NEW EYES ON COMMUNITY

ELEVEN YEARS OF THE PEW PARTNERSHIP FOR CIVIC CHANGE

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The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes. —Marcel Proust

Early in 2003, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change conducted a national survey to discover what Americans believe they can contribute toward improving life in their communities. Forty percent of respondents said that working together with others in their community is the most important thing they can do, followed by volunteering and voting at 27 and 14 percent, respectively. Our experience confirms that this 40 percent of the public, while not yet a majority, is right-on in its perception. The new eyes that America needs are actually its own: looking anew at one another, but also looking forward in the same direction.

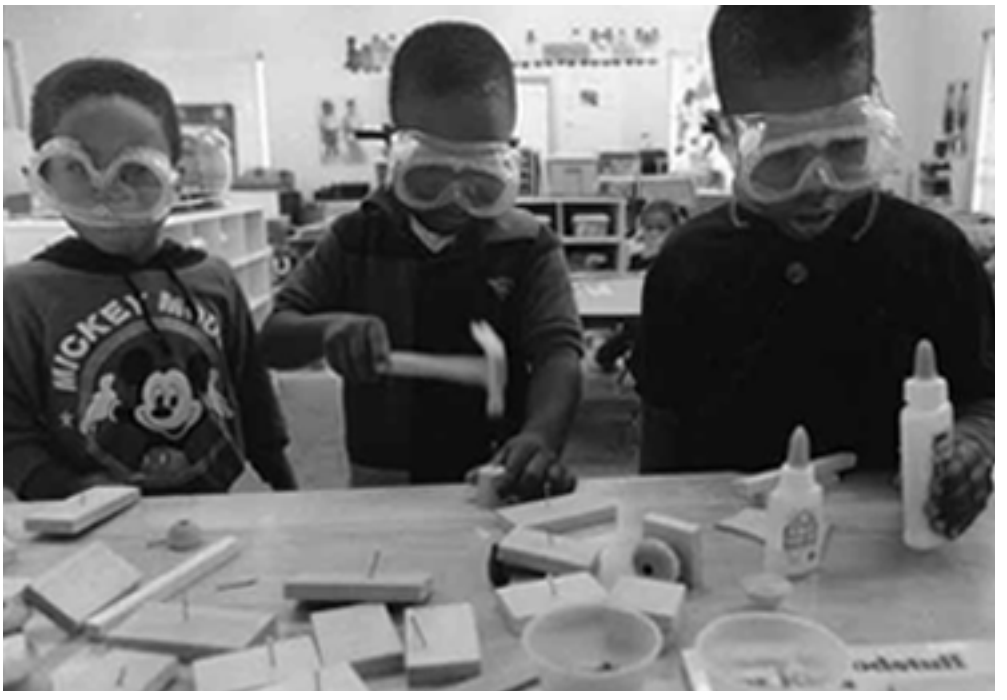
Over the past forty years or so, Americans have tried every conceivable intervention in our search for sustainable ways to improve our communities. We have torn down and we have built up. We have created new theories of change and discarded the old. We have invented program after program, each one touted as the silver bullet, only to see them fall short or wide of the mark. There have certainly been some successes, but in reality not nearly enough. And while we all know that we can and must do better, we are not always sure which actions to take. The Pew Partnership for Civic Change for more than a decade now has been asking questions and seeking answers related to community well-being. We hope that this retrospective, while by no means a detailed account of our work, will inspire others to renew their own efforts while learning from both our successes and our mistakes.

Improving the Odds

Community challenges cannot be addressed by a one-size-fits-all solution. However, there are ways to improve the odds for positive results, and our task over the past decade has been to learn those ways and to share them with others. The Pew Partnership was established by The Pew Charitable Trusts in 1992 and since its founding has served as an intermediary grantmaker, technical assistance provider, and catalyst to almost fifty communities through defined projects, to hundreds more through our expanded leadership work, and to literally thousands through our extensive dissemination network. Collectively and individually, these partnerships and associations have given us new eyes on old problems, in more than just a figurative sense.

We have completed four major initiatives in these eleven years of work. The original Civic Change Project worked with fourteen small cities on their toughest issues. It was followed by the Pew Civic Entrepreneur Initiative (PCEI), which selected ten midsized cities to test new strategies for leadership development. The Wanted: Solutions for America project matched nineteen community programs with academic researchers to test and disseminate solutions that really work. Finally, LeadershipPlenty is an ongoing project that works with hundreds of communities and organizations to provide access to civic leadership training for every American. While these are all stand-alone projects, each one has built on the knowledge of its predecessors, and the summaries that follow are ordered according to the succession of ideas rather than strictly chronologically. The Pew Partnership is part lighthouse, part laboratory, and part library—seeking out, testing, and illuminating ways that communities can ensure a better future for their citizens.

Eleven years notwithstanding, it seems we are just beginning to understand the vehicles for community success. As an organization we have had tangible results. We selected our partners well, and they have created substantive change on a wide range of issues. Over the same period of time, however, the learning curve has continued to grow ever steeper. What seemed like a quick fix or an easy answer in 1992 turned out to be only a small step on the path to change on critical community challenges. The problems we addressed in the first fourteen civic change communities haven't gone away, they've just taken on new forms. We learned quickly that solutions take time and patience, not three-year grant cycles, and that community investing done well provides the catalyst for change; it is not the change itself. In other words, projects don't change



communities—people do. Change, as we have come to understand it, is driven by three factors: individual commitment, community capacity, and the collective will. Seeing through the eyes of our hundreds of community partners, we have successfully found effective ways to encourage, promote, and sustain communities' abilities to increase all three.

Laboratories for Change

The focus of our early work was on small cities. Research has shown that cities with populations ranging from 50,000 to 150,000 possess many of the same kinds of problems as large urban areas, but their more manageable size gives them an advantage when developing solutions. These "laboratories for change" set a standard for partnership that has provided the template for our work ever since. Our early partners in the Civic Change Project—which included twenty-two counties in western North Carolina; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Fargo, North Dakota—were working on some of the most demanding of issues: rural economic development, affordable housing, and cultural diversity. But they were not working alone. In each community, diverse sectors of the

community came together to face an immediate need while engineering long-term solutions addressing the root of the problem. For us, that diversity of viewpoints was the key to their selection and the key to their eventual success. One organization never took on the whole community's issues; the whole community took on its own issues. As these communities learned to work together, we learned the importance of collaboration.

In the mountains of western North Carolina we learned that values still matter in a community and that cookie-cutter approaches to economic development don't work. Our partner there, HandMade in America, continues to work with citizens and organizations to craft a sustainable development strategy around the region's long-time crafts heritage. In Santa Fe, one of the most expensive housing markets in the nation, we worked with local government and nonprofits to find a housing strategy that would place and keep families in affordable homes and connect them to the community. Home ownership, we learned, is as much a community issue as it is a personal one. It leads to the creation of personal assets that in turn allow citizens to start new businesses, go to college, and fully participate in civic life. Our work in Fargo to establish a regionwide cultural diversity initiative illustrated that even in places that have small numbers of minority citizens, basic services and entry points must be put in place—not just to assimilate, but to *welcome* new Americans.

We learned from all fourteen of our partners that positive change in a community comes from many different corners. Sometimes it requires an outside stimulus, but more often than not we found that what a community needs is an attitude shift: to take hold of its future and believe that average citizens, community organizations, schools, and others can actually change something. Obviously some of these partners were more successful than others. However, all fourteen saw the tangible results of diverse groups of individuals and organizations working together for common purposes. As one partner in Rapid City, South Dakota, said, "You can accomplish a lot of your own goals by working with and supporting and pursuing the goals of others." Finally, there were two characteristics present in the most successful cases that seemed to make all the difference: strong leadership at all levels and a viable community-convening organization. This observation led us to the next level of our work: the Pew Civic Entrepreneur Initiative.

Leaders Still Matter

The realization that community leadership and organizational capacity are keys to success on any community issue forced us to think about the kind of leadership that might be missing in less successful communities. Our instinct, based on our earlier work, was that every community has an abundance of citizens who do not call themselves leaders but whose talents are critical to the long-term success of the community. We got a big hint in that direction when a "recognized" leader in one community told us that *there were no leaders* in a particular fifty-block low- to moderate-income neighborhood where we wanted to

invest. We didn't believe it. Of course there were leaders there; they just were not recognized as leaders by the larger community. Our challenge and our mission became, and still is, to change the leadership landscape by engaging these untapped citizens and equipping them to work effectively with others on behalf of their communities.

The Pew Civic Entrepreneur Initiative, or PCEI, thus emerged. The project included ten midsized cities in which a variety of community organizations—a community foundation, a volunteer center, a humanities council, and a United Way, to name just a few—were asked to recruit a class of twenty participants who were recognized as potential leaders in their own communities but were not the usual suspects; that is, they were not the traditional leaders who show up at every meeting where decisions are to be made. These classes of twenty "civic entrepreneurs" then worked together on community projects of their own choosing and, in the first two years of the project, were brought together with participants from the other cities at a Pew Partnership–sponsored national conference, where they received skills training and shared their successes and failures with their colleagues. This selection process was repeated three times in three years. Naturally, the groups of new leaders wrestled with the same inner conflicts, power struggles, and volatile group dynamics that any group of twenty strangers encounters when working together for the first time. In the controlled context of PCEI, with trained facilitators there to get the group back on track, these issues were not debilitating. What was worrisome to the Pew Partnership, however, was the idea that in thousands of other communities across the country, these predictable and resolvable conflicts might stymie otherwise well-intentioned efforts to create civic change.

On completing the PCEI training, one civic entrepreneur from Jersey City, New Jersey, observed, "I have learned to hear, to build consensus, and to be proactive on the things that matter most." The PCEI groups continue to work together in different ways across the ten cities. Alumni have been elected to school boards, city councils, and state legislatures, and many more hold formal and informal positions in their communities, all of them helping to create a more positive scenario for change.

We learned from all ten PCEI cities that every community group—be it the city council, a nonprofit board, or the parent-teacher organization—must have certain baseline skills in order to move forward. And we learned that conflict management skills are not all that is needed. A whole toolkit full of skills like

asset-building, strategic partnership development, meeting management, public relations, and evaluation capacity is necessary but had not been adequately addressed in the PCEI program and most others like it.

LeadershipPlenty

By looking through the six hundred pairs of new eyes that PCEI had provided us (10 cities × 20 participants × 3 years), we came to the realization that America and Americans have an impoverished notion of leadership. Our experience had shown us that there are plenty of leaders in every community. Everybody has the potential to lead if given the skills, motivation, and context in which to do so. And while we at the Pew Partnership had done a good job of reaching out to communities and providing needed assistance, we had come up short in identifying the skills that citizens—all citizens—must possess in order to bring

about effective civic change. That prompted us to join with our community partners in developing a new program called LeadershipPlenty, which incorporated the lessons learned from PCEI.

Now in its second year, LeadershipPlenty is a nine-module training program used by diverse groups around the country to make civic leadership training accessible and affordable to every American. Working with national, state, regional, and local partners like the League of Women Voters of the United States, the Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation, and Pocatello Neighborhood Housing Services, we have seen a steady demand for a more accessible leadership program and a recognition that we must find ways in every community to prepare more people to create positive change. "We know that there are people out there who are willing to address critical issues," said one participant. "We must find a way to identify a corps of community leaders and train them with the skills to tackle these difficult problems." We believe that this may be one of the greatest domestic challenges of this century.

Solutions Are Possible (and Happening)

In 1998 we launched another ambitious project called Wanted: Solutions for America. We searched the country for the kinds of interventions that really work. The catch was that we were not going to fund them in the traditional way but rather provide each "solution" with research and technical assistance to allow them to document their own results. One person commented on hearing about the project, "You won't have any organization apply for that program!" Fortunately, she was wrong. More than a hundred local organizations, including nonprofits and local governments, said they had a solution to share and wanted the resources to prove that what they were doing really worked. An advisory board selected nineteen sites as Solutions communities, and we organized the research plan. We struggled with the research design. The project did not lend itself to traditional research that included control groups and massive amounts of data collection. Nor did it seem appropriate for a thorough case study approach. Necessity became the mother of invention, and we developed an innovative "hub-and-spoke" research model that paired each site with a researcher of its own choosing from a local college or university, then selected a lead research team to coordinate the entire effort and report back to us.

The two-year project tested whether certain kinds of interventions actually work and whether or not issues really do have documentable solutions. In both

cases, the answer was yes. Beyond Shelter, an innovative housing program in Los Angeles, California, has developed a strong organizational base for moving homeless families into permanent housing and keeping them there. The Vermont Development Credit Union has built a lean but effective financial infrastructure to provide low-income citizens with access to capital while maintaining an exceptionally low default rate. Jacksonville Community Council Inc., in Jacksonville, Florida, has been engaging citizens in finding solutions to community problems for more than a quarter of a century. Organizations like these are turning good community ideas into sustainable solutions.

Here again we learned just how important collaborative leadership is in the shaping of community consensus around an issue. Sometimes that leadership comes from ordinary citizens, like in St. Louis, Missouri, where individuals are trying to bridge the racial divide that creates unnecessary barriers to relationships and, ultimately, to change. Or the dentists, hygienists, and school principals in Arlington, Texas, who have organized themselves through Dental Health for Arlington to make dental care available to low-income children through the schools. Or the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative that has developed relationships with key champions in the community to make sure not only that their mentoring program has mentors, but also that the program has the resources it needs to meet the challenges of next week and next year.

Finally, we learned from Solutions for America that information matters. Of those nineteen communities, the ones that made the best case to the larger community about the issue they were addressing invariably enjoyed greater success. The Taller San Jose program in Santa Ana, California, has kept the community involved and informed about its work to provide pathways to success through job training for Latino young people. The local media, local government, and key players in the educational system all know and understand the program, its goals, and its dreams. Neighborhood Transportation Service in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has built a strong partnership with local government and also with the citizens who need a reliable, inexpensive way to get to work, to the doctor, or to school. And there are the parents in rural Minnesota who, in response to a growing substance abuse problem, bonded together as volunteers to create more positive environments for their children. Getting the word out matters, and in some cases it makes all the difference. Our emphasis on dissemination has been driven by two key motivations: getting new information about what works out to practitioners and citizens, and collecting and synthesizing the wealth of information that already exists.

Eleven Years and Still Learning

Perhaps the most important thing we can say after eleven years of work is that restoring and reviving communities is not for the fainthearted or the impatient. If America can mobilize the energy and know-how needed to send a man to the moon, create the World Wide Web, and put a wireless phone in almost every hand, what will it take to put our collective wisdom, energies, and resources together for sustainable change at the community level? We know without a doubt that it will take time, patience, and practical research, but most of all common sense. Communities do not spring to life overnight or as a result of one single intervention. They are organic and sometimes fickle: they need time and the proper conditions to grow and thrive.

Communities must also have their eyes focused on the right things. Based on more than a decade of experience, we suggest that a community can prosper only if it is thinking simultaneously and over the long term about five separate but interrelated issues: the well-being of children and families; the availability of living-wage jobs; the importance of safe and affordable places to live; access to capital of all types (financial, social, and human); and the presence of strong networks of leaders in every part of the community.

In spite of the occasionally blurred vision that accompanies any long period of focused attention, our eleven-year search for the formula to community success has not made us jaded or discouraged. Quite the contrary: this journey of discovery has been one of hope and possibility. Americans, we believe, have the will, the capacity, and the resolve to create different futures for ourselves. Citizens and community leaders who learn to think critically but optimistically about challenges and opportunities may well find that they have already made the discovery that Proust suggested: they have given themselves new eyes with which to see, and to improve, their own communities.

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