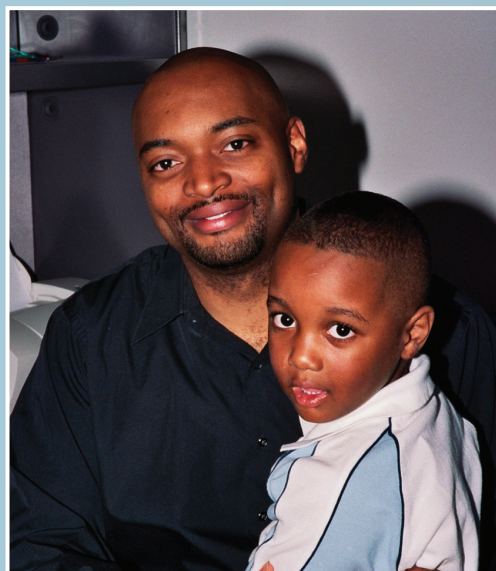


# “I had this sense of people just pouring into me.”

## How one man's journey from a Louisville housing project to the governor's office shows the power of networks

“True enough, opportunities are important. They are the door, but relationships are the key to unlocking the door.”

—Delquan Dorsey



Delquan Dorsey with his mother in front of their home and when he received a college scholarship, and with his son DJ.

In Louisville, the *Making Connections* initiative has invested heavily in creating a broad-based network that pulls together residents of its target neighborhoods, connecting them with each other and with opportunities that can help them in concrete ways—a job, a scholarship, a ride to work.

The life story of one of the people who helped create this ambitious network and ground it in the realities of his community—Delquan Dorsey—demonstrate the power of networks as well as the importance of supportive communities and strong families in challenging neighborhoods.

**By Laura Crawford**

“When Delquan left for Frankfort, I sat in my office in despair. I could count on Delquan to have a story and be able to connect the dots in a way that I could remember why we were doing this.”

—Jennie Jean Davidson



Delquan Dorsey's son DJ with Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear.

For months, it was a story that buzzed through church basements, meeting rooms, porches and sidewalks in the *Making Connections* Network in Louisville. Delquan Dorsey, born and raised in the Shepard's Square Housing Projects, lead organizer for the *Making Connections* Network in Louisville, had been appointed Director of the Governor's Office of Minority Empowerment.

People often repeated it out loudly and slowly just to hear the sound of the words again: Director-of-the-Governor's-Office-of-Minority-Empowerment. Friends and colleagues from all sectors joyfully toasted and celebrated the success of one of their own, holding back tears and swallowing lumps in their throats as they wished him well.

To the people in the community centers and youth agencies who dedicated their lives to working with young people day in and day

out—taking them on field trips, helping with homework, organizing summer programs—Delquan's appointment was a reminder of just how meaningful their efforts are. Delquan is a self-proclaimed product of great community services, the same services they continue to offer young people today. Though they celebrate the smaller successes constantly and there are many, people experienced this one as something really special.

Within the smaller *Making Connections* site team, the news was bittersweet. Delquan had come on board as the lead organizer in 2004 and was a much beloved team member, known for his disarmingly easy-going demeanor, saint-like levels of insight and patience, and his unfailing ability to see the “big picture.” Jane Walsh, *Making Connections*' Family Economic Success coach, always referred to him as “My Mayor.”

He along with several other core site team members were the creators of the *Making Connections* Network in Louisville, spending hundreds of hours in deep thought and planning for its launch, making certain it had a solid foundation based on sound social network theory. His fingerprints were everywhere. Now he was leaving.

Jennie Jean Davidson, Deputy Director of the Network, remembers, “When Delquan left for Frankfort, I sat in my office in despair because I thought Delquan is where I go when I start to lose faith or over-worry. I could count on Delquan to have a story and be able to connect the dots in a way that I could remember why we were doing this.”

“Networking is the activity of gaining relationships. Even with education and economic opportunities—nine times out of 10, it’s based on who you know. Networking should be part of core curriculum. High school students in particular should know how to network.”

—Delquan Dorsey

At the same time, they were thrilled for him and his family. Even more importantly, they recognized that their Network had become just that much stronger. They had a good friend in the Governor’s office now—someone who understands deeply the issues facing low-income communities in Louisville and the power of simple, meaningful human connections in addressing those issues.

As Delquan says, “True enough, the opportunities are important. They are the door, but the relationships are the key to unlocking the door. Nine times out of 10 you took a risk because someone you knew either had that experience or exposed you to it. “

**A**fter years of disinvestment and systemic isolation, many of the residents in the *Making Connections* neighborhoods have not had the benefit of those door-opening relationships. The *Making Connections* Network is designed to help people “make friends on purpose.” The network includes other institutional, organizational and professional networks to broaden the scope of those potential friends and connections.

At Network Nights, CEOs of foundations and executive directors of organizations sit knee to knee with neighborhood residents, all of them simply “Network Members.” Everyone is seen as having something to offer, even as they may come with fairly urgent individual needs—a job, housing, childcare.

At Network Nights, relationships are forged around the simple elements of a shared

humanity—breaking bread, casual conversation, spontaneous laughter. Once the ground for connecting is fertilized, the rest happens organically—offers are made, information is shared, appointments set up.

The Network is based on several other community-based networks, most notably Lupe in Texas and Lawrence Community Works in Massachusetts. Delquan had visited both these places on peer-learning exchanges and was one of the first site team members to begin beating the Network drum. He knew how instrumental social networks had been in his own life.

## Delquan’s Journey...

An only child, Delquan was raised by his mother and grandparents, all of whom were profound influences on him. “The people in my family weren’t the most notable community activists, but my mother and grandmother were always involved in church and doing things.”

At Bates Memorial Baptist Church, where he still attends, Delquan was encouraged to take a visible role. “At the time, it was a small church with a lot of seniors. They put me in the position to welcome visitors and be in front of people. I really wasn’t comfortable with it, but I had a lot of respect for the people who asked me to do that.”

From the time he was a little boy, Delquan had a gift for seeing the good around him—his community’s “assets”—no matter what the circumstances.



“Delquan found adults who believed in him and nurtured him along and that is something that the Network should take to heart—how we support and coach our colleagues moving through the world.”

—Lockett Davidson

“When you grow up in a place like Sheppard’s Square, true enough it’s economically challenged, but it’s such a beautiful experience. It’s such a culture there that you get exposed to. I remember report card day and how you received ridicule among your peer group if you didn’t get good grades.”

“I wasn’t the fastest or I didn’t get the girls. I was really a pretty mediocre guy, but there was something about my faith in God and how Jesus lived that taught me how to treat people. My grandmother had a tremendous personality—everyone was crazy about her and she was this tremendous light. I would see her break up fights and they would stop and apologize to her. When you see stuff like that, it has an impact on you.”

Delquan’s natural inclination is to gravitate towards a person’s gifts and assets instead of their challenges.

“Regardless of where a person is in life, I always see something that I admire and have respect for—whether it’s a janitor or someone working in a restaurant. I have some family members who are not that esteemed in the business world, but I have so much respect for them. I grew up an only child and I always saw things in people that I was interested in or admired.”

**A**s he grew up, Delquan’s genuine interest in others created a loop of caring and connections that began to grow exponentially. He made others feel respected and valued, and they in turn wanted to help

him feel respected and valued and so it went. One connection led to another and another in a geometric expansion of support.

Lockett Davidson, Consultant to the *Making Connections* Network, sees implications in this for the work and direction of the *Making Connections* Network itself: “He found adults who believed in him and nurtured him along and that is something that the Network should take to heart—how we support and coach and are company for our colleagues moving through the world.”

In fact, it was that web of support that prevented Delquan from taking a dangerously wrong turn when he was 14. “I had the opportunity to sell drugs and I got drafted. People don’t realize that these young teens are drafted just like the Army and just like in sports. They are recruited.

“And I remember my recruitment process. It got nipped in the bud. I was hanging out with the niece of one of the big drug dealers at the time. He had me walk some ‘work’ (which is dope) to an alley. So I did that and he gave me money. But by the time I got home, my mother had heard about it. So there was some intervention there.”

After that pivotal juncture, Delquan became increasingly more drawn to the multitude of opportunities available to him through school and community programs. During high school, he was Senior Class Treasurer and Student of the Year for the Louisville Education and Employment Partnership (LEEP), which connects young people to education and employment

“Sometimes fear can be a motivator too. That’s what motivated me to go to class every day  
—an incredible sense of urgency that I’m going to disappoint my family  
and the people who sacrificed for me.”

—Delquan Dorsey

opportunities. He interned at PNC Bank and with General Electric. While with the LEEP program he had a mentor, one of many he would have in his life.

“I was starting to find my place in life,” he explains. “There was a plethora of stuff that I was involved in which was very fortunate for me growing up in Sheppard’s Square and considering I didn’t have the highest GPA. It was slow starting for me, but it clicked my junior year and I realized that people were recognizing me.”

One person who recognized the potential in 16-year-old Delquan was fellow church member, Andre Kimo Stone Guess, now an arts management consultant in New York City. Guess, then a young, passionate, recently married professional in the insurance industry, provided Delquan with an image of what life could hold for him.

“He created a strong template for me,” Delquan says. “Here was a professional male, god-fearing, devoted to his family, involved in his community—and he grew up in the same neighborhood as me.” After school each day Delquan would walk to the Guess’s condominium and the two would listen to jazz and talk endlessly. Guess would often tell Delquan, “Don’t let anybody put you in a box.”

**A**fter high school, Delquan went off to Central State University, a historically black university in Ohio, with the help of scholarships from the Smoketown Heritage Organization and the Louisville Housing Authority. Because of those



From an early age, Delquan’s church asked him to welcome visitors.

scholarships, he was able to meet Darryl Owens, then a County Commissioner, now a state representative in the Kentucky State Legislature. Owens, like Delquan, had grown up in Smoketown and gone to Central State. Delquan considers it one of the “most instrumental relationships” in his life.

At college, Delquan continued to seek out leadership positions. He became the treasurer of the student government and joined another network—the Omega Psi Phi fraternity, which he describes as another pivotal force in his life.

For Delquan, going to college was not simply a prudent thing to do—it felt like a life-or-death situation. “If I didn’t go, I thought I would go to jail,” he says. “Growing up as an African American man, you see so much information that says this will be your outcome. I saw it and the data is there.

“All of these white men in power were practically getting on their knees in front of Senator Powers and this tremendous respect for her. Just being around that legacy and hearing the stories—I had this sense of people just pouring into me.”

—Delquan Dorsey

“Sometimes fear can be a motivator too. Whether it’s good motivation or bad motivation, it’s how you channel it. That’s what motivated me to go to class every day—an incredible sense of urgency that I’m going to disappoint my family and the people who sacrificed for me.”

Immediately after college he got a job at Bank One and then the Water Revenue Department, but as he says, “I was 21 and it was hard for me to fit into that 9–5 template, but I was determined to do so.” Sticking with things when they became difficult because of an innate sense of duty and gratitude was a characteristic Delquan was beginning to demonstrate often.

**D**uring this period, Delquan maintained his relationship with Darryl Owens, still the County Commissioner for most of Western Louisville, and serendipitously a position opened up in his office. Delquan was brought on board as a liaison to community organizations, picking up the task of reading proclamations.

“I was one of the few people in the office who didn’t mind speaking in front of people. If I wanted to stay around and make a contribution, I had to do things that people didn’t want to do. I was in many situations where I was the only African American in the room or I could be at a concert with some old Motown artists and people way above my age group—all of this was great exposure for me at 23 years old.”

Delquan’s real break came when he was introduced to Raoul Cunningham, the president of the Kentucky NAACP. Darryl Owens and Raoul were friends going back to the civil rights era. Delquan was hired to help with voter empowerment. It was the year 2000 and Louisville was facing a controversial merger of city and county government.

“It was the position of the NAACP that this would result in the diffusion of the African American representation within the city’s council districts,” states Delquan. “At the time in the city of Louisville, the population 18 years old and older was 33% African American, and the population 18 and younger was 50% African American and people of color. So if the merger passed, we would become a smaller percentage of the population and so would our representation.

“That situation was key to me in terms of what I’m doing now. Dealing with the re-



“My grandmother had a tremendous personality—everyone was crazy about her and she was this tremendous light.”

“People say, ‘What happened to our young people?’ Well, we’re here. Part of what makes the difference is some people were willing to deal with the cost of putting someone young in a leadership position.”

—Delquan Dorsey

districting, I remember I sat before a Senate hearing. It was Senator Georgia Powers [the first female African American in the Kentucky State Senate], Raoul Cunningham and me! And that was really intentional on their part. And all of these white men in power were practically getting on their knees in front of Senator Powers and this tremendous respect for her. Just being around that legacy and hearing the stories—I had this sense of people just pouring into me.”

Just as the seniors in his church had pushed him to stand up and greet people, Raoul Cunningham and Senator Powers made a deliberate effort to involve Delquan prominently in this process. Their faith, respect and willingness to put their own reputations on the line inspired in him a deep sense of gratitude and desire to succeed.

“People say, ‘What happened to our young people?’ Well, we’re here. Part of what makes the difference is some people were willing to deal with the cost of putting someone young in a leadership position. Raoul really pushed me and said, ‘You can do this.’ It’s one thing for the older generation to say, ‘We need this and we need that,’ without creating the room for people to take leadership.”

After the election cycle, the Kentucky NAACP did not continue to receive its funding and, by 2003, Delquan found himself unemployed with a wife and young baby. “It’s hard being an African American male with an education because sometimes people say you are overqualified, but I would always think, ‘This lint in my pocket isn’t overqualified.’ While Delquan continued to volunteer in the

community, he eventually took a job as an insurance agent just to pay the bills.

About that time, *Making Connections* Louisville was starting to take root in the community. Dana Jackson had come on as Local Site Coordinator and was reshaping the resident engagement work. She desperately needed to find a local lead organizer. As she started working her own networks for referrals, Delquan’s name kept coming up and eventually he was hired.

Jackson recalls, “When we met for the first time, I just knew it was right. With Delquan, you meet him and there’s instant recognition—like somebody you have known before. It was supposed to be one of those quick meetings and we talked for hours.”

From his first *Making Connections* community meeting, Delquan had the sense of being at home—like he had connected with his true calling. “I remember thinking—this is it. This is what I want to do. Being involved in politics, it becomes very discouraging because it was hard for the community to connect the dots in voting on Election Day to their day-to-day life issues and how it impacted them. So I really wanted to work in the community.”

**F**or Delquan, *Making Connections* provided an opportunity to address two issues he thought about deeply—economics and race.

“Of all the issues *Making Connections* faces, the most important is raising income.



“It was so important to me to have those relationships outside my race in terms of my development and my ability to grow. These people were my family. There were times that I would forget that they were white and I was black.”

—Delquan Dorsey

This goes back to slavery. Slavery is based on economics. It’s not just about race. We talk about social networking and network organizing—that is so key for the families in our neighborhoods to achieve the American Dream.”

At the Center for Neighborhoods, where the resident engagement work was housed, Delquan was the only African American in management, a vantage point he greatly appreciated.

“It was so important to me to have those relationships outside my race in terms of my development and my ability to grow. These people were my family. There were times that I would forget that they were white and I was black.

“At the same time we recognized race and those challenges. They would put themselves in situations that I know weren’t the most

comfortable situation—where they would be in the community at night working with people where they might have had an attitude with them. And vice versa: the ROCs (Resident Organizing Coordinators) would be in situations where we knew that everyone didn’t want us there.”

For Delquan, the Network presents an excellent vehicle for people of all races to experience the healing power of mutual relationships founded on a common goal.

“I know from my own experience that, if you put people together from diverse backgrounds on a work opportunity or a project, they begin to learn more about each other and become able to recognize, ‘Hey, I’ve got some baggage that is rooted in some stuff that I inherited. But at the same time I want to get better. I’m able to sacrifice my ego and things that I’ve clung to because, if I get better, my community gets better.’”

Jennie Jean Davidson, The Network’s Deputy Director, affirms this, “He brings such a beautiful, open, loving spirit to stuff that it’s really easy to engage in a struggle with him because he’s not holding anything back. He’s not trying to manipulate anything. He’s not trying to win for the sake of winning. All he’s saying is, ‘Let’s all get there together.’”

Always a realist, Delquan recognizes that this change is slow and often painful—but the Network concept supports that change and that is what is important to him.

“The Network practice thing is hard. All of us are coming out of traditional status quo



Delquan Dorsey thought that, “If i didn’t go to college, I would go to jail.”



“The focus on data is definitely making us better off.  
But some results don’t come up in a bar graph or you can’t show them  
in a cost/benefit analysis. Sometimes they look like a Delquan Dorsey.”

—Delquan Dorsey

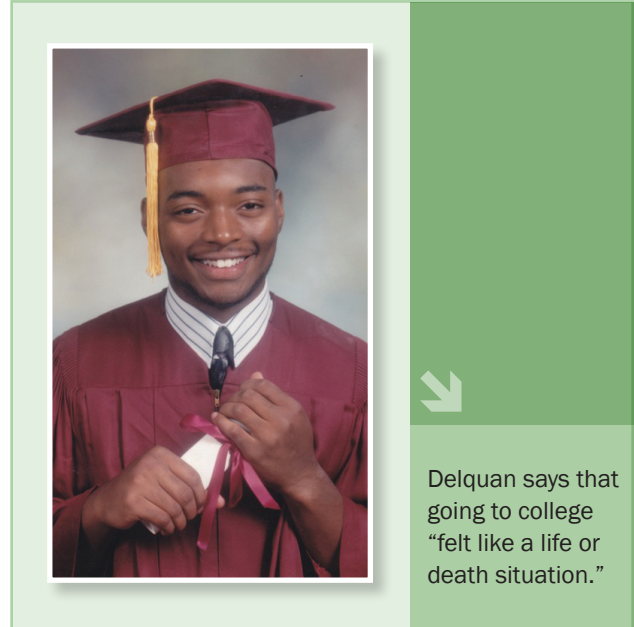
types of behavior, but we have this vision of whites and blacks working together and learning about each other. But we have to be honest that all parties have their own stuff. The beauty in the Network concept is in trying to apply it to the way we behave as an organization and initiative. Teaching humanity is what we’re doing. Fundamentally we’re all the same.”

Ever humble, Delquan laughs at the idea that he has done anything special.

“Someone said to me, ‘We need to pick your brain to find out what you do.’ I thought, ‘Uh oh, I’m exposed now.’ One of the skills I have learned is to be able to listen and take a sincere interest in other people—whatever it is they do—and get people to talk about themselves, and in doing that make an intentional effort to connect them to other people.”

That simple social skill set—reciprocal, caring conversation—is rarely taught in school or even in churches and community groups. Yet clearly it made all the difference in Delquan’s life. He nurtured the relationships in his network and they in turn nurtured him and opened doors for him that he would not have had access to otherwise.

The *Making Connections* Network exists to throw some light on this process of mutuality, encouraging folks to step outside their comfort zones to develop more “habits of attachments.” The Network’s creators believe that these habits of attachment are the fuel for a thriving community.



In the fall of 2007, Democratic candidate for governor, Steve Beshear, who knew Delquan through his work with the NAACP, tapped Delquan to help with his campaign. When Beshear was elected governor, it wasn’t a surprise when he offered Delquan a spot in his office.

As Delquan left for Frankfort—saying “see you later” but certainly not “good bye” to the community he loves—he did have one thought to share about results within the *Making Connections* initiative.

“The focus on data is definitely making us better off and I would encourage everyone to keep working for those measurable results and don’t give up. But some results don’t come up in a bar graph or you can’t show them in a cost/benefit analysis. Sometimes they look like a Delquan Dorsey.”

“It’s a group of us that went to college and achieved professional careers.  
Yes we’ve all moved away, but something was put into us growing up  
and now we all give back to this community.”

—Delquan Dorsey

## **Not One Isolated Story**

### **A reflection about what can be learned from Delquan Dorsey’s story**

*“Delquan’s story is a placeholder for  
many, many stories.”*

—Dana Jackson

If you talk to Delquan about his journey to the Governor’s Office, he is quick to point out that he is not the only one from Shepard’s Square to move up the career ladder.

“I’m not one isolated story.... It’s a group of us that went to college and achieved professional careers. I can think of a whole bunch of friends who also have master’s degrees. Yes we’ve all moved away, but something was put into us growing up and now we all give back to this community or are involved in some way.”

Certainly some of Delquan’s success can be attributed to unique aspects of his personality and situation—a good nature that inspired others to help him, a devoted mother and grandmother who valued education, an innate optimism and sense of gratitude—but clearly external forces played an important role in shaping his life and the lives of his friends.

What can we learn from Delquan’s story about what it takes for young people to thrive in tough neighborhoods?

And what can we learn from the role he played in shaping an ambitious effort to make a difference in the community in which he grew up?

❖ **The black church is a powerful source of guidance, inspiration and unification in all communities, but especially in low-income communities.**

For Delquan and his friends, church not only was central to their spiritual and moral development, it was central to their concept of what it means to be “in community.” The church was Delquan’s first exposure to a network of people he could count on and who counted on him. “I can go to church on a Sunday and see everyone I grew up with and some of them didn’t even grow up in church.”

Not only is the black church a community, it communicates “an obligation to do for those who are less fortunate,” Delquan believes.

“An institution doesn’t have to have a whole lot of financial resources for it to have an exponential impact on people’s lives. Over and over again that [community center] has had an impact on someone who has changed their station in life.”

—Delquan Dorsey



Delquan introduces Kentucky’s governor at an Office of Minority Empowerment conference.

“The beautiful thing about the black church is that it pushes W.E.B Dubois’ idea of the ‘talented tenth’—those African Americans who receive education at a 4-year institution should go back and mentor those who are left behind. I had the mentors and not only did I have the mentors, I had the examples. So when you are exposed to that, even though you are still exposed to the examples that are not as positive, you begin to make choices in and around those.”

❖ **Community centers offer a critical “home base” for children in low-income neighborhoods, providing them not only with resources but with a web of caring that often continues throughout their lives.**

His church wasn’t the only source of community and support for Delquan: a community center also played a key role. Located in the heart of Smoketown, the Presbyterian Community Center provides tutoring, after-school

and summer programs, health services, senior’s programs, tax preparation and more.

It also connects children and adults: nearly every child who passes through its doors can tell you about a person who made a difference in their lives. “Miss Jeannie let me stay with her when I couldn’t stay at home,” or “Mr. Lawrence talked to me about how I need to show up on time for work.”

“An institution doesn’t have to have a whole lot of financial resources for it to have an exponential impact on people’s lives,” Delquan says. “Over and over again that place has had an impact on someone who has changed their station in life and teaches them to continue that cycle.

“I wanted to go to college in state and my mother didn’t have a driver’s license, much less a car, and here it is that I went to school out of state. The church and the community would come and get me and take me back. That tradition still goes on at the Presbyterian Community Center. When you have that impact on your life and you are fortunate to get where you are, you don’t forget that. It’s part of your DNA.”

❖ **Young people need to be exposed to many positive examples that ignite their ability to dream. Often a single mentor isn’t enough.**

“Delquan found adults who believed in him and nurtured him along,” explains Luckett Davidson. “That is something our Network should take to heart.”



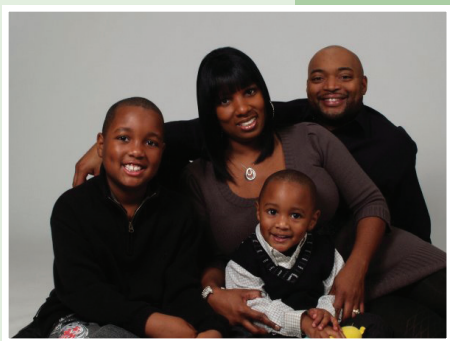
“When I talk with Delquan, he always has a story that takes you back to his roots. And every time you tell those stories, you re-root yourself. The charge of the Network is to grow and foster that sense of rootedness.”

—Dana Jackson

According to Delquan, it is essentially a matter of numbers. If young people in neighborhoods like Sheppard's Square see *many* people succeeding in a *variety* of ways, working in *new and exciting* professions—they will be more likely to follow similar paths.

“A lot of it is social science. What you are exposed to is what you gravitate towards. You look at anybody in any profession and somewhere they have been exposed to that profession—they didn't just jump into some situation voluntarily without having any information.”

Delquan had the opportunity to see the examples of Darryl Owens, Raoul Cunningham, Senator Georgia Powers and many others. Their sense of mission and their accomplishments helped fuel Delquan's own dreams and enabled him to chart a path to get there.



Delquan with his wife Shealonda, sons Delquan Jr. and Destin.

“They are the reason I do what I do...and the how – they support me in everything.”

❖ **A sense of history and rootedness is vital—connections to the past and previous generations provide an important touchstone.**

Delquan says that he was profoundly moved by his association with his older mentors, particularly those involved in the quest for civil rights. Being in their presence and observing their ongoing work provided an almost visceral connection to the past for him.

“Just being around that legacy and hearing the stories.... I had this sense of people just pouring into me,” he recounts. “Doing this work and seeing the challenges that not only my people face today but have faced in the past motivates me. It's not only the way I look and my DNA, but it's something about that spirit going back to slavery and what my ancestors experienced that I still have with me.”

Dana Jackson, executive director of *Making Connections* Louisville, has observed Delquan's strong sense of history—both his personal history and the history passed down to him by his elders—and sees a strong message in this for the *Making Connections* Network itself.

“When I talk with Delquan, he always has a story that takes you back to his roots. And every time you tell those stories, you re-root yourself. There's a rootedness which comes with that. It is the charge of the *Making Connections* Network to grow and foster that sense of rootedness—that young children and adults need to find their center...and I think that's the power of a good positive network.”

“He brings such a beautiful, open, loving spirit to stuff that it’s really easy to engage in a struggle with him because he’s not holding anything back. He’s not trying to win for the sake of winning. All he’s saying is, ‘Let’s all get there together.’”

—Jennie Jean Davidson

❖ **Being rooted is important not just for young people but also for efforts to make a difference for people living in neighborhoods with many low-income families.**

Delquan’s story demonstrates the value of deeply involving residents—young and older—in change initiatives. Delquan played a critical role in keeping the *Making Connections* Network firmly rooted in the realities and needs of his community.

As Jennie Jean Davidson puts it, “I could count on Delquan to have a story and be able to connect the dots in a way that I could remember why we were doing this.”

Jackson says that he “had the ability to take it out of the ether and say, ‘What does that look like? How does that work tomorrow?’ He had this ability to say, ‘I hear you, I get the concept and the air may be good up there, but I need you to land this.’”

He also reinforced the team’s belief in what they were trying to create. “Delquan believed in the deep power of what we were doing with the Network,” is how Davidson puts it. She relied on him “when I start to lose faith or over-worry.”

Delquan also made a big contribution to the team that has been building Louisville’s network in a very different way—by being an effective team builder. Perhaps because of his nature, perhaps because he grew up around so many people, Delquan seems to understand a lot about team dynamics.



“Just being around that [Civil Rights] legacy and hearing the stories... I had this sense of people just pouring into me.”

“He brings such a beautiful, open, loving spirit to stuff that it’s really easy to engage in a struggle with him because he’s not holding anything back, he’s not trying to manipulate anything,” is how Jennie Jean Davidson explains this. “He’s not trying to win for the sake of winning. All he’s saying is, ‘Let’s all get there together.’ He generates so much good will and energy that it makes it much easier to think about doing the stuff that is hard.”

Lockett Davidson puts it this way: “His pushing is very powerful because it is not headlong, aggressive kind of pushing.”

Delquan himself attributes some of this to the leadership training he received through *Making Connections*, training that emphasized facilitation skills. “I learned so much from *Making Connections*. Facilitated-style leadership has helped so much because I work now with a lot of head-strong people. I’m always connecting and weaving—connecting myself to others and connecting them to each other and to opportunities.”

“Those who question whether the attempt to reach youth has an impact,  
I have an answer. If you don’t do it, someone else is going to do it.  
Someone is going to draft these kids. It better be us.”

—Delquan Dorsey

❖ **Relationship-building skills are one of the most valuable assets a person can have, but they do not develop naturally in everyone.**

Delquan’s ability to work effectively with a wide variety of people has clearly both helped him make important connections and to be very effective in his work. But for many young people, social interactions outside their peer groups are difficult.

From his experience, Delquan believes that we need to coach young people on how to nurture relationships, develop reciprocal conversation skills and create a supportive network that crisscrosses diverse environments

“Networking is the activity of gaining relationships. Even with education and economic opportunities, nine times out of 10, it’s based on who you know. Networking should be part of core curriculum. High school students in particular should know how to network. But because of society’s history, some people have a tough time connecting with and relating to people.”

❖ **Many young people develop an understanding of the world not just through their relationships with people, but also through their relationships with the characters they see in the media.**

Delquan says that he grew up at a time of change in television and the movies,



when decades of stereotypes or neglect of African Americans was just beginning to change.

“Around the time that our generation was growing up, hip-hop was about 10 years old. A lot of the hip-hop came out of New York, and with the East Coast feel there was a strong black pride consciousness.

“And not only that, African Americans were becoming more successful. Spike Lee was being successful with black movies like Malcolm X. You started seeing different examples like ‘A Different World,’ which was a spin-off of ‘The Cosby Show,’ where one of the Cosby daughters went to a historically black college. A lot of us in the inner city who didn’t have parents who went to college hadn’t ever been exposed to those opportunities before that.”



*“Making Connections understands that the answers are in the group instead of having the belief that the answers are already figured out. Regardless of where you are in the Making Connections Network, you have to come out of your isolated situation and gain as much understanding of the people you are trying to impact and vice versa.”*

—Delquan Dorsey

❖ **If we don’t educate our children, the streets will.**

As people work to strengthen low-performing schools, it’s important to remember that children are getting an education outside of school as well. As Delquan notes, “There’s formal education and informal education and everyone is going to get an informal education one way or another.”

Delquan was being educated in the ways of the street when he was asked by a drug dealer to deliver drugs. Fortunately people who knew him told his mother, and that was the end of this downward path.

“Those who question whether the attempt to reach youth has an impact, I have an answer. If you don’t do it, someone else is going to do it. Who does it is going to determine the impact on us all. Someone is going to draft these kids. It better be us.”

❖ **Communities need non-traditional initiatives like the *Making Connections* Network that value reciprocal relationships and group process.**

When Delquan found *Making Connections*, he felt like he had found his soul’s true call-

ing. The bedrock principles and values of *Making Connections* were almost mirror images of his own.

“I remember going to my first meeting and thinking, ‘This is it. This is what I want to do.’

*“Making Connections* understands the hypothesis that the answers are in the group instead of having the belief that the answers are already figured out. Not only that, regardless of where you are in the *Making Connections* Network, you have to come out of your isolated situation and gain as much understanding of the people you are trying to impact and vice versa.

“Those who are in an economically challenged situation are pushed to be able to understand people who are higher up on the chain. So there is the constant push and pull, and even though it sometimes gets rough in terms of understanding, there is a respect and an appreciation.

“I refer to our work around Network Organizing as human behavior science. To get people to work together to achieve a goal, you have to understand human behavior. You are constantly in the lab, experimenting.

“The power of reciprocity is the power of the Network.”

“I learned so much from *Making Connections*. Facilitated-style leadership has helped so much because I work now with a lot of head-strong people. I’m always connecting and weaving—connecting myself to others and connecting them to each other and to opportunities.”

—Delquan Dorsey

## The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of publications about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Making Connections* Initiative put together by The Diarist Project. The project is a new approach the foundation is using to learn from its efforts to strengthen families and transform struggling neighborhoods.

Diarists work to capture strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. In *Making Connections*, the diarist worked closely with the staff people who led the work in each city, the Site Team Leader and Local Site Coordinator.

This story of the Network was written by Laura Crawford, the *Making Connections* Louisville diarist. It was edited by Tim Saasta, diarist coordinator. Photos courtesy of Delquan Dorsey.

***Making Connections*** is a Casey Foundation initiative to support work that demonstrates the simple premise that kids thrive when their families are strong and their communities supportive. What began in 1999 as a demonstration project in selected neighborhoods in 22 cities is now an intricate network of people and groups committed to making strong families and neighborhoods their highest priorities.

**The Annie E. Casey Foundation** (AECF.org) works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families.



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***Making Connections Louisville*** is a ten-year initiative supported in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation designed to catalyze change, to close the gap and improve the life opportunities of families and children in four inner-city neighborhoods: Smoketown, Shelby Park, California and Phoenix Hill.

For more information, please contact Tonia Nolden 502-583-1426.