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All Politics is Local (and Personal):

A Case Study for Building Social Networks and Political Will

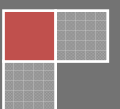
In the Vested Interests Interpersonal Theory of Change, we maintain that building the social networks of low income residents is a key strategy to achieve economic, health and social equity in the U.S.

This case study of Monument Futures, a grassroots economic development center in Concord, California, illustrates how the intentional expansion of positive, peer-based social relationships across lines of class, race and educational attainment could increase social cohesion and reframe resident leadership, service delivery and political opinion to achieve greater equity.

Vested Interests

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Introduction: All Politics is Local (and Personal)

In the Vested Interests Interpersonal Theory of Change, we make the case that building the social networks of people who live in low income communities must play a central role in the social equity movement. Personal ties and community bonds, not social services, are the critical path for low income people to get themselves out of poverty, and are the most dependable way to build broad-based political support for more equitable economic, health and social policies.

The expansion of social ties is work that must start at the local level, where personal relationships and human empathy can often trump more abstract notions like cultural bias, political ideology, religious conviction or academic theory as motivators for interpersonal and political behavior.¹

The following case study illustrates what happened in the low income Monument Corridor neighborhood of Concord, California as Monument Community Partnership (MCP), a cross-sector community collaborative, moved from a service-driven to a relationship-driven approach to social change. Within MCP, we created models that intentionally expanded the social networks of low income residents across lines of class, race and educational attainment, and worked to restructure social hierarchies within those networks. We found that by strengthening the social infrastructure of the community first, it created essential preconditions that allowed other interventions—such as resident leadership development, expansion of resources and political action—to take root and flourish, accelerating the progress toward economic, health and social equity at the local level.

Some benefits of this approach included:

- Residents' expanded personal connections within and outside of the Monument community acted as conduits for reciprocal information and resource sharing.
- As new social organisms, social networks that encompassed low income residents, service providers, local business owners and government officials as equals generated innovative, cost-effective solutions to community problems that none could have achieved independently.
- Armed with good information and expanded social contacts, community services and resources were increasingly demand-driven or created by residents, and therefore often valued more highly and utilized more heavily.
- The expanded social network of residents and other stakeholders acted as conduits to redefine social norms and the terms of inclusion of some of the City's most marginalized residents—day laborers and undocumented immigrants, among others—as valued peers, problem-solvers and community benefactors.

¹ For instance, a May 29, 2009 Gallup Poll cites personal relationships as a major factor in support for gay marriage: “[Though v]iews of gay marriage are strongly related to ideology. ... Further analysis reveals that, when controlling for ideology, those who know someone who is gay or lesbian are significantly more supportive of gay marriage than are those of the same political persuasion who do not personally know someone who is gay or lesbian.”

Concord Tackles a Familiar Problem in an Unfamiliar Way

In the first half of 2003 city officials in Concord, California were struggling with an inflammatory issue concerning the city's diverse, economically challenged Monument Corridor community: What to do about a failing day labor center known as Monument Labor Works.

The Center had been started in 2000 as one of the first projects of a new cross-sector community collaborative, Monument Community Partnership. It was created in a last-ditch effort to address longstanding complaints by business owners and residents about the increasing numbers of Latino men searching for work along Monument Boulevard. Supported by seed funding from the city and dues paid by members, during its first year Monument Labor Works incorporated as an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit and had some initial success in engaging both laborers and employers to meet at the Center rather than hire from the streets.

But things quickly began to deteriorate, and by 2003 Monument Labor Works had become a lightning rod for protest from all quarters. Neighboring homeowners complained about disorderly behavior. The windowless un-air conditioned warehouse housing the Center was sweltering and filthy, and equipment, toilet paper and other supplies routinely disappeared. Disenchanted workers stopped paying dues and returned to the street. The City was under siege from some to de-fund the organization, while advocates argued that the Center's core problem was under-funding. At one particularly rancorous City Council meeting, City Council Members, feeling at the end of their rope, turned the tables, asking why the business community and faith groups weren't stepping up to help solve this difficult problem.

Just as things were coming to a head, a group of resident leaders affiliated with MCP, known as the Neighborhood Action Team (NAT) Facilitators, decided to get involved. Day laborers, it turned out, were seen as outsiders even by other Latino residents in the neighborhood. So the NAT facilitators started with some questions that no one else had thought to ask: Who are the day laborers? What are their goals? What do *they* think should happen to the Center? *How do we include them as part of our community?*

As their first step to build relationships with these men, NAT facilitators conducted surveys to learn more about their backgrounds and motivations, and their views about the Center, which yielded some unexpected and eye-opening information. Next, in collaboration with a volunteer facilitator and others from MCP, they took the lead in organizing a series of meetings that included, for the first time ever, key stakeholders in this difficult issue: day laborers, the Concord police, city officials, other Latino residents, and members of the neighborhood association that opposed the Center. Here, hot button issues such as documentation status, problems at the Center, perceptions of disorder, and racial prejudice were put on the table and candidly discussed.

Within two months, the group had come to consensus: the Center was worth saving, but only if it became an economic development center that served everyone in this economically challenged community—day laborers, as well as other Latino residents, Anglos, women, seniors, youth. Program goals were outlined by the workers and other residents. Renamed Monument Futures, the organization had a new vision of success: **For the Monument Corridor neighborhood to become a connected**

community with a vibrant economy, where everyone has the chance to make rewarding economic and social choices. Most of the Serious People in town predicted it would fail within six months.

Fast forward two years. Monument Futures is in a new facility, remodeled by its members. Its day labor program is gaining a reputation as one of the best organized in the state, achieving high rates of job connections between workers and employers. During construction season, it has a steady membership of more than 130 dues-paying workers per month. Members, who were once a group of disconnected competitors divided along lines of national origin, race and class, now proudly identify with Monument Futures, referring to it as *nuestra casa* ("our home"). Latina women and seniors are getting jobs and taking computer classes. The organization has secured additional sources of funding and more than doubled its operating budget. City Council Member Bill McManigal, once the most vocal opponent of Monument Labor Works, votes for continued city funding of Monument Futures, and goes on record saying, "We finally have something that works. What we need now is more of it!"

Progress continues. Day laborers, a group of seniors from MCP and County officials collaborate to bring a library annex to Monument Futures, another "first" in the community. Members volunteer at the Monument Crisis Center and in the neighborhood's elementary schools. Latinas who had formerly never touched a computer are becoming proficient users of technology, teaching computer classes, starting micro-businesses and organizing a "green" worker-owned cooperative. Monument Futures' members are among the leadership of the Monument Healthy Eating Active Living initiative, a highly visible redevelopment campaign to improve the physical infrastructure, health and commercial success of the community.

Meanwhile, Monument Futures is connecting its men and women members with the broader community. At Monument Futures' annual holiday party, it has become established tradition for members, residents, the Mayor, city and county officials, faith groups, and business owners to celebrate together, and it has become normal and comfortable for them to mingle with each other. In a fellowship program sponsored by the Contra Costa County Workforce Development Board, businessmen and -women participate in a dialogue with Monument Futures' members, and come away impressed by the men's perceptions, astuteness and professionalism. The experience has begun to shift some opinions about immigrants and immigration policy, as participants defend day laborers and raise some cogent questions with an anti-immigrant speaker in the final session of their fellowship year.

By the end of 2008, despite growing fears about the Great Recession, City Council meeting discussions about day laborers are taking on a different tone. During the public comment period of one City Council meeting a Concord resident stands up and demands to know what the City is going to do about day laborers and immigrants. The Mayor, who has become a strong supporter of Monument Futures and come to respect its members, turns to him from the dais and said, "Did you know that day laborers from Monument Futures have been raising money and organizing a food drive to support the Monument Crisis Center? They're also volunteering 100 hours a month to the City to help us keep our parks clean at a time when we're facing cut-backs and struggling to do the basics. It's hard for me to see how this is a problem."