

REFLECTIONS

on Making Connections

Making a Difference:

One Life – One Family – Transformed

“I never had self-confidence. I didn’t see myself as a leader. But then I got involved in RCI [the Rebuilding Communities Initiative, the predecessor of Making Connections in Denver]. I began to participate. To speak up. I got the sense that my ideas had value. I realized that I live in this community. I better say what I have to say. It’s important.”

— Candace Redshirt, *member of Denver’s Community Learning Network, recently hired resident staff member for Making Connections*

When she was a young girl living in Rapid City, South Dakota, in a Native American family that knew alcoholism and violence, Candace Redshirt made a decision about her life. “I wanted something different. I’m not going to do this to my children.”

A dozen years later, in the far-off city of Denver, living on public assistance as a single mom, Candace had to confront the challenge of creating a different life for herself and her son. It wasn’t

easy. It didn’t happen overnight. But it did happen.

Candace’s story is the kind we love to hear: struggling individual who pulls herself



Candace Redshirt and her daughter, who is also named Candace.

“Her success suggests that it can make a real difference to link services, connect community residents to each other, provide concrete opportunities and allow people to develop a sense of control over their lives and their communities.”

up and out of poverty and into a better life. But her story is as instructive as it is inspiring.

For one thing, it suggests that, as important as it is, an individual’s drive to succeed is just one of many factors that allow a person to find success. No matter how driven someone may be, she also needs support, opportunity, knowledge, resources and a great deal more. Candace would be the first to tell you that.

Candace would also tell you that a big factor in her success has been the opportunity to connect with other people in her community, as well as to experience herself in a role she had never envisioned for herself: the role of community leader.

For Candace, that opportunity came in part through the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which has been trying for a decade to learn how to rebuild inner-city communities and make them better places to raise children.

Her story shows how much time change takes – in individuals and in communities. Candace’s transformation began more than a dozen years ago and she’d say it continues to this day.

Her story also illustrates how much it takes. One good idea, one good program, one good service, is rarely enough. Finding someone a decent home doesn’t improve the local school. Finding a single parent a decent job isn’t enough if she doesn’t have access to child care. Organizing to force

the city to build a park in your neighborhood doesn’t help residents get to jobs and services outside their neighborhood.

All this said, Candace’s success is still inspiring. And not just because she feels so empowered and energized, or because her kids are doing so well. Her story is also inspiring because her success — and what she says about why she has succeeded — suggests that the wisdom of the day, that nothing works, is simply wrong.

Her success suggests that it can make a real difference to link services, connect community residents to each other, provide concrete opportunities and allow people to develop a sense of control over their lives and their communities. Trying to find ways to do all this is the purpose of the Casey Foundation’s “Making Connections” Initiative.

Her experiences also say a lot about what it means to “empower” residents through this work, and her words have much to say about how to do it.

To describe Candace simply as a “Making Connections” success story would be wrong. Her story long predates this initiative, the first phase of which started not quite four years ago in Denver.

But her success does demonstrate the powerful potential of the ideas underlying Making Connections.

“I wanted to fix my life by myself. But I felt powerless. I prayed. I knew there was a better life out there.”

Candace begins her story by talking about her struggle as a young, single parent of a “wild” 3-year-old boy. She was spending a lot of time with Brandon because she couldn’t find the kind of support and training she needed to take a full-time job and get off public assistance.

“I felt kind of helpless,” she says now. “I wanted to work. But the system trapped me in a way. To get child care, I needed a job. But to get a job, I needed child care.

“I wanted to fix my life by myself. But I felt powerless. I prayed. I knew there was a better life out there.”

Not having a job led her to focus completely on being a parent. “I tried to create a warm, safe environment. Our ‘place of peace.’ I didn’t let myself get down because I didn’t have a job.” As she focused on parenting, she quickly realized how little she knew about this role, especially about what to expect.

To get help, she turned to an agency that served Native Americans. “I felt more comfortable in a Native American community,” she explains. The need to provide services from within a person’s community, by people who understand that culture, is one idea underlying the Casey Foundation’s

approach to reforming services in low income communities.

She connected with a doctor who has worked in her community for three generations. The doctor told Candace that her son was normal and that the key was to channel his energy into something creative. She learned about time outs for young children, their need for structure, their need to learn social skills. She signed him up for Head Start. She also got help finding a home and a parenting class. Again, a basic tenet of Making Connections is that services need to be linked.

Candace then volunteered for Head Start. “I felt that children are our most precious resource. I wanted to know the person who was involved in my child’s life.”

Being a volunteer also made her “feel like I was doing something.” Not able to work, “I found a different avenue to fulfillment.”

She also learned more about child development. What she learned helped her son: when he entered kindergarten, he was already reading and writing.

She continued to volunteer in his school. She met other parents and other teachers,



“RCI’s emphasis was on the need to focus on the community’s assets. I began to see that I was an asset to the community, to the teachers, to the students. They helped me step out of the life around me and develop into a leader.”

slowly building a social network. “I got to know the teachers as friends. That was important for parents. I wasn’t a stranger.”

Soon it was time for her daughter (along with a niece whom Candace was raising) to start school. When Candace did begin to work, a child care center in the school became increasingly important to her and other parents. Unfortunately, caught in a space crunch, the school district sent home a note saying the program would be ended. At this moment, a community activist was born.

Again, it wasn’t easy. “I didn’t see myself as a leader,” Candace explains. But she was encouraged and supported by NEWSED CDC’s Poder Advisory Council, a group that came from a Casey Foundation program called the Rebuilding Communities Initiative, or “RCI.”

“RCI’s emphasis was on the need to focus on the community’s assets,” Candace explains. “I began to see that I was an asset to the community, to the teachers, to the students. They helped me step out of the life around me and develop into a leader.”

Candace and the other parents won their fight to keep the day care center open. This was but the first step in what became a much larger mission for Candace.

“I began to learn more about Casey, RCI, the Poder Advisory Council (“poder” means power in Spanish). It helped me

understand. It led to my desire to want something better. I saw that outside my community the schools were nicer. The housing was nicer. There wasn’t so much traffic.

“I thought: ‘We deserve that. We’re here and just accept it.’ Living in the ‘projects’ defined who you were, that you had a ‘problem.’”

Soon Candace became the co-chair of the Poder Advisory Council. “I began to develop as a leader. When I first met Garland, I told him that I didn’t see myself as a leader. [Garland Yates helped lead both the RCI

and Making Connections work in Denver.] But he pushed me about that. He helped me see that I had always been a leader. Even as a child taking care of my brother and sister, I’d made choices.”

Her involvement with Poder, which included a 7-week leadership training pro-



Candace calls her daughter “my apprentice.” At 13, she is already organizing young people.

“When I first met Garland, I told him that I didn’t see myself as a leader. But he pushed me about that. He helped me see that I had always been a leader. Even as a child taking care of my brother and sister, I’d made choices.”

“There is always a little fear,” Candace says about her new role as a staff person for Denver Making Connections. Here she is engaged in a small group discussion at a Denver Making Connections “retreat.” She is talking with Gabriela Jacobo, another resident leader.



gram, taught Candace how to be an effective leader. “I’m still in development. I’m continuing to learn.”

Her new role is not always easy. “I’m often going into a place where I’m uncomfortable. There is always a little fear. But I’ve had the courage to do it.”

When the Casey Foundation broadened its work in Denver through Making Connections, Candace quickly became involved as a member of its “Local Learning Partnership.” Believing in the power of knowledge, the “LLP” works to make information and data more available and useful to residents in Making Connections’ four low income neighborhoods. Denver’s Learning Partnership – now called the Community Learning Network — has already started a dynamic “Story Circle” process that has engaged hundreds of residents, built a community-

friendly website and developed a plan for tackling the “Digital Divide” in its neighborhoods.

Most important, they are doing it themselves. When they weren’t satisfied with their consultants’ initial plan for their website, they sat down to hammer out a new way of working together. “We met. They agreed to work in a different way with us. They learned. They were considerate. They wanted to hear our ideas.”

Experiences like these have slowly transformed Making Connections’ resident leaders. The experiences have helped build their confidence. They see that they have a crucial role to play in the process and have knowledge and experiences to contribute.

“I’ve come to understand that we are important to this process,” Candace explains. “It went beyond just participating. I realized that the residents’ voice is important.”

“We began to feel safe. Equal. Not intimidated by the experts and the professionals. We saw that they could learn something from us.”

Candace and others also grew more confident in expressing their voices. “We began to feel safe. Equal. Not intimidated by the experts and the professionals. We saw that they could learn something from us.”

Why has this transformation occurred? Candace believes that one reason is that the Learning Partnership’s main “professional,” Terri Bailey of the Piton Foundation, keeps insisting that the residents run the show. “Terri always throws it back at us: ‘What do you think? This is yours.’ I’ve never experienced that before.”

In a sense her work to make information and data more accessible completes a circle for Candace, who began her journey into community by reaching out for more information about parenting.

The work is also solidifying her sense of community. Because members of the Partnership come from all four of the Making Connections’ neighborhoods, Candace says she has seen “bonding across neighborhoods. I believe in extended family, and that is what we’ve been developing — family-like relationships.”

Candace’s journey into community is continuing. She was recently hired to help Making Connections reach more residents. “I was a little scared to take this job,” she says. She says that one reason is that she doesn’t have a college degree. “In our society, people judge you by that degree. I don’t have one. I may be judged in a different way. People may question my skills. I live with that. It’s not as bad as it was. But I

still get a little uncomfortable. I would be intimidated by Cec and Terri if I didn’t know them.” (Cec Ortiz is the Denver Making Connections site liaison.)

But while the job has stimulated some fear, “It has also stimulated the part of me that says, ‘Do it.’ I want to help make this work. I want to be the hand that reaches back to the next ones coming along.”

This has become Candace’s passion. “I want to reach out to people. Bring them in. Give them some hope. That’s how you can create social change. That’s how you build a movement.”

She often feels that she is “reaching people where I was 17 years ago. I see all the drinking. All the drugs. Everywhere. It’s sad.” But it doesn’t make her hopeless. “I’ve always had an optimistic attitude, even at the worst times. I felt it could only get better. I always had hope. I always knew it wouldn’t always be this way.” Part of her job now is convincing others that there is hope, as well as connecting them to sources of support.

“I reflect back to my culture. I try to live my spirituality. We get words from elders about our humbleness. We are not outstanding people if all we seek is money and prestige. There is value in being kind. I’ve always tried to help people. I could not say no.”

But in keeping with her commitment to speak up, she did say no to the job description for her new position within Making Con-

“I knew a handful of my neighbors. But now I see people we’re connected with everywhere. They feel our energy. To see the Partnership come to where it is now feels kind of unbelievable.”

nections. “Initially there were seven or eight ‘assists’ in the job description. I told Terri that I was supposed to work *with* her, not *for* her.” Terri changed the job description.

Candace now works in a new office located in a church in the middle of one of the Making Connections neighborhoods. It feels extraordinary to her. “I knew a handful of my neighbors. But now I see people we’re connected with everywhere. They feel our energy.

“To see the Partnership come to where it is now feels kind of unbelievable,” Candace reflects. She could and probably would say the same thing about herself.

But she knows the process is far from over, for her community or for herself. During her time on the Poder Advisory Council, Candace felt the need for help in her personal life. Fortunately, because the Rebuilding Communities Initiative’s vision included neighborhood-based counseling, she found what she needed right in the offices of the community group that helps run Poder.

The struggle for transformation not only takes time, it also takes perseverance. “I could have turned to drinking, or reached out for help. I knew I had a choice there.”

“I’ve learned a lot on the way,” Candace reflects. “But I feel I have so much more to learn.” She remembers a saying from a program she participated in: stars are life-long learners. “That simple statement encompassed so much for me. I feel I’m always learning.”

Just as important, Candace has not been the only one in her family who has been learning. Her son is a high school senior and hopes to become an Air Force pilot. Her daughter still comes with her to many meetings, sometimes helping take care of younger children. Candace calls her “my apprentice.” At 13 she is already organizing other young people. Both children see a confident mother who has strong connections to her community, a mother who models a strong desire to learn and to make life better



Candace has helped Tracey Saulters become a strong resident leader in Making Connections. They were both single moms living in public housing.

for her kids and her community.

The ultimate outcome for any effort to strengthen families is what happens to their children. When you experience Candace’s children, you can’t help but experience hope. “What matters to you in your heart,” she explains, “strengthens your family.”

“I believe in the spirit of Annie E. Casey: improve the lives of disadvantaged families. I’ve known the need. More than anything I want to see that happen. It encourages me to see there is a bigger picture. To see hope. Opportunities. I can be a little part of that.”

The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of “Reflections” about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections Initiative. These Reflections come through The Diarist Project, a new approach the foundation in trying to learn from its efforts to strengthen families and transform struggling neighborhood.

Diarists work to capture strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. In Making Connections, the diarist works most closely with the Casey staff person who leads the work in each city, the “Site Team Leader.”

This Reflection was written by Timothy Saasta, the diarist for Denver and the coordinator of The Diarist Project.

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 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.



“I reflect back to my culture. I try to live my spirituality. We get words from elders about our humbleness. We are not outstanding people if all we seek is money and prestige.”

For more information about **The Diarist Project** or to receive copies of its “Reflections,” contact:
The Diarist Project,
c/o Charitable Choices,
4 Park Avenue, Suite 200,
Gaithersburg, MD 20877
(240-683-7100;
Tim@CharityChoices.com).

Making Connections—Denver is an initiative to improve life for families living in four lower-income Denver neighborhoods—Baker, La Alma/Lincoln Park, Sun Valley and Cole. Its philosophy is that children succeed when their families are strong and families get stronger when they live in supportive neighborhoods. For more information, contact Gloria Marrujo, 303-454-5369. www.makingconnectionsdenver.org