



A neighborhood coming together

Want some weed?" It's not a question one is asked every day, but it was a logical question to ask me. I was a white guy walking into the "Green Store," a store known as a "million dollar spot" because millions of dollars of drugs had been sold there, and most white people walking into the store were there to buy drugs. Little did the drug dealer know that I was a Baylor School of Social Work intern at Waco Community Development and literally had no idea what I was doing.

It all seemed so simple when I formed my community organizing strategy. I would organize a residents' council in Parkside, a 200-unit, low-income, drug-infested apartment complex. It is located in a north Waco neighborhood of roughly 6,000 people (60% African-American, 33% Hispanic, and 7% White) with a median household income of \$16,189). It was one of early Waco's finest neighborhoods, but like many older neighborhoods, the ravages of time began to take a toll. Houses were not maintained and began to decay. Eventually, many of these homes burned or were torn down leaving more than 200 empty lots in the neighborhood and a 16% reduction of housing units from 1990 to 2000. Like the neighborhood, Parkside was once a fine place to live. Its first residents moved there, in the 1970's, with a sense of pride, but by 2007, it was the center of north Waco's drug traffic. In fact many of the young boys living there look up to the drug dealers and aspire to be one when they become older. Parkside has the well-deserved street reputation as the toughest of all of Waco's low-income apartment complexes.

In large part, Parkside's law-abiding residents have ceded community areas to drug dealers, and the fact that the Green Store is one block away, only exasperates internal problems. After years of watching outsiders try to mandate changes in Parkside, Waco Community Development de-

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The Rev. Maurice Walker (right) of Living Witness Missionary Church and a fifth-grade teacher at West Avenue Elementary, visits with a neighborhood friend at the Back to School Bash.

cided to organize the residents so that solutions would come from the residents themselves.

When I started in January 2007, I felt confident that within a few, short months I would form great relationships, establish a residents' council, and Parkside would be a safe place for families. Although I knew relationships would take time to form, I failed to realize the internal difficulties I would have as a white male working in a predominantly African-American context.

These difficulties very quickly emerged. I spent all of January and the first part of February hiding in my office. Although I did not realize it at the time, I was scared of Parkside, specifically its culture. I was scared of the color difference. I was scared of being mugged. I was scared of being rejected. I was just plain scared. Instead of building relationships with Parkside residents, I read books about African-American culture, met with non-profit leaders about Parkside, and wrote grants to fund the work I was doing at Parkside. In short, I did everything except organize the residents because I was scared. It quickly became apparent that my seclusion was not going to change anything in the neighborhood.

My fear came to a head on February 7, 2007, when Gaynor Yancey, my internship supervisor, helped me admit that I was scared. After discussing my fear, she asked me what I was going to do about it, and I told her that I was going to walk through Parkside. That afternoon I walked through Parkside, and on that day, I lost my fear. I realized that the residents were people just like me. On that Independence Day of sorts, I gained the freedom to begin organizing in Parkside. In retrospect, I was suffering from culture shock. As a white male from a rural middle-class background, I did not know how to enter an African-American urban low-income community. Yet, even after I lost my fear, I struggled to develop relationships.

LEARNNG COMMUNITY CULTURE

I thought that I would be able to walk through Parkside, strike up conversations, build relationships, and then organize the residents. Through much trial and error, I discovered that meandering through Parkside was not a culturally acceptable way to enter the community. Instead of building relationships, I built misconceptions. Some thought I was buying drugs. For example, this misconception once led to the police stopping and searching me for drugs. Drug dealers thought I was an undercover policeman, leading to a couple of verbal altercations, and at least one resident thought I was a pedophile. After a month of fruitless meandering, I discovered two culturally acceptable ways for a white person to enter the Parkside community.

The first was through King's Club. For 15 to 20 years, Mission Waco, a local non-profit organization, has sent Baylor students to Parkside on Saturday mornings for King's Club, a time of games, songs, and Bible stories. Parkside residents expect and look forward to seeing the Baylor students. I began volunteering with King's Club, giving me the opportunity to meet children and their parents. I now had a reason to be at Parkside every Saturday morning. Two, I began leading a behavior modification group at Brook Avenue

Elementary, one of two neighborhood schools that Parkside students attend. Five of the six boys lived in Parkside, and after establishing relationships with the boys at school, I began to visit them at their apartments and meet their families. The children I met through King's Club and the school gave me the cover and credibility I needed to meet families without raising the suspicion of the drug dealers.

SUCCESS AND STARTING OVER

After four months of building relationships and talking to people about a residents' council, three women came together on May 25, 2007 for

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the first Parkside Residents' Council meeting in years. Over the next four months the council met eight times, and two more residents became active members. They worked with the police to shut down a "trap house" operating on Parkside property. A trap house is a vacant house or apartment used to sell drugs. They helped organize a school supply give-a-way, and advocated for and obtained better lighting. Although the council experienced some initial success, problems began to minimize its effectiveness.

Foremost of these problems was fear of retaliation. Fear was the primary reason that law-abiding citizens did not participate in the council. The members lived in continuous worry that drug dealers would retaliate against them or their families. This fear was only intensified when a group of about 15 drug dealers and their cohorts verbally assaulted one of the members. On top of this, there were serious conflicts between the council and management that prevented any type of collaborative work. The manager felt threatened by the council, and the council felt like the manager treated them and the other residents with disrespect.

Plus, change was painstakingly slow, and the members struggled to see the effectiveness of their work, especially when the summer of 2007 was extremely violent, highlighted by series of drive-by shootings. Even with these issues, the council was functioning, but then everything began to fall apart.

In September, one of the core members moved from Parkside because she did not want her family to be around the violence. She was the glue that held the council together, and after she left there was only one more meeting. Three more meetings were scheduled, but no one attended. In fact, the most vocal of the residents suddenly moved before a meeting with management and the owners to discuss issues that she had with Parkside. With these two key members gone, the Residents' Council was dead.

I spent September, October and November trying to drum up support for the Residents' Council, but found nary a soul willing to join. After two and a half months of treading water, my executive director asked me to evaluate the progress of organizing in Parkside. Although it was painful to admit, it became increasingly obvious that a Residents' Council was not feasible for three reasons:

- One, many of the residents were connected with drug trafficking. Some were users, and others had friends and/or relatives using or selling. These residents were unable and unwilling to come together against the drug dealers.
- Two, residents who were unconnected were fearful of retaliation from the drug dealers.
- Three, residents did not feel that Parkside was worth their time and energy. They viewed

it as a place that had always been bad and had no chance of becoming better. They just wanted to leave as soon as possible. With this knowledge we went back to the drawing board and began crafting a community organizing strategic plan.

ENGAGING, ENRICHING PARENTS

As I began to craft the new plan, I took stock of what a year of community organizing had accomplished. Although the Residents' Council fizzled, my work had given me the opportunity to build solid relationships with several residents and key neighborhood leaders, including the Brook Oaks Neighborhood Association, both neighborhood schools (Brook Avenue Elementary and West Avenue Elementary), community organizations, and some of the local pastors. I also began to realize that the people who were unable to join the Residents' Council would jump at the opportunity to make the schools better. I felt confident that this would include people connected to drug trafficking because everyone cares about their kids. Out of this time of reflection came the Parental Engagement Project, or PEP.

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The PEP began in January 2008, with a focus on strengthening the relationships between schools, parents and community. This approach to community organizing showed immediate results.

For example, Brook Avenue Elementary began actively inviting parents to participate in Learning Walks. Once a month parents visit each classroom during times of instruction and provide feedback on what they like and do not like. Parents who felt marginalized by the school are now given an opportunity to voice their opinion, and teachers who once feared parents now realize that the parents just want a quality educa-

parents to engage them in the change process. The Learning Walks and this group of Spanish-speaking parents were a significant reason that Brook Avenue Elementary received an “Academically Acceptable” rating from the state of Texas for the 2007-2008 school year.

West Avenue Elementary recognized that parents were not receiving enough positive comments about their children and took the initiative to correct this. The school made a list of the more troublesome kids and their positive attributes. Then they recruited one of the student’s grandmas to call the parents of these students and share the ever-so-important positive

comments. The parents loved hearing the good news about their children and began feeling better about the school. In part, because of these phone calls, more parents have participated in PTA meetings than ever before. As a result of the school’s “Recognized” rating, the second highest in Texas, for the 2007-2008 school



Members of “God’s Precious Angels,” a dance group from Living Witness Church, provide entertainment at the neighborhood Back to School Bash.

tion for their children. The Learning Walks have allowed a great diversity of parents to participate in their child’s education, including Black, White, Hispanic, unemployed, employed, and drug users. These Learning Walks changed the culture of parent/teacher relationships from one of negativity to one of partners in education.

A group of Spanish-speaking parents once felt cut off from the school but have been meeting regularly. To date, they have improved the safety around the school and worked with the principal to have a bilingual computer class for parents and their children. For their latest project, they are planning a parent meeting that will reach out to Hispanic and African-American

year and the school’s parental outreach, Andreia Foster, the school’s principal was named Principal of the Year for the Waco Independent School District.

UNITY IN DREAMS

Another part of the PEP was to rally the community around the two schools. In May 2008, pastors from five neighborhood churches came together to begin dreaming about what they could do jointly.

Out of this time of dreaming came the Back to School Bash. Seven different neighborhood churches, both neighborhood schools, and three neighborhood organizations came

together for this event. The Back to School Bash was an outstanding success. In fact, Melvin Carter, a long-time community leader, stated that the bash was one of the best things to ever happen to the neighborhood. This was not the first time that an event like this has taken place in the neighborhood, but it was the first time that so many different parts of the community participated and acted on one accord. This event demonstrated what the community can do.

The Rev. Maurice Walker, pastor of Living Witness Missionary Church and a fifth-grade teacher at West Avenue Elementary School, said, “The people were caught up in the amazement of what this community could be.” This event helped the community see that it was “one”. It showed this community that if we continue to come together then, as “one” we can overcome the obstacles that prevent this community from thriving and make it become even more alive.

HOPE WINS OUT

Community organizing in North Waco has been a slow process, but there is definite progress. In the beginning, my network of relationships was extremely limited. Now, that network includes a city councilman, drug dealers, church



Darrell Abercrombie, program administrator at Waco Community Development and a long-time resident of the neighborhood, takes on grill duty.

pastors, “crack-heads,” and regular people who want to see their community transformed.

I still struggle to understand the culture, but I take great pride that one Parkside resident told me, “I think your soul is Black. You’re white on the outside, but Black everywhere else.”

The drug dealers still control Parkside, but they no longer ask me if I want to buy weed. Nor do they sell drugs at the Green Store because of police pressure on the storeowner. There is an exciting sense of hope that was but a dream two years ago, a hope that this community will become better. The neighborhood is beginning to come together, and I envision the day when this loose network forms into a tight-knit coalition that stands shoulder-to-shoulder against the ills of this neighborhood and champions the cures at every turn.

In your neighborhood

Is your church wanting to do some organizing? Models of transformative organizing ask how we seek to partner with God’s Spirit in working for change in our communities and at the same time, how we seek to be changed by God as we engage our communities. Here are some questions to consider as you organize in your community:

- What specifically is the identified community and what are its boundaries?
- What are some key assets your church can identify in the community?

- With what individuals in the community do your church members already have relationships?
- With what community organizations do you already have relationships?
- What are some ways you can use your church’s gifts and strengths to serve the needs of your community?
- What are some areas where you hope to learn more from your community members?