Creating equal partnerships between communities and the organizations that support their work

Introduction
In 1985, at the first public meeting held by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), Robert Holmes, Jr., a trustee of the Riley Foundation, remembers feeling “very alienated, very much an intruder and thinking that this was not a place that I should be and maybe I should get up and leave.” But as he listened to the angry voices of local residents, Holmes and his colleagues realized that they had made “an incredible mistake” that they wanted to correct. Their mistake was developing a plan to revitalize the community without the involvement of local residents. Fourteen years later, he and the Riley Foundation still have not gotten up to leave.

The Foundation offered to step back from their initial plans and to support the development of an organization that would be more representative of community interests. Local residents and organizations took them up on their offer, and the Foundation eventually provided seed money for a start-up organization that grew to 2,500 members and drew tens of millions of public and private dollars into a neighborhood that had been undermined by disinvestment for decades. In the process, Holmes and the other trustees radically changed their ideas about grantmaking.

By 1997, Riley Foundation grants to DSNI exceeded $1.4 million and grants to other organizations serving the neighborhood exceeded $4.5 million. Public and private sources have invested more than $55 million in community development initiatives. The Annie E. Casey Foundation committed $3 million over seven years through the Rebuilding Communities Initiative.

Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street is about the lessons learned by one community as it struggled to remake itself. At the heart of this story are the relationships that defied the logic and history that had nearly destroyed the community. This guide is a companion to the Holding Ground video and viewer’s guide and is intended to provide further food for thought and discussion about the nature of these relationships. Numerous reports and articles have been written about the complexities and tensions between low-income communities and the institutions that offer support in various forms. We have included several of these in a resource list at the end of the guide. This guide is not intended as another position piece on the subject, but instead provides interview excerpts with key Holding Ground storytellers to illustrate points of view for discussion.

We have included excerpts from interviews taped for the documentary between 1992 and 1995 with Robert Holmes, Jr., Trustee of the Riley Foundation; Che Madyun, former President of DSNI; Peter McDoft, former Director of DSNI; and Lisa Chapnick, former head of Boston’s Public Facilities Department. The interviews with Bob and Che are paired because they present two perspectives of the tumultuous meeting where the seeds of a long-term relationship were planted. The interviews with Peter and Lisa are paired because they discuss the challenges in creating an equal partnership from the perspective of a fledgling neighborhood organization and a powerful city agency.

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Robert Holmes (second from left) at the first DSNI meeting in 1985.
ROBERT HOLMES, JR., a trustee of the Riley Foundation, first visited the Dudley neighborhood in 1984. He went with the director of the Foundation and other trustees to visit La Alianza Hispana, a local nonprofit that had requested a capital improvement grant for their offices. A tour of the area, including the vacant lots, abandoned buildings and illegal garbage dumps, had a dramatic impact on the trustees, and they decided to look into investing substantial resources toward the revitalization of the neighborhood as a whole. They worked with the director of La Alianza and other local nonprofits to form a new “organization of organizations” that would revitalize the community. In early 1985, they called a meeting to announce the effort to the community and to elect board members.

I guess I thought that there would be some sort of a consensus that what we were doing had the community’s approval. What happened in fact was that there was a very negative reaction to our effort. And the people I was with, the other members of the planning committee, I could see there was panic in their faces as well.

We had some speakers who wanted to know where the neighborhood representatives were on the panel and frankly we didn’t have them or we didn’t have many. And our bylaws didn’t provide for resident control or even major resident involvement. We had put a lot of work into preparing for that meeting and when the tide sort of turned against us, I suppose we had two choices. One would be to leave and the other would be to try and regroup and try to involve the residents.

When I came to that meeting that first night, I had never really been to a community meeting before. I didn’t know what to expect. I knew that displacement was an issue for the city and being a newly single parent I was concerned about “Am I gonna be displaced? Am I gonna be homeless?” So I thought that I better go to see what this was about.

I was hearing them talk about community involvement and I looked up like, “I don’t know these people. Who are these people?” I mean, foundations and nonprofits — I didn’t know what those organizations were all about. What do they really want?” I was very skeptical and many of my neighbors were even more skeptical than I was.

I looked at the paperwork they gave me. I saw they had 3 community representatives, 21 members on the board. I’m like, “What do you mean ‘community representatives’? This is crazy.” So that’s why I continued on next page

CHE MADYUN

CHE MADYUN moved to the Dudley neighborhood in 1976. The apartment where she and her three small children lived was surrounded by buildings that were destroyed by fire or demolition in the late 70s and early 80s. In 1985, she went to the first DSNI meeting out of curiosity and concern. She was hopeful that there might be opportunities for better housing for her family, but she was also worried that this might be the beginning of the kind of gentrification that was pushing people out of other low-income neighborhoods nearby.

A neighborhood initiative will not succeed unless it is truly under the control and direction of the residents. Control in the hands of agency leaders and others who live outside the community is a fatal flaw. The difficult task is to identify dormant leadership within a disadvantaged community. It is there but it may not be visible. When we first became involved with Dudley, we did not appreciate the need to identify resident leadership. This resulted in a serious misstep. Residents, out of caution, attended the first community meeting primarily to challenge the self-appointed agency leaders. Resident leadership did emerge from that confrontation, but there are better ways to accomplish this objective.

See Discussion Questions 1 and 2

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PETER MEDOFF was hired as DSNI’s first Executive Director in 1986. He was a Boston native and had a masters degree in urban planning, but his background as a community organizer in New York City and Hartford had the strongest influence on his work with DSNI.

Without an organized community you have forces that are very powerful — market forces, real estate forces, government interests or whatever they happen to be — that end up controlling what goes on in your community. Organizing is the key to maintaining a level of control over what happens in your community.

A lot of traditional organizing has been about stopping things from happening. So one of the most confrontational things was when we had the demonstration to stop the trash transfer stations and tried to get them closed and we stopped the trucks and had a big demonstration down there. At that kind of an event is not particularly unusual in the organizing world. People do that all the time. But I think what gave us some added clout was the idea that we always talked about those kind of efforts being tied to a much larger vision of what the community could be and will be some day. I think when (Mayor Flynn) came along and all of a sudden shows up at a meeting in which there’s a couple of hundred people at the St. Patrick’s church… talking about dumping and so forth, I think to some extent he saw it as an opportunity to jump on board. As an organized, multi-racial, multi-ethnic organization that basically could speak as one voice for this entire community that had been voiceless up until that point, I think that is a very powerful thing for any city administration, for any government agency.

I recently came up with the phrase “premature partnership.” And what I mean by that is lots of people these days in organizations and agencies talk about wanting to build partnerships with communities and you know the business community and the city and the neighborhood all come together and form this partnership and it isn’t that wonderful. In my mind, the reality is that if you just sit down with everybody coming to the table from the beginning, you don’t have

LISA CHAPNICK first encountered DSNI when she was the director of the Boston Public Facilities Department (the city agency responsible for most neighborhood development projects). DSNI representatives met with her in 1986 to lobby for their support of eminent domain authority over 15 acres of vacant land in the neighborhood.

My memory is that there was a group of people from the community who had come together by themselves for themselves long before I was aware of anything called DSNI and created a dream and a vision and a plan. And they walked into my office as a group and said “Want to be our partner? Would you please give us a lot of money and your land and a lot of power?” Here was a group saying, “Trust us.”

You know, on a personal level, when I heard the DSNI proposal, they were talking about my job. And I remember saying that to them, what they wanted to do was a very, very adequate strategy, on a neighborhood commitment, and here were neighborhoods saying, “We want to own and control our destiny.”

And I think when the community has done those two things, then I think it can come to the table and it can act as equal partners. But before that, the partnership isn’t equal and I think it just ends up being a bogus partnership.

I felt eminently trustworthy and had met new people around a new idea and had kept my word consistently and yet I was getting this level of anger and suspicion and I felt like I was walking on eggshells and at any moment I could hit one and it would be a bomb and I would be a memory.

I said, “I don’t get this.” You know, I’m giving them millions of dollars, I’m giving them my friendship. And I think it was ultimately someone from DSNI who explained to me the history of that community and people in it with the city government. Urban renewal was what people talked about. Which was really urban “removal.” And it really made sense to me that when someone was saying, “Trust us.”...I felt eminently trustworthy and had met new people around a new idea and had kept my word consistently and yet I was getting this level of anger and suspicion and I felt like I was walking on eggshells and at any moment I could hit one and it would be a bomb and I would be a memory.

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I will always be proud of my involvement with Dudley Street Initiative and I will never confuse the fact that it is they that invited me along for a ride and it is still on their invitation that I and the City continue to be involved. And I never thought that I would like that transfer of power because I’ve always been with government. But it’s the right way to do things.

See Discussion Questions 3 and 4
Discussion Questions

1. Imagine an announcement has just been made about a development project in your own neighborhood.
   - What would you want to know about the plan?
   - How would you assess the benefit or harm to your community?
   - What would the planners need to understand about the history and culture of your community?
   - What qualities would they need to have in order for you to accept their expertise as legitimate?
   - What kind of input or control would you want to have over the plan?
   - If you felt that the plan was going in the wrong direction, what would you do?
   - Imagine you are involved in creating an entity that will govern and manage a community change effort in your own neighborhood.
   - Who else should be involved in defining the structure and goals of the entity, and why is their involvement important?
   - What power do those involved in defining the entity have?
   - What could happen if this power is misused?
   - How will you ensure that the structure of the entity reflects the interests, needs, and assets of community residents, partners, funders, others?
   - What conflicts or tensions do you anticipate between the collaborators? How will these be resolved?
   - Are there imbalances that will make some collaborators less powerful than others? How can this be addressed?

2. Imagine you are a funder interested in investing in the revitalization of a low-income community.
   - How do you begin?
   - What obstacles do you anticipate?
   - What are the advantages and drawbacks to including local residents in developing a plan?
   - What would you need to do to assure the community that your agency would be a valuable partner?
   - What qualities would you look for in their plan?
   - What assets might a well-organized community bring to your agency?
   - What assets would your agency be able to bring to the effort?
   - What would you want to know about the plan?
   - If there are no obvious community-wide networks through which you can develop community partnerships, what informal networks of residents might you try to find (i.e., churches, schools, crime watch groups)?
   - At what point would you approach these groups?
   - What steps would you take to establish trust with these groups?

3. Imagine that you are the director of a city agency and representatives of a community organization approach you about supporting their plans.
   - What would you assure them that this group legitimately represents the interests of their community?
   - What qualities would you look for in their plan?
   - What assets might a well-organized community bring to your agency?
   - What assets would your agency be able to bring to the effort?
   - What would the planners need to understand about the history and culture of your community?
   - What conflicts or tensions do you anticipate between the collaborators? How will these be resolved?
   - Are there imbalances that will make some collaborators less powerful than others? How can this be addressed?

4. Imagine that you are a community organization that needs the support of a foundation or government agency.
   - What will your organization hope to gain from the relationship?
   - What will the other partner gain? What might they lose?
   - What areas of disagreement do you anticipate?
   - In which of these areas are you willing to negotiate?
   - Which are non-negotiable?
   - How can you ensure that you are in a powerful negotiating position?
   - What steps could you take to build trust between your organization and the other?

Resource List

CORE ISSUES IN COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES: LESSONS IN NEIGHBORHOOD BUILDING COMMUNITIES FROM THE INSIDE OUT
(Chapter 6, Providing Support for Asset-Based Development: Policies and Guidelines), John Kettmann and John McKnight, ABCD Institute, 1993. Available for $15 from ACTA Publications, 4848 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60640; 800-397-2282

FOUNDATIONS AND COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES: THE CHALLENGES OF PARTNERSHIP, Prudence Brown & Stand Garp, Chapin Hall Center for Children, 1997. Available for $6 from Chapin Hall (see ordering info. above)

SHELTERFORCE Web Site (www.sfhi.org) includes an interactive Comprehensive Community Initiative Forums and back issues of Shelterforce articles on related topics, including: Redefining Community Development, Part I-New Partnerships, Winter 1990; November/December, 1997; Community Building: Hope and Caution, Fall 1992; September/October, 1995; Comprehensive Community Initiative: Lessons in Neighborhood Transformation, Anne Kudinch, NF #85, January/February, 1996. Back issues are available for $5 each from Shelterforce, 459 Main St., Orange, NJ 07050; 973-678-9600


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