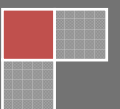


2010

The Opportunity Makers

**A Model for Community-Driven Growth and
Development**

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Vested Interests
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Fabiola

The Blooming of an Opportunity Maker

***Fabiola** is a Mexican immigrant and married mother of three. She joined Monument Futures, an economic development center in Concord, California in 2004, when our Day Labor program started a program for women. Prior to joining Monument Futures, Fabiola cleaned houses for a commercial cleaning company, working long hours for a pittance, earning \$20 per day. At the time, she had never touched a computer, spoke no English and saw no pathway to a better life for herself and her family.*

Through Monument Futures Day Labor Program, Fabiola was able to get housecleaning jobs as an independent contractor earning \$10 per hour with a minimum of 4 hours per job. Recognizing her ambition and talent, Monument Futures' staff invited Fabiola to join the Women's Leadership Team, where she set a goal of owning a business. She was among the first to take advantage of Monument Futures' computer training program, and encouraged others to do so as well. To build her business skills, Monument Futures referred her to the Women's Initiative for Self Employment microenterprise training program, where she learned the essentials of planning and running a business. When Monument Futures sponsored site visits to other model programs in the area, including Caminos, Plaza Comunitaria and WAGES, Fabiola, with others, began advocating to bring these programs to Concord.

Today, Fabiola is co-owner of her own business, Fiesta Party Rental, and uses Microsoft office to plan, promote and manage her business. With another Monument Futures member, she launched, coordinated and taught Plaza Comunitaria, a new Spanish literacy program, at Monument Futures. (Thanks to Fabiola, Plaza Comunitaria graduated its first class of 13 previously illiterate individuals in 2007. At their graduation, one said that, for the first time in her life, she could walk into a bank solo! [by myself!], sign a check and know what she is signing.) Fabiola joined Monument Futures' Board of Directors in January of 2008. In forums co-sponsored by Monument Futures, Monument Community Partnership and the City of Concord, she and her colleagues have voiced their priorities on redevelopment and economic development measures that would benefit their families, their career potential and the people who live in this community.

Fabiola would now like to see the creation of more businesses in the Monument that not only provide important goods and services, but also create investment and asset-building opportunities for people who live here. And now she knows the people who could make it happen.

Is Fabiola unique in her talent and ambition? Not in our experience. Every day, by the hundreds, Fabiola and others like her can be found in our under-resourced communities. Is it solely her intelligence and ambition that has gotten Fabiola this far? There is no question that her personal qualities are a key ingredient. But it also takes social networks, reliable information, educational opportunities and financial resources for the Fabiolas of the world – just like anyone else-- to use their talents for self-fulfillment, economic success and contributions to the community.

Vested Interests has created an approach to development in low income communities called The Opportunity Makers. This is a practical, resident-driven model of social change that has been intensively tested and developed over ten years through Monument Community Partnership (MCP), a place-based community-building initiative in the Monument Corridor neighborhood of Concord, California.

The Opportunity Makers is designed to complement existing community-building models and can be readily adapted by other practitioners in the social equity field. In combination with other best practices, this model can accelerate the pace of community transformation, create greater equality of opportunity, and increase the social status of low income residents not as a long-term goal, but *now*, as a function of implementing the model.

In The Opportunity Makers Approach:

- Residentsⁱ are full partners and have equal status with equity activists, service professionals and government agencies in community decision-making and development;
- By working as peers with residents, service providers and government agencies meet their objectives more effectively and have greater impact;
- Growth and development are dynamic, sustainable and avert gentrification, because residents are drivers of change.

Two Key Elements of the Model:

1. A robust *resident engagement and leadership development vehicle*ⁱⁱ that:
 - Builds the capacity of residents to become versatile community problem-solvers and generators of community change;
 - Combines personal and community development in a mutually reinforcing process;
 - Continually expands residents' social networks and sphere of influence over time.
2. A dynamic institutional *community-building incubator*ⁱⁱⁱ that:
 - Creates a framework to restructure the social, resource, and policy infrastructures of both low income and better-off communities;
 - Supports, resources and provides a platform for resident-generated solutions to community challenges;
 - Engages a broad group of community stakeholders and decision-makers, and builds their capacity to work in peer-based partnership with residents;
 - Creates strong, productive relationships and social networks among stakeholders from all different backgrounds, who would otherwise be unlikely to meet or collaborate.

Overview of *The Opportunity Makers Process and Roles:*

In the Opportunity Makers model, the aim is to create a continuous and growing pipeline of resident problem-solvers who have an expanding sphere of influence and impact in the community. These are people distinguished by their motivation to help themselves and others, and who are looking for opportunities to act on this motivation. We talk about this “pipeline” of potential leaders in three progressive phases of personal and leadership development:

- **Opportunity Seekers**—residents who are actively looking for opportunities for a better life.
- **Opportunity Users**—residents who are actively using opportunities for self-development.
- **Opportunity Makers**—residents who are actively generating social and economic opportunities for themselves and others, and increasingly influence community growth and development.

Likewise, there are three categories of community resources that are essential for a community to thrive:

- **Basic services and resources**—such as food, jobs, housing, and health care.
- **Self-development services and resources**—such as schools, training programs and financial institutions.
- **Generative services and resources**—such as leadership development programs and incubators.

Role of the Community Engagement and Leadership Development Vehicle:

The role of the Community Engagement and Leadership Development vehicle is to search for and engage a core group of people to become an initial team of Opportunity Makers. At the outset, these are not necessarily the most visible community activists. They are people who are the natural connectors and problem-solvers in the community, whom other residents trust and turn to for help. Once a handful of these leaders are engaged and provided with support and resources, *they* are the ones who find, organize and mentor other residents who have leadership potential.

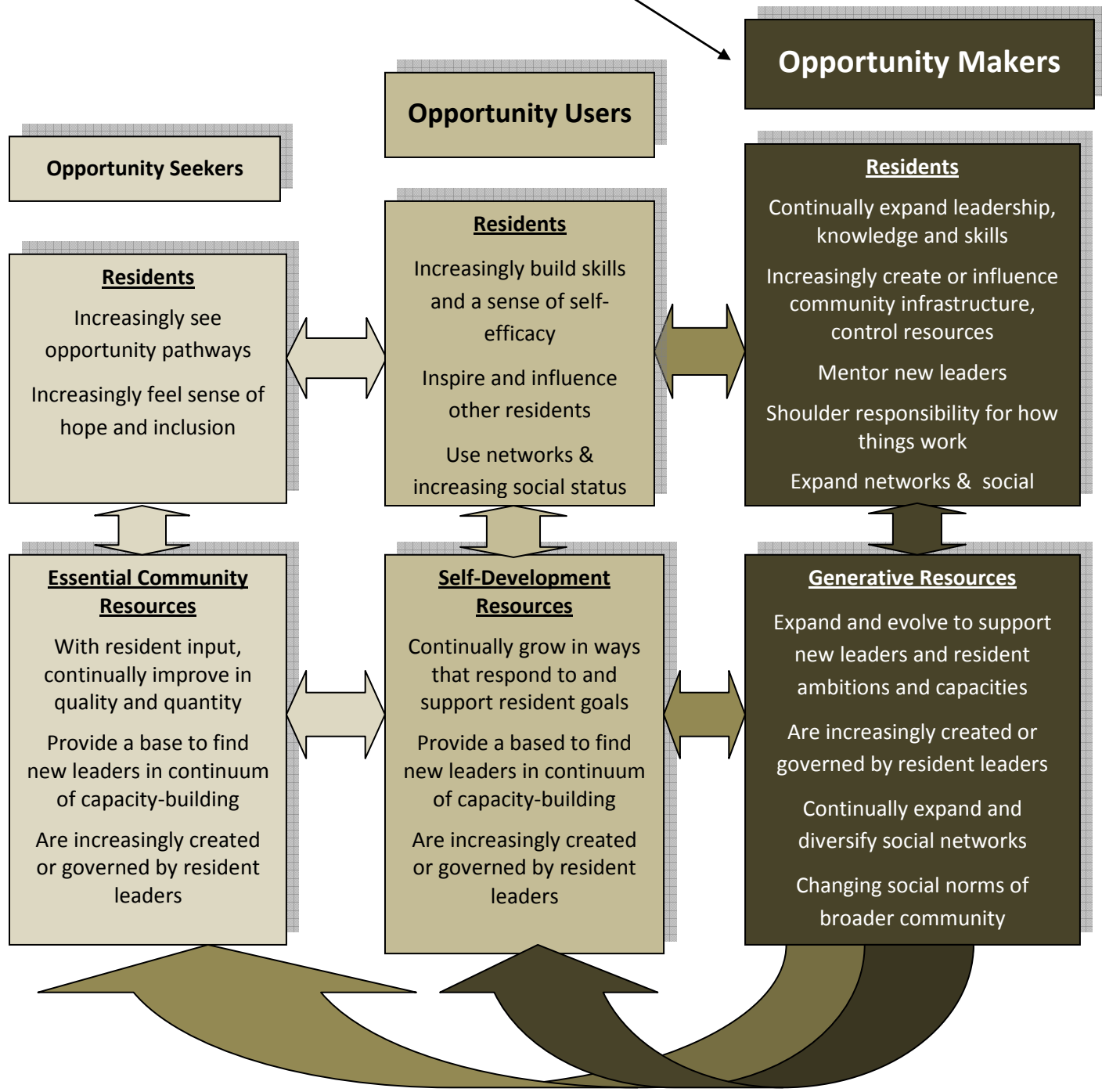
Unlike most community organizing models, this team of initial leaders do not advocate for change. They generate change – they are the community’s trail-blazing group of social entrepreneurs. In collaboration with other residents and other stakeholders, they identify and analyze key community challenges, set goals, and plan, implement and evaluate solutions.

Role of the Community-Building Incubator:

The role of the Community-Building Incubator^{iv} is to provide a center for strategic, intentional community action that is aligned with residents’ capacities, goals and needs. It assures that community action not only promotes, but models social equity—meaning genuine partnership between residents and other stakeholders. Thus it not only incubates tangible community change--it serves as a powerful vehicle for restructuring the attitudes, behaviors, social networks and social norms of participants and the broader community.

Once established, the Leadership Team and the Community-Building Incubator work together in a mutually reinforcing process of growth and development, in which residents become initiators and co-creators of change with the cooperation and support of community power brokers. In a cycle that provides mutual benefit, residents increasingly influence or create community services, resources and social policies, “making” opportunity; and this allows service providers and policy makers achieve their objectives in a much more pertinent, powerful and sustainable way.

The Opportunity Makers cycle of community change **starts here** and produces the following outcomes:



Opportunity Makers: A “People Capability Maturity Model” based on Social Networks

Organizations are now competing in two markets, one for their products and services and one for the talent required to produce or perform them. An organization’s success in its business markets is determined by its success in the talent market....

As agility in responding to continual change in technological and business conditions has become critical to success, organizations must strive to create learning environments capable of rapidly adjusting to the changes engulfing them. A critical component of agility is a workforce with the knowledge and skills to make rapid adjustments and the willingness to acquire new competencies. In fact, an agile workforce may reduce some of the stress currently being experienced as a talent shortage.^v

The above quotation is from the introduction to the “People Capability Maturity Model (P-CMM).” Though P-CMM was developed at Carnegie Mellon University in the context of the software development industry, the same underlying principle applies to community development: *The success of a community (or society) is contingent on its capacity to continually engage and develop the creativity and talents of the people who live and work there.*

Before all else, the baseline capacity that any community needs in order to thrive is a strong social infrastructure. In the legal world, this baseline capacity would be called a *precondition*, defined as “a condition that must be fulfilled before other things can happen or be done.”^{vi} As Robert Putnam has argued, our society, our economy and our democracy all depend on strong social bonds in order to work.^{vii}

One of the biggest obstacles to self-determination and the social and economic mobility of low income residents is the isolation of low income from better-off communities, and sometimes fragmentation within low income communities themselves.^{viii} If, as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett^{ix} assert, inequality and low social status are root causes of poor health and other social problems in the U.S., it is the social disconnection of low income residents that perpetuates and exacerbates inequality.

That is why The Opportunity Makers model focuses first on building peer-based relationships and social networks as the starting point of all other community-building efforts. Furthermore, at the outset we establish a level playing field for social action in which residents and other stakeholders are *genuine* equals, regardless of background and experience: As human beings, we are equal in our resourcefulness and our problem-solving capacities; and in isolation from one another, we are equal in our inability to make things better. Like the gears of a machine that has been dismantled, none of us can solve inequality on our own. The power of social change comes to all of us *only* when we find a way to mesh.

About Vested Interests and Molly Clark, Founder

Vested Interests is a new social venture that addresses a critical gap in the social equity movement: creating peer-based social ties between low income and better-off communities as the most direct path to changing social norms and generating support for a more equitable and sustainable society. The Vested Interests approach focuses on building the social networks, the problem-solving capacities, and the social status of people who live in low income communities. It is called Vested Interests, *because everyone has something to contribute to and something to gain from closer social ties and shared prosperity.*

The Opportunity Makers and other Vested Interests models are based on the [Vested Interests Interpersonal Theory of Change](#), in which social networks, social action, and policy change interact in a self-reinforcing dynamic. Social networks create the fertile social conditions essential for social equity programs and policy change efforts to take root and flourish, accelerating progress toward a more equitable, cohesive and sustainable society.

As Vested Interests' founder, I bring 30 years of experience in models that build social equity, spanning the worlds of community-building, economic development, public health and social enterprise. My experience includes executive management, strategic planning, organizational development, community organizing, leadership training and fundraising. Throughout my career, I feel lucky to have worked with cutting-edge grassroots and national organizations, including Working Capital, Community Catalyst, the Family Independence Initiative, and MentorNet. And most recently, I joined the Board of Directors of People's Grocery, a leading community-based food justice organization in Oakland, California.

My proudest achievements to date were as Executive Director of both Monument Community Partnership and Monument Futures in Concord, California. These organizations succeeded in doing what few believed possible: redefining a city to include some of its most marginalized residents – day laborers and undocumented immigrants – as respected peers, community leaders, benefactors and visionaries in their own right.

I created Vested Interests as a vehicle to help other communities and social equity practitioners weave social network-building models into their current practices and push experiments that create social capital into new territory. If we do this on an ambitious enough scale, we can make substantial strides in creating social equity and reducing the wealth gap--not just within our lifetimes, but within the next three to five years.

If you are interested in applying The Opportunity Makers or other Vested Interests models in your community or social equity initiative, or simply want to learn more about the Vested Interests approach, please visit our web site at www.vestedinterest.org or contact me at:

Molly Clark, Founder

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Notes

ⁱ “Residents” is a general term to denote people who have a personal and survival stake in the community, as distinguished from the mission-driven interest of government officials and service providers. It can include not only the people who live there, but also local business owners, who have a commercial and personal stake in a community where their businesses can thrive and grow. For that matter, some individuals could be motivated by all three interests (personal, commercial and mission-driven) in community development.

ⁱⁱ In MCP, we used the Neighborhood Action Team model as our foundational resident engagement, based on the Support Action Team model created by TEAMS: Transformation through Education and Mutual Support.

ⁱⁱⁱ The mission and structure of Monument Community Partnership and its sister economic development organization, Monument Futures, are two examples of such incubators.

^{iv} The ideal organization to play this role is a robust, institutionalized cross-sector community collaborative, such as MCP. However, this model was also tested in Monument Futures, a community-driven economic development center, demonstrating that a direct service organization can also fulfill this function, though perhaps to a more limited degree.

^v <http://www.sei.cmu.edu/reports/01mm001.pdf>

^{vi} www.wordreference.com. And thank you, Marice Ashe.

^{vii} *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 2000

^{viii} The importance of social networks to community-building and social equity is discussed in greater depth in a separate Vested Interests document outlining The Interpersonal Theory of Change.

^{ix} *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, 2009