

ROLE CHANGE: FROM COMMUNITY WORK TO ACTIVISM

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The author's first work experience was in a community that would later become her permanent residence. The community had a rich history prior to being subjected to devastating and failed urban renewal. As new development projects come to the community, local residents are determined to prevent slight and oversight that was experienced previously. Employment of local residents was a critical negotiation point in a Community Benefits Agreement and the result is a First Source Center. Because of committed community activism, these issues were a part of an enforceable contract and continued community activism is critically important for future economic development.



Learning to Work in a Community

Fresh out of graduate school, I moved to a new city with high hopes of “working with people.” I was anxious about landing a job and using some of the skills I had learned in graduate school. After searching for one month, I interviewed for a job as a community organizer. I was excited about the community where the job was located as well as the responsibilities—that was until the salary was revealed. It was less than \$6,000. What a surprise, even 30 years ago! I could not believe what I was hearing. I decided to indicate my keen interest and stated that I needed to think about the offer overnight. After listing my loan re-payments and rent expenses, I could not reason this salary amount; so my answer was “no.” This was a big disappointment because I wanted to work. I felt a need to start working to build the list of “experiences” that were needed for my resume. I continued to meet as many people as possible and indicated I was unemployed with a fresh master’s degree. I also faithfully searched the want ads daily.

Within a month, another offer came, and I was pleased when hired as a job developer by a faith-based skills training development organization based in the Hill District/Uptown. The agency offered training in several skills areas, as well as GED preparation. I anxiously counted down the days before I would start the following Monday.

Although I was excited about the job, I soon realized that because I was new in the city I did not have ready-made contacts that would be helpful when seeking jobs for trainees. As a quick study, I asked the four individuals I knew for advice. They offered helpful suggestions for contacts, and I continued to “let my fingers do the walking” through the yellow pages. My supervisor suggested a specific number of placements per month that were needed for gainful employment of the trainees. There was even a chart on the wall that tracked the placements. I looked at the chart daily, hoping that today would be the day to record a number resulting from my hard work. This was a task I would conquer, and my supervisor was encouraging, although I felt a need (and pressure) to increase my numbers. My drives through the city to meet with prospective employers provided mini city tours, and I noted every business and agency along the way as a future contact.

As a job developer, I quickly realized that I needed to get to know the person for whom I would be scouting a job. These initial contacts were especially helpful, and most often information from the trainees and their counselors proved vital when considering the most appropriate match with a prospective

employer. Many of the trainees wanted to work, but often faced situations that smacked of racism and discrimination. Interactions with the trainees were learning experiences unlike those that I had in the classroom or during my years growing up in Mississippi. I heard stories and concerns first-hand that I had previously only read about in books such as Liebow's *Tally's Corner* and Valentine's *Hustling and Other Hard Work*. Clients' stories reminded me of the street corner men whose jobs included nondescript chores (Liebow, 1967, 51-59). I also recalled Valentine's caution against a "blame the victim" syndrome and her analysis of the residents of Blackston (Valentine, 1978). She identifies the wider social systems that perpetuate an unequal status for African Americans.

Admittedly, I also encountered situations that required more personal discipline on the part of the trainee. Initially, after identifying job sites and interview times, additional follow-up was required for some trainees. In some instances, this meant meeting with the individual to review and emphasize time management skills, proper dress, and language usage. This was a tough eye opener for me. I soon learned that any number of factors impinged on the ability to follow through responsibly and promptly with a scheduled interview. However, I was determined to do all that was necessary for individuals to land a job; I sometimes found myself doing wake-up calls, providing transportation to the job interview, and conducting last minute mock interviews. I recall the sense of hopefulness of many trainees about this opportunity: the desire to be self-sufficient, and the need to provide for their families. They expected the work environment to be receptive and supportive, and they hoped to survive the probationary period.

During lunch on most days, I would walk or drive through the community in which my job was located, as well as an adjacent community. I became interested in the rich history of these communities, so I read up on the history and talked with colleagues who were familiar with the area.

It is now 30 years later and I find myself living blocks away from my first job in this

city. At that time, I had no way of knowing that I would call one of these communities my home, would be actively involved in community activities, and would be working as a concerned citizen to revitalize the community that I had admired 30 years earlier.

My current community has a major concern: economic survival. Employment for local residents is an immediate concern at the heart of economic viability. Large development projects have been planned for my community. As this unfolds, local residents believe they should not be forgotten and should have their voices heard about these projects. Additionally, they believe the developers should want community involvement through employment opportunities. Local residents were not given consideration when earlier urban renewal efforts were approved. These earlier efforts failed and today displaced residents still carry memories of the devastation of the social fabric of the community. The richness of Pittsburgh's Hill District included national and internationally known artists and sportsmen, including August Wilson, Art Blakely, George Benson, Stanley Turrentine, Mary Lou Williams, Billy Eckstine, Josh Gibson, and Cool Papa Bell. Well-known entertainment and cultural venues included the New Granada Theatre, the Hurricane Lounge, the Savoy Ballroom, and the Crawford Grill—famous jazz spots that attracted local and international patrons. Recently, a community located near one of the new massive re-development projects (a new hockey arena) observed plans for economic development moving forward without their input. Acting with determination, the community organized so that they could also be active participants at the planning table. The realization of the existence of valued community human assets buttressed this determination for mobilization. Furthermore, the community was positioned for renewal capacity building using residents' talents and skills. My first job dealt with employment opportunities; then and now I find myself searching for opportunities in the same community where I started as a job developer. But this time, I'm a concerned resident who is convinced that collective action will lead to desired outcomes.

Working Towards a Community Strategy

Because I am once again concerned with employment opportunities for residents in my community, I am actively involved in organizing efforts. For two years this has meant attending weekly and monthly meetings that determined organizing strategies to be used as a means of conveying residents' seriousness and determination. From 2006-08, residents addressed the proposed new development coming to our community in a space that had been stripped away 50 years earlier. The primary concern was to stop the repeat of a major failed urban renewal effort in the late 1960s and 1970s, which displaced 8,000 residents. The main strategy considered—which would possibly bring with it immediate returns—was a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA). A CBA would demand inclusion of local residents' voices during the planning stages of development projects and offer community give-backs or benefits. Because urban development projects were springing up in low-income communities and ignoring their neighbors, the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department urged more proactive input by residents prior to development projects approval. This position meant more involvement and influence over local development processes by local residents. A CBA—a legally binding agreement or documented contract between a developer of a proposed project, governmental officials, and coalitions of local residents and organizations—also begins to redress past injustices and begins to reconcile lingering oversights in an effort to plan for a more sustainable future. CBAs offer low-wealth and racially diverse communities the opportunity to negotiate directly in organized and unified formats with those in control of development capital (Ho, 2008; Salkin, 2007).

Community Activism and a Community Benefits Agreement

Although I was not living in the community during the 1950s and 1960s, the hurt and disregard experienced by the community at that time should not occur again. With the announcement of a new arena for the local professional hockey team were concerns about

employment opportunities for local residents. The coalition organized by the residents identified community equity as a primary concern. I began attending community meetings in early 2006 that specifically addressed proposed new economic development. The need for community residents to take action was imminent; they realized that "their seats at the table were empty." It was not until elected officials and religious leaders cautioned the group about the need to move with more deliberate speed that specific actions were discussed. At a strategy meeting on January 27, 2007, approximately 15 concerned residents met to strategize in response to rapidly moving decisions regarding the new hockey arena. However, up to this point Hill residents' input was nonexistent. I recall the different positions that were expressed regarding whether immediate actions should take the form of non-violent protests or be more confrontational. This reminded me of the discussions I participated in during my undergraduate years in Mississippi during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Now as then, we were saying we must stand up for what we know is "right" even though it may mean irritating some local and state elected officials. After lengthy discussions, it was decided that our immediate action was to hold a press conference the following Sunday. Within 24 hours a detailed press statement was crafted which included the main points identified at the strategy session. Bundled in layers of clothing and a wool scarf and hat, I stood with other residents in front of Mellon Arena on that cold Sunday afternoon as we proudly expressed our rights to full participation in development decisions and voiced other concerns. A determined strength was apparent among the community residents at the press conference. Our press statement indicated a fierce determination to be included in all talks regarding the development of the new arena, especially since public tax dollars would be involved. This collective of faith-based institutions, private citizens, and service and development entities identified the present moment as a pivotal point that could determine a new path and brighter future for our community.

Meetings among this initial group of residents followed, including some appearances by government officials. However, four months later another series of meetings began with backing from organized labor organizations, with the intent of forming a coalition. Labor organizations were initially viewed as ideal partners because of their continuing and committed fight against social injustice. They touted their concern that public investments were not benefiting the public. This was congruent with concerns of community residents. Clearly, the stance taken by community residents was a response to an historical injustice with a renewed spirit to prevent another. The Hill community was now focused on empowering itself so that a repeat of failed urban renewal efforts would not occur. On August 19, 2008, after approximately 18 months of negotiations, countless hours of meetings and protest marches, a CBA was approved. The benefits included workforce development, living wages, affordable housing, smart growth and livability, and community services and improvements. These are often the ultimate goals of a community coalition, and can be seen as common goods for a community (Baxamusa, 2008). Such work often involves extensive negotiations; in exchange a developer may receive a community coalition's support of the proposed project while leveraging its chances of receiving government subsidies and project approval. Workforce development opportunities for local residents can have an immediate and, hopefully, long-term benefit for the community. Communities that face high unemployment rates and low skills training should consider development projects that seek to hire and train residents rather than employ individuals outside the neighborhood. Local hire actions will develop human capital resources within the community (Chaskin, Joseph, & Chipenda-Dansokho, 2001).

Prior to the inclusion of employment in the CBA, residents engaged in a priority setting process that resulted in the document *Blueprint for a Livable Hill*. The priorities called "planks" would serve as benchmarks for addressing residents' concerns and lead to meaningful engagement of residents in any new

development. With employment a lingering issue in the community, this would allow developers of the arena to contribute directly to the economic survival of the community through Hill-employed workers. The "plank" emphasized training, hiring, and apprenticeship/trainee programs. The latter would require unions and subcontractors to provide training and hire community residents in service unions, the trades' apprentice programs, and management positions. Local residents would be recruited and trained for permanent jobs at all levels of employment in service unions, trades, and management. Lessees at the new development would also be required to recruit and hire local residents. The creation of a "first source" center would become the vehicle that would serve as the prime contact point for developers to communicate employment opportunities and also serve as a clearinghouse for inclusion of local residents in all employment areas from construction to jobs at all levels throughout the complex when opened. The more immediate action to address employment was the First Source Center, which was a CBA benefit. The First Source Center opened on June 10, 2009 and manages the referral of residents to jobs at the new hockey arena, after receiving first notice of openings. This one-week advance notification applies to all job openings, prior to the release of public announcements.

The dedication ceremony for the Center, which was held in August, was filled with the usual upbeat comments from elected officials, community leaders, and corporate sponsors. The joy of the occasion was tapered for me because my usual positive beliefs for my community were not a match for what I was hearing regarding the anticipated outcomes of the Center. Where were the individuals that are referenced in the speeches? Was I "out of touch" and unfamiliar with community residents who would benefit from the Center? My continuing concern about qualified residents who could be employed immediately on the new arena construction caused me unrest. Undisputedly, the Center is needed, but its programming must be multi-focused on present and future opportunities. Future training programs will prepare residents for

jobs one to two years out. However, no program would prepare residents for jobs on the current construction site where every day land was being cleared and the foundation was being poured. Prior targeted behaviors that left adults unqualified for some construction jobs are irreversible. So the question is—What can be done to prevent this from happening in the future? Maybe the answer lies with our future generation: community teens and youth. Giving hope to the youth of the community is not the only solution. Other programs and support systems must be considered. Several leadership programs are being introduced to Hill youth with explicit goals of providing mentoring and leadership skill development that will prepare them for various future leadership and employment roles within the community.

It takes the input of the whole “village” to address the lingering problem of qualified community residents who will fill jobs identified as part of the CBA benefit. I felt compelled to structure an education plank that was among the priorities considered by Hill residents. This plank was included among those in the *“Blueprint for a Livable Hill.”* A year later this plank was approved for inclusion for funding as part of the State of PA Neighborhood Partnership Program (NPP). The NPP award supports Hill college students who have indicated a commitment to return to the community after graduation.

The First Source Center devotes energies to assist all residents with job placement. However, a continuing concern for me and the local organizing group is the employment of local residents at all levels of management and service within the new arena facility, as well as the adjacent hotel and development of acreage next to the existing hockey arena. Would the arena developer and the hockey team see any job as fulfilling the employment CBA work benefit, with most being in the service area? Vigilance by the Center’s staff and community residents is required to monitor this component of the CBA benefit. The Center is currently funded by a two-year grant; therefore, the long-range planning that should be part of its work is questionable. Hopefully, additional funding will be forthcoming. An extended life will allow for its effectiveness to

be evaluated and measurable outcomes to extend beyond present employment opportunities to future possibilities. I recall the many discussions during organizing and strategic meetings about the need to work with unions and project developers on workforce development. During many of these conversation comments also turned to concerns for identifying residents who could meet the qualification needed for employment. Comments early in strategy meetings recounted the deep-seated problems experienced by qualified residents in the community, such as drug-related and violent crimes. During an earlier request for local residents to work on a development project close to the community, a local agency put out a call for workers. Approximately, 300 local residents responded, but only about 30 residents qualified for an interview because of drug problems, criminal records, and the lack of a driver’s license. This demonstrates the breadth of the task facing the First Source Center.

My community realizes the importance of income-producing opportunities for its future sustainability. Unemployment rates have a direct impact on the economic viability and sustainability of a community. With employment comes a greater sense of personal value, as well as a sense of stability, satisfaction, purpose, and financial security (Center on Race and Social Problems, 2007). In Pittsburgh, African American men and women are twice as likely as whites to be unemployed (Center on Race and Social Problems, 2007, pp. 41-42). These figures highlight the recognition by community residents to emphasize the need for employment opportunities for local residents. These startling figures provide the backdrop for one major push in the CBA: the establishment of a “first source center” to assist local employable residents. This benefit and the expected commitment of developers to give back meaningful tangibles to the community is one essential component of community renewal.

Recently, I read a publication that noted the value of racial equity in employment as well. It indicated that “inequity imposes high economic costs on virtually every actor in the regional economy including homeowners,

renters, rich and poor, the idle and workers alike" (Sustainable Pittsburgh, 2009, pp 3). Qualified workers benefit not only themselves, but neighborhoods, communities, and regions. This is a fact that Hill community advocates realized and, thus, pushed for inclusion of a "work" CBA benefit.

Changes Come with Renewed Hope and Continuing Involvement

The questions now confronting this community as a whole and the activists working for change within it include: How do we work now to ensure a positive and promising future outlook for our youth? And how do we prepare them for future employment opportunities? We are unable to change the historical situations of those men and women who felt a sense of hopelessness and isolation and were caught in a series of unacceptable behaviors that lessen their chances for gaining meaningful employment and succeeding in this society. But community advocates can set a foundation for our youth. I will continue to be engaged because I want my community to strive in the future and to be a part of the economic growth taking place around our community. We must work now to provide our youth with hopefulness, inclusiveness, and real possibilities. We must help them to see that they possess leadership skills that will allow them to make a difference in their lives and others. No matter how small a part I play, my hope is that local programs will provide our youth with resources that will enable them to develop their leadership skills and provide useful information about skills development that will lead to productive employment in the future. Most important is that residents from my community will be qualified to fill jobs that come with development projects within our community and beyond.

For me, community activism is special and satisfying work, even though it can be demanding and sometimes filled with compromise and disappointment. Committed residents concerned about the past, present, and future status of their community, continue to be involved. This commitment is often accompanied by participation in all aspects of

making the community as attractive as possible for current and future occupants. Some adult residents may carry feelings like those expressed by the trainees I worked with 30 years ago, but upcoming generations must believe in their value in being contributing members of their community and of society. They must also be prepared to compete confidently in all employment fields. Future employment opportunities can be part of development projects' commitment to the community. Community residents must be prepared to be involved so that there are "give backs" to their community. Residents must advocate for and be prepared to take advantage of all opportunities such developments present. Community assets exist and further nurturing is required. This need is acknowledged and is being addressed, in many instances, by Hill leaders.

These examples from the intersection of my own community practice and the world of work suggest that, more and more, community organizing will be about issues of jobs and the effects of unemployment. Twenty years ago I established a bond with this community, and today the attachment is stronger than ever. This is a community with many assets that can and must be developed. I will remain active and work toward the future development of this community's human capital.

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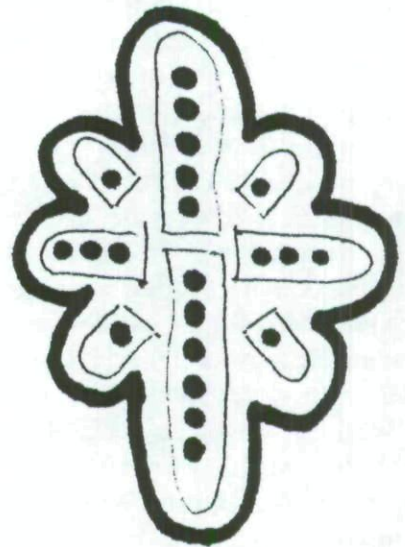
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