

Title: Building Relationships: The Foundation of Community Renewal

Authors: Linda Carleton and Joanne Roberts (Hardin-Simmons University)

Abstract:

“Society,” according to the British historian Arnold Toynbee, “is a dynamic system of human relationships.” The healthy phase of a community’s life cycle is only possible when there is an intentional and sustainable system for growing and nurturing the relational foundation of a community. Historically, communities have mistakenly assumed that *mutually enhancing relationships* are self-generating and self-sustaining and thus fail to nurture and grow them.

The mission of Hardin-Simmons University is to be a community dedicated to providing excellence in education enlightened by Christian Faith and Values. Among the initiatives set forth by Dr. Craig Turner, University President, is the implementation of programs geared towards reaching out to the local community and surrounding neighborhoods, especially the North Park Neighborhood, which is adjacent to the campus. (This neighborhood has declined over the last thirty years, and there are many rundown homes, neglected yards, and vacant lots, as well as an increasing crime rate.) After two years of collaboration with the Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal Project (SBCR) with the goal of implementing a similar project in Abilene under the umbrella of Hardin-Simmons University, the HSU Neighborhood Enhancement Center (NEC) was established in March of 2004. Hardin-Simmons University, through its Neighborhood Enhancement Center, has been recognized by SBCR as the first official replication of its simple and practical method to stop the collapse of interpersonal relationships and to begin rebuilding a sense of community.

The purpose of the Neighborhood Enhancement Center is to make a positive impact in depressed neighborhoods. The program is also designed to afford students the opportunity to be involved in community renewal projects as well as to educate them in practical ways to implement the commandment “love your neighbor as yourself.” Goals of the NEC include the following:

- Improve the overall appearance of the neighborhoods.
- Build relationships with residents of the community.
- Offer students the opportunity to be aware of social problems and experience the satisfaction of becoming a part of the solution.
- Provide a bridge between the needs of the neighborhood and the resources available at HSU and in Abilene.
- Build a model of community renewal to train others.
- Empower the neighborhood to help themselves and each other.

Through the efforts of Hardin-Simmons University’s faculty, staff, students, and community volunteers, the Neighborhood Enhancement Center has intentionally worked with residents of the North Park Neighborhood to build relationships and to restore the neighborhood. Volunteers have repaired and painted several homes in the neighborhood, they have worked on Habitat for Humanity homes, and they have demolished condemned buildings on two different properties. HSU students have assisted

elderly and disabled residents with yard maintenance and household chores. During the last four New Student Orientations at HSU, over 200 tons of trash has been collected during neighborhood clean-up days. Several departments at HSU have also been actively involved with residents of the North Park Neighborhood. The HSU theatre department provides a free, annual dinner-theatre for the neighborhood, the physical therapy department provides free health screenings at neighborhood health fairs, the sociology department has surveyed the residents to assess their concerns and needs and also sponsors an annual neighborhood block party, and students in the education department administer reading tests and provide an after-school reading program for some of the neighborhood children.

The Neighborhood Enhancement Center also partners with several organizations, businesses, and government agencies within the community. Several church groups have provided funds and worked on Habitat for Humanity homes. The city of Abilene has provided equipment and support personnel for neighborhood cleanups, and they also provided the containers for the recycle center in the neighborhood. Other groups such as United Way, Blue Cross, Blue Shield, and Hendrick Medical Center have supplied resources and services. Plans are currently underway in the North Park Neighborhood for a housing development comprised of low to moderate income houses that will be anchored by a new NEC facility.

HSU's ultimate goal is not only to develop relationships through renewal activities, but to provide a model to inspire and train individuals, institutions, schools, churches and other organizations to invest in the neighborhoods in which they live. We would like to share this model and some of our results with those attending the 2nd Annual Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture.