn’t a planner either, but she truly experienced the places she lived.”

Maybe that’s why, as Ned was assigned to work in the outlying small towns of Spartanburg County, he took his bike. “The first thing I did was ride around and take pictures so that I’d know what people were experiencing and talking about.” Mostly, though, Ned’s secret is that he cares about people.

IT’S ABOUT THE PEOPLE

Just as he did with students, his primary goal is to transfer power to those who will live with the results. “I go to neighborhood meetings and love working with the people. There are three particular women who are powerhouses in their neighborhoods. They’re just spectacular. Also, working with the community advisory groups is amazing. They all understand how the community works and it’s great.”

The HKHC partnership advocates for resolutions, like Healthy Park Zones, that supports traffic calming around parks to facilitate pedestrian and bicycle access. They also promote healthy eating policies in communities throughout Spartanburg. Ned is noticing an organic development of committees to keep the work going. Partners for Active Living supports these teams, including efforts to formalize their partnerships with cities.

People are interested in continuing this work beyond HKHC. That makes Ned proud; and he’s no longer wondering what to do with the rest of his life. “As my mother once said, ‘Immortality means leaving the world a better place.’”

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Spartanburg County partnership visit tinyurl.com/mzzfqgh

John Bilderback

Community: Chattanooga, TN

Originally Published:

July 2011



John Bilderback was small for a high school freshman and was occasionally picked on. One day, two guys started giving him trouble.

"I was never really afraid to defend myself," he said. "But two against one is never a fair fight." None of his friends wanted to get involved. "But BJ Barney," he said. "He got my back and it was interesting because we weren't really that close. BJ walked me to my truck every single day until those two guys were basically kicked out of school. I never forgot that."

That was a formative encounter. John learned a valuable lesson about not judging people by their looks, how they talk or by their habits. "BJ was not a person most parents would want their kid hanging around," he explained. "But he took care of me. And now when I see kids in our focus neighborhoods, I kind of understand where they're coming from. Most of them are not bad kids but their view of the world around them forces them into bad decisions. I feel strongly about giving back every day—remembering BJ. It's a part of what made me who I am today."

Besides being bullied John also struggled with dyslexia and attention deficit disorder, making school a difficult journey. "I did not graduate high school with honors, shall we say," he noted. But he did make it to college, "although a lot of people in my hometown probably thought I'd come back without finishing," he said. If they did, they underestimated his tenacity. A fortuitous conversation helped him decide to major in exercise science. "I asked, 'How much money do you make doing that?'" he laughed. "But then I thought it's something I love, so it probably won't feel like work and the money will come." With classes like anatomy and physiology, he knew it would be tough - but he never looked back.

John graduated in 2001 with his B.S. in exercise science and met his future wife, Riann, in that same year. After college John went to work at a local gym, but after two years he was laid-off. "That was a tough time for me professionally; I didn't want to work in a gym the rest of my life. Riann stood by me and encouraged me to pursue my master's degree. She is the reason for my success and her unwavering belief in me was something I needed more than anything." With the support of his wife, John finished his M.S. in clinical exercise physiology and, in the process, John and Riann welcomed their son Ben into the world. In John's words "life was starting to come together."

FROM PAMPHLETS TO POLICIES

Now, John serves as the project director for Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) in Chattanooga, TN and the Step ONE Program Manager for the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Health Department. He is leading policy and environmental change efforts toward improved health. However, when he first started working for the health department as a public health educator in the Eat Smart Healthy Starts grant, his training and professional expectations were still heavily biased toward individual behavior change.

Neighborhoods in South and East Chattanooga have serious health challenges. About 29 percent of residents live below the federal poverty level, 35 percent have less than a high school education, and 71 percent of adults are overweight or obese. John started meeting with residents to talk about nutrition. "Folks pretty much knew what was good

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“I made a promise to both communities that 100% of the grant would be directed to their neighborhoods, and only theirs.”

for them and what wasn't,” he said. “It was more about cost and access. I saw problems with the fundamentals of how they get their food. And I'm thinking ‘I'm supposed to do nutrition education with 30 people for 20 to 30 minutes? Is that really going to change the course of overweight and obesity in the estimated 205,000 residents who fall in that category?’ I felt like we were spinning our wheels.”

So he looked again at the grant's objectives and activities and noticed a budget line item for 10,000 educational mail outs to residents. “I talked to my boss and said, ‘We're spending \$10,000 per year for three years on these pamphlets? Let me ask you something. When you get mail at home and it's not from someone you know, do you read it? And how would we show that it reversed obesity anyway? How about if I see if there's another way to use this line item?’”

His boss told him to make a proposal and John's tenacity kicked in again. He researched why people make certain choices and how to effectively impact the family unit. He and his staff conferred for weeks. He reflected on his discussions with residents about not being able to afford healthy food and his childhood on a dairy farm where they grew their own food in a backyard garden. “It took several months to convince my supervisor that teaching gardening would be a wise use of dollars. But I showed him research that if kids are engaged in growing food, they're more likely to eat it. I finally got the green light,” he said. They developed a mini-grant gardening program designed to involve children from planning through harvest. And they invested in leadership by providing a scholarship to a master gardener program for whoever organized these gardens. Schools, a museum, the food bank and a neighborhood, among others, have started gardens. Some worked well and continued to flourish, and others didn't. In some cases, additional gardens cropped up around the initial one. “It was a shotgun approach to find the hotspots and identify true leaders and that's working,” John said, describing the beginning of his work investing in neighborhood residents to direct and lead change efforts.

LEADING FROM WITHIN

Then came HKHC. John, Kasey Decosimo, and Sarah Ingle coordinated the grant writing process and included residents. “We wrote the grant in the neighborhoods,” he said, using existing community contacts. Meetings and focus groups were held in both neighborhoods to identify daily issues and challenges. “I made a promise to both communities that 100% of the grant would be directed to their neighborhoods, and only theirs. And that we'd be transparent. They could see the budget at any time. We even developed a Healthy Living Fund with match dollars that they have control over.”

Once the grant was received, John and his team searched for community-minded leaders to hire. It took eight months. “We wanted people that understood these neighborhoods in particular and could gain residents' respect and trust. And it's paid off. Once they got on board, they formed committees in both neighborhoods and finished the goal-writing process in four months. Now they're taking action and implementing those plans. So literally, the leadership of the grant was put in the hands of the residents. They truly are in charge.”

John and his volunteer coordinator Falice Haire looked for residents who were taking initiative on their own. “We identified leaders like Miss Josephine who had basically tilled a garden with her butcher knife in her back yard because it was the only thing she had. People like Rosemary Porter who started her own neighborhood watch or the Morelands who started the East Side Taskforce. Folks like Miss Wright and Maggie Simpson who started gardens without external support. People like Mr. Elder who started “Men on Board,” retired men and men on disability or who were jobless that

greet kids daily as they enter school and provide positive male leadership. Mr. Elder also helped raise money for a playground at Orchard Knob Elementary. To me, those people are real leaders.”

These and other residents form leadership advisory committees, one for each neighborhood. Together they are the “leadership advisory council.” They put together the workplan and for each goal a workgroup. Workgroups include organizational partners. “In the past the leadership committees were made up of organizational partners and they would try to put residents on the workgroups,” John said. “We wanted to flip that on its head because we felt like the residents knew what they wanted to see in their neighborhoods and what needed to be done better than the organizational partners. Then your outcomes are what residents are going to utilize because they have ownership of it.”

BRIDGING BACK

Both neighborhoods prioritized developing community capacity as their most important goal. And John strongly believes that growing leadership within the neighborhoods is vital for long-term success. So in addition to finding grassroots leaders to advise and direct the work, they are working hard to heal relationships and improve communication between the residents, city, and county government staff. John empathized with residents about their history of broken commitments, disinvestment and other legitimate complaints. But then he told them that different people work at the city and county now. And he turned to city and county staff and helped them see a different side, too.

“I would tell them, ‘Yeah, you’re going to hear complaints when you go in there,’” he said. “Just know that it’s not directed at you. You weren’t here when all that stuff happened. But they want to be heard. They want to be listened to. So you let those complaints come out until they can’t get any more out, and then that’s when progress starts. Hear them first, don’t be impatient, and then you can move forward.’ And that develops the relationship that’s so important. Now the residents can call the regional planning agency and be heard, and they don’t feel like they have to be as abrasive as they were in the past. Changing that relationship isn’t something that is necessarily measurable from the clinical standpoint, but it’s an immensely powerful and positive outcome. To me that’s the sustainability of this whole project.”

Clearly John is no longer an undersized freshman and has not forgotten the empathy and care he was shown in those days. In fact, he is now the one breaking down walls, righting wrongs, ensuring safe passage and building bridges that connect people, neighborhoods and an entire community. BJ would be proud.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Chattanooga partnership visit tinyurl.com/kepgjv7

Maria Teresa Cerqueira

Community: El Paso, TX

Originally Published:

April 2012



An artist is skilled at seeing things not as they are, but as they could be. Combine the artist's eye with international experience and you have someone with limitless imagination of what "could be."

You have, in fact, Maria Teresa Cerqueira, the Chief of the U.S.-Mexico Border Office of the Pan American Health Organization in El Paso, TX. She is also the Project Director for their Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities initiative. In this role, she envisions the potential in community leaders and a better quality of life for residents of neglected neighborhoods.

Maria Teresa was born an artist, and she can trace how creativity runs in her family. One great uncle was an illiterate fisherman in Portugal who made up poems. His children wrote and published them. Maria Teresa enjoys painting, especially fruits and vegetables or things inspired by the garden. Her son is also artistic.

In addition, she was born into a family that valued intercultural experiences. Portugal is her birthplace and where she spent her early years. Her family moved a lot, and she also lived in the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, Mexico and the United States. Maria Teresa said she was taught to learn from each place and to respect different cultures. "Now I like to see places not just from the tourist side, but also from what makes people proud of who they are," she said.

BUILDING ON EXPERIENCES

That background turned out to be ideal for her career in public health. She didn't know this was her path until she decided in high school to volunteer as a candy striper in a local hospital. While there, she was asked to design educational pamphlets and became interested in nutrition. She followed a traditional public health track but didn't like clinical work. So she went to Mexico to study the relationships between diet, exercise and health under a National Institutes for Health (NIH) grant. Her focus population was the Tarahumara and also Raramuri (indigenous in Chihuahua, Mexico and known for their long-distance running skills).

She stayed for several years working on different projects and then applied for a doctorate program at Cornell University to expand her skills. She took courses in public policy, government, organizational behavior and international labor, whatever interested her. "I took courses all over the place, and my advisors were going a little nuts," she laughed. "But since I was an older student they said 'All right, let her do whatever she wants to do.'"

For her dissertation, she worked with local community health workers and evaluated the federal Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and worked with the Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC). The WIC program didn't have community health workers but EFNEP did and, she realized, WIC wasn't connected to EFNEP. "In my training I tried to connect them. I asked the health workers, 'What do you do with the women in their first trimester, and can you refer them [to WIC]?' We began to talk about that. I took community field workers to meet the people in WIC, encouraging a more holistic approach to their health services." She also helped them understand the connection between not breastfeeding and childhood obesity. Consequently, that

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“One thing is very clear. You need to build a partnership and trust at the community level and also with policymakers.”

unit was among the first to bring breastfeeding into WIC’s agenda.

REALITY IS A GOOD TEACHER

“Little by little I was seeing evidence for having policy at the national and local level to mobilize resources and people. Even in small units like that WIC unit,” she said. And the more she looked, the more evidence she found. “Once I worked in Cuba evaluating their national policy around food rationing. I looked at their La Libreta (“little book”) policy and worked with the Institute of the Internal Demand to see if that policy was working because they had a lot of obesity. Then they lost the support of the Soviet Bloc and they lost gas and people had to walk and ride bikes and that fixed that,” she said. “I also worked in rural Mexican communities trying to educate people about eating healthier. They were using a lot of lard in their cooking. All of sudden, the price of lard went through the roof and because the price of vegetable oil was lower, people began to switch to oil,” she explained. “It had nothing to do with our educational efforts, but we learned that if you work with prices and taxes you can influence behavior,” she said. “Keep your eyes open and reality will be a good teacher.”

BRINGING IT ALL HOME

Maria Teresa drew from those perspectives when thinking about El Chamizal, a low-income Hispanic neighborhood in El Paso, located on the Mexican border along the Rio Grande, where HKHC is helping residents re-imagine their environments and think about better city policies to improve health. El Chamizal is predominantly Latino with low education attainment, high poverty and crime, including multiple youth gangs. In addition, there is limited access to affordable, nutritious food and opportunities for physical activity.

However, there are many passionate community leaders and local partners collaborating to change that picture. In addition, youth leaders are forming ECOCLUBS to help assess the environments and advocate for change. This is the first ECOCLUB in the United States, joining thousands of youth from more than 30 countries. Maria Teresa is encouraged by these youth. “It’s not super sophisticated,” she said, “and it doesn’t need a lot of money,” noting how this work can help foster long-term sustainability. “These groups build self-confidence, leadership, pride in community and a vision of the future. For the neighborhood, this is very critical,” Maria Teresa explained. Rather than the underinvestment they’ve historically known, she said, this is an opportunity to show them they are valued -- that efforts will begin in this neighborhood and then branch out to help the rest of the city.

BUILDING THE BORDER

“One thing is very clear,” she said. “You need to build a partnership and trust at the community level and also with policy makers. It’s not an either/or. Policy makers respond to people,” she said. Yet in a border community like El Paso, especially with the escalating violence in the neighboring Ciudad Juarez, trust is a difficult thing to build.

“The border is getting more and more tense,” she said. “A lot of troops came out here, and the security issue has been a real distraction of the local people and local authority. Resources and attention are being drawn and isolated as if security has nothing to do with healthy living. They are looking at things in silos, creating competition among the different sectors instead of collaboration.”

Maria Teresa continued, “The residents get less attention, and their own issues get put on the back burner: needs for improved housing and green spaces. Resources all get drawn to having more police. These issues are overwhelming. A lot of people who may not have all their ducks in a row, all their papers, may not feel as comfortable putting themselves on the line and putting issues forward. And situations like the new Arizona laws influence others to find scapegoats. Instead of trying to work together, the mindset becomes, ‘It’s hard times, well it must be the fault of the immigrants.’ It separates people,” she said.

Yet in the midst of this extreme stress, El Paso is still moving forward. The City Council recently passed a Resolution to Improve Nutrition and Physical Activity in El Paso, and smaller surrounding cities followed suit. It is providing momentum and needed support. And recently, El Paso was one of only six cities recognized at the World Summit on Urban Health in Japan. “That was great validation for the work, the cities and to meet and share with other local authorities on healthy cities,” Maria Teresa stated. And not surprising. It reflects Maria Teresa’s creative vision for making health the routine business of every community.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC El Paso partnership visit tinyurl.com/lvdjfk

Mark Colomb

Community: Jackson, MS

Originally Published:

January 2011



What grabs your attention better than a personal health crisis or watching someone die? Mark Colomb had both experiences.

Undiagnosed hypertension led to kidney failure and four years on dialysis. That's a lot of time to think. And during the many hours he was hooked to machines in the same room with others who were being treated, he saw at least six people die. "That woke me up," he said. Luckily for Mark, his brother was a perfect match for a donor organ. "That gave me a second life and propelled my work...it pushed me to focus more on disparities and especially on undiagnosed conditions for poor people."

Mark is the Project Director for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Jackson, MS. He is also the President/CEO and founder of My Brother's Keeper, a non-profit organization pursuing the health and well being of minorities through leadership in public and community health practices, collaborations and partnerships. Mark has spent a lifetime working in public health on issues such as HIV, diabetes, cancer and heart and he sees the HKHC work as a culminating project.

"It took two decades worth of work to get to this point, addressing an obvious problem," he said. "All the co-factors for obesity are here," he said. Diabetes, heart disease and other obesity-related diseases are rampant there. "We have more facilities around here for dialysis than for fresh fruits and vegetables," he said. "We have a lot of doctors and health centers, which is good, but they popped up because of the demand. If we could change the norms, we wouldn't need some of these practitioners."

STUBBORN SOCIAL NORMS

Of Jackson's 176,000 residents, 70 percent are African American. The cultural habits are typical of the southern way of life—eating fried chicken and greens with pork, and having a sedentary lifestyle. "Every time there's a family event or activity, there's food," he said. "When someone dies, there's food. A holiday, there's food. Sunday, there's food. And this leads to the health disparities I'm talking about."

Residents of Mississippi are among the heaviest, poorest and most illiterate in the nation. So Mark's degrees in sociology and education are especially helpful as the partnership supplements efforts to change environments, policies, systems by giving individuals the resources and education they need to advocate for change and make healthier choices. As Mark explains, if restaurants use menu labeling but the residents don't know how to read those nutritional values then, "It's just posted on the wall."

Not that it's always easy to give people this opportunity. "We don't have many choices for fresh fruits and vegetables. You can get to a lot of liquor stores before ever getting to a grocery store." In fact, although the City of Jackson is the largest in the state, grocers are far and few between in low-income neighborhoods.

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“It’s easier to teach children to adopt a healthy lifestyle if we start now and maybe we change their lineage with food. We’re helping kids to get a jump start on a healthy lifestyle.”

COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

To address these issues, Mark and his many HKHC partners, including the State Department of Health, the City of Jackson Department of Parks and Recreation, Alcorn State University Home Extension Agency, the Wellness Center, Jackson Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services and others, are working on a number of strategies. These include advancing Safe Routes to School efforts throughout the city, improving public parks, offering incentives to bring in grocery stores and possibly eliminating statewide taxes on groceries, among other strategies.

And they know that community involvement is key. Using Photovoice, they engaged residents in identifying significant problems, demonstrating the complexity of improving the food and physical activity environments. For example, a 22-year-old mother of two said the dilapidated houses in her neighborhood are eyesores. When asked if this is a safe place for her kids she said, “Absolutely not, but this is all I could afford.” Mark said, “That told me that some people don’t have a choice and will have to take extra-protective measures to keep their children safe in this neighborhood.” Other photos showed kids walking in the street because there are no sidewalks and a general store closed for years because the owner was shot and robbed, and he never reopened his business. “Now that store is used by homeless and other vagrants,” said Mark. Many issues must be addressed to ensure access to healthy food and physical activity options.

MY BROTHER’S KEEPER

Realizing it’s difficult to change the habits of adults, Mark is enthusiastic that an approach targeting children can work. “It’s very synonymous to learning multiple languages when you’re young,” he said. “It’s easier to teach children to adopt a healthy lifestyle if we start now and then maybe we can change their lineage with food,” Mark said. The Jackson HKHC project is called Jump Start Jackson because “We’re helping kids to get a jump start on a healthy lifestyle,” Mark said. And they’ll do it together because, like the name of Mark’s organization, the partnership and the residents will be their brother’s keeper and create a new culture of health for generations to come.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Jackson partnership, visit tinyurl.com/pwj2uvd

IN MEMORIAM

The staff at HKHC is very sorry for the passing of Dr. Mark Colomb on Thursday March 24, 2011. His work beyond HKHC Project Director involved international, national and community level change on HIV/AIDS prevention, reducing health disparities and promoting well-being in minority populations. We are honored to have worked with him.

Eleanor Dunlap

Community: Greenville, SC

Originally Published:

April 2013



It was a pivotal moment. As part of Black History Month, an event was held to discuss racism, celebrate victories and talk about the work that still needed to be done.

Greenville had just received the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) grant, and a media announcement named particular communities that would be a focus for the work. A man stood in the back of the crowd and spoke to the group. "It bothers me that we received this grant funding, and it feels as if it's being given to do something to us." He didn't know that Eleanor Dunlap was sitting in the front of the room. He didn't know she had been hired as Lead Facilitator of the HKHC partnership. And he didn't know she was struggling with his words, recognizing that his perception was accurate. It was a fork in the road requiring a choice about which path she should take.

"It represented a challenge to me as an educated, white female, hired to be the conduit of resources on behalf of communities, primarily of color. I felt very emotional." She resolved to go door to door to talk with residents about their needs. Then she re-examined the grant she'd inherited. With help from others, the workplan was dramatically overhauled so that each community could utilize resources in ways that were meaningful to them. In one community, a resident was hired to serve as a lead guide. In another, resources were funneled to support community efforts where residents had formed a board and an organization that will shape that neighborhood.

TITLES MATTER

From years of working with coalitions and nonprofit organizations, Eleanor had already been moving in the direction of collective ownership and impact. Before the grant was announced and the YMCA (the HKHC lead agency) asked her to be the director of a new coalition called LiveWell Greenville, she balked. If she was an employee of the YMCA, it would be harder to keep LiveWell neutral in the eyes of other partners. And she didn't want to be seen as directing the vision and partnership. So she assumed the title of Lead Facilitator as a consultant. "So that no matter who I was talking to, they'd know I wasn't the authority figure but simply shepherding and supporting community change," she explained.

Today LiveWell Greenville is a partnership of public and private organizations, working to make Greenville County a healthier community. There are more than 100 key partners engaged in the work to make safer places to walk and bike, healthier foods in schools, workplaces and childcare centers, and better access to parks.

In the early stages, the partnership assessed food environments and Eleanor became even more passionate about the work. "In some neighborhoods, the choice of produce and the expiration dates on frozen food was deplorable. I'd never quite been exposed to the extreme disparity I was seeing, the degree of poor access in these food deserts. And we're starting to refer to several areas of our community as physical activity deserts in that there aren't adequate facilities and infrastructure that provide safe places to be physically active," she said.

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“This sends a message
to the community that
no one sector alone can
create the kind of impact
we’re seeking in reversing
childhood obesity and
creating community health.
Everybody has a role!”

CONTINUITY AND CONNECTIONS COUNT

LiveWell Greenville has evolved into a coalition with eight, tightly connected workgroups covering the various sectors where health is affected: LiveWell at School; LiveWell Before and After School; LiveWell at Work; LiveWell at the Doctor; LiveWell at Worship; LiveWell around Town; LiveWell at Mealtime; and LiveWell for Fun. “This sends a message to the community that no one sector alone can create the kind of impact we’re seeking in reversing childhood obesity and creating community health. Everybody has a role!”

Eleanor loves seeing all the pieces fit together. As the LiveWell model has evolved into eight focused areas of work and partners are finding their unique role, the momentum grows. “The realization by all partners is that what we can do together, we could never accomplish alone. That’s my serum, when people are putting down their agendas and turfs and saying ‘we can do that.’ We’re tearing down the walls that would prevent us from achieving our vision as a community.”

HELPING THE HOMETOWN

Why does that resonate so strongly with her? First of all, Eleanor is a Greenville native. “Many of my family members and close friends grew up here. I have a very strong sense of place.” She was raised in the city and went to Greenville High School like her parents had done. “We had a local market, and I remember biking there to get items for my family.”

She also remembers the daily walk to her elementary school. Since then, she’s seen a shift to the suburbs where larger schools and grocery stores are built and people rely on cars to get to them. She also watched a decline in the downtown, where she had seen once vibrant neighborhoods.

For the last 20 years, there has been tremendous investment in revitalizing the downtown area, but that has not always trickled into the surrounding urban neighborhoods. Eleanor is determined to be part of the long-term solution to create vibrant, healthy communities for all residents. And she’s bringing everyone on board with her. “Most of my family and friends have a LiveWell Greenville magnet on their cars, and they are actively engaged in spreading the word.”

Even more than that, she says, “I have to pull my faith back into this. It’s like the symbolism of the body. Without the feet, the hands, the eyes and the ears all working together, we’re not complete. We’re using the talents and resources we all bring, and that creates an amazing energy for good.”

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Greenville partnership, visit tinyurl.com/k777a5w

SteVon Edwards

Community: Louisville, KY

Originally Published:

May 2011



SteVon Edwards might never have been born, and that gave her a clear vision for her life.

The first couple of doctors who saw her pregnant mother suggested therapeutic abortion because of high-risk complications in the pregnancy. But her parents believed God for a miracle that she would be all right and found a doctor who supported their decision. "That doctor helped her go through the pregnancy and kept her as comfortable as possible," said SteVon. "And out came me with all 10 fingers and 10 toes," she laughed. "So ever since middle school, I've wanted to be that doctor who would believe in miracles." SteVon Edwards is the Childhood Obesity Prevention Specialist for the Louisville Metro Department of Health and Wellness, and the Project Coordinator for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Louisville, KY.

"I originally wanted to be an obstetrician," she said, inspired by the story of her birth. "Then I decided I wanted to reach a broader audience and I went into public health." That's lucky for Louisville. Born and raised in the city, she knows the project neighborhoods of their initiative well. She grew up in a neighborhood with limited access to healthy foods. Fast food restaurants and corner stores dominated the streets. Her parents still live there. Fortunately, SteVon had strong family influences that helped her see other choices. "My grandmother and grandfather had a small garden when I was growing up and I always helped them out. I especially loved tomatoes," she said. "I've loved them ever since I was born."

A LONG LINE OF ADVOCACY

Her parents have long advocated for their community around issues of violence prevention and education. They are currently working with several groups on urban gardening. "They have instilled in me a passion to improve my neighborhood and my community," SteVon said.

After SteVon graduated with a Masters in Public Health from the University of Louisville in 2008 she worked for the Community Farm Alliance (CFA) to increase fresh food access statewide. "Little did I know what I was getting into," she said. "Food is very political! I got a wake-up call on how the food system works, not knowing anything about the legislation around it. I learned a lot from the members."

And although her parents have long modeled it, that was the first time she'd heard the term "community organizing." CFA sent her to Chicago for training at the Midwest Academy of Organizing "with the folks that trained President Obama," she said. "We did a lot of role-playing on how to host a protest, how to talk with elected officials, how to host one-on-one meetings." She was impressed with her trainers. "These folks won major campaigns in Chicago, where the political climate is tough."

While at CFA, she connected with Marigny Bostock, HKHC Project Director and Community Health Specialist for the Louisville Metro Department of Public Health & Wellness. SteVon organized a Food Summit under the direction of CFA and also began working on evaluation for HKHC. It turned into a full-time position with the Department of Public Health working on policy development centered on healthy eating and active living. With her background in community organizing and her growing understanding

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of how policies influence behaviors, SteVon is working with HKHC partners to influence change.

EMPOWERING OTHERS

“Right now it’s about empowering the community to take on the policy development piece,” she said. “We didn’t want it to be health department-driven; we wanted it to be from the community. They are the power-holders. They vote for the elected officials. I may take notes, set up meeting times and locations, and work on the paperwork, but the final decision really comes from the community. Recently we have had more community voices in the project, and it has helped us tremendously.”

“We didn’t want [policy development] to be health department-driven; we wanted it to be from the community. They are the power-holders.”

SteVon said residents provide insight on possible reactions, what needs to be emphasized and what “won’t fly in this community.” For example, they’re working on decreasing the concentration of fast foods in their focus neighborhoods. But the definition of “fast foods” is tricky. The way it was written would include a lot of “mom and pop restaurants.” The food served there is high in fat and sodium, but the community sees it as home-cooked and affordable. The partners are going back to the community for help in defining the term. This is important as SteVon wants to ensure that even after the grant ends, the community has enough skills and capacity to continue improving the quality of life in their neighborhood.

And that includes youth. HKHC partners are currently working with students living in west Louisville neighborhoods to help them advocate for better environments. Recently, these students held a showing of the photovoice and digital stories they created for Metro Council members, business leaders and community residents. The event was called “My Normal” and highlighted images of the struggles they live with every day, barriers to good health. The discussions are leading to ideas on specific policy changes which could improve these health and safety issues.

SteVon appreciates the title of this event. “Kids grow up thinking their way of life is normal,” she said. That can either be healthy or unhealthy habits fostered by what’s available to them. She wants Louisville youth to believe it’s normal to run around their neighborhood without fear, without risking their lives crossing the street due to traffic or crime. “I am fortunate to have been raised by my parents, to have the positive experiences I had, and I want to ensure that for other young people.”

KEY STEPS TO COMMUNITY CHANGE

While SteVon is still early in her professional career, she has learned a lot about creating community change. She believes there are at least three important factors to consider when working with residents. First, she said, there must be buy-in “from the oldest to the youngest.” It has to be deeply felt. “You can’t just go in and say ‘this is an issue,’ because if you only have two or three people on board to change that issue for an entire neighborhood, how successful can the work be?” she asked. And to get that buy in, she added, you have to present information honestly. “If you have information that might work against you, show it to the stakeholders anyway,” she advised. “The community can creatively think of solutions. And without buy-in you don’t have empowerment. It becomes you doing something for someone else instead of that person doing it for themselves.”

Second, trust is very important. If people don’t trust their leaders, a project is not going to happen. “We have discussions within our team about that trust. If you don’t live in the focus neighborhoods, there’s a perception that you must live in the outskirts, the

‘rich, affluent parts.’ Several of us don’t live in the neighborhoods we’re trying to help” she explained. “So we need to build trust by showing that although we don’t live here, we’re invested; not for financial gain or accolades, but because you live in the same city that I live in, I care about you.”

How is that accomplished? “You have to be genuine, and trust comes with time. You just have to get to know folks and come from an honest place. You have to stick by your work and know that it’s not just your job, but that you’re passionate about it.”

Finally, change comes from understanding what people really need and caring about that. For some in Louisville, SteVon said, it’s violence prevention. “We have to address that issue first before we start preaching nutrition,” she said. “Although folks are suffering with chronic diseases, violence is in the forefront of their minds. The eventual course of diseases doesn’t seem as immediate as the fact that a bullet might come through their window,” she said. That’s understandable. So SteVon looks for ways to connect the issues.

She recently joined the board of a non-profit called Peace Education which works on non-violent conflict resolution among youth. One of their community partners worked with the HKHC youth advocates to break through “their emotional brick wall” which made it difficult to articulate their feelings about the images they took of their neighborhood. SteVon said, “I had no clue that the dam would break after that. After working with Peace Education, they were expressing how they felt, using their voices to advocate for themselves.”

Clearly, SteVon is becoming “that one person who believes in miracles.” Big changes are happening in Louisville. “I still have an interest in medicine, specifically disease prevention, and eventually I’ll move toward that. But right now, working on policy development is where I’m most effective.”

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Louisville partnership visit tinyurl.com/l6hur7o

Mary Giannetti

Community: Fitchburg, MA

Originally Published:

August 2013



If you're looking for Mary Giannetti on any Sunday, you'll find her in Car #765 serving the regulars and guests of Moran Square Diner.

"I like to be there. You really get the pulse of what's happening in the community." Mary sees everyone from the bank president to the mayor, police and neighbors in the busy eatery she's owned with her husband Chris, the main cook, for almost 20 years. The building is a 1940 Worcester Lunch Car, one of a limited and numbered series.

Her part-time role at the diner speaks volumes about her life. Mary works long days, embraces a challenge, loves food and serves her community.

LEAVING LIFE IN BOSTON

Her parents were immigrants from Italy and her dad and uncle owned a fruit and produce wholesale business in Fitchburg. Food was always central in their household so it was no surprise that she became a Registered Dietician.

Early in her career, Mary worked at Massachusetts General Hospital managing their catering, cafeteria and patient tray line. She was happy living in Boston and never imagined moving back to the smaller city of Fitchburg. That is, until she got a life-changing call.

"My dad passed away suddenly. I was eight months pregnant, my mom had multiple sclerosis and dad was her full-time caretaker," she said. "Family is my number one priority so I took a job closer to her home to help take care of her."

She was hired by the Montachusett Opportunity Council (MOC) 20 years ago and is now their Division Director of Nutrition and Wellness Services and the Energy and Housing Division. She is also the Project Director for their Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) grant called Fun 'n FITchburg.

MOC is a Community Action Agency for 30 communities in the North Central region of Massachusetts. Their mission is to alleviate poverty and create healthy communities by providing services and coordinating community resources that promote self-sufficiency and advocacy for social change. It's no wonder Mary was drawn to their work.

"My family often said I should be a public defender because I always took the side of the underdog," Mary said. Working at MOC has provided Mary with opportunities to stretch her talents beyond dietetics.

EMBRACING A CHALLENGE

During a time when she was MOC's Elder Nutrition Director, she was asked to help deal with challenges in their low income energy assistance programs. She didn't learn about heating and cooling systems or weatherizing buildings at dietetic school. But Mary welcomed the opportunity to solve problems and continues to run that division

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“The HKHC work really strengthened the way our community works together. It’s been really exciting to see partners come together around a single issue and now that group can work together for other issues.”

today.

“It helped me realize the importance of social determinants. Housing, the cost of energy and more all affect a person’s health,” she said. In fact, she’s now working with various departments in the City of Fitchburg on a healthy homes initiative.

“We’re breaking down silos to leverage our funding and results. Now when we go into a home to weatherize it, we’re also looking for mold or other issues that could be remediated through another funding source.”

Fun ‘n FITchburg, while focused on increasing options for healthy eating and active living, has also helped the community think more holistically. The Fun ‘n FITchburg partnership includes more than 100 people from youth and residents to the mayor, the Board of Health, the Parks Department, City Police, Fitchburg Public Schools, businesses, environmental groups and more.

Together, they have built more than 40 community gardens in low-income neighborhoods. To improve the perception of safety in parks, they created an adopt-a-park program at 16 parks enabling residents and community groups to clean up and monitor these public spaces to play. Also working to transform overgrown vacant lots to open spaces for gardening or physical activity and a complete streets ordinance is on its way for approval, making active transportation a priority.

Strong collaboration has been the key. “The HKHC work really strengthened the way our community works together,” Mary said. “It’s been really exciting to see partners come together around a single issue and now that group can work together for other issues.” And who gets the credit? That doesn’t matter to Mary.

ROLLING (OR HOLDING) THE CREDITS

“My father worked very hard but he never bragged about his success,” she said. “He was always giving to people without others knowing. I only learned how extensive his generosity was after he passed away. Countless people told me how he helped them. This idea of not having to take the credit...I respect that.”

As quickly as she says that, she’s giving others the nod. “Ayn Yeagle has been very helpful with evaluation and youth organizing. We wanted youth to be equals in the effort so we invited them to partnership meetings. At first, they clustered at one end of the table and sat very quietly. Now, they intermingle and are fully engaged; they help with assessment, program implementation and advocacy. That was the result of Ayn’s work with them.”

And she names others within and outside of the organization who’ve helped deepen the roots of change. “There have been so many endless partners,” she said looking back. And although she knows the importance of reflection, she doesn’t linger in the past.

“I’m writing a grant now to marry the Fun ‘n FITchburg coalition-building model with another place-based initiative to improve a low-income neighborhood,” she explained. “We want to address healthy eating and active living plus housing, education, economics, entrepreneurship and civic engagement. Really working comprehensively in that neighborhood to move this forward.”

No small task. But then, nothing Mary does ever is.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Fitchburg partnership, visit tinyurl.com/m7gkfnh

Warren Goldstein-Gelb

Community: Somerville, MA

Originally Published:

August 2012



When Shape Up Somerville (SUS) approached The Welcome Project to be a partner for its Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) grant, Executive Director Warren Goldstein-Gelb exemplified his organization's welcoming mission and invited them in.

SUS is a citywide campaign to increase daily physical activity and healthy eating through programming, physical infrastructure improvements, and policy work. Early in the HKHC grant, partners wanted to attract more low-income families to the farmers' market in the commercial hubs of the city. The Welcome Project trains bilingual youth to help with language interpretation in the community – they began assisting the project by assisting SUS in conversations with residents.

One of the youth interpreters was asked to give input at a meeting and said, "In my country, we have people with produce carts and they wheel them into the neighborhood to sell their vegetables. Why not bring food carts to residents and sell that way?" SUS responded to her suggestion. They retrofitted a bus, filled it with food from local farms and began serving residents in neighborhoods. Thus began a fruitful partnership between the Welcome Project and the HKHC partnership.

"HKHC wants to make sure the whole population benefits from various improvements made. That's consistent with what we want, too. We want to empower immigrant families to shape the future of the city," said Warren, who is dedicated to building bridges between marginalized communities and larger institutions. Throughout his career, his heart for service and justice has been evident.

HOW TO TREAT A GUNSHOT WOUND

Warren Goldstein-Gelb moved to Boston in 1986 after graduating from the State University of New York at Binghamton with a degree in literature and rhetoric. He went to a temporary employment agency and asked to be placed with a non-profit organization. The closest fit was with Tufts University School's Department of Community Health where Warren helped edit a nutrition curriculum for a National Cancer Institute study on the effects of a low-fat diet on breast cancer. From there, Warren worked several jobs within Tufts. One was a project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and Pew Charitable Trust called "The Health of the Public" to help medical schools adopt a more population-based perspective on their work. Warren created a newsletter for the project. One of the stories he wrote was called "How to treat a gunshot wound." He explained, "It was about a doctor who, after treating a number of gunshot wounds, asked why he was seeing so many and became involved in violence prevention. He looked upstream for the causes of the problem." Warren knew he also wanted to work on systems changes, so he began pursuing a Master of Arts degree in Urban and Environmental Policy from Tufts University.

During this endeavor, Warren moved to the Center for Environmental Management at Tufts and helped create sustainable practices for the university. He promoted recycling, composting and other green practices, and raised awareness about environmental justice issues. He connected advocacy groups in Roxbury (a low-income neighborhood in Boston) with resources at the university. The community groups were concerned with small vacant lots that accumulated garbage and illegal dumping from outside

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the community. Warren did some research, talked to other communities in the Northeast with similar situations and organized a conference called “From Vacant Lots to Common Ground” at Tufts. Social justice had become his north star, and he was facing it full on.

GETTING INTO THE NITTY GRITTY

As he finished his degree, leaders with one of the community groups with whom Warren was partnering, Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE), asked him to join them. He left Tufts after eleven years and began working at a grassroots level with residents and advocates. ACE’s mission is to build the power of communities of color and low-income communities in Massachusetts to eradicate environmental racism and classism, create healthy, sustainable communities and achieve environmental justice. The staff was a mix of those with advanced degrees and those without. Warren learned a lot from both, but remembers well the lessons he learned from “real community people.”

Whether it’s language
classes, healthy food
retail, or something else,
Warren sees connections.

“One of the organizers was a formerly homeless mother who was a dynamo organizer with no formal training,” he said. Warren remembered when they were testifying on air quality and transportation in front of a state house committee. “People were being deferential, referring to data, doing it the way we were taught,” he said. “And this organizer came up and started to accuse the chair of the committee of not caring about the community. I put my head in my hands. Had she told me the day before of her plan, I would have done anything to prevent her from saying that. But instead of getting angry, the chair was positively affected,” Warren said. “She knew instinctively what was needed and conveyed the community’s needs in a way I wouldn’t have been able to do.”

BUILDING MORE BRIDGES

He worked there for eight years, gathering lessons and building relationships. During this time, Warren also served as a board member for The Welcome Project, a community-based organization which builds the collective power of Somerville immigrants to participate in and shape community decisions. When the director left in 2006, he took the job. In his position Warren continues to find ways to collaborate with others, like the HKHC partnership, to deepen their work.

Since the initial partnership was formed, their alliance has deepened. For example, the Welcome Project hosts ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes and discovered that immigrants speak more easily about their barriers in these settings than in others. So they developed an integrated curriculum to incorporate healthy eating/active living policy discussions into the classes. Students from Haiti, Brazil, Eastern Europe, Nepal, and Central America have been equipped to understand how their environment impacts health and how to advocate for healthy community policies. Another way they leverage their strengths is by aligning the city’s healthy restaurant program with the Welcome Project’s initiative to promote immigrant-owned restaurants: YUM: A Taste of Immigrant City. SUS approved restaurants offer healthier menu options. The Welcome Project connected this effort with its network of supporters and immigrant-owned restaurants in underserved neighborhoods. A win-win for all.

Whether it’s language classes, healthy food retail, or something else, Warren sees connections. He’s learned that what blocks change may have nothing to do with the issue at hand. “For example,” he said, “we frequently hear that immigrant families stop at Burger King to bring home take-out food. You could say we need to stop that practice. However,” he said, “maybe they’re working multiple jobs to marginally sustain their

family and don't have time to cook. We might need to work on minimum wage jobs or standards of occupational safety to help them the most." Warren continued, "If we care about how much physical activity people get and what they eat," he said, "we need to care about their mental health, how they're treated by immigration laws, language and so much more. This work has shown me that's true."

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Somerville partnership visit tinyurl.com/losgd7n

Adolfo Hernandez

Community: Chicago, IL

Originally Published:

December 2010



Adolfo Hernandez showed up for a game of basketball that never happened and, in the process, launched a career. It was unexpected, of course.

In college he played basketball at a local YMCA. One Friday night he couldn't play because a gang intervention program was using the gym. They needed help and Adolfo volunteered. He loved it and kept showing up. "A few weeks later I was offered a part time job. I left a full-time retail job to work at the Y for \$80 a week and was much happier."

He felt connected to the kids who were struggling with things he experienced growing up in a nearby neighborhood, and he was learning about the nonprofit world. As the new YMCA Health Coordinator he wrote grants, organized children's programming and helped develop a sliding fee-scale that was piloted city-wide. About five years later, a board member of the American Transportation Alliance (ATA) noticed that Adolfo rode his bike to work.

"I didn't ride it because it was cool or environmentally friendly," he laughed. "I rode because it was fun." The board member asked if Adolfo would like to help families be more active using active transportation. He said yes and began his journey into policy and environmental change strategies.

Adolfo is the project coordinator for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Chicago, led by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and supported by many partners - including ATA, for whom Adolfo is now the Director of Advocacy. He works to make Chicago better for walking, bicycling and transit, with a particular focus on improving access to parks.

RECLAIMING PARKS

The HKHC initiative focuses on parks in five neighborhoods along Chicago's Emerald Necklace, a series of lush boulevards designed by Daniel Burnham in the late 1800s which links seven of the city's major parks and was modeled after the grand parkways of Paris and Rome. But as Adolfo says, "This necklace has roads through it - four lanes in each direction with traffic flowing at 40 to 50 miles per hour. So while they're beautiful, they're also parks and should be spaces for community."

These large streets and fast moving traffic makes accessing parks dangerous for pedestrians and bicyclists. Even drivers are intimidated. Adolfo remembers a community meeting where one woman said she made the sign of a cross every time she left the parking lot. Adolfo said, "I told her, 'If you're terrified in a 2,000 pound car, think of a person pushing a stroller.' She got it."

Adolfo is energized by the idea of dramatically reducing crashes around parks and making the city's park system vibrant, safe and healthy for all children and their families. "If we can do that around parks, we can do that around schools, residential areas... we can start a movement where it's not okay for people to feel unsafe getting around."

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“It’s been helpful for me to refer to my own experience growing up in the community. It’s not someone coming from outside. It’s not just the benefit of [residents’] passion, but how easily they can convey and connect with people from their own community.”

HIRING RESIDENTS

Adolfo encourages community-based organizations to hire residents. His own status as a long-time resident has been a tremendous asset. “It’s been helpful for me to refer to my own experience growing up in the community. It’s not someone coming from outside,” he said. “It’s not just the benefit of [residents’] passion,” he explained, “but how easily they can convey and connect with people from their community.” He continued, “They have firsthand perspective on how things work and who the real decision makers are. Someone may think it’s the local official, but if you grew up there you know that that elected official really responds to these two churches and this community institution and so those are actually the decision makers to engage. Having people from communities directly involved with making the change from within the community is amazingly helpful.”

And even beyond hiring, he encourages developing residents into leaders, helping them assume key roles within organizations and boards of directors for non-profits. “It’s so important because we talk so much about doing work in underserved communities or lower-income communities. Those overlap along racial and ethnic lines, yet we see so few of these people doing the work or leading organizations.” In Chicago’s population of about three million, nearly 60% are Latino or African American. So, Adolfo said, “It is both an equity and social justice issue that we include them. And even if you didn’t care about that ...you’d be wrong,” he laughed, “but even if you didn’t care about that, it’s simply a matter of numbers. If you think about political power and funding, it in no way makes sense to exclude those communities. They are making up bigger parts of the populations so we need them to be engaged to have any sort of impact.”

KEY INVESTMENTS

Adolfo discussed the importance of investing in the community. Ensuring opportunities for community involvement is key, he said. The HKHC partnership takes their outreach to people on their blocks, in their schools and parks and during times they can meet. They also invest in what matters to the community. “I spend a lot of time working on issues not necessarily connected to my work to build trust,” he said, like showing up at community fairs or helping distribute surveys unrelated to active transportation or parks.

It’s also important to invest in partners, he said. Recently, HKHC partners took two people from their Department of Transportation to a Walk 21 Conference in New York to learn about pedestrian issues. It was a brilliant move. Their partners met with counterparts from other communities, experienced walkable and bikeable environments and built rapport with each other. The DOT partners returned and initiated a traffic calming strategy around one of their busiest parks.

Another investment in relationships is the practice of not wasting people’s time. Adolfo does his homework before meetings. “I won’t walk into an Alderman’s office without knowing who he or she is and who he or she responds to. I try to get a sense of the work they’ve done and what they bring to the table, and then I try to frame the work or the discussion with an understanding of those dynamics.”

Finally, Adolfo never forgets that this is an equity issue. He knows what’s hardest for community members—access to jobs, affordable housing, keeping youth out of gangs. Those feel more immediate and pressing than the condition of parks. Adolfo works to show people how transportation is connected to all those issues. More eyes on the street improve safety, and access to jobs isn’t there without good transportation systems, including walking and bicycling.

Author and activist Parker Palmer, also from Chicago, once said, “Our real freedom comes from being aware that we do not have to save the world, merely make a difference in the place where we live.” One needs look no further than Adolfo Hernandez to understand how very true that is. “I had a lot of classmates and friends I’ve known since kindergarten, and some of them landed in jail or with gangs and some just aren’t around today. Obviously there were people doing work to make it easier and better for me, and I owe them a huge debt of gratitude...and probably the best way to do that is to continue to try do good things in our city,” he said.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Chicago partnership, visit tinyurl.com/87pxhju

Genoveva Islas-Hooker

Community: Central Valley, CA

Originally Published:

January 2013



Stepping over self-doubt, Veva stood before representatives from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health as the only Latina presenter at a prominent state meeting.

The organizer wanted her to emphasize the serious inequities among Latinos. "In her instructions to me," Veva said, "I was hearing, 'You come from a farm worker background but you have to represent every Latino' and I was thinking how can I ever do that, that's way too much pressure?"

Veva took a deep breath and began. "I told them my father died at 55 from a heart attack because of a lack of services in our rural area. That my sister died at 39 from cancer and that I've buried one of my sons from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) when he was three months old. I talked about how lucky my grandparents were for having a long life together and that each generation in my family brings shorter lifespans. I described the vulnerability created by health disparities. I grew up knowing my parents and grandparents while my nephew can barely remember his mother's face. It was hard to share. But I believe that it's important to share these stories and help others see the impact and pain of inequity. People deserve to live a full lifetime, not just some of us, all of us."

SPEAKING UP

This wasn't her first experience representing life in the San Joaquin Valley of California. As a second generation Latina whose parents were born and raised in Mexico, Genoveva (Veva) Islas-Hooker has been speaking up for immigrant farm workers her whole life.

As the Regional Program Director for the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program and the Project Director for their Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) grant, Veva worked with her partners and residents to design a leadership development training program and curriculum. Powerful People: Building Leadership for Healthy Communities enables those who have traditionally been marginalized to speak for themselves.

Veva's drive stems from her family. Her paternal grandfather came to the United States as part of the Bracero Program, which was enacted by Congress to fill the extreme shortage of farm labor workers during World War II. Veva's extended family have been farm workers ever since. At age 12, she joined them in the fields but she knew her future would be different.

LOOKING FORWARD

When Veva was young, her mother attended United Farm Workers (U.F.W.) meetings when they lived in Delano. Veva remembers doodling the U.F.W. eagle in the first grade and feeling pride in her community, knowing this group was standing up for her parents. She wanted to help, too.

As a girl, she interpreted for her relatives at social service and health care appointments,

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which piqued her interest in the health field. When health matters were particularly sensitive or complex, Veva felt the weight of her responsibility within a system that didn't support her community. There were no interpretation services, few materials produced in Spanish and no coordinated care.

Mr. Sanchez, her sixth grade teacher and first Latino teacher, told his 25 sixth-graders that only two would make it to college. "He was very attractive, so I thought fondly of him," she jokes. "And I remember thinking, 'I'm going to be one of those two.'" She was. Her parents' educations ended at fifth grade. Veva is the first in her family to achieve a graduate degree, a Master's in Public Health from Loma Linda University.

While supervising the health education department for a health insurance company, she observed some members and their children repeating the same weight management classes. She asked one woman what else she could do to help her. "Veva," she replied, "you've done a wonderful job teaching me about what to eat and how to stay active, but I live in a place where we have no park and my kids can't play outside because of cars speeding down my road and gangs so I let them play videos inside where I know they are safe. Also, I don't drive, so I have to wait for my husband's day off so he can take me to the grocery store. Because I don't go that often, I buy things that I know are going to last until the next trip; I can't just buy fruits and vegetables." That's when Veva began to appreciate the impact of environments in shaping behaviors.

LIFTING UP

So far, 175 residents from eight counties in the Valley have completed the Powerful People course. They've learned how community policies and environments affect people's choices for eating healthy and being active. They've learned to build relationships with decision makers, give presentations, resolve conflict and advocate for change. "We created a process where residents identify what they want to work on, and we help support their priorities," Veva said.

Many new immigrants are repressed from advocating for change because of language barriers, apathy in thinking nothing will change and even fear of reprisal. "We have communities in the Valley that are 90% Latino who have never had a Latino representative, no City Council member, Board of Supervisor or anyone that's Latino in an elected or appointed capacity. And it's ludicrous that we have the majority, but we're not represented."

Powerful People graduates are changing that picture. They've achieved agreements between schools and cities to share facilities, enabling children more access to safe places to play. They've led Safe Routes to School programs, resulting in new and improved sidewalks and crosswalks for children's daily commutes. They've made it possible for parents and students to buy fresh produce at school-based farm stands. And they're joining decision-making boards and committees.

STILL RISING

One Mexican-born Powerful People graduate, who has known much discrimination and had never formally presented, spoke before the school board. She told Veva she never imagined herself talking to the third largest school district in the state and having her words matter.

Veva said, "It was very rewarding for me to hear that. It reminded me of my experiences

growing up. I do see things changing, people becoming more engaged and involved in making decisions to create healthier communities.”

And Veva, too, is rising. After her nerve-racking presentation, the Institute of Medicine twice invited her to speak at national convenings. She is also now a board member for the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California, California Food Policy Advocates and the California Institute for Rural Studies. She’s also being considered for two other state-appointed boards; the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley and the California Water Board. “I’m very critical of myself,” she said, “but I’m proud of how I brought attention to this work and what we’re doing in the Valley.”

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Central Valley partnership visit tinyurl.com/lyta3t7

Laureen Husband

Community: Jacksonville, FL

Originally Published:

June 2011



Laureen Husband grew up near the foothills of Mount Kenya and walked everywhere as a young child. She was seven years old before she owned her first pair of shoes.

That was also the year she took her first car ride because her family moved to Nairobi and their lifestyle completely changed.

"We took vehicles everywhere and our lives became more sedentary," she said. Her mother had high blood pressure, diabetes and struggled with being overweight. And Laureen's classmates teased her saying she would be overweight too. Noticing the health challenges of the women in her family, she asked relatives with more education what she could do. An aunt taught her about the importance of physical activity and good nutrition suggesting she eat more vegetarian as was tribal tradition. And she found a way to be physically active.

"I started running when I was eight and I've been running ever since," she said. It wasn't as easy as it might sound. "One difference between growing up there and here was that by eight I had adult responsibilities. I took care of my siblings when not in school, cooked family meals, cleaned the house. My aunt said to exercise at least 30-60 minutes daily. So I organized a running team with friends and we started running each evening. Our inner sense of youth meant we didn't know the risk in terms of safety that we were taking, so we were courageous and did whatever we needed (to get our running in)."

A NATURAL LEADER

Forming that team foreshadowed her career in community organizing. Laureen is now the Project Director of the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Jacksonville, Florida, a position she's held for almost one year. She is also the Director of Healthy Jacksonville with the Duval County Health Department, the lead agency for the HKHC grant. Many experiences paved her way to this point.

Previously, she spent time with Appalachian women in Kentucky, helping them become self-sufficient through job training and starting cooperatives to become more interdependent. She also worked with at-risk youth to improve academic achievement using physical activity. "I organized running clubs in four schools; we met at 5:30 a.m.," she said. She not only motivated teens at that hour, she also inspired parents to run with them to ensure safety. Academic scores went up and so did support from the community.

In other positions she helped hurricane victims in Florida with housing issues, job development, transportation needs, counseling for post traumatic stress disorder—whatever it took to help people reintegrate. She worked with more than 2000 HIV/AIDS patients and streamlined the Ryan White program using technology, patient networks and partnerships to manage their caseloads proficiently. Their office at the Polk County Health Department was recognized statewide as a model program.

Laureen said her master's degree in diplomacy has served her well. Negotiating partnerships, working with myriad agencies and helping residents navigate through challenging waters toward workable solutions has never been easy. But Laureen is

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comfortable with challenges and knows that long-term change requires a systems approach.

CHANGING A CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT

“Whatever we’re doing now has to be here forever,” she said. “That’s why policy work is so important because it sets the foundation for what’s to come. I’ve worked programs and they come and go. Policies have the potential to stay long term.”

That’s especially important for her current work with HKHC. In the urban core of Jacksonville, 40 percent of children live in poverty and 100 percent of residents live in distressed neighborhoods. Residents deal with high levels of crime and fast, heavy traffic. Fast food and convenience stores are the primary food options. Step by step, though, residents and partners are changing their environments. For example, Laureen sees tremendous progress in integrating community gardens into neighborhood landscapes.

“When I first got here there were 12 community gardens and now through collaborative work we have at least 27,” Laureen explained. “We’re forming a network to change our ordinance language so that it includes and protects us. And we’re working to establish a food policy council.”

A UNIFIED APPROACH

Laureen notes that one of the greatest attributes in Jacksonville is their strong partnership. She’s impressed by their dedication to the work. “We have a very strong coalition of over 300 individuals committed to fighting childhood obesity. They’ve existed for more than 10 years and they are quick to describe the direction the coalition is moving and how HKHC fits into their larger vision. HKHC has helped to shift the thinking of the whole community in terms of policy. I wish you could be a fly on the wall during coalition discussions.”

For example, the City of Jacksonville’s Parks and Recreation department provided physical activity after school to help fill school shortfalls and now they are also helping to advance joint use agreements. The planning department is working cooperatively to align their work with healthy living through a mobility plan that will include complete streets elements. Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation of Florida invested in programs that address childhood obesity. “Now we are working in tandem to align their programs with the policy work of HKHC so that the program can illustrate how the policy is important and vice versa. That’s so important especially when you’re talking to policymakers,” Laureen said.

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS

And Laureen is always looking for new connections, be it between people or issues. “Since I’m so new to Jacksonville I like to volunteer and attend a lot of diverse community events on the weekends,” she said. “When we had our first food policy meeting, it was the same people who’ve been active for the last 10 years. But at their last meeting more than 20 people, mostly new, attended. They were people I’d met at community events and talked with about their connection to the food community, like realtors, insurance agents, farmers. Now they’re part of the conversation, and that changes the conversation.”

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why policy work is so
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come.”

She also notices connections between issues. “Childhood obesity is a platform that launches talk about asthma, cancer...if we can deal with what causes obesity we can address related chronic diseases,” she said. “And all of a sudden people are seeing the tie to the environment or justice movements. One of the areas HKHC is funding is affected by very poor air quality. This work helps people understand the need to create walkable communities and think about other important factors. Or like with gardens where the soil may be contaminated...there are many things we need to look at.”

Through her experiences, Laureen knows the importance of nurturing these partnerships for the synergy and creative problem solving that result when people work together on a common vision. She stresses the value of honesty in communication. “You have to keep your partners informed about whether things are working or not. We try to seek funding as a coalition, for example, and that’s a very agile process,” she explained. “It can be difficult because you navigate so many different personalities and you have to keep everybody validated and move the conversation forward without insulting anybody. That was part of my training in diplomacy but it’s also something you have to learn as you go.”

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

And apparently it’s working. Her coalition remains very active. They meet monthly with 45 to 80 in attendance. Members also work on subcommittees and hold themselves accountable to the HKHC workplan. “In other jobs,” Laureen said, “I’ve had to beg people to volunteer but not here. It’s our greatest asset...how committed people are to solving problems in Jacksonville. And that cooperative strength is something she knows a bit about.

“One of the things that made my life possible is to have the right women (and men) along the way mentoring me. When I first came to this country I was only 16 and I had a host mother in Minnesota. She taught me what a strong, determined woman could and should be. She didn’t finish college until she was 72. She did not let anything stop her from attaining her dreams at whatever age. I’ve had many great mentors who’ve made my dream to come to the US possible, including a co-op of women (at home) who raised the money to bring me here. Giving back to that group along the way has been an honor. It literally took a village and it continues to take a village.” So Laureen will press on with community organizing in order to help Jacksonville achieve its dreams for a healthier community.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Jacksonville partnership visit tinyurl.com/n8q5uzm

Jamie Jeffrey

Community: Charleston, WV

Originally Published:
May 2012



Look behind the white coat and you'll see more than a pediatrician in Dr. Jamie Jeffrey.

She is also a mother of four and the Medical Director of the Children's Medicine Center and Healthy Kids Pediatric Weight Management Program at Women and Children's Hospital, a division of Charleston Area Medical Center. The Children's Medicine Center is the pediatric residency teaching clinic so she's also an educator and the project director for the Charleston, WV Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities initiative (HKHC). No small challenges for Jamie. "I'm a fixer," she says. "I love to find problems because then I can go to work on fixing them."

It's no wonder she was drawn to work on childhood obesity. In Kanawha County, where Charleston resides, 47 percent of predominately low-income children are overweight or obese. This was a problem she could not ignore. "Half the kids I was seeing had a weight issue," she said. "I've seen it explode before my eyes."

Viewing this issue through her "doctor lens," she searched for ways to teach hospital residents what to do for someone with an abnormal BMI. "I looked for standard protocol," she said. "There was more about the "why" it happened, but not as much about how to stop this."

She tried to simply talk with parents and was frustrated with the outcomes. "We had been doing the education piece," she explained. "Telling them how to make healthier choices, telling them they should be off the baby bottle at 12 months ...notice...I said 'telling them.'"

TAKING A NEW APPROACH

Then, Jamie had a turning point. She stumbled onto a technique called "motivational interviewing," a patient-centered method for enhancing intrinsic motivation to change. She received training in this technique, which differs from the authoritative "telling," and began using it with her patients. Motivational Interviewing is based on the philosophy that people know what they can do to be healthier. By tapping into their value system and identifying what they're willing to do, they can self-determine solutions. Instead of an authoritative figure, she became a facilitator.

This approach translates well to the community-based HKHC work. Charleston's HKHC partnership focuses on at-risk youth and their families living on the West Side and the East End of Charleston. Eventually, it will expand to other communities throughout Kanawha County. Between Motivational Interviewing and working with the HKHC project, Jamie began to see how policy fits in the equation.

"I was seeing patients and families make three or four healthy eating goals only to find out that if they eat school lunch, even making the best choices they can from the school menu, they couldn't meet those goals," she said. "When they say to me 'We have a salad bar, but it has potato salad and macaroni salad,' that's a huge barrier. That's when it clicked in my mind that we needed to move away from individual responsibility to community responsibility. I'm not saying blow up the McDonald's, but they should be able to eat healthy every day, they should be able to go outside to their neighborhood

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park and be able to play without feeling like they'll be injured or in harm's way."

ENCOURAGED BY THE FUTURE

Jamie appreciates the translation of Motivational Interviewing in their community work. "We have really attacked this as a group project through the Kanawha County Coalition for Community Health Improvement. The Partnership is so good at listening to the community. We first ask them what they need. Not 'this is what we're going to do to make you healthier.'"

With strong passion for the work, Jamie is hoping a movement rises from within the community to make healthy changes including the youth so that the next generation is doing better, instead of worse, than their parents. How would she know if a movement is happening?

"I would see evidence that people are demanding better things, like a boycott of restaurants if they don't have menu labeling with nutritional information. I guess I like controversy," she said with a laugh. She also described kids walking to school every day and playing in the playgrounds after school and on the weekend. "It's very sad to see empty playgrounds and no kids out playing and riding their bikes. We do have a lot of physical barriers in Charleston such as limited sidewalks and the mountains."

Despite the geographic and policy mountains, Jamie is encouraged. She is, after all, a problem solver and she's working in her sweet spot. And she believes the most potential for change is through children. "Maybe because I'm a pediatrician," she adds. So working long hours and juggling many roles is okay with her if it means her children and the children of Charleston will know a better future.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Charleston partnership visit tinyurl.com/mponm5b

"The partnership is good at listening to the community. We ask them what they need. Not 'this is what we're going to do to make you healthier.'"

Megan Joseph

Community: Watsonville and Pajaro Valley, CA

Originally Published:

September 2013



Megan Joseph found herself facing an inspiring world leader and a provocative question. “What have you burned for since you were young?” asked Dr. Monica Sharma, Director of Leadership and Capacity Development at the United Nations, of her workshop students.

In her 20’s and on a life quest, Megan realized that this was the pivotal and clarifying moment that would ground her career. “I knew immediately,” she said. “It has always been about equity and social change. Since I was young I have been strongly pulled toward criminal justice work.”

Megan, Director of Community Organizing for the United Way of Santa Cruz County, CA, has been a social activist from childhood. “I campaigned for my father to quit smoking when I was seven,” she said. She brought home pamphlets, drew advertisement and left him notes. But it wasn’t her “smoking cessation” work that Megan remembered in response to that critical question.

AN UNJUST(ICE) SYSTEM

At 16, Megan learned that her father had been sent to prison for six years. During that time, he wrote her letters describing his life and she learned about a broken system. That personal connection fueled a passion to help change the justice system and work on other quality of life issues. “What I learned could be applied to any other system where politics and other factors can sabotage desired outcomes,” she said.

As part of the workshop Megan attended with Dr. Sharma, she created a project in Contra Costa County to assist formerly incarcerated people with successful reentry. After starting her current position at the United Way of Santa Cruz County, she convinced the organization to support community engagement related to Assembly Bill 109, which ensures that low-level offenders serve their sentences in county jails instead of state prisons, and to work on a county-wide youth violence prevention program.

“It’s all about equity,” she said. “That’s the common denominator in all my work.” Megan also serves as the project director for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) grant in the City of Watsonville and the unincorporated Pajaro Valley, CA. Residents of these communities have pronounced health disparities and lack access to healthy food.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE, VISIBLE

For those who don’t live in certain neighborhoods, these issues may be hidden. But Megan is all about making the invisible, visible. And helping those who often don’t have a voice be heard.

“Our Jóvenes SANOS youth are the stars of the show,” Megan said. These HKHC youth

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“Change the way you run a meeting so that your values are front and center in your conversations and visuals. So that it becomes part of the fabric.”

leaders have passed healthy restaurant policies and recently partnered with the local public health department to assist restaurants in low-income areas to offer healthy menu options. They are aligning work with corner markets, restaurants and vendors in the county’s metro station to help change the social norms of eating in their community.

Megan credits a longstanding, strong community coalition and a local culture of collaboration for their successes to date, and she loves seeing ideas evolve into self-sustaining projects. For example, she helped start a speakers’ bureau that turned into a leadership academy for formerly incarcerated adults. “Some of the men and women were so empowered that they started peer-to-peer support groups, independent businesses and consulting work,” she said proudly.

With HKHC, youth in Jóvenes SANOS have turned passionate conversations into community policies. They have also been recognized by the community for their health-enhancing work. They’ve won awards and are in demand as thought leaders and speakers.

SUSTAINING SOCIAL CHANGE

Through her training in community organizing and her work at the United Way of Santa Cruz County, Megan believes there are three key elements for sustainable community change. The first is to meet immediate needs. Hunger, safety and shelter are critical issues which require primary attention and services.

Simultaneously, it is critical to look at the system that generates these immediate needs. Addressing the policy and environmental barriers to health and quality of life is vital to reducing the need for these services.

Finally, social change agents must help shift the community’s social norms and values. That way, when a champion at any level is gone, things don’t revert. This may be the most difficult step. Megan suggests doing things differently rather than doing different things. “For example,” she said, “change the way you run a meeting so that your values are front and center in your conversations and visuals. So that it becomes part of the fabric.”

Megan’s passion for social change will never die. “I never feel like I’m going to work. I would be doing this no matter what. It’s my hobby and my passion,” she said.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Watsonville and Pajaro Valley partnership, visit tinyurl.com/k3s9bsl

David Kakishiba

Community: Oakland, CA

Originally Published:

March 2011



Behind the quiet demeanor is a man who has risen above personal and social struggles and molded those experiences into authentic leadership. Not an easy thing to do.

"Authentic leaders are genuine people who are true to themselves and to what they believe. Rather than letting the expectations of others guide them, they are prepared to be their own person and go their own way. As they develop as authentic leaders they are more concerned about serving others than they are about their own success or recognition," states Bill George, author of *Authentic Leadership*. This is a perfect description of David Kakishiba, Project Director for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Oakland, CA.

NAVIGATING A CULTURE CLASH

David, a Japanese American, grew up with parents who didn't speak English and weren't familiar with U.S. culture. David's father moved to the U.S. after graduating high school. Within six months he was "relocated" to an internment camp in Colorado, spending the duration of the Second World War there. His mother was still in Japan and was required to work in support of the war. Once married, his parents moved to California and raised two children, David and his older brother.

David's friends' fathers had served in the war and were not happy to have Japanese neighbors. "Nothing was hostile," he said, "but I realized tension, conflict, and deep-seated feelings at a young age. I was conscious of differences in the treatment of people based on race and class, occupation...money. I grew up feeling I wanted to do something about it, in particular, so that children and teenagers wouldn't have to go through that kind of experience." He further explained, "Even if you're well loved in a family, the social world is harsh. Your family can't always protect you or help you make sense of it."

NAVIGATING FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Understandably, David entered adulthood with a lot of anger over social and personal injustices. He could have channeled that anger in many ways. But David's parents wanted him to go to college. Any college. "They just wanted me to go to one and graduate and be better than they were. I picked Berkeley because I heard that's where smart people and revolutionaries go," he said.

But within the first year he was disillusioned and stopped attending. Family guilt kept him registering for classes for another six or seven years. "I got three years of straight F's because I never withdrew from class," he said. His eye was on community work.

A fellow Berkeley student who had helped found what is now the East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC) finally opened a door for him. He offered David a job for ten hours a week. "It was a group of people, like me," David said. "Sons and daughters of immigrants from Japan, China and the Philippines. These high school kids were trying to develop a supportive community space for themselves. It was super rag-tag. We were operating out of somebody's living room."

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“The theory is that you engage the community to design it, you build it and people will come -- and for me it’s really remarkable for people to see [their school] like that.”

NAVIGATING THE DEEP WATER OF CHANGE

Make no mistake. This wasn’t an easy path out of college. The area was experiencing large influxes of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian immigrants and EBAYC helped them resettle. Within a few years a new generation of Southeast Asian gangs arose, and with it a steep rise in the number of Southeast Asians entering into the juvenile justice system. David explained, “The nearby communities of Richmond and Oakland had huge population shifts, and schools were nowhere near equipped to deal with the trauma that the early refugees were dealing with let alone their multiple languages.”

Fortunately, David was able to stay focused on the mission and work with youth in a meaningful way. Years later, as EBAYC’s Executive Director, he has leveraged the strengths of this non-profit organization into many wins for the Asian American community and youth in particular. No longer operating out of a living room, EBAYC is a private non-profit youth development organization that provides long-term comprehensive support to a multi-racial youth membership of 1,200 individuals. The organization offers counseling, advocacy, home visits, parent meetings, academic support programs, media arts production and peer resource groups. They conduct community organizing training and provide support to parents and youth, serve as a capacity building intermediary for neighborhood and regional collaboratives and have a staff of over 200 with an annual budget of more than \$4 million.

NEW VISIONS FOR OLD PROBLEMS

Through their Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities initiative, EBAYC is working on Oakland Fresh, an effort to create school produce markets in neighborhoods with limited access to fruits and vegetables. They’re also working on an Oakland School Yards Initiative, an effort to transform what are often empty paved lots into real opportunities for recreation and creative play. This is where the issues of power, justice and equity can be most clearly seen. “We are in neighborhoods in which the schools have been historically underinvested. One school had three outdoor portable classrooms and one indoor classroom that had been torched. The district never replaced them,” he said.

The School Yards Initiative is changing that trend. For example, a large cracked asphalt lot was the only place for children at Roosevelt Middle School to play, and so they didn’t. David said that at first there were no plans for capital investment at the school, so it was a long-shot for them to engage students, parents and teachers to design a new schoolyard. Nobody knew where the money would come from. “But through that planning process and being able to bring the head of facilities and the City Council member to see the landscape as it is and the results of the planning process and hear from the students and the principal, we were able to find the investment and make that schoolyard come alive,” he said. Now students are physically active during lunch, afterschool and on the weekends. High school students from the neighborhood go there to play pick-up games of football, basketball and soccer. EBAYC manages the gym and the artificial turf field weekdays until 8 p.m. “The theory is that you engage the community to design it, you build it and people will come -- and for me it’s really remarkable for people to see Roosevelt like that,” David said.

A FAIR FUTURE

By the end of this grant, David hopes the Oakland Unified School District has fully transitioned these efforts such that they are able to economically sustain a network of high quality produce markets and safe, clean schoolyards that are buzzing with activity both

during and outside of the school day. This would be true policy and systems change, which aligns with David's personal philosophy of social change. "That is the very strong orientation I was trained in," David recalls. "Early on, a few established Asian American community leaders influenced the development of EBAYC, saying 'we're not going spend a lot of time doing grassroots fundraising, calling the favor of rich donors or going to private foundations. Your role as our staff person is to advocate for public policies that provide some degree of equitable treatment for the Asian American community'" which later expanded to children, youth and families. That's tough work. It takes time and patience. It takes resolve and focus. It takes an authentic leader like David.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Oakland partnership visit tinyurl.com/k5m8q3g

Kathy Lewis

Community: Rochester, NY

Originally Published:

April 2012



You'd never guess it. Kathy Lewis is a dropout. But she didn't quit. Kathy dropped out of college to "save the world," and she's been doing it ever since.

To date, Kathy has worked on nearly every major quality of life issue including poverty, unemployment, education, affordable housing and health. And now she's working on childhood obesity. Kathy is the Project Director for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Rochester, NY of the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency. She is also the Director of Community Health Policy for the Center for Community Health of the University of Rochester Medical Center.

Kathy left college to serve as a VISTA volunteer, becoming part of the national service program designed to fight poverty. It was during the late 60's and early 70's, a time of multiple demonstrations in Washington and activists like Ralph Nader and H Rap Brown speaking on campus stirring a strong sense of urgency. "I lived through the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement and the Anti-War Movement and my family members and I were active in those. I felt there was a greater need for me to save the world than to get a degree," she said. She later completed her education, earning a Master's Degree in Business and Policy Studies from SUNY Empire State College.

The VISTA experience was life-changing. "I really got turned on to the power of community organizing," she said. "I was young and impressionable... too young to realize how difficult the challenges were." She worked in northern Wisconsin with very high rates of poverty, welfare dependency and drug and alcohol abuse. In just 18 months, working directly with the community, she and her team of three opened the first daycare center with a sliding fee scale and a food co-op where no grocery store existed. They organized an information hotline for teenagers, an affordable housing project and convinced the community to apply for more federal money for senior housing. Put simply, they moved mountains.

"This was all done by pulling together people who had an interest and hunger to make change. It was really the human energy, the human talent and very little money," she explained. "I was impressed with the level of energy within a community to address these issues."

SAME WORK, DIFFERENT PLACE

That was years ago and she better understands the challenges, yet Kathy still tackles tough environments. For decades, Rochester has struggled with a shrinking manufacturing base resulting in job losses and deepening poverty. Although home of the National Museum of Play, children lack safe places to play in their neighborhoods. The predominantly African American and Latino communities living in the inner city have high rates of obesity, high concentration of corner stores selling unhealthy food and high crime rates.

Nevertheless, Kathy knows there is strength in people and that all parents want what's best for their children. So when she and HKHC partners go into neighborhoods, community members are an integral part of the process for developing "playability plans." Residents discuss the issues and typically find there are underutilized facilities.

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“It was all done by pulling together people who had an interest and hunger to make change. It was really the human energy, the human talent, and very little money.”

“Let’s not forget that when we all grew up kids played in the streets and the yards,” Kathy said. The community considers empty lots, parking lots, streets and parks as potential assets while also discussing barriers, like fear of crime. Through conversations, direct observation, dreaming about possibilities and prioritizing recommendations, change is coming.

“Residents are identifying small and achievable changes they feel will make a difference,” she said. “Like speed humps, lighting, fencing, signage, putting up and decorating garbage cans. None are million dollar items. They can be done with existing resources or resources for which we can realistically advocate.” These small wins can lead to greater community trust and larger systems change wins down the road. And that’s just one example of many strategies to increase healthy eating and active living.

Rochester has a broad-based coalition of citizens led by the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency called HEALTHi KIDS which focuses on obesity. They were active before the HKHC grant. HEALTHi KIDS identified five priority areas for change, and the HKHC grant augmented this larger community effort. “HKHC made our very ambitious five-point policy agenda more realistic. It’s increasing both the quantity and the quality of our work and accelerating the time frame,” she said.

KEYS TO COMMUNITY CHANGE

As a longtime community organizer, Kathy knows a thing or two about the change process. First, she said, it’s about relationships. “Identify who to develop a relationship with, who to bring onto your team and who to work with off line. Diagram the key decision makers for what you specifically want to accomplish and stay in constant communication.” Also, be clear about expectations, roles and specific desired outcomes. “It’s not enough to say we need more play for kids, you have to say we need some signage, lighting, recreation, at these specific locations.”

A constant principle in community organizing is to start with an easy win to build confidence. For the Rochester team, it was school lunches because of opportunistic timing. The district, which serves 34,000 mostly low-income students, was requesting bids for a school lunch contractor. Kathy explains, “We were able to advocate with the school district to include criteria in the bids that addressed our nutritional concerns and to seek a provider passionate about healthy meals. We did a lot of advocacy over three months and made sweeping changes. It was not only low hanging fruit but it had a huge impact.”

Kathy is encouraged by examples of big changes in a short time. “Go back to your childhood and think about how many kids made ash trays in arts and crafts classes for their parents,” she said. “Now we think that’s laughable but it wasn’t that long ago. Smoking, seat belts, drinking and driving... change can happen incredibly quickly... and we’re poised with obesity to reach that tipping point because we’re reaching a critical mass of societal awareness.”

Kathy knows the community organizing approach works. “And communities can get good at it,” she said. “They can get good practicing on one issue and take those skills and alliances and move to another issue.” In Rochester, the community worked together to reduce childhood lead poisoning by 83% in 10 years, earning a coveted Environmental Justice Award from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Now they’re using those same strengths to work on eliminating childhood obesity. And Kathy is a quiet leader through it all. Not bad for a college drop out.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Rochester partnership visit tinyurl.com/7o2uwtx

Erika Lewis-Huntley

Community: Rancho Cucamonga, CA

Originally Published:

February 2011



About 40 miles east of Los Angeles sits the city of Rancho Cucamonga, CA, a place where the Mojave Trail, the Old Spanish Trail, the Sante Fe Trail, former U.S. Route 66 and El Camino Real converge.

These historic routes carried adventurers and settlers, immigrants and travelers to new places. Erika Lewis-Huntley knows something about that. Her mother's family emigrated from Mexico and her father's family is Syrian. "I come from a mixed background," she said. And yet, she is right at home in this place.

Erika's title is Management Analyst II in the City Manager's Office. She's also the Project Director for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities initiative there. Whew. That's a business card full. And it belies her real title. "I'm a community advocate," she says.

A BORN ADVOCATE

It's no surprise that advocating is Erika's passion. She comes from a long line of public servants who instilled the value of giving back to the community. And she grew up in an underserved community spending a lot of time with her grandmother, who didn't speak English. Her childhood neighborhood is what we would now call a food desert. With that context Erika developed a heart for people who struggle with their daily environments and sought ways to help.

In her early professional years Erika was a community mediator. She resolved issues between neighbors, between merchants and residents who used credit cards to get by and could no longer pay their bills, and between landlords and tenants. "I remember staying late on a Friday night to mediate an issue where a single mother and her kids were getting evicted. I negotiated a plan to let them stay in the house. [The mother] sat there crying, saying 'thank you.' All I really did was make phone calls until we found a resolution." Erika had a strong sense of satisfaction that, at the end of the day, she was making a difference.

Grant funding for her position within the Social Services Department diminished and she moved on to work in the City Manager's office. "As I started doing the big picture stuff, I was intrigued by how the decisions made on a planning level affect health. It wasn't an instant gratification, things take more time, but it was exciting."

STRONG CITY SUPPORT

The City had just launched Healthy RC, a comprehensive effort to connect all programs, activities, amenities and policies that facilitate healthy living in the community. Rather than house the program within a specific department, they decided it was central to the role of city government and should be housed within the City Manager's Office. They needed someone to lead the effort and Erika was the perfect fit. Healthy RC inventoried efforts in every department and started packaging them as part of a new brand for their city. The administration and partners agreed on the mission—to encourage a healthy and sustainable lifestyle for residents by addressing mind, body and earth.

Erika brings a personal touch. With her heart for and experience with reaching people

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With her heart for and experience reaching people where they are, Erika builds strong relationships with residents and partners alike.

where they are, she builds strong relationships with residents and partners alike. She is pleased that their focus is on the area most in need, the southwest section of the city specifically, Northtown and Los Amigos. Once unincorporated, these neighborhoods have experienced historical disinvestment leaving them with a dearth of sidewalks, bike lanes, streetscapes, grocery stores, parks or other health-enhancing environments. But the city has been investing in Northtown and tapping their strong sense of community.

Recently, the city connected resident leaders in Northtown with residents in Los Amigos to strengthen opportunities for mentoring and the link to the city at large. At a recent meeting, 150 residents from both neighborhoods gathered to discuss their challenges to healthy eating and active living. A number of their suggested strategies, like farmers markets and community gardens, are now part of the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities workplan.

SYNERGY WITH RESIDENTS

Erika loves to see residents advocating for themselves and providing them the venue, tools, resources and skills to do so. "One woman who was part of our leadership class spoke at a community meeting where City Council members were present. She had a script and at the last minute she threw out her script and said, 'Mayor, this is what I want. I want a community garden' and it came off so authentic that the City Council really took it to heart. She went back to her neighborhood group and said, 'The Mayor told me that we're going to get our community garden' and everyone started cheering."

Along the way, Erika has learned a lot. One critical ingredient for creating lasting community change, she said, is to remember it takes time. "It needs to be real," she said. "It can't be something you check off the list like 'had the meeting, invited the citizens, done.'" She describes the need to help people gain leadership and communication skills so they can go to a meeting and articulate their needs. That can be uncomfortable and sensitive, she said. "People may say things we don't want to hear, they'll be some tough issues to deal with, but in the end residents will have a sense of ownership because they've been part of the process and they'll help to make it happen."

And the intrinsic rewards of knowing it will produce sustained change makes the uphill battle worth it, Erika said. Once, at a community forum she looked over and saw three generations of women working together to map out their barriers to healthy eating and active living in their neighborhood. "There was a grandmother, about 70, who doesn't speak English working with her daughter and granddaughter. They'd never done anything like this and they kept thanking us for letting them be a part of this and I thought, 'This should be the way we do business. They shouldn't be thanking us; this should just be how it is.'"

And with Erika in the mix, that's very likely to be the way it remains. She thinks about the future and says, "I might not see my impact tomorrow. Changing social norms takes time after all, but I know it will happen and I see the conversation changing in those communities. When I have a resident able to articulate to elected officials about how the built environment is affecting her health, I go home that night and I sleep really well."

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Rancho Cucamonga partnership visit tinyurl.com/lvva6o9

Peggy Linton

Community: Desoto, Marshall, and Tate Counties, MS

Originally Published:

September 2011



Shy, stay-at-home mother Peggy Linton enrolled her daughters in 4-H, the youth development program of America's Cooperative Extension System.

She expected it to have a positive influence on their lives. Little did she know how dramatically it would change her own.

"People would be surprised now to know how introverted I was," Peggy said. "I used to be so much in my shell. I would very seldom talk in front of people, unless it was little children. I didn't want to do anything different, like fly in an airplane. I was scared of challenges. But all that changed."

Peggy is currently the Community Development Director of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, which serves as the lead agency for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities initiative for Tate, Desoto and Marshall Counties. In that role she serves as the project director and project coordinator for HKHC and now she often speaks out and up.

On a given day, you might find Peggy talking with community members, professional partners and elected officials. It's not unusual for her to meet with a mayor to present ideas about how to create healthier environments for children and adults. Peggy shares stories about her communities' work locally and nationally, like at the Southern Obesity Conference this fall. She's a champion for improving quality of life for all. And it all started by enrolling her girls in an afterschool program.

A NURTURING SPIRIT BECOMES A LEADER

As an involved 4-H parent, Peggy became a local club leader. "We were always seeking money to do good things in the community and so I learned about grants. I found out I could succeed at getting money," she said. With an eye on helping her children learn leadership and be civically engaged, Peggy grew more confident as well. She won an award for state 4-H leader of the year. As a result, she received an all-expense paid trip to Washington, DC. "I'd never flown before in my life," she said. "That was my first flight (in her 30's) and I've loved it ever since." And she never looked back. "I started going to national programs and learning what other people were doing in other states, it brought me out of my shell. I saw what was happening all over the nation."

Skills gained as a leader in 4-H transferred to one of her first professional jobs, that of a program coordinator for a local economic development council. She worked with adult and student leadership groups. She continued finding grant money to support their ideas. And her skills didn't go unnoticed. Soon the Mayor of the City of Olive Branch hired her to start a new community development department at the city. Her job was to raise money through grants to provide more services and amenities to residents. Over 9½ years, Peggy helped bring in millions of dollars to provide extra support to the police and fire departments, start an arts council, create new youth programs, plant trees, develop new parks and start a health initiative. "I can drive through Olive Branch today and see the trees, landscaping, and parks developed while I was there. Every new park has a walking path," she said.

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"I'm at an age now where I
could retire if I wanted to,
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being made."

CONNECTING PEOPLE TO THE CAUSE

The fact of the matter is that Peggy leaves her imprint wherever she goes. She's an energetic spirit with a "can-do" attitude. It's no wonder, then, that she was tapped by the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi to coordinate a new initiative addressing childhood obesity. They developed a Community Health Council to lead the charge, and Peggy was the first chair. She eventually left her job at the city and worked full time for the Foundation. Her experience and appreciation for the work of volunteers, learned leadership and organizational skills, understanding of how government functions and love of people and the community made her a perfect fit. And she's thriving.

"I'm at an age now where I could retire if I wanted to, but this job is so rewarding. It's something I want to do, to be there every day to see the changes that are being made." Peggy embodies the Foundation's mission to "impact communities by connecting people who care with the causes that matter." She's a natural connector, always looking to bring together those who have something to share with those who want to make a difference. For example, none of the cities and towns in two of the three focus counties has a formal planning department. Peggy found and contracted with a certified city planner as a resource for these communities. "She goes with me and can talk the lingo," Peggy said. "She knows the policies that need to be in place. She's been able to go in and be a mentor, a valuable resource, and without HKHC we wouldn't have had the chance to do that."

Change is happening. The HKHC partnership is developing new greenways and bike lanes and improving parks and playgrounds. All three communities are embracing farmers' markets. And before it's over, if Peggy has her way, key decision makers will adopt a culture of incorporating health in all policies and residents will advocate for policies to be changed in the community so they can more easily make healthy decisions. That's a bold vision. Not surprising coming from a natural leader like Peggy.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Desoto, Marshall, and Tate Counties partnership visit tinyurl.com/lyx2dm9

Rocio Muñoz

Community: Benton County, OR

Originally Published:

July 2012



Rocio Muñoz grew up playing in orchards, surrounded by her hard working parents, neighbors, and four siblings. Fresh produce grew all around her. Sound magical? Look more closely.

Rocio grew up in rural, Hood River Oregon. Her parents were migrant workers who didn't speak English and had to work very long hours every day. She lived in a basic farm laborer's "cabin" - literally in the orchard- with limited heat. School mates jeered at her and told her to go back to her own country even though she was born in the United States. And her playground? "We played with small round balls of fertilizers which were just left out in the open, and we climbed on farm equipment," she said. At age four she was run over by a tractor. "I still have those scars, and it reminds me every day that I need to do more," she said.

More? It's hard to imagine. Rocio has made it her life's work to improve quality of life for all residents in Benton County, especially migrant workers. Currently the co-project coordinator for their Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities grant, she is also the Community Health Navigator for the Benton County Health Department. Community Health Navigator may be her formal title, but she's played this role her whole life.

GROWING UP QUICKLY

When Rocio was five, her mom was diagnosed with multiple chronic diseases. Rocio made and attended appointments with her mother, interpreting complicated medical conversations. She filled out Medicaid and food stamp applications and picked up prescriptions at the pharmacy.

"It upsets me that we had to live like that," Rocio said. "There wasn't a lot of support (in the schools, in my parents' jobs or in housing development) for farm workers and their families. That's why I do what I do. I'm the bridge...I bring up needs and barriers that our residents experience."

In Mexico, her parents went to work in the fields after attaining only a second grade education. They immigrated to make a better life for their family. Her father encouraged his children to get an education. Rocio was the first, including 72 cousins, to graduate from college. "My high school and college class rings and my diplomas...I got them all for him. My mother, too, but my dad gave me a strong attachment to my future. He grew up in a household where the woman was the homemaker and not allowed to leave the house. When they got to the United States he could have expected the same from his daughters, but he didn't want that for us."

CHANGING THE PAST AND FUTURE

It was difficult to find a new path, but Rocio did. Despite little encouragement or help from high school faculty (except for her Spanish teacher) to pursue higher education, she figured out the way and graduated from Portland State University (PSU), majoring in criminology, criminal justice and Spanish. While attending PSU she worked as an immigration paralegal and learned to navigate legal systems. She also interned at the Mexican Consulate and helped people acquire passports, obtain driver's licenses and

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Rocio calls herself a cultural broker: “I’ve been given the opportunity to gain the trust of Latino residents by working with them at different levels.”

access social services. She also worked in the university in order to mentor others. “I helped my friends and siblings enroll in college. It’s scary moving from the orchard to the big city and going to school, especially when your parents still live in a culture where women have to ask permission and can’t do things on their own.”

Rocio calls herself a cultural broker: “I’ve been given the opportunity to gain the trust of Latino residents by working with them at different levels, including coordinating wellness classes and physical activity programs when I first started with the health department. I’ve also networked with different community partners, so I’m able to bridge our communities and address a lot of barriers and needs.” As Rocio moved into policy and environmental change strategy work with HKHC, she asked residents to attend public meetings. And because they trusted her, they did.

FINDING THEIR VOICE

“Now when there’s a community forum, residents feel like they own the conversation. Two years ago we had maybe one or two attendees, now it’s 30,” Rocio said. HKHC partners are working together with the Corvallis Department of Parks and Recreation as they update their master plan. South Corvallis, an area where many low-income and Latino families live, has historically known disinvestment. Today, residents are advocating for parks there as part of the master plan process.

In addition, because of HKHC partners’ intentional conversations about the need for inclusivity, the parks and recreation department changed internal policies and culture so that more Latino families can access their offerings. They increased scholarship amounts so entire families (parents and children) can participate. They hired a bi-lingual and bi-cultural Zumba instructor, drawing in Latino moms for their first class. Activity guides and marketing material are now printed in Spanish. Rocio knows it’s working. “The parks department has seen a huge increase in utilization of their programs since we started,” she said.

As a cultural broker, Rocio never forgets where she came from and the responsibility she’s been given. At a recent “Working with Differences” workshop, participants engaged in a “Privilege Race,” an ice breaker-type activity where everyone stood together on one line. As the moderator asked questions based on equity, privilege and power, people stepped forward for each “yes” answer and back for each “no.” At the end of the exercise, Rocio was at the very back. A white man was at the front and everyone else was in between. People were deeply moved. “There were a lot of people crying,” Rocio recalls. “People said, ‘I can’t believe Rocio is at the very back.’” When they asked her how she felt, she said, “Every day I have to struggle, so this is not news to me. But what really upsets me is that I am privileged compared to the rest of my community. The race is long, and some of my peers didn’t get a chance to start.” She continued, “What I took from that is that at least now I’m in the race. I am visible. I need to use that.”

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Benton County partnership visit tinyurl.com/m5rsutn

Ruth Perot

Community: Washington, D.C.

Originally Published:

April 2012



Having known much prejudice and racism in her life, Ruth Perot could have easily turned into a cynic. Instead, she leveraged her experiences to better the lives of others.

Ruth remembers being called “nigger” for the first time at age five. Her mother told her it was the result of a limited vocabulary. Limited vocabulary, she could forgive. Then Ruth went to high school in Ohio and her high school prom was cancelled because the principal was afraid that whites and blacks would dance together. The swimming pool was closed so whites and blacks wouldn’t swim together. And when she was named valedictorian of her class it was decided that for the first time in the school’s history the valedictorian would not give the speech but rather it would be shared by members of the honor society. Ignorance could not explain away these actions. Clearly, said Ruth, lack of fairness was linked with race and color. The principal’s power was being exercised to disadvantage her and other African American students. That was racism and it was hard to accept.

Ruth traveled to Germany for a year during college. Her travel increased her awareness of racism, but not because of what she saw there. “I didn’t feel the impact of race in Germany in the same way I did when I returned in 1961. Things were really heating up then in the U.S.” So she began tutoring students in Farmville, VA where public schools had been closed for four years because Virginians refused to integrate. She became a member of and later a full-time activist for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Cleveland, Ohio, where she helped build an active CORE chapter, organized the community to address discrimination and was arrested for a sit-in at the board of education during a protest of segregated schools.

Today, Ruth is the co-founder, Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer of Summit Health Institute for Research and Education, Inc. (SHIRE). Since its inception, SHIRE has worked toward the dual purpose of achieving health parity for communities of color and aiding vulnerable populations in attaining optimal health. Ruth is the Project Director for Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities in Washington, D.C. “Gratefully, we have such a capable young woman named Jenne’ Johns to move things day to day,” she says. So, as Project Director, Ruth provides overall guidance and serves as a sounding board.

KEY LESSONS FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

She draws from a deep well of wisdom in providing such guidance. Lessons learned during the Civil Rights Movement translate to her work today. “I learned about the importance of organizing, the importance of engaging people in issues that are important to them. That people united can accomplish great things.” And she learned what it takes to make community change.

First, she says, you need a catalytic event. “You have to have someone or something that focuses attention on a need for change and something that touches a lot of people’s lives. That event in our community is the epidemic of childhood obesity and its consequences.” HKHC is focused on Wards 7 and 8, among the city’s poorest neighborhoods with rates of childhood overweight and obesity approaching or exceeding 50 percent. These also are the communities with high unemployment and the highest crime rates which too often limit residents’ use of the parks and other available green space.

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"If we really want to see change across the board, and you recognize the disparities are there, we need to make a special effort to reach those with the greatest need."

Second, Ruth continues, "You need an organized, coordinating presence that brings people together and helps move the agenda forward. Volunteers alone can't make things happen, although they're important. Even though we were paid the modest sum of \$50 per week in the Civil Rights Movement, we had staff that planned, engaged, coordinated and provided opportunities for participation." And for HKHC, that organizing presence is SHIRE, with Ruth at the helm and a strong partnership working to advance four policies: instituting the Federal After School Supper Program, creating a saturation index of unhealthy food and beverage vendors, implementing and enforcing policies that will create a Park Keepers workforce and creating policies to reimburse community-based fitness and healthy living programs by insurers.

Finally, leaders are needed who can give voice to the problem and the solutions. "We were blessed in the Civil Rights Movement to have a number of those leaders," said Ruth. "Today, we are excited by the new energy flowing from the White House and resonating at the local level. We are encouraged by local emerging legislative efforts and the development of a solid framework for policies. Slowly but surely, obesity is becoming a priority issue in our community. Our Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities partnership stands ready to work alongside our local leaders to advance a healthy living agenda. We are also totally committed to educate, engage and empower a cadre of community residents who can assume leadership roles to advance and sustain these efforts. Community leaders are essential."

There are a few more things necessary for change. These are what Ruth calls the three E's: enlightenment, environment and engagement. Ruth defines enlightenment as education and awareness building and yet, she says, it's more than that. "You've got to turn the light bulb on. Not only know the statistics, but what does it mean in terms of what (people) care about. It goes beyond sending out fact sheets, it means an internalization of the information so that people want to be involved." For example, she was recently at a meeting where a woman articulated why she cares about DC's work on the After School Supper Program. "She said she never had a hot supper waiting for her at home and had to wait for kids to give her leftovers for breakfast. She was tearful in telling that. Whatever we're promoting and advocating needs to have resonance with people who have to work it through. If they feel it's important then it gives them more energy to work for it. That is engagement." In addition to enlightenment, Ruth said it's important to know what power levers can be pressed, to know the system and the environment of the community while also using engagement strategies to get people involved.

"My experience over the years tells me these are the essential requirements to make major changes," Ruth said. "To the extent to which you have them, your chances to make change are much greater."

IT'S NOT ABOUT TRICKLE DOWN

Clearly, Ruth cares about making deep-seeded changes to strengthen quality of life for all people. She said she prefers to work on policy and systems change because she knows that will have the biggest impact on the most people. And she is always keeping her eye on the need to address inequity.

"I would like to see a more conscious awareness that while some folks have a cold, others have pneumonia," she said. "I'm talking, for example, about African Americans, Latinos, American Indians and those affected by poverty." Ruth warns that we must look carefully at statistics which, as in the case of DC, may show improvement but not adequately reflect reality.

"We're pretty sure the improvement in D.C. obesity rates comes almost totally from the white community," Ruth explains. "Because that's the community which has been reached by national efforts and campaigns. Our goal is that if you really want to change statistics, go where the problem is most severe."

She knows addressing inequity takes longer, but points out the unfairness of only improving one group while those who are affected most profoundly end up even worse off. "It's very important to target our efforts," Ruth said. "Trickle down doesn't work. We know that. If we really want to see change across the board, and you recognize the disparities are there, we have to make a special effort to reach those with the greatest need."

LOOKING FORWARD

Long term, Ruth hopes to move some of the HKHC policies they're working on into an institutional framework. "I want to see something like the park keepers workforce become a part of the City Parks and Recreation Department as a permanent policy or as a legitimate public works opportunity." And even more than that, Ruth hopes that the community engagement component of their HKHC initiative becomes an empowering experience for residents in Wards 7 and 8. "I hope they'll feel what I felt in the Civil Rights Movement. That feeling of 'I have made a difference.' That feeling is something that stays with you for the rest of your life." And the more Ruth Perots we have in the world, the better off we'll all be.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Washington, D.C. partnership visit tinyurl.com/kpwjg9b

Kerri Peterson

Community: Omaha, NE

Originally Published:

February 2012



Kerri Peterson wanted to be a physician's assistant (PA) and moved to Omaha, NE, for PA school. She didn't get in, and Omaha has benefitted big time.

Instead of working to change health one person at a time, she leads a community-based collaborative to change social norms and integrate health into city goals. Her work brings public and private partnerships together to completely rebrand Omaha, change the landscape and ultimately improve health for all.

"My husband and I thought we'd stay five years," she said. "Fifteen years later we're still here, and I don't see us leaving." Kerri is the Executive Director for Live Well Omaha (formerly known as Our Healthy Community Partnership) and the Project Director for their Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities project. She's happy she never became a PA. "I would have struggled with things that aren't my strengths, like routine detail work. My job really fits my strengths, networking and building relationships, the ability to be flexible and creative. It's something new all the time."

IN THE BEGINNING

Though she loves her work, it hasn't been an easy road. Omaha has never been a mecca for biking and walking -- at least not before Kerri's organization received an Active Living by Design grant in 2003, launching a conversation about the community's role in health. "Early on," Kerri said, "public planning and works told us their job was to move automobiles. We slowly started chipping away to show them active transportation was important, too." At that time, their partnership focused primarily on promotion, trying to create a movement through community campaigns. Omaha only had one-half mile of bike lanes and not much interest in growing a network of bicycling routes.

Kerri and her partners started building relationships and growing their collaborative. One day, a major CEO held a meeting to talk about making Omaha the healthiest city in the country. She didn't know anything about Live Well Omaha (LWO). The potential for duplication loomed large. "Right away, someone invited us to their effort," Kerri explained. "Everybody agreed to collaborate and then it quickly became 'non-profit meet business mentality.' The business community was used to quick turn-around times on decision making, and we were trying to balance the need to be collaborative with the need for immediacy." LWO had to become very clear about who they were and the unique role they played. They also had to refine their approach and structure. In the end, that CEO assigned another representative to the collaborative but the LWO partnership was stronger than ever. And they still communicate with that leader to avoid duplication.

THE EVOLUTION OF GROWTH

"It was a tough period," Kerri said. "At times I doubted myself, but it was one of the best things that could have happened. We gained confidence as an organization. Aligning non-profit with business gets tricky, but we've figured out each other's sensitivities. "And," she adds, "they caused us to raise our bar. The documents we distribute are more polished, something we can take in front of a business CEO. We have our stair-

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“There has to be collaborative ownership in the collaboration. The success of the collaboration is only as good as people’s commitments.”

well speech down. And as an organization, we’ve evolved from basically doing some programming and granting to being a catalyst of community health, a purveyor of data through our community report card and an infrastructure for any community health issue which can now come under our umbrella and utilize the resources and wisdom of our collaborative.” Kerri compares it to a think tank. “Our job is to keep community health on the forefront,” she said.

Fast forward and it’s easy to see how far they’ve come. By the end of spring 2012, they’ll have more than 30 miles of bike lanes in Omaha. They have bike racks on busses, an updated master bike plan which has been overlaid onto the transportation plan with high prioritization for complete streets. They have an urban pocket park for mountain biking (and are working on a larger one nearby) and a number of local farmers’ markets and community gardens. Even more is in the works.

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Perhaps as importantly, Kerri and the LWO collaborative are no longer the only ones carrying the torch. At a recent meeting, more than 100 people gathered to discuss updating Omaha’s master plan. The mayor spoke along with the heads of the planning department and public works—people who at one time didn’t embrace active living concepts. Without prompting, they spoke about making Omaha more bike-friendly. “It was one of our most rewarding moments,” Kerri said. “Now they’re the ones carrying the message, and now it will stick. It’s got to be multiple sectors working together. Community health is huge. No one organization can do it alone.”

And what has Kerri learned in this process? “We don’t need programming to show outcomes,” she said. “So much is happening through networking and collaboration.” “The other thing I’m learning is that there has to be collective ownership in the collaboration. People have to invest time, money and/or resources. The success of the collaboration is only as good as people’s commitments.”

For example, their organization was renamed Live Well Omaha to coincide with the partners’ desire to co-brand together. Many organizations now bring their health-related efforts under the name “Live Well Omaha” even if Kerri’s organization is not the lead. When the local hospital invested \$1 million into reversing childhood obesity, they adopted the brand “Live Well Omaha Kids” working in tandem with the collaborative. When the local health department received a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) grant, they didn’t brand it with their name. They graciously called it “Live Well Omaha Douglas County Putting Prevention to Work,” and they report their progress to the LWO board. “We’ve created the illusion that LWO is huge, when it’s not,” Kerri said. The result is that branding all these efforts under one name leverages a greater collective impact.

Much has changed from the days when Kerri saw public health primarily through the lens of traditional health care. Today she has a much different perspective. “I have realized how big this is,” she said. “We’re talking about culture that people are instilled in. It has to be distributed action to really change the trends. It’s not one effort, not one grant, not one organization. It’s got to be community wide and policy driven.”

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Omaha partnership visit tinyurl.com/lyvsu8d

Samina Raja

Community: Buffalo, NY

Originally Published:

December 2011



Samina Raja has been there. She knows. Some speak theoretically about food justice and health. Samina brings personal experience and cultural relevance to the conversation. "When my daughter and I moved to the United States, I was on a limited budget and always thinking about how I was going to provide for us."

A friend connected her to a community garden, which helped, but still she struggled. "I know what it feels like to be a poor person, what it feels like to scrimp. As a parent, I shouldn't have to think about how many busses I have to take to get to the grocery store. I didn't own a car and I had to come up with strategies, which took an incredible amount of time and planning. Something as ordinary as buying food became this big task in my life."

Today Samina is an associate professor in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Buffalo in New York. Her research focuses on planning and design for healthy communities. She is also an active partner with the local Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities initiative. "My job is to gather information and shed light on the problems as well as possible solutions so people can advocate for what they see as the right solution." Samina has been working in Buffalo on food systems and related policies for about 10 years, and she's been connected with many of her HKHC partners a majority of that time.

"I get really excited about helping people see why something as drab as a zoning code matters for health. That really fires me up. It's not difficult to rally troops around hunger and poverty, and that's good. But my calling, my place in the world, is to think about policy structures that ultimately affect health."

THE SEARCH FOR PURPOSE

Discovering her calling wasn't easy, however. Samina traveled halfway around the world to figure it out. "I grew up in India," she said, "in the northern most portion, Kashmir, the 'Switzerland of Asia'. I've never come across a more beautiful place." Samina thought she'd design buildings as a traditional civil engineer, her first degree. "I was interested in sustainable building because in Kashmir the ecology is so sensitive. If you grow up there, you can't help but recognize the incredible power of nature and how small humans are. You're surrounded by mountains thousands of feet above sea level. I always thought I'd do something in building and construction in ways that would protect the environment."

She left Kashmir as conflict heightened and earned her master's degree in planning at the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi. She returned home to work, but was frustrated. "I was working on designs for luxury hotels in a war-torn region where people were being left homeless by the conflict. Living in an extreme environment forces you to think about social justice issues more so than when things are hunky dory," she said.

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ESTABLISHING ROOTS IN FOOD SYSTEMS

Seeking answers, she moved to Madison, WI with her infant daughter to pursue a PhD and study the role of ethics in planning and building communities. When Professor Jerry Kaufman told her that planners did not view community gardens as the "highest and best use of land," Samina became intrigued with the role of planning and food access. She worked with him on a citywide food system project and questioned the narrow way planning analysis determined value of land. After all, she found great value in her community garden. Ultimately, she assisted Professor Kaufman and the City of Madison to write (and pass) what she said "may have been the first municipally-adopted plan for community gardens in the country."

In time, Samina relocated to Buffalo and connected with others working on food systems. "In Madison, people had the means to overcome food system barriers. Not so in Buffalo. It caused me to think a lot more about the health consequences of the food system. Food insecurity levels were much greater in Buffalo, but so were the opportunities," she said. "For example, more than 15,000 vacant lots many call 'blighted' held incredible potential."

Samina believes the field of planning helps make change possible. "Planning really opens up possibilities for people not to have to fight those daily battles for basic things," she said remembering the days she lacked easy access to healthy, affordable food. "Planning is a hopeful, visioning exercise, giving people a chance to say what they want in their neighborhood and to see how to get there."

NOURISHING COMMUNITY CHANGE

"Getting there" clearly takes time. "You have to be incredibly patient if you work in a partnership geared toward making policy change, which doesn't happen as quickly as a tree planting or putting in a community garden," she said. In addition to patience, Samina has noticed a pattern around successful community change efforts. She said first there's a concern, like in Buffalo when a woman was told she couldn't have chickens in her back yard.

Then, Samina said, you need to have an organized group of community members willing to raise that concern. In this case, the woman's fellow residents and neighbors started asking "Why in the world does the City of Buffalo not allow chickens?" Third, champions outside of city government bring those opinions into the public view. In this case a number of non-profit organizations, the local media and the legislative aid of a local council person heightened visibility of the issue. Finally, there needs to be someone within local government (a planner, an administrator or health official, for example) who will be an advocate or liaison. Their liaison reviewed a proposed ordinance around chickens and made it stronger.

She noted, "For every comprehensive plan I've seen that includes food in it, for example, I can replicate that story for you. There is a concern, an organized group of interested residents, a champion who raises the visibility and a local government person open to the idea." Clearly, it takes a multi-layered approach to build healthy communities.

And Samina supports many of those layers. In addition to strengthening the HKHC partnership, she teaches planning students and is happy to see a growing number of them interested in social justice issues. Beyond Buffalo, Samina builds the field through numerous published articles, speaking at conferences and serving on various

committees. She is the only urban or regional planner appointed to a committee of the National Academies of Sciences (NAS) that recently developed a framework and guidance for health impact assessments in the United States.

Impressive. But she'll be the first to tell you that leadership works best in a collaborative. "I would not be able to do the work I do without so many partners," she said. "And with the HKHC partnership, I have witnessed the incredible power of partnership."

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Buffalo partnership visit tinyurl.com/kju9nvx

Sam Robinson

Community: Columbia, MO

Originally Published:

December 2011



Sam Robinson is a thoughtful man, careful about his actions and sensitive to the needs of others. He lives to serve. So much so that he went into ministry -- and community organizing.

So after two years of building relationships and engaging residents around healthy eating and active living in a low-income neighborhood of Columbia, MO, he was surprised when residents pushed back. Publicly.

"I felt like we understood the needs of the community," said Sam, Director of Healthy Community Initiatives for PedNet Coalition, the lead agency for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) grant in Columbia. Sam went on a local radio station with PedNet's founder and executive director, Ian Thomas, to talk about their HKHC work. People called in with concern. "Our African American champions and gatekeepers were not happy with us as an organization. We were surprised by that. They essentially said, 'We don't appreciate the fact that you have this money and our members are living in poverty.'" Sam noted that although he has lived in Columbia for twelve years, he's still considered an outsider. "So part of that public dialogue was, 'Who are you to come in and tell us what we need.'" Even though that was never PedNet's intention.

In the early stages of HKHC, Sam led a community advisory board. Together with Ian they worked to establish trusted relationships with the community and prove their desire to work collaboratively. But a history of short-term and one-sided engagement isn't easily forgotten. "I heard the community's cry saying, 'We are tired of organizations coming into our communities, receiving research dollars, and we do not benefit.' I took that to heart," he said. And while Sam wishes they had come to him personally with their concerns, he didn't get angry. "I handled that by praying and by going back to the drawing board to ensure that we were in the community for the right reasons."

HONORING THE PAST

Part of what draws Sam to this work is his own background. "I've been through a lot in my life, growing up in poverty and struggling with serious health challenges." Sam was raised in a suburb of St. Louis with a father who worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. His mother died when he was five. He had to grow up fast and life wasn't easy but he is grateful for many things. "Although I lived in poverty, I didn't feel like I did. I went to the same grade school and was exposed through sports and other activities to a world outside of my SES (socioeconomic status) background. My heart really goes out to kids who don't have a stable background."

Sam worked a series of low-wage jobs while trying to figure out his future when he was diagnosed with end-stage renal disease at the age of 20. "It was all of a sudden," he said. "I went to the doctor and my blood pressure was at stroke level. I was immediately placed on dialysis." He took treatments three to four times daily at home for three years until he was able to go to a dialysis center. "I turned the corner when that happened," he said. "I started focusing on goals and seeing that I didn't want to work dead-end jobs for the rest of my life." He moved to Jefferson City, MO and enrolled in Lincoln University. The disease made it difficult to keep up with the coursework, especially during his long-awaited kidney transplant. But Sam finished an associate's degree in computer information systems and moved to Columbia where he believed opportuni-

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“My career and vocation as a minister are integrated. All the stuff I learn in ministry allows me to effectively engage with residents.”

ties would come. “The transplant freed me up,” he said. “It’s a treatment, not a cure, so I have come to terms with that. I am focused on living my life day to day. The kidney could be rejected by my body, but I thank God for the technology and the doctors and all He allowed me to go through to have a productive life and a career. I trust and believe He has a plan for my life.”

BUILDING THE FUTURE

His journey has taken twists and turns but as far as Sam is concerned, everything has been leading to this job. Sam worked in a resident care facility for abused and neglected children, where he learned to connect with kids who struggle with trust and authority. As a customer service representative for a textbook organization, he learned to communicate with people from all walks of life and create efficient systems. As a school transportation dispatcher, he gained insight into the school system and integration of transportation modes. While working as a family advocate for a community-based organization, he helped low-income people with job readiness, utility assistance and more. But most importantly, Sam says, he became an ordained minister and serves as Director of Christian Education at his church. “My career and my vocation as a minister are integrated. All the stuff I learn in ministry allows me to effectively engage with residents. They see me Monday through Friday AND Sunday. They can call me in the evenings. I often say, ‘People are not concerned with how much you know unless they know how much you care,’ and I really have a heart for God’s people.”

One of Sam’s most rewarding experiences so far has been a campaign to save Columbia’s public transit service. “We were facing a dismantling of our bus system,” said Sam, who was worried about the impact on residents who rely on public transportation, like a single mother who’s trying to take classes at night. “To mount a campaign that was able to sustain the services at least for a year...that’s dear to my heart.” Subsequently, the mayor appointed Sam as a community representative to the Transit System Task Force, which seeks to quadruple ridership. Sam is also involved in developing youth leaders, revitalizing neighborhood associations and managing the day-to-day operations of their HKHC action teams. On top of that, he’s taking courses to become a certified community development specialist.

Things have come a long way since that radio show. In fact, after leading a workshop on civic involvement and strategic planning, one lifelong resident spoke directly to Sam for the first time. She looked him in the eye and said, “I LOVE what Sam Robinson is doing, and I am going to tell everyone about Sam Robinson.” Sam paused. “And that made me really feel good because at the end of the day, I need to make sure everything we’re doing is sensitive to the needs of our community members.”

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Columbia partnership visit tinyurl.com/kv7du5q

Ray Sharp

Community: Houghton County, MI

Originally Published:

June 2012



Like the place where he lives, Ray Sharp's story is one of endurance, determination and adaptability. A story that involves a complete identify shift, but never a loss of identity.

Maybe that's what attracted Ray to the northern-most part of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. This remote, rural, rugged area is a lot like him.

Houghton County is situated in the beautiful Keweenaw Peninsula and was once primarily associated with copper. Between the mid-1840s and 1968, Keweenaw Peninsula mines produced 10.5 billion pounds of copper, and the industry supported tens of thousands of residents. It was a booming place.

"Copper Country" was the first identity for Houghton County. Ray had a first identity, too. "In my twenties, when most would be starting a career path, I was race walking as part of the Olympic and international track and field program," he said. "I didn't make an Olympic team, although I came close. But I made many United States teams that competed in world championships, so I was a top race walker in the country and a world-class athlete."

SHIFTING GEARS

Transitions from big identities aren't easy. Since 1968, when Houghton's last copper mines closed, high rates of poverty and unemployment ensued. Its population declined, and the community struggled to emerge as something new. Fortunately their college, founded as the Michigan Mining School to train mining engineers, continued to grow. Evolving into what is now known as Michigan Technological University (Michigan Tech), this institution was one heartbeat that kept the community going.

After ten years traveling the world as an internationally-ranked athlete, Ray moved to Colorado in search of a new beginning. "When I was 28, I got a job working minimum wage as a teacher assistant in a rural school district," Ray said. It didn't take long for him to decide to finish his degree. He enrolled in the University of Colorado and developed an interest in Spanish literature. Completing 90 credits in a little more than two years to graduate, he moved to Arizona and taught high school Spanish, math and science.

How did he go from teacher to Community Planning and Preparedness Manager for the Western Upper Peninsula Health Department and Project Coordinator for its Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) project? "These things happen by accident, sometimes," he said with a laugh.

By accident? Or by determination? Ray and his wife left Arizona and moved to Houghton County. They wanted a change of scenery, to be closer to family, four seasons, and a place to kayak and cross country ski. "We came to this remote, rural area and it's been a great place to raise our kids," Ray said, who now has two sons and a daughter ages 13 to 19. Since he wasn't certified to teach in Michigan, he began writing for a local newspaper and covered the health and education beat.

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“One of my strengths is that I frame the message about multiple benefits of policy change.”

EMERGING IDENTITIES

“I got assigned to education because they knew I was a teacher and health just came along with it,” he explained. “The editor said, ‘Well you’re a health kind of guy aren’t you?’ That actually opened a lot of doors. I became acquainted with school superintendents and teachers and people working in public health.” This experience led to his next job as health director of a child development agency and, from there, to the local health department. Over time, he became the Emergency Preparedness Manager, working on bioterrorism-related grants. Ray’s new identity was surfacing, but it was not yet fully visible. “It was important work, but not my passion,” he said.

Meanwhile, Michigan Tech continued to grow. It now has more than 130 degree programs, 7,000 students and 450 faculty, doubling the size of Houghton, the county’s largest population center. Michigan Tech has historically invested in its hometown and now that extends to healthy communities work. In addition to supporting trail development, students in a transportation planning class and other groups are working to create a bike-friendly campus, improve transit and be involved in the city’s comprehensive planning work. All of these are connections that Ray made through the HKHC grant.

Ray has been the staff lead for the HKHC partnership since the grant was awarded and his title changed to incorporate “community planning.” Both the man and the community have been a natural fit for the initiative. Ray loves that his work fits his life and passion. And the community was ripe for change given that the economic downturn had stalled or halted growth for decades. Not that change has been easy. Harsh winters with more than 250 inches of snow per year and extremely hilly roads create added barriers to walking and biking. Growing fresh produce is also difficult because of the region’s rocky soil and short growing season.

However, Ray has good relationships with decision makers and can more quickly get an audience than someone working in a larger city. In addition, his skills as an educator serve him well. “One of my strengths is that I frame the message about the multiple benefits of policy change,” he said. “Like when I talk about Complete Streets, I talk about public health and also about the economic, environmental and quality of life benefits of a walkable community.”

MAKING CONNECTIONS

It must be working. Because of the HKHC partnership’s efforts, Houghton became one of the first cities in Michigan and the first in the Upper Peninsula to pass a Complete Streets ordinance. Some of the local towns are investing in small vehicles to plow sidewalks and trails in the winter. And they’re developing the 50-mile Copper Heritage Trail that will link many of their towns and villages, provide more opportunities for active commuting and enhance winter activities like snow shoeing and cross-country skiing.

Community and school gardens are emerging with the aid of compost-based soil, experimentation with hoop houses and a summer youth gardening club. Farmers’ markets are also gaining support, including new permanent structures with EBT installation in two small towns. Ray is also working with “party stores” (their version of corner stores) to find effective models of fresh produce distribution.

Both Houghton County and Ray embrace their pasts and their futures. Ray still competes in international race walking events. He recently placed 8th in the Olympic Trials against people half his age. More frequently, though, he bikes to work, stays active through a variety of outdoor sports and eats healthy. His days are spent working

with local partners to create environments where everyone can do the same.

And despite the struggling economy and harsh winter weather, Houghton County is healthy too. In addition to Michigan Tech's draw, the area attracts many tourists. In fact, Houghton has been listed as one of the "100 Best Small Towns in America," and National Geographic Adventure Magazine rated the Keweenaw Peninsula one of the top 10 outdoor spots in the country. And thanks to the work of HKHC partners, Houghton recently earned a Bronze recognition in the Bicycle Friendly Community program from the League of American Bicyclists. A fitting symbol, since bronze is made mostly of copper.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Houghton County partnership visit tinyurl.com/lb9xmjz

Rosa Soto

Community: Baldwin Park, CA

Originally Published:

September 2010



As a child, Rosa Soto didn't listen well. Not to adults who said she'd never speak clearly because of her lisp. Not to a community that said she'd never graduate.

Not to social pressures that resulted in most of her friends becoming teen mothers or accepting the low-paying job and sticking with it to "pay the bills". Instead, Rosa overcame her lisp in three months, graduated from the University of Southern California with a degree in political science and international relations, and has been working to empower underserved families and children for over 15 years.

"I'm a community organizer," said Rosa, Regional Director for the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA) and the Project Director for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) project in Baldwin Park. "I never thought of myself as a public health person," she said although her career spans teen pregnancy, diabetes and now childhood obesity.

It's understandable that Rosa self-identifies as a community organizer. She grounds herself in family and in helping others find their voice. Rosa's parents were immigrants from Mexico. "A lot of my childhood was about fitting in and finding a place of belonging," she explained. And she wants others to also feel they belong and can make a difference. That the status quo doesn't have to remain "the norm." "This work is important to me because it gives me an opportunity to demonstrate that change is possible."

A STYLE OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

Strong community engagement has been a critical component of the HKHC work in Baldwin Park. With every step, youth and community residents have been equipped to take leadership roles in the initiative. It's a more time consuming process but creates incredible synergy and deep capacity for social change. Recently, residents attended a city council meeting regarding a moratorium on new drive-through restaurants. As usual, CCPHA provided a translator for them. But this time, things were different.

"One resident, who always has a translator, told the translator to sit down," Rosa said. "He said, 'I'm going to do this in English.' It was a transformational moment," she explained. "And now every one of our residents is speaking in English, especially in meetings with elected officials."

Clearly, Rosa and her team are true connectors. They build bridges across traditional divides. For example, before a meeting between resident leaders and consultants or professionals, they ensure that community residents have training around the issues and are equipped with the language needed to confidently advocate for their needs. Not just by having translators available, but by teaching them professional terminology. They also ensure that the professionals know before coming in what the residents need and want so that the conversation can be more productive.

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“When people feel like they’re leaders and are connected to larger changes, you can affect transformation in any issue and have significant impact in the social fabric of the community.”

MAKING VITAL CONNECTIONS

They connect communities. Recently, resident leaders took a field trip to a nearby community and were exposed to a new model of community design—one where fresh and healthy produce was available and affordable in multiple locations within walking distance and where the built environment made it possible to easily walk or bike to those stores. They talked with store management about their retail philosophy and also shared back what they are working on in Baldwin Park. Good connections were made with leads to new resources. And the residents returned more confident and passionate about making the changes they envision.

They connect issues. Because of CCPHA and their partners’ work in this area, the connection of health to other vital issues is becoming more prevalent. Rosa was recently at the annual “state of the city” address where the mayor discussed the pillars of a community for improving quality of life. “He mentioned the economy, services, safety, and then there was a pillar for health,” Rosa said. “Wow, when health becomes a pillar of the community and the mayor says so, you’ve forever changed the course of how business is conducted in the city.”

And they are connecting people to the power they have within themselves to change their world. “Often times,” she said, “we’re so challenged by deadlines and imposed processes that allowing natural leadership to evolve gets pushed to the side.” Yet, Rosa said, it’s a little like fishing. “It’s like throwing out a net and waiting. Whatever gravitates toward your net is what you’re meant to consume. It’s the nourishment you need. Artificial processes, like nets, are only meant to be guides, but we need to allow people to come together and exert their own leadership and grow.” That takes time and good listening skills.

According to Rosa, “When people feel like they’re leaders and are connected to larger changes, you can affect transformation in any issue and have significant impact in the social fabric of that community.” It’s a good thing Rosa didn’t listen when she was child. But she’s sure listening now.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Baldwin Park partnership visit tinyurl.com/ms35gdd

Amanda Storey

Community: Jefferson County, AL

Originally Published:

November 2012



Even before you see her, you know Amanda Storey is in the room. Her energy is palpable and her spirit is warming, like bread in the oven. Food analogies seem natural with Amanda, the project director for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative in Jefferson County, AL. Her career has transformed from seed to fruit-bearing plant.

As a journalism and women's studies major at the University of Georgia, Amanda focused on telling the authentic stories of southerners, especially women. Amanda was drawn to strong narratives. Her first job out of college was with Southern Progress Corporation in Birmingham, Alabama, where she worked for eight years in roles ranging from editing to marketing at Southern Living, Health, and Cooking Light magazines. Not only did she discover her strengths in building relationships and managing projects, but these jobs firmly planted Amanda in places where she learned about the non-profit "food for good" movement, as she describes it.

Frequent work-related travel around the country introduced Amanda to the farm-to-table movement and other food justice initiatives. Something resonated with her soul as she explored these worlds. She nourished connections, soaked in new learning and helped sow more intentional conversations around sustainable agriculture within her organization. And then, like when the earth's rotation shifts the sun's direction, Amanda received news that Cooking Light's marketing department was leaving Birmingham and her entire department was getting laid off. Rather than be shaken by this unpredictable change, Amanda embraced the opportunity for new growth.

BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED

After traveling so much for work, Amanda realized she didn't know her own community. So she knocked on doors to connect with the local food movement. Impressed with the work of Jones Valley Urban Farm, she approached them with this offer: "I have severance pay for a while; I can work for you for free." With Amanda's contagious smile and effusive personality, they didn't hesitate. While there, Amanda began organizing with several other groups working to enhance access to local, affordable food. For example, after hearing that screenings of the movie Food, Inc. were being held across the country, she called and said, "Hey, Birmingham isn't on the list. Why don't you show it here?" She then worked with local nonprofits to host three screenings at a local bar. "It was awesome," she said. "So many people showed up." Little wonder. Amanda spiced things up with tastings from local venues, a panel discussion addressing the key issues, and resources for those hoping to get more involved.

Her year of being unemployed turned out to be a win-win for Amanda and her community. "It was a reawakening for me, finding cool work to attach myself to and learn from." She joined a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) from Jones Valley Urban Farm and realized she didn't recognize some of the produce. "I'd never seen a rutabaga before," she said. "I grew up in the 70s as a true supermarket baby. Rutabagas weren't at the top of our ingredient/grocery list" So Amanda researched each vegetable and found recipes. She developed a website called "Food Revival" to share her journey with

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Amanda not only links people and local organizations, she also connects with others across the country to learn about effective models and strong ideas that work locally.

others. It drew a strong following as Amanda posted blogs and mini-cooking shows from her “one butt kitchen,” all part of her constant quest to learn and deepen her work in the field.

In December 2009, Amanda was hired as the Project Coordinator of Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities at the United Way of Alabama. She quickly moved into a new title, Assistant VP of Community Health and Wellness where she is now Project Director. Her experiences and relationships have fully bloomed into a career she loves and in which she clearly excels. She’s tapping her strengths and expanding her reach. The Health Action Partnership implements healthy eating and active living initiatives in Jefferson County, such as strengthening health and wellness policies in childcare centers and schools, increasing access to healthy, affordable food through policies and partnering with grassroots organizations who recently launched a new mobile farmers’ market and improving opportunities for walking and biking for transportation, such as Safe Routes to School. It’s vital work. Childhood obesity rates in Birmingham and Jefferson County are higher than the national average for all age groups. And among African Americans, who make up 75 percent of Birmingham’s residents, rates are higher still.

MENDING AND CONNECTING

In Birmingham’s traditionally underserved neighborhoods, environmental barriers to eating healthy foods and being active are similar to other like areas across the country. Families have limited access to affordable, nutritious foods. The perception and reality of unsafe streets keep many residents indoors. Furthermore, trust was broken from historic disengagement and segregation. One could wonder where to begin. Amanda started with an inclusionary assessment process, using the YMCA’s Community Health Living Index tool. “We held 60 meetings across three communities the first year,” she said. “It was intense and a huge benefit to our work. Relationships were made, trust was built and many people are still involved now three years later.”

Amanda’s gift as a natural connector clearly helped. Amanda not only links people and local organizations, she also connects with others across the country to learn about effective models and strong ideas that will work locally. “We’ve had a tremendous opportunity to be part of a learning network with HKHC, which helps us look at the big picture, at the long-term.” For example, during a HKHC grantee meeting, Amanda heard PEDNET, located in Columbia, MO, talk about walking school buses and how they can build relationships. “In our assessment work people said, ‘We don’t know each other, our own neighbors,’ and I realized the walking school bus could meet many needs.” Now they have 70 kids walking with parents and teachers on one route, and they received state transportation money to expand the program and improve environments at other schools.

Amanda drew from other innovative and effective models as well. She talked with colleagues in Omaha, NE and Greenville, SC about their public/private partnership structure. “We’re now doing a complete restructuring of our partnership, being mindful of their lessons,” she said. Amanda also connected with a colleague from Louisville, KY, who visited Birmingham to talk with HKHC partners about Louisville’s Food Policy Councils and youth advocacy work.

FULL CIRCLE

In many ways, Amanda’s career has come full circle. Her interest in women’s studies and journalism helped her see things differently. “I quickly realized that if I was going to write about southern stories, I needed to uncover my own white privilege. I started

asking questions of myself and communities around me and worked on seeing more than just my point of view.” She said that translated well to HKHC. “This work is hard and touches on so many different issues, especially social justice arenas. In Birmingham, we’re working predominately in African American areas and we talk about challenges that I personally am not faced with. It’s been helpful to think back to those class experiences and look at things with an open heart and mind to get at root causes, and to be open to all viewpoints in order to arrive at a solution. And quite frankly, to also be open to receiving constructive criticism on ways I can personally evolve, be more intentional and inclusive, and listen to differing points of view and experience.”

Amanda was recently honored by the Women’s Fund of Greater Birmingham as one of a dozen of the smartest and brightest women in Birmingham. She was recognized for her innovative work in children’s health. She is quick to credit her mother. “My mother never complained about the struggles she had as a single working mother. I never knew her challenges. Though she undoubtedly hit many glass ceilings, she raised me to believe I could do anything I dreamed,” she said. “As I move into a new role as a working mother, I begin to understand the difficulties of work/life balance and recognize questions I never knew to ask before because it wasn’t my experience. I’m now way more understanding about a community member’s challenges showing up to a PTA meeting, for example.”

Thinking back over the last ten years, she said, “Here’s one of the most important things I’ve learned: Every woman’s story is her own, and every woman’s story is different. I see women juggling two to three jobs and raising four to five kids and still giving on the weekend to shelters and other causes. That’s powerful, and I see it every day. I am so proud to be a woman working alongside grandmothers and teachers and business leaders who are changing this community. I am fully aware of my village around me and how it has allowed me to get to this place where I can do this work. Our project coordinator, Kadie Whatley, does so much on the ground and for me. All of our partners do. I am but one in a sea of amazing, talented people who do this work. And I’m incredibly honored to work alongside these folks.”

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Jefferson County partnership visit tinyurl.com/yk6kk7n

Katrina Tatum

Community: Moore and Montgomery Counties, NC

Originally Published:

February 2013



When FirstHealth of the Carolinas, a comprehensive health care system, received a Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) grant for Moore and Montgomery Counties, NC, they knew they needed strong partners.

As a result, they reached out to leaders from Southern Pines, Aberdeen, Robbins, Candor and Mt. Gilead for help in removing barriers that keep children from being active and eating right.

Katrina Tatum, Mount Gilead's Town Manager, immediately jumped on board. Not only is she always looking for ways to improve quality of life for the residents she so passionately serves, she also knew this might help her break some of her own unhealthy habits acquired as a transplant from Washington, DC.

"Everywhere I went in North Carolina they fed me - fried chicken and potatoes. There was food at every meeting and I quickly gained a lot of weight." In rural North Carolina, she also struggled to find environments that supported her exercise habits.

Her personal commitment was solid and she was in a strong position to help. Having the town manager as a partner is good. Having Katrina in that role has been invaluable. Melissa Watford, Health Education Specialist for FirstHealth Community Health Services and Project Director for the HKHC initiative said, "Katrina is a true leader and really embraces our work helping small, rural communities become healthier places, especially for children. She's not afraid to create policies or present policies to the town council. In fact, she's been very effective with policy changes in the town."

SMALL TOWN GATHERINGS

Mount Gilead passed a Healthy Foods policy which, Katrina hopes, will ensure that healthy foods are served at town-supported events. This policy covers all town meetings, potluck and catered events, community health fairs, and town-operated children's programs. With a population of nearly 1,200, the town employs and reaches many residents through its community events.

Now, they serve food like roasted chicken, salad, fruits and raw vegetables. "We don't have the fried chicken and the whole hog meals anymore," Katrina said. "At first, adults complained. I heard comments like, 'We thought we'd be eating something decent today,' but then they found they liked the alternatives."

The first step toward creating this policy was to serve healthy foods, snacks and beverages during the town's summer park program for children. "We have 30 to 60 kids who come every day," Katrina said. "We think about things differently as a result of HKHC. Instead of feeding them what we thought they wanted to eat (like hot dogs), we feed them what they should eat and they love it."

In addition to healthy food policies, Mount Gilead upgraded their planning and zoning ordinances to require sidewalks in new developments with at least four units. They

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"I had a diverse upbringing, and that's made a difference in how I react to people. It's made me understand the importance of equality."

also added low-grade lights to their walking trail using a mix of donations and grants to fund the enhancements. "We've more than tripled the use of the track and it's adjacent to the elementary school, so the kids use it too." Katrina loves piecing together resources to achieve change, especially for those who need it most.

COMPASSION AND TENACITY

"I am drawn to working with senior citizens and children, because they're often the ones people forget," Katrina explained. "Seniors pay their bills; they don't complain. They may live in hazardous, unhealthy conditions and never say anything. I meet with them and help them fill out applications to fix their houses. I think they deserve that."

And the kids? "I guess that's because I'm a kid at heart." She paused and then said, "I was abused as a child myself, so I like to see all children happy and healthy and having fun. Children are supposed to have fun; they're not supposed to have bad things happen to them. I work to try and help kids stay kids a little while longer."

When Katrina lived in Washington, DC, she worked for the U.S. Department of Housing and Community Development. In moving to North Carolina, she was hired to handle housing issues for the Lumber River Council of Governments. Through what she calls "divine intervention," she moved into town management. Through a series of serendipitous events, she became the interim town manager and then town manager of two small towns.

She walked into difficult situations where communities were struggling financially and worked hard to strengthen their systems and boost their fund balances. In both places, however, she was asked to resign and believes it was racially motivated. "The political atmosphere changed and, in one case, she was told that the new mayor said, 'No woman, and certainly no black woman, will ever hold that title in this town.' Living in the north all my life, racism wasn't overt that way, I wasn't used to it."

It would have been easy to quit trying. However, she was raised in a military community, "which gave me the discipline and structure I needed." She was also raised by a multicultural family. One grandmother is white, one is Indian and her grandfathers are black. "I had a diverse upbringing, and that's made a difference in how I react to people. It's made me understand the importance of equality."

NEVER SAY NEVER

Katrina's tough but fair-minded mindset has served her well, even when she didn't think it would matter. When Katrina was being interviewed for the Mount Gilead Town Manager position, she didn't think she had a chance. "Here I was this black woman in the south going to an interview with an all-white panel and staff. I laughed and said, 'They'll never hire me. It's North Carolina.'"

They liked that she wasn't a "yes-woman" and she, in turn, was drawn to them. "The first year here, we didn't have a town Christmas tree to light, so we turned on street lights and all the shops stayed open late and people went from store to store, talked and ate hors d'oeuvres. After it was over, I walked through downtown and it started snowing. There was such a peace in this town and I knew this is where I wanted to stay. Right here in Mount Gilead."

And that sits well with Melissa, who described Katrina in glowing terms. "She's confi-

dent. She's passionate. She's smart. People respect her. She says it like it is, and she gets things done. When we meet with her we always leave saying, 'Wow, she gets it.' We come in with the public health lens and she helps us see what it's like on the ground and how a small community can make some amazing changes. If we could have duplicate Katrina, we would."

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Moore and Montgomery Counties partnership visit tinyurl.com/mnv3tyn

Joyce Tseng

Community: King County/Seattle, WA

Originally Published:

November 2012



Joyce Tseng never thought she'd be promoting physical activity and healthy eating as a living. "I've almost always struggled with my weight, she said."

"I was that kid who watched tons of TV while my parents were working. They wanted me to eat fruits and vegetables. I would sneak in junk food." In fact, she pictured herself working mostly with animals. "Like Jane Goodall....studying primates," she said. Her life path took some surprising turns to bring her to this point. She is now the Public Health Coordinator for the Seattle Housing Authority and Project Co-Coordinator for King County/Seattle, Washington's Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) initiative. The King County Housing Authority (with Project Director Linda Weedman and Co-Coordinator Elizabeth Westburg) and the Seattle Housing Authority are leading the HKHC partnership, which aims to increase access to and opportunities for healthy eating and active living (HEAL) among public housing residents. Housing authorities are not the usual lead agency for HEAL work. And yet they provide an excellent opportunity to reach people exactly where they live.

SORTING OUT POSSIBLE PLANS

Likewise, Joyce doesn't come from the usual public health background for this work, although her experiences and training are a perfect fit. In college, Joyce followed her passions related to environmental work and Asian-American cultural identity. The felt like two distinct paths until she took an environmental justice class that helped her see the strong connection between caring for the environment and helping people find their voice. "I wanted to pursue environmental justice after that," she said. "It made a lot of sense to me."

She signed up for training by the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the umbrella federation for unions in the United States. They were recruiting Asian union organizers. Everything was coming together as Joyce realized the great need to help people who were working in hazardous and toxic work environments under unfair labor practices. Her idea of being a Jane Goodall morphed into a passion for helping people improve their lives.

KNOCKING ON DOORS

Her own parents emigrated from Taiwan and, even though her dad had a college education, they struggled to find jobs. "Seeing how much they sacrificed, working temporary and odd jobs to provide for me and my sister, that gave me a different lens," she said. Her perspective expanded as she began working for the Service Employees International Union on various campaigns, first with home health care workers. She knocked on doors all across Seattle and Washington State. "People welcomed me into their homes and talked about their struggles. It was amazing how even though they were being paid only minimum wage with no health benefits or worker's compensation, they were dedicated to caring for people 24 hours a day, seven days a week." Joyce talked with people about the benefit of forming a union and helped organize workers to advocate to the state legislature for the right to do so.

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"I used to think about environmental justice as toxins, or landfills... chemicals in people's backyards. I was learning that toxins can be a concentration of fast food restaurants as well."

"That was life changing right out of college," she said. "Meeting so many people, seeing different neighborhoods, talking with people from all income levels, ethnicities and races across the state. It gave me a strong faith in people. And it opened me up a bit. I've always been introverted. Not shy...but to knock on 20-30 doors a day...it helped."

From there, Joyce's work extended to hospital workers, especially those in service jobs which were filled mostly by immigrants and people of color. It was rewarding work, but also challenging. It was her mother who helped her think about what might be next. "I didn't think my parents even understood what I was doing," Joyce said. "But my mom was on the phone with me once and said, 'Aren't you trying to make other people's working conditions better? And yet you're working such long hours!' She got it."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Joyce decided to pursue a master's degree in public health and enrolled in the University of Washington's program in environmental and occupational health. As a research assistant, she interviewed day laborers and farm workers about the work hazards they faced and learned a lot about how "the people who grow our food, build our houses and build this country are not respected nor treated well." Other work led her to the International District in Chinatown, where she focused on reducing toxins and encouraging business and residents to recycle and compost. As she was studying the social determinants of health and realizing how interconnected everything is, she expanded her understanding of environmental justice.

Meanwhile, she was a board member for the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice, where youth mapped out how many fast food restaurants were near New Holly, a Seattle Housing Authority development which now also happens to be a focus neighborhood of HKHC. "I used to think about environmental justice as toxins, or landfills...chemicals in people's backyards. I was learning that toxins can be a concentration of fast food restaurants as well," she said.

That was when Joyce started looking at her own health and habits. She began realizing how important having access to healthy food is for everyone. About two years later, Joyce was hired to co-coordinate the HKHC project and now works in the New Holly and High Point neighborhoods (the King County Housing Authority HKHC neighborhoods are Birch Creek and Greenbridge) to increase access to healthy, affordable food and opportunities for physical activity. Her skills in community organizing are helpful. She assists residents to advocate for the changes they desire so that their neighborhood supports healthy lifestyles.

ADVOCATING FOR HEALTH

Joyce convenes community members, service providers and SHA staff to collaborate on their healthy communities' goals. "To get feedback from the community, we go to already occurring community meetings to get people's input and encourage involvement." She notes that everyone is very busy, so she tries to help make the work easier for all. "If community members need certain information but can't find it, I help. I'm their ear on the ground, and I don't hesitate to prompt others to follow through when needed."

One of their strong areas of focus has been on healthy vending machines. With much resident input about what choices they'd like and guidance from partners to create healthy food guidelines, the HKHC sites provided an opportunity to pilot the work, which could impact vending machines at all SHA sites. "It could influence 5,000 units

with the contract process,” Joyce said. “That would be exciting!”

Other successes include convincing a local Walgreens to carry fresh fruits and vegetables because none were available within walking distance of that neighborhood. “The community members influenced the store,” Joyce said. “It’s been really exciting to see.” Childcare physical activity and nutrition standards, improved walkability and increased physical activity programming, as well as opportunities for community gardening, have been achieved throughout the four sites. Joyce is quick to credit residents and their partners for the many accomplishments. There are several grant-funded programs with complementary goals, and they are working together to leverage success.

Change is very evident in King County and Seattle. And, Joyce notes, for her personally. “This work has made me more interested in nutrition, healthy eating and physical activity,” she said. “That wasn’t something I’d focused on before.” In fact, she exercises every day now and completed a half-ironman two years ago. Clearly, her days of sitting in front of the TV eating junk food are over.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC King County/Seattle Partnership visit tinyurl.com/lkbagca

Stephanie Welch

Community: Knox County, TN

Originally Published:

April 2012



"If there's one thing I've learned about myself, it's that I don't do well working only on one thing," said Stephanie Welch. And she's clearly addressed that issue.

Stephanie is the Community Development and Planning Director for the Knox County Health Department and Project Director for the Knox County Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) grant. In addition, she's an Adjunct Instructor at the University of Tennessee - Knoxville and a Captain in the United States Army Reserve.

"I was extremely busy in graduate school between classes and my job, so when I graduated and began my first full-time 'career' position I was surprisingly bored," Stephanie said. "I saw a recruitment ad for Army dietitians and it seemed like a cool challenge!" In her spare time, she also serves on Knoxville's Better Building Board (which works to improve unfit structures), serves as chair of the local Food Policy Council, is a coach for the YMCA's Pioneering Healthy Communities initiative and is on the board of her neighborhood association, just to name a few of her extra roles.

How does she do it? "It is hard, but I see everything as connected," she explained. Even the Army Reserves. "The bigger system affects how people are able (or not) to be soldiers," she said. "Did you know that, historically, major changes in nutrition policies had to do with national defense? School lunch and other major food assistance programs were tied to the fact that we didn't have people prepared to be drafted for World War I or World War II. When I was on active duty, I was frustrated to see that army bases were full of junk and you couldn't walk anywhere. I think that's changing now."

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Clearly, Stephanie is a big-picture thinker, although she didn't always realize that about herself. As she was trying to decide where to go for graduate school 15 years ago, she knew three things. She wanted to go where it was warm. She didn't want to incur more debt. And she wanted options other than clinical work. That was how Stephanie selected the University of Tennessee for graduate school. "I saw this public health nutrition program in Knoxville and I said, 'I like public health,' although I had no idea what it meant."

Her first job as a nutrition educator with the Knox County Health Department quickly underscored why she wanted to focus at a population level. "I was working with small groups and I felt very ineffective. I was telling people to do something that as a community we were not supporting." She began asking her boss to approach the work differently. "The organization was focused on individual behavior change at that time and systems thinking was not a good fit," she said.

So she moved on to the State Department of Health and into a community development position where she worked in rural East Tennessee with Community Health Councils. "They focused on broader issues around education, the environment, economic development...the social determinants of health, although we didn't call them that at the time. It was a transformational period in my career. I had a fabulous mentor who was a social justice guy." Stephanie began learning a different philosophy of public health and working with a community-based, strategic planning process to improve health.

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“Working at the neighborhood level is critically important to sustainable change... we’re in big trouble if we don’t make sure the conditions are in place for the [grassroots] to be strong and healthy.”

SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

In that role, she assisted the Knox County Health Department in developing a regional strategic plan for healthy weight and she was eventually hired to implement it. Stephanie returned to the health department because she saw more receptivity for visionary thinking. “There was new leadership in the organization and within Knox County,” she said. “I could see a lot of potential in the direction the organization was heading.” And, once the door was ajar, Stephanie didn’t hesitate to push it wide open. First, they completed a strategic plan, called the East Tennessee Two Step, which had a strong focus on environment and policy change and inspired a HKHC grant proposal. And then?

“I saw potential for bigger picture work at the Health Department, so I pushed and cajoled and prodded for an organizational strategic plan. We put a committee together and, through the work of leaders and staff, our health department has been transformed. It’s a very different place than five or ten years ago. We have a much larger community health component in the Health Department now and we’re much more visible. It’s more than a place for poor people to get care or for restaurant inspections. We’re an agent of change in the community.”

TAKING IT TO SCALE

Not surprisingly, that work was the impetus for developing a community-wide strategic plan called Together Healthy Knox which, after three years, is nearly complete. And to Stephanie’s delight, everything is connected. Together Healthy Knox has agency partnerships across the county, and their HKHC initiative is working with people at the neighborhood level. “It’s very difficult work, and in my opinion, some of the most important work we’re doing at the health department right now. It’s been very energizing. We’ve seen the light bulb go on for people that they can actually do something about improving health.”

For example, residents in one neighborhood are highly concerned about speeding traffic. Although they have a school, a park, a grocery store and a recreation center within walking distance, people drive everywhere because traffic is so bad. Solutions like building sidewalks or changing the design of streets were not getting the buy-in they needed, so neighbors decided to replicate another community’s solution... murals on the street. They will collect pre- and post-data to see whether and how it changes the speed of traffic.

“Working at the neighborhood level is critically important to sustainable change,” said Stephanie. “I’ve noticed that most of this work in our community was historically with people at the agency level, mostly the “worker bee” types. We’re like the grass stalks. The grass tops are the big decision makers, the electeds, and business executives. Grassroots are the residents in our neighborhoods. We’ve done a lot of work with the tops and stalks, but the roots have been ignored. The rest of us are going to die if we don’t have strong roots. That is important from a long-term strategic perspective. I feel we’re in big trouble if we don’t make sure the conditions are in place for those roots to be strong and healthy.”

Spoken like a true visionary. And someone who is no longer bored.

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Knox County partnership visit tinyurl.com/l9n2fdh

Erica Whitfield

Community: Lake Worth, Greenacres, Palm Springs, FL

Originally Published:

May 2013



If you vacation in Florida, you may expect to see white beaches, palm trees and estates. But as a lifelong resident, Erica Whitfield knows another side of her community.

In the three Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities (HKHC) cities of Lake Worth, Greenacres and Palm Springs, 70 percent of children receive free or reduced-price school lunches. Park access is unequally distributed, and 44 percent of students in the school in the grant target area are overweight or obese.

Erica, HKHC Project Coordinator and a Specialist for the School District of Palm Beach County, notes the dichotomy. In the five-mile square city of Lake Worth, 27 miles of platted roads are still unpaved. Many are alleyways, but some are roads that serve 50,000 people, including immigrants from Guatemala, Haiti and other places. And recreational areas in these low-income neighborhoods are scarce.

Luckily, Erica and one of her HKHC partners noticed a specific five-block stretch of unpaved road that connects two parks. They envisioned it as the perfect place for a demonstration project to vastly improve opportunities for active living. The City Manager said it wasn't a priority because of so many other pressing issues, so Erica made it hers. "I went to the Mayor and City Council and said, 'I will throw all my political capital at this project.'"

CREATING GREEN STREETS

It became very personal for Erica, who worked for two years to move it forward. She walked the neighborhood talking to residents about their ideas and gathered support from partners. She convinced the City and The Community Redevelopment Agency to submit an application to the County's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and worked with them on the proposal.

The vision is to turn that five-block stretch into a multi-modal greenway for residents to use for both transportation and recreation. There will be children's play spaces, gathering spots and opportunities for people to safely walk or bike to the public field at one end for soccer games and other activities. A high school is two blocks away. The MPO liked the proposal and awarded \$750,000 for the project. Receiving that news has been one of Erica's most rewarding moments professionally and aligns with her long-term goals.

As a native Floridian, Erica realizes that most residents are transplants. She wants to prove that Florida is a place you can call home from birth to retirement. "I want to live in a beautiful, healthy place, and I didn't want to have to leave to do that." Maybe that's because she's familiar with the effects of uprooting one's family.

CREATING DEEP COMMUNITY ROOTS

Erica's parents were immigrants from Italy and England. Although they have been citizens here for many years, Erica knows they've never felt the same connection

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"I haven't decided which office, yet. I don't want to remove someone who's doing a good job for our community, but I think I'd be good at politics. I love where I live, and I want to keep making it better."

as with their hometown. "When we go to Italy, my dad is like the prodigal son who returned. He's a hero. People love him here, but it's not the same." Her dad was always a connector in their neighborhood. "If you lived on our street, you knew everyone on our street because of him." Erica captured that notion and is scaling it up to her entire community.

"I'm a joiner. I want to be part of the community in any way I can." In addition to frequent volunteer work through her local Kiwanis Group (of which she is President), Erica brings high energy to her work. While working to improve transportation and recreation environments, Erica also connects with many low-income schools to develop and incorporate gardens into their landscapes. She recognizes the difference this is making for children and their families.

Erica reflects on one of those children. "I'm amazed at how much Bianca loves being outside; she's working in the garden every day. She was recently interviewed by the local paper, and her garden knowledge was impressive. She described what they were growing and what had been harvested." Student gardeners take produce home to their family and are proud to contribute food for their meals. Some are even starting home gardens.

Erica's dream of transforming her community will definitely come true one way or another. She loves the work and imagines herself campaigning for an elected position someday soon. "I haven't decided which office, yet. I don't want to remove someone who's doing a good job for our community, but I think I'd be good at politics. I love where I live, and I want to keep making it better."

PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE

To learn more about the HKHC Lake Worth, Greenacres, Palm Springs, FL partnership, visit tinyurl.com/kgsvvbd

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