

Learning from a Learning Partnership

What Denver's Community Learning Network Can Teach About How to Build a Resident-Driven Process and Keep a Community-Building Initiative Accountable

"Denver exemplifies having a strong, well-informed base of residents to which the Making Connections process is accountable. This is what makes the use of data and information hugely substantive.

"This is not just about building skills so people can learn how to read data maps or do ethnography. This is about being able to understand what available information tells us about how our neighborhoods are doing, knowing what information we don't have, how to go after it and how to use it to improve the lives of families. Knowing this is a huge tool in our toolbox."

—Audrey Jordan

Annie E. Casey Foundation Evaluation Liaison



- ▶ The residents who run the Community Learning Network include (l to r), Front row: Jim Kittel, Candace Redsbirt, Phuonglan Nguyen, Candace Tafoya, Elias Burgos. Back row: Sharon Bridgeforth, Suzanne Gruba, Phillip Kasper, Gabriela Jacobo, Tracey Saulters, Loretta Koehler, Linda Wurst.

“This happens in everything we do. We have come so far from where we started. People ask questions. They feel free to have strong opinions. We’ve become empowered in a way we were never empowered before in other committees and boards.”

—Linda Wurst

On its surface the proposal seemed pretty straightforward. An organizing group called Metro Organizations for People (or MOP) wanted to evaluate its model for developing leaders. It was requesting a grant of \$15,000 from the Community Learning Network’s Flexible Evaluation Fund, a pot of money created to support community-driven evaluation and research in the four Denver neighborhoods targeted by Making Connections Denver.

Since MOP is a key Making Connections partner and two MOP organizers who are part of the Community Learning Network were presenting its proposal, an outsider would have laid good odds that MOP’s modest request would be approved with little discussion.

An outsider doesn’t know the diverse group of residents who make up the Community Learning Network.

These residents take their role as grantmakers very seriously. They scrutinized MOP’s proposal. One CLN member, Candace Redshirt, pointed out that the proposal stated that this evaluation will “enhance MOP as a powerful organization.” But helping one organization, even if it is a key part of Making Connections, is not the purpose of this money, Redshirt pointed out. The key question is how this grant will help Making Connections, not MOP.

Loretta Koehler agreed. “What is the future value of this for everybody? I can’t see that from this proposal. It’s too vague.”

Linda Wurst wanted the evaluation to reach beyond MOP’s current leaders. “Why

leaders leave the organization is really important to know.”

Tracey Saulters pointed out that MOP is a Making Connections partner. “We know MOP.”

The back-and-forth discussion was respectful but intense. Ultimately the group voted to approve the grant with several conditions, such as being able to see the evaluation instrument, meet with the researcher and receive quarterly reports. They also wanted to make sure that the data generated by the research is shared with the community and has utility to other Making Connections leadership development efforts.

It was an impressive display of what happens when a group of neighborhood residents become empowered.

“What could have been a pretty ordinary discussion in the end became a powerful ex-

This is one of a series of publications about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections Initiative done by The Diarist Project. The purpose of these publications is to learn from the people engaged in the day-to-day work of Making Connections (MC).

MC is a long-term effort to transform low income neighborhoods in 10 cities. Each city has a Local Learning Partnership (LLP) to make data available to neighborhood residents, help evaluate MC locally and to learn from MC. In Denver, the LLP is called the Community Learning Network.

For more on Making Connections and The Diarist Project, see the back page.

The Learning Network's fundamental purpose is to create a process for keeping a long-term initiative like Making Connections accountable to the community and to the outcomes that the initiative has laid out for itself.

Learning Network member ◀
Candace Redshirt wanted to know how MOP's proposal would help Making Connections as a whole.



ploration,” reflected Garland Yates, site team leader for Making Connections Denver. “They went right to the key question, which is how to hold a partner like MOP accountable to the larger initiative.”

“This happens in everything we do,” said Learning Network member Linda Wurst. “We have come so far from where we started. People ask questions. They feel free to have strong opinions.”

These days many people involved in community-building initiatives agree with the idea that residents of these communities need to be engaged and “empowered.” But what exactly does that mean? How does someone become empowered? What level of “engagement” is appropriate? Perhaps most important, how do you set in motion a process that

will engage and empower an entire community of residents, not just a handful of leaders? The Learning Network story offers perspectives about all these questions.

It also has much to say about how data and information become compelling to residents.

But the Learning Network's fundamental purpose is not to engage residents or make data relevant to them. Instead, it is to create a process for keeping a long-term initiative like Making Connections accountable to the community and to the outcomes residents have helped set.

It's too early to know if this very different approach to accountability will work. But it's gotten a good start, it's an intriguing theory and the people involved have already learned a lot.

“I was really impressed with their level of intelligence and ingenuity. They have been able to figure out ways to work through hard questions.”

—Tory Read

The Community Learning Network began as two distinct “Neighborhood Learning Partnerships” in early 2000. One focused on the Cole neighborhood. The other focused on several West Side neighborhoods. By September of that year the two merged into one group.

In early 2002 it changed its name to the Community Learning Network to highlight its transformation from a small partnership of residents to a network that engages many more residents and other stakeholders from the Making Connections neighborhoods.

The Network is directed by an 11-member Leadership Committee, the group of residents that met to review MOP’s grant proposal. The Committee decides on the Network’s work, structure and budget and hires contractors.

The Learning Network’s list of accomplishments is impressive.

- Developing the Making Connections Denver bilingual website.
- Conducting the first comprehensive assessment of their neighborhoods’ access to technology and resources.
- Developing the innovative Story Circle model that just in 2002 engaged more than 500 neighborhood residents – students, men, public housing residents, non-English speakers and many more.
- Developing a set of principles to guide its Flexible Evaluation Fund, which supports research to meet the neighborhoods’ data and information needs.

- Supporting a resident-conducted survey of crime in the Cole neighborhood, a survey that uncovered the tremendous amount of crime that is never reported (see page 13).
- Evaluating three school-based models for tackling illiteracy.
- Developing a toolkit for putting on a block party as an organizing tool.
- Helping design a technical assistance program for residents who want to make a difference in their communities, a program that includes training in subjects such as grant-writing, personal skill-building activities (such as attending a conference), peer-to-peer exchanges, making consultants available and developing a resource bank.
- Putting together an impressive, 4-color magazine –The Learning Connection – as a way to get information and data out to the wider community.

Community Learning Network’s Goals

1. Collect data and information about the Making Connections’ neighborhoods of Baker, Cole, La Alma/Lincoln Park and Sun Valley.
2. Capture the lessons learned from the work of Making Connections-Denver.
3. Build the skills and abilities of residents to be community leaders.
4. Create and incubate new models and new tools to support community change.

“Denver is the one site that is continually at the stage of residents leading the work. It’s not just some sexy notion that it is cool for residents to do this. It is fundamental to Making Connections Denver and its change agenda. The depth and breadth is extraordinary.”

—Audrey Jordan

In Denver, says Audrey Jordan (left), “There is a deep understanding that residents have expertise that needs to be explored and used. It’s no longer just rhetoric. It’s real.”



While the Learning Network’s accomplishments are impressive in themselves, they don’t completely communicate its major accomplishment, which is the central role residents are playing in leading the Network and directing the learning process. In fact they have become models for the entire Making Connections Denver initiative.

“I was really impressed with their level of intelligence and ingenuity,” says Tory Read, Denver’s new diarist who regularly sits in on Network meetings. “They have the capacity to think through process. They have been able to figure out ways to work through hard questions,” such as the MOP grant proposal.

The Casey Foundation’s Audrey Jordan explains that there is a four-step process for developing a truly resident-led learning partnership, a process delineated during the

planning for a joint National Neighborhood Indicators Project/Making Connections conference in November 2003.

The first three steps are creating the environment, teaching residents to use data and involving residents as participants in data collection. The fourth step is having residents lead the work.

“Denver is the one site that is continually at this point,” Jordan says. “Other sites have examples of resident leadership. But in Denver, it is the practice. It is not just words. It’s not just some sexy notion that it is cool for residents to do this. It is fundamental to Making Connections Denver and its change agenda. The depth and breadth is extraordinary. I don’t know how else to say it. It pervades not just the Learning Network but every aspect of Making Connections in Denver.”

“Despite living in a culture that emphasizes individualism and power over others, Tracey doesn’t operate like that. When a leadership or learning opportunity comes her way, the first thing she does is think about people around her whom she can share this with.”

—Audrey Jordan

Jordan contrasts Denver’s Learning Network with a more typical partnership between university researchers and community people. She explains that a typical partnership focuses on a particular project, such as a polluted site in a neighborhood on which a playground has been built. The researchers help residents find data about dumping patterns as well as data about health effects of what was dumped.

“This can be a pretty powerful project for change,” Jordan says. “But it is a project. Then it is done.”

In contrast, in Denver, the partnerships are not built around one research need. “There is a continuous relationship. There is a long-term focus on change around a whole set of indicators, not one specific problem. There is scope and depth.”

And information does not flow just in one direction, from the “experts” to the community. “There is a deep understanding that residents have expertise that needs to be explored and used. It’s no longer just rhetoric. It’s real.”

The best and perhaps the only way to really understand the depth and importance of what has happened in Denver is to spend time with the residents who sit on the Learning Network’s Leadership Committee, Jordan believes.

“These residents are so focused and determined. They step up every time.

“I think of Candace [Redshirt]. Candace is a person who never jumps away from a



► Learning Network member Suzanne Gruba

fear or a risk that gets in her path. She just says that if she wants to get over there she has to go through this.

“I think of Tracey [Saulters]. Despite living in a dominant culture that emphasizes individualism and personal success and power over others, she doesn’t operate like that. When a leadership or learning opportunity comes her way, the first thing she does is think about people around her whom she can share this with.

“Everyone thinks that way. They just naturally take this out into the community.”

When they do that, Jordan adds, they become models for others in the commu-

“There has been a critical paradigm shift. These people see residents differently now. Before there was a sense of ‘we need to take care of residents.’ But now they recognize that they have a lot to learn by hearing about and better understanding residents’ experiences.”

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nity, helping build the base of residents who, over time, can lead a transformation.

But they also have a profound impact on people who aren't residents of these neighborhoods: the researchers, the people working in social welfare agencies, the police that got engaged in the survey of crime in Cole, judges and many others.

“There has been a critical paradigm shift,” Jordan believes. “These people see residents differently now. They relate to residents differently. Before there was a sense of ‘we need to take care of residents.’ A sense of needing to do something *for* residents. But now they recognize that they have a lot to learn by hearing about and better understanding residents’ experiences.

“This is the core of what has to happen if we are ever to get to scope and scale. People change. Institutions change. Expectations change. Relationships change.

“This paradigm shift is what will allow public and political will to be built, which is

ultimately what all this has to be about. Without it we are just talking about one more initiative.”

How did such a strong learning network develop in Denver?

Many people who have spent time in Denver agree with Jordan that something profound is happening there and that the Community Learning Network is at the center of much of it.

The question is how did this happen? What were the conditions that allowed a group of residents to feel so empowered and to find the energy to accomplish so much in a very short period of time? Can it be replicated? How?

And the question is, what can be learned from this experience? What did the Making Connections staff people who got this process started do? What have they learned? What would they tell others who want to start this process in their communities?

To learn the answers to these and other questions, several staff involved in the Learning Network were interviewed, along with Audrey Jordan and four residents who are deeply involved in the Network.

The Learning Network’s many connections

Not surprisingly for an initiative called Making Connections, many people emphasized the importance of the Learning Network’s strong connections: to the neighborhoods,

Local Learning Partnerships

The idea and part of the money for the Learning Network came from the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s requirement that all Making Connections sites have a “Local Learning Partnership.”

This partnership is supposed to bring together local researchers and community people to make data and information available to communities as well as to help the foundation and its local partners learn from and evaluate the MC work. It is also supposed to build local capacity to use data to inform and propel change.

“I’ve been amazed at the things these people do to put information out to their community. It has really enhanced this community’s capacity to learn and its ability to push for changes that will make a long-term difference for families.”

—Garland Yates

Start Not With Projects But With Principles

One of the Community Learning Network’s first activities did not involve doing research or even learning about the four Making Connections’ neighborhoods but defining how they were going to do their research.

The group came up with nine principles to guide their work. This mirrors the process used by Making Connections-Denver, which developed its guiding principles during its early stage.

The principles have been invaluable in helping the group get through issues that could divide the Network’s members, such as the funding proposal from Metro Organizations for People. They helped justify the hard discussion they had about a proposal brought by two of their own members. And they helped the group come up with guidelines for future proposals from Making Connections partners.

Guiding Principles for Community Driven Research

1. Research and evaluation projects must address the needs of the community as identified and prioritized by the community itself. Projects should actively incorporate ongoing organizing and community building efforts in the community in the design, implementation, and follow up actions or activities.
2. Residents should be in decision-making roles in the design and implementation of the research or evaluation project. These roles might include selection of contract personnel or organizations to carry out the activities, approval of tools or instruments being developed on behalf of community, decisions about how to enter and engage community, and decisions about when, what and how to communicate the projects and lessons learned back to community.
3. To avoid duplication, competition, or exploitation of community residents, all projects should build upon and learn from other research projects already completed or underway in the same community.
4. When paid opportunities are made available, first priority should go to residents of the same neighborhood who have or can develop the necessary skills and capacities to competently carry out the work.
5. As community members are investing significant amounts of unpaid time in efforts to improve their community, contract personnel or organizations should be prepared to make some commitment of time or other resource, without the expectation of payment, as a condition of their grant or contract.
6. Projects must respect and address the socio-economic, cultural and family needs of community, including providing opportunities at times convenient to community, translating all materials or public meetings into the primary languages spoken in community, and promoting participation by providing for the needs of family members such as child care.
7. All research and evaluation projects should have as a core component the building of new knowledge or skills among residents or other community stakeholders who can then apply those skills in an ongoing way for the improvement of their community.
8. The knowledge gained through the research or evaluation project must be communicated back to the larger community including but not limited to those who participated in the research or evaluation project.
9. Protecting for confidentiality, all data, instruments, materials, and other tools developed should remain the property of community to use as they see fit without cost or other barrier.

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—Terri Bailey

to the organizing being done in these neighborhoods, to the overall Making Connections initiative and to the local foundation that has been a key supporter, the Piton Foundation.

For Jordan, who has worked with learning partnerships in many cities, one key has been the way this partnership is connected to the overall MC initiative.

“The people involved with the Network have always been an important, recognized player at the Casey site team table. For too many of the other sites, the Local Learning Partnership is often an after-thought if it is a thought at all. That never happened with Garland as the Site Team Leader. Other Learning Partnerships are still fighting to be recognized as credible partners all the time, not just when they are needed for something.”

The simple fact that the staff for the Learning Network and the staff for Making Connections had offices next to each other also was critical. There has been constant communication. “Structurally we are the same organization,” observes Matt Hamilton, who provides much of the technical know-how to the Learning Network.

Those offices are in the Piton Foundation, which has invested considerable money and staff time in Making Connections.

At the same time the Network has strong ties to each of Denver’s four MC neighborhoods. People on the Network’s Leadership Committee come from all four neighborhoods. All of them

are active in those neighborhoods, sometimes with other MC projects, sometimes with work that is separate from Making Connections.

Much of the work they do in their communities involves organizing, Jordan points out. This affects what the Learning Network does. “Their data learning agenda is about the stuff people are concerned about in the neighborhood. It is not data in a vacuum. It is about data that has an immediate application. It has immediate power. You can’t overstate the importance of that.”

“These are stories that are absolutely dependent on other things happening,” is how Bailey explains it. Nothing that the Learning Network does or supports is done in a vacuum. A good example is its support for an evaluation of the Victim Offender Reconciliation Project, a Making Connections partner. This evaluation is seen as but one part of a process that, hopefully, will lead to profound change in Denver’s criminal justice system.

“VORP is dependent on TA,” Bailey explains. “We don’t provide that. That is a TARC grant [TARC was the technical assistance arm of the Casey Foundation]. We don’t support the Cole Community Justice Council. That comes from a different partner.”

To Bailey the key is the integration. “All the partners need to see this as part of their mission. This must be said out loud. People need to know what they are doing. It’s not just creating a table where residents are invited. It is a larger task.”

“It’s a single vision,” adds Hamilton.

“After the first year, if you had evaluated what we had done, you might have concluded that we didn’t accomplish all that much. We knew we had accomplished a lot. But it wasn’t the kind of thing you can easily measure. Piton understood that.”

—Matt Hamilton



“There has been major, major growth for me in this work,” says Learning Network member Tracey Saulters (middle).

Denver’s emphasis on the principles of organizing

Denver’s connection to organizing has helped the Learning Network in another way, Jordan believes. “When you bring a community organizing philosophy to this work, as Garland did, it is inconceivable to have a learning partnership without residents. It was the only LLP that started with the notion that residents will lead. That’s important. People were oriented to make it real.”

A substantial commitment by two foundations

The value of data to communities was not a new idea for the Piton Foundation, which

houses and supports Making Connections. Piton had already built what Jordan calls “one of the exemplary data warehouses in the country.” Rather than focus on gathering data, the Learning Network could focus on how to put that data to use and how to find data that weren’t available.

But Piton did more than house and support the Learning Network. It also made a large commitment to supporting its agenda of building resident leadership.

“The transformation that happened within that organization to become a real local leader for this was crucial,” Jordan says. “They put up money, staff, resources. They had a pervasive involvement. It wasn’t just a grant. It is a level of commitment you can’t overlook.”

They also made a critical *long-term* commitment to the Learning Network’s agenda, notes Hamilton.

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Both Hamilton and Terri Bailey say the same thing about the Casey Foundation and Jordan. “What Audrey created for us is the same space that we created for the residents,” Bailey says. Rather than require Denver to produce a detailed roadmap of how they planned to build their local learning partnership, Jordan allowed them to set broad goals and then figure out as they went how to achieve them.

“The first two years we had close to total freedom. You couldn’t have created a better formula. We had funding. We had partnerships. We had advocates. We had Piton saying, ‘be as flexible as you need to be.’”

—Terri Bailey

“The first two years we had close to total freedom,” Bailey recalls. “You couldn’t have created a better formula. We had funding. We had partnerships. We had advocates. We had Piton saying, ‘be as flexible as you need to be.’”

Resources alone are not enough

Bailey believes that many think that the main reason for the success of Denver’s Learning Partnership is the considerable support it has received from the Piton Foundation. Yes, Piton’s support has been extremely valuable. But if you focus on Denver’s resources, she thinks you miss the many other factors that have been at least as important.

“It’s an excuse,” she says. “This tendency to say, ‘That’s Denver,’ needs to be countered.”

If you look at the specific projects that the Learning Network has supported, Bailey says the total amount of money invested in these projects is only a little more than \$50,000. “For that we got a survey of parents in 10 schools, the Cole crime survey, an evaluation of three new literacy models, we paid for the restorative justice evaluation.

“You can do a lot without a lot of money. But a big part of it is you have to have committed partners who see this as part of their mission, not as part of a grant.”

Hamilton believes one key is to “think about the work differently than it has been traditionally done. To *not* pay one consultant \$50,000 to do one survey.” Much of the research supported by the Learning Network has paid residents to help conduct surveys and do other tasks.

“If everything you do as part of a learning partnership is on the clock, if everything is an hourly rate, that will preclude” how much you can accomplish, Bailey adds.

Committed staff and leaders

“If you could replicate all these things about Denver you still would need a kind of leadership and vision and stick-with-it-ness” that exists in Denver, Jordan believes. “You have to have people with a fundamental belief that residents know how to lead and that all we need to do is learn how to follow.”

In particular Jordan believes that much can be learned from Bailey’s approach to this work. “You really can’t say enough about a person who brings a rare combination of passion, intelligence, a drive to build the leadership skills of those around her. Her energy. The hours she puts in. The relationships she has been able to forge with the residents. And, importantly, she was open to change in herself, and change she did!”

Bailey thinks it is a mistake to focus on her or any other person involved in the Learning Network. “Most of the other cities have people who feel as passionately about this as Matt and I do. They are frustrated because they don’t feel they have the venue. Their passion is not being taken advantage of.

“It’s an interesting thing about passion. You can’t control it. If you value control over passion and commitment...”

The key is for a staff person to be open to the work, to be willing to learn from it just as the residents are learning. “No one

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comes to this work prepared for it. You can learn. You can change.”

Bailey also believes there are residents who can become excellent leaders in every neighborhood, though she would also be the first to praise the leaders involved in the Learning Network.

Jordan says the number of leaders involved in Denver amazes her. “The people... Candace, Gaby, Tracey, Suzanne, Phil, Elias, Sharon...they are so determined. They all have struggles in their daily lives. But they step up every time.”

What allowed so many residents to become so deeply engaged in this work?

Many community-based initiatives can point to some extraordinary individuals who have overcome challenges and transformed themselves into powerful leaders. What may set Denver and its Community Learning Network apart is the number of people who have gone through this process to become leaders.

Go to one of its meetings and you will learn that all 11 members of the Learning Network’s Leadership Committee are deeply engaged in its work. Their meetings are seldom if ever dominated by one or two voices. There is often disagreement.

There are sometimes deep strains, such as when the Network would not rubber stamp the MOP proposal even though it was being presented by two of its own members. But so far, the group stays committed to each other.

When one member left the Network’s retreat in the summer of 2003 (a retreat that spent considerable time working through the strains caused by the MOP situation), a delegation went to talk with her and urge her to return to the Network. She did.

The question is, how did Denver achieve this? How did they get such a strong core group of resident leaders? How have they managed to keep bringing in new residents who become as deeply engaged as those who were there at the beginning? What have they learned from this process?

Ask these questions and the first response you get is a little disappointing! “We don’t know the recipe,” says Bailey. “We know some of the ingredients.” Later she adds, “It just happened that we did some things right.”

But push and you discover that they have learned a lot from their experiences.

• Understand why “resident-led” is so important

Building a learning partnership like Denver’s is not easy. It takes time and patience. It takes a willingness to go into communities and relationships. It takes a willingness to let go of the special status of being an expert.

There’s no way to do it without a deep commitment to allowing residents to direct the work. A person must understand why that is important.

For Bailey, it initially came from the third goal laid out for Making Connections Learning Partnerships: build the capacity of the community to use data.

“The most important thing is, the research issues come from the community. That’s different from traditional research where the professor identifies what he or she wants to study and goes and studies it.”

—Prof. Nick Cutforth

How a Crime Survey Has Helped Start a Process To Reduce Crime in One Denver Neighborhood

Crime in the Cole neighborhood of Denver may be vastly underreported, according to a study conducted last spring by Cole residents and analyzed by researchers at the University of Denver.

Almost half of surveyed residents who had been crime victims in the previous year didn’t call police.

The survey was done by the Cole Alliance’s neighborhood safety committee. The Alliance — which is part of Making Connections-Denver — brings together Cole neighborhood groups and residents to work on issues in this mostly low income neighborhood. The survey was supported by the Community Learning Network.

The survey involved residents going door-to-door to interview fellow residents. The survey teams included one English speaker and one Spanish speaker. The project is an excellent example of how resident-led research can both shed light on a neighborhood’s issues and become part of an effort to transform that neighborhood.

The survey found that 53% of Latinos in Cole didn’t call police after being victims of crime. One big reason: “They can’t get anybody to speak Spanish” at the District 2 police station, according to Debra Johnson, one of the residents who conducted the survey.

Another reason: fear of drug dealers.

► *The survey teams included one Spanish speaker and one English speaker.*



But despite the fact that more than one in five Cole residents reported being victims of crime in the previous year, fear of crime isn’t rampant. According to the survey, 56 percent of residents expressed only mild fear while 29% reported no fear at all. The most fearful were Anglo residents.

Another very interesting finding: residents complained the most about trash, followed by public drinking, drug abuse and drug sales. All of these are problems that residents can do something about, says Cole activist Steve Reemts, the administrator of a low-income housing community.

To work on these problems, the Cole Community Justice Council meets monthly with police. Liquor store owners were invited to discuss the public drinking problem. They agreed to install security cameras and hire off-duty police officers and people to pick up trash twice a day.

“A lot of stuff evolved out of the survey,” says Reemts. “When it’s resident-driven, it’s pretty pure, pretty honest.”

The Denver University professor who helped evaluate the study, Nick Cutforth, agrees. “The most important thing is, the research issues come from the community. That’s different from traditional research where the professor identifies what he or she wants to study.”

Cutforth says he was intrigued by the perception that quality of life was related to certain types of crimes such as public drug and alcohol abuse.

“But what’s important about that is, it really doesn’t matter what I think. What matters is that we provide results that [residents] can use.”

Being involved in community-driven research projects like this one has another positive impact, Cutforth believes: “My sense is the students are transformed by this work. They realize there is a world out there that needs their contribution.”

“We didn’t believe that you could build the community’s capacity to use data without genuine resident leadership. Our experience has taught us that people do not use data unless they have ownership of the data.”

—Terri Bailey

“You could do the data warehouse. You could do the process documentation. But we didn’t believe that you could build the community’s capacity to use data without genuine resident leadership. Our experience has taught us that people do not use data unless they have ownership of the data.”

“We get calls from people who ask, ‘How do you get residents to care about data?’” explains Matt Hamilton. “We haven’t scratched the surface on that subject. But it obviously has to do with data being relevant to them.”

He recounted the story of one member of the Learning Network, Phillip Kasper. Hamilton gave him a computer printout of some very detailed information about local schools. “If I had given him that data five years ago, it would have been meaningless to him. But now he has a deep concern for the school in Sun Valley, where he lives. So he delved into that data because it was relevant to an issue he cared about deeply.”

“The data is not relevant,” says Bailey, who has worked with data much of her professional life. “It’s the understanding that’s relevant. It’s the ability to say: ‘We’re working with our elementary school. We see these kids starting to struggle in the 5th grade. We don’t understand it.’

“They already have all of that knowledge. They then look at the data and they can see exactly the point where they can intervene. It gives them solutions.”

“The data sophisticates can say, this is what the data means, statistically speaking,” explains Jordan. “But residents can connect the data directly to conditions in their

neighborhoods. They can use it to solve problems.”

Just as important, residents can bring deep insights to the data, insights that come from their experience. “People think of residents using data as someone giving them the data and residents use it,” says Bailey. “It’s all one direction. But it’s not.

“Residents don’t *just* know what the issue is, they know things about the issue. From their life experiences. Their kids’ experiences. Their neighbor’s. From observations. They have data.”

• **Engage residents first**

Bailey thinks the biggest mistake a staff person can make in this work is to “fill the room” with people from academia and research organizations before residents are invited in.

“The residents’ role becomes superficial. It’s an inch deep. This is what we mean by creating and protecting space. If the room is already full, people can’t create.”

The need to not fill the room is why Bailey and Hamilton thank the two supporters of this work – the Casey and Piton Foundations – for not insisting on a detailed plan and set of outcomes before the work got started.

“The award that the Learning Network gave to the Casey Foundation was not for the money but for allowing this process to happen,” Bailey says. [The award was one of three given by the Learning Network during a ceremony and celebration in December 2002.]

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“The key to replicating this work is not to do exactly what we did, not to copy our model for something like story circles, but to let the residents implement it themselves. That’s all you’ve got to do. But you’ve got to mean it.”

—Terri Bailey



“I feel enfranchised to do things,” ◀
says Network member Linda Wurst.

model for something like story circles,” says Bailey, “but to let the residents implement it themselves. That’s all you’ve got to do. But you’ve got to mean it.”

Denver’s “story circles” are similar to Indianapolis Making Connections’ “family circles,” Bailey believes. “The real difference is that, in Indianapolis, the staff created them. I think they are identical in every other way. The act of the residents creating the story circles is what makes them special. It’s not the model. It’s the act of creating a model.

“The more definition you have on tasks and products, the less space you can afford to give residents,” Bailey believes. “You invite residents to join you on certain tasks as opposed to inviting residents to join you in a relationship from which the tasks will emerge. Our experience suggests that this is a mistake.”

It needs to start at the beginning, Bailey and Hamilton believe. “Residents were never at the ‘being involved’ stage,” Bailey says. “From day one we defined the space according to what we wanted at the end: ownership, leadership. You need to define their role big enough that they will fill it.”

“Those residents who only want to be involved don’t stick around,” Hamilton explains.

The residents say they are very aware of the difference between being involved and being in control. “I feel enfranchised to do things” is how Linda Wurst puts it.

• **Reach deeply into communities**

The easy way to try to engage residents is to call a community meeting and invite the leaders of existing community groups. But doing this excludes most residents. Had they done this in Denver it’s possible that none of the current members of the Learning Network’s Leadership Committee would have gotten involved.

Instead, Cec Ortiz (the MC site coordinator) and David Portilla (staff of the Denver Foundation, a MC partner) spent weeks going out and talking with community leaders they knew. Ortiz did more than 200 interviews herself. She asked the same questions to each person: What are your hopes and dreams for this neighborhood? Where does work need to be done? Who are three other people in your community who we should talk to?

She says she looked for people “who had a passion about the Casey ideas.” She picked people who “I thought Terri could

“If you could replicate all these things about Denver you still would need a kind of leadership and vision and stick-with-it-ness that exists in Denver. You have to have people with a fundamental belief that residents know how to lead and that all we need to do is learn how to follow.”

—Audrey Jordan



Learning Network staff member Terri Bailey. ◀

engage. They had energy. They could grasp the ideas. They had connections in their neighborhoods.”

“They were very intentional about not getting the people who are ‘gatekeepers’ for the community,” Bailey explains. “They wanted people who were known, who were somehow engaged in their communities, but who had never been in a gatekeeper role.”

They started small: only about six people, of whom perhaps only three came regularly to their initial meetings. “People think you’re going to start with this magic group of 20 people, but that wasn’t our experience,” Bailey says. “We started with three people coming consistently to meetings. But we overcame that disappointment.

And we saw that core of three people become six, then nine, then 12.

“We became comfortable with the idea that whomever shows up is a gift. You value them. You sit and have a meeting. You never make them feel like you are disappointed. Never.”

The Learning Network held a retreat in September of 2000 that brought together a handful of learning “partners” with the members of the Cole and West Side learning partnerships. “It was such a teeny retreat,” says Bailey. But the mix of people stimulated some great discussions. “With more people there’s more energy. There’s more new thinking. They loved it. At the meeting they were like, ‘We are going to do this. We are going to stay together.’”

After the retreat the core groups remained small. “They were saying, ‘You’ve got to bring in more people.’ We kept saying, ‘This is yours.’”

In response, the members developed a plan for bringing in more people and “it just happened,” Bailey remembers. “They were very intentional. They wanted 12 people. They wanted the work connected to the organizing.” They recruited several people doing organizing in Cole and on the West Side.

Once they reached a critical mass, the members were able to regularly bring in new people.

“Sometimes people have to walk away,” explains Matt Hamilton. “We’ve become comfortable with that. Some people just find other ways to get involved. They find another niche.”

“We are at the point where I think we don’t have much to worry about. The folks that we get involved bring in new people. You just have to be comfortable not knowing where you will be in six months. You really have to be comfortable with ambiguity.”

—Matt Hamilton

One key is to make new people feel welcome. “With the turnover we’ve had it’s been critical that we keep the history,” Bailey says. “Residents bring someone along, then that person brings a new person along. In some cases we are as far along as the fourth generation, but with continuity, with consistency.”

“We are at the point where I think we don’t have much to worry about,” Hamilton

“First impressions are important”

Someone who has witnessed the process of building the Community Learning Network is Grace Giermek, a former Casey Foundation staff person who played a crucial support role for Denver site team leader Garland Yates. She brings a perspective influenced by her strong Philippine culture.

“Cultures are so different. First impressions are important. People observe your body language. Are you comfortable? Are you present? Are you listening?”

The ability to listen is key, she believes. “It can take two hours, but it’s important. It’s a way to gain their respect. To show that you respect them. It’s not that hard! Their stories are very interesting.”

This process of listening can help an outsider find a connection with people who have a very different background and culture, Giermek believes. “The way Making Connections works, it doesn’t allow for this to happen. You have to give them this time.”

You also have to follow through. “If you promise to do something you have make sure you do it. It’s all about trust for them.”

believes. “The folks that we get involved bring in new people. You just have to be comfortable not knowing where you will be in six months. You really have to be comfortable with ambiguity.”

• Listen!

While many new people have become part of the Learning Network over the past three years, there is a core of people who have stayed with it. Many invest a tremendous amount of time in the Network. Talk with them and they offer many insights about why they have chosen to invest so much in this work. To a person they talk about the willingness of the staff of the Learning Network to listen to them.

“I couldn’t believe there was someone there who was willing to listen to us,” says Candace Redshirt, who has since become a resident staff person for Making Connections. “Staff didn’t want to tell us what to do. That had never happened to me before.”

Linda Wurst says essentially the same thing: “They really want to hear from us.”

Because being listened to is a new experience for many residents, Bailey believes that one key is for staff to work very hard at holding back their own opinions. Over and over she repeated the same line: “I don’t know. What do you think?”

“This issue of repeating and reminding is huge. You have to say to them over and over again, ‘This is yours. What do you think? This is yours. What do you think?’ It takes a long time before it becomes real to them. But it does.”

“‘It’s not, ‘yes, I value you.’ It’s that you contribute to me. That’s different. A lot of people understand it intellectually, but if they haven’t experienced it relationally, they still don’t get it.”

—Terri Bailey

Bailey says that she didn’t go into this work with this mantra in mind. She only recognized its importance when she was at a meeting where Learning Network members explained that, “Terri and Matt say to us all the time, ‘We don’t know. What do you think?’”

“They said that at first we would just piss them off because they thought, ‘Well, if you don’t know, who does?’ But now they talk about how important that was.

“If we’ve learned nothing else, it is to keep saying what is important for people to hear. Sooner or later someone is going to hear you.”

The “what do you think” mantra eventually communicates that you “value residents’ expertise,” explains Hamilton. “We say in our job descriptions that you in the community have something no one else can provide: knowledge of your community. You are an expert. But actually saying that to people over and over again empowers them.

“People perceive this idea intellectually, but it’s not intended intellectually. Residents have real skill. They have real knowledge. They have real experience.”

“You think of yourself as a nice person and you want to say, ‘Yeah, of course I know that.’” But saying it is very different from practicing it, Bailey believes.

“It’s not, ‘yes, I value you.’ It’s that you contribute to me. That’s different. A lot of people understand it intellectually, but if they haven’t experienced it relationally, they still don’t get it.”

Pay residents for their expertise?

In a culture that puts a monetary value on so much, Bailey and Hamilton believed that it was important to offer to pay residents for their time. They asked both the Cole and West Side groups to decide about a stipend.

The Cole group decided not to take a stipend because a previous initiative in Cole had created tension by paying some people but not everyone. The West Side group had a “wonderful, reasonable conversation about it,” in Bailey’s words.

“‘Well, yes we should because we should value ourselves.’ This was the first time they articulated the fact that they brought something, not just that they were getting something.” But how much?

One resident suggested \$25 an hour or \$50 for a monthly meeting. “The others just fell out of their chairs,” remembers Bailey. “They were thinking like \$5. We said okay. They then started to develop rules about how much someone would have to participate to get their \$50.”

Candace Redshirt remembers that meeting well. When asked how much, she says, “We were just speechless. We didn’t know.”

She emphasizes that she would have participated without the stipend. “The value of what I’ve learned. The relationships I’ve built. The transformation I’ve seen with other individuals and in myself. I would have been part of this group even if the money hadn’t been there. There’s so much richness and value in it.”

But the \$50 was meaningful, and not just as a concrete symbol that the residents were valued. “Economically, where I was in my life, that \$50 was me taking my kids to the movies, doing something extra for my family.”

“We’ve learned that their hunger for knowledge and skill is so great that whatever they need to know they will seek out. They use us to help them find it. I trust the process the most on this.”

—Terri Bailey

• **Respond!**

Listening to residents and valuing their expertise is a start. But to truly value someone’s experience and ideas, you need to act on them, Bailey and Hamilton believe.

“Our role was to be supporters of the process,” says Hamilton. “We quickly got clear about that. It makes perfect sense, but it’s not like we always knew this.”

Once again, this is an easy concept to grasp but often a hard one to put into action. “It is hard to get out of the mode of needing to direct what people do as opposed to responding to what residents need,” explains Jordan. “How do you do that when you are paid through a contract? When you are locked into these organizational procedures?”

“Our role is being totally responsive,” Bailey says. “There are times when we teach, but I wouldn’t define our relationship as teacher.”

The learning that happens comes naturally, Bailey believes. “We’ve learned that their hunger for knowledge and skill is so great that whatever they need to know they will seek out. They use us to help them find it. I trust this process the most on this.”

“If we weren’t responsive, we would be driving the knowledge,” says Hamilton. He suggests this would defeat the whole point of this work, which is to have residents drive the knowledge.

Residents perceive this. “Terri will tell you real clearly, ‘I do not have the answer for you. I don’t have a clue, but let’s find out,’” explains Jacobo. “They know they don’t have

the answer but they’ll help you find out. So I think that is the answer for me.”

• **Don’t begin by imposing an agenda or a structure**

You can’t be truly responsive if you start with an agenda, Bailey and Hamilton believe.

“I think a critical lesson is that you’ve got to go in agenda-less,” Bailey believes. “I don’t think we had any wisdom around the fact that we had no agenda, but now, looking back, it was one of the smartest things we did.”

When they began the Learning Network their first work plan was all of two paragraphs. Subsequent plans were longer, but the focus was on process and priorities, not activities and products.

This allowed residents to determine what the Learning Network would do and produce. The residents weren’t there simply to react to or carry out someone else’s plan.

“Our work plans never describe what we are going to do over the next 12 months,” Hamilton says. “We sort of frame the thing for you, but we can’t paint the center of it.

“Our intention was always creating space. We didn’t want to jump into the void. We didn’t want to do for them what they can do for themselves.”

Over time this strategy has paid off in Denver. Residents are not only determining the Learning Network’s direction, they are doing much of the work, Hamilton says. “They are doing it. They don’t look to me for everything. We don’t have to always be

“If you want to start a learning network, you’ve got to let it go – the decisions and the power. If you are not willing to do it, to let go of the power and to share the information, I don’t think you’re the best person to start a learning network.”

—Gabriela Jacobo

Residents are taking on many tasks says staff member Matt Hamilton (2nd from Left). “They don’t look to me for everything. We don’t have to always be there. They’ve become a flexible team of people.”



there. They’ve become a flexible team of people. They get tasks done in different configurations.”

Because they are so engaged in the work, the Learning Network can get more done, one reason that Making Connections believed that residents must be engaged in the first place.

Trying to impose too confining a structure on this process is a danger not just at the beginning. Hamilton believes that Making Connections’ stress on quantifiable outcomes could be a problem for a learning process that tries to engage residents deeply.

“What rubbed me wrong about the stress on outcomes at this stage is that you are now defining that space a little more. You’ve put goals on paper that you are tied to.” You also push the learning process to-

wards quantifying progress rather than identifying problems and solutions.

- **Allow residents to take on key decisions, including those over the budget**

“If you want to start a learning network,” reflects Gabriela Jacobo, “you’ve got to let it go – the decisions and the power. If you are not willing to do it, to let go of the power and to share the information, I don’t think you’re the best person to start a learning network.”

The residents’ decision-making role has grown over time, as they’ve felt more comfortable making decisions and begun to ask to make more decisions, Bailey explains.

In relation to the budget, early on “residents just wanted to know that they had re-

“If we had said no at any of these stages where they were asking for more and more control over the budget, that would have been the ball game. We could have just packed up and gone home. People know when they have real decision-making authority and when it’s just a sham.”

—Terri Bailey

sources available to them. They trusted staff to make those resources appear when they were needed.”

This evolved into deciding on the budget for Learning Network projects such as developing story circles.

When the Network was about two years old the residents asked to draft the budget for using all the Casey Foundation funds for the Learning Network.

The next year they began to budget for the other part of the Learning Network’s support, which comes from the Piton Foundation. They now look at and approve every expense item in the budget. They also see monthly financial reports.

“As staff, our policy has been to not crowd them with what we want or think they need,” Bailey says. “But we also never get in their way once they’ve decided what they want or need. Money can distract people too early in a process before the relationships are strong enough to survive what money can do to people.

“But if we had said no at any of these stages where they were asking for more and more control over the budget, that would have been the ball game. We could have just packed up and gone home. We knew that. People know when they have real decision-making authority and when it’s just a sham.”

Control over a budget is a very new experience for most residents, thus Bailey’s mantra is again key: “This is your budget. What do you want to do with it?”

“It’s been very instructive,” Bailey says. “Most of them have never had this kind of experience before. They say, ‘I’m on the board of a nonprofit but I’ve never seen its budget.’”

As the budget is developed, Bailey says that the staff do “a lot of listening. We’ll move stuff around and say, ‘Is this what you mean when you say this?’ But it’s no longer just us asking questions like this. The other members do it as well.

“They definitely feel ownership of the budget,” Bailey adds. Before they were involved in the entire budgeting process, residents demonstrated their sense of ownership by “calling us up and saying, ‘I need this stuff tomorrow.’ And it’s stuff you had to go out and buy.”

But now residents no longer ask for things on short notice if they are not in the budget, Bailey reports. “They’ve come a long way in understanding how, if you want to move things around in a budget, it requires a full Learning Network discussion.

“It’s all about learning and growth and having the conversation when it’s time and not before.”

• **Be patient and resist the temptation to go out and do something**

Bailey, Hamilton and Jordan all agree that none of this work is easy for most professionals who have spent their adult lives managing projects and accomplishing tasks.

“You can’t just go out and create this entity,” Hamilton explains. “You can’t build it. It has to grow naturally.

“You have to resist the temptation of the professional to just go out and do something. In your heart of hearts you know what really should happen. You have to fight that.”

—Matt Hamilton



“I listen to Linda, to Tracey, to Phuonglan. It's just a learning, a learning, a learning.”

—Gabriela Jacobo

“There is something in that idea of professionals letting go of the leadership role...admitting that you don't know,” Hamilton adds.

“In retrospect, we just thought we were being honest,” Bailey adds. “But what we were doing is creating room for people to learn new things. If we said we didn't know, after awhile they pick up the mantle. They begin to invest, to try. When you don't know, there is a vacuum. People will try to fill a vacuum.”

Allowing something to grow naturally takes time, especially in the early days. At times, Hamilton says, “You need to be comfortable doing things at a slower pace. You and your organization need to be comfortable with this pace.

“You have to resist the temptation of the professional to just go out and do something.

In your heart of hearts you know what really should happen. You have to fight that.”

Jacobo saw how much patience it took in the early days. “Terri and Matt have a lot of patience. They e-mail me like 10 times sometimes. Why didn't they give up on the 2nd e-mail? Or the 4th? They didn't because they know I'm going to answer. They know how busy we are.”

The pace doesn't stay slower, Bailey warns. “On some things, particularly when they're new, it takes longer. You have to slow down. You need more dialogue, more conversation, more time.

“But on other things, particularly once they've made up their minds on something, they leave us in their dust. And they know it, too!”

• **Trust in the Process!**

Patience needs to come, at least in part, from a conviction that this seemingly slow process is going to produce changes and products that are worth the extra time.

“Garland [Yates] calls it trust in the process,” Bailey says. “It's interesting because, if it's a genuine process, you really don't have to worry about things like gatekeepers.”

“You need to believe that the end product is not going to be something that you came up with because you were efficient,” adds Jordan, “but something real different that's a product of a collaborative effort.”

Jordan says she is amazed by the creativity that has emerged from this collaborative process. “I'm not sure I've ever experienced

“I’m not sure I’ve ever experienced the level of creation that these people are experiencing. Because we control our lives. We have jobs. Somebody tells us what to do. I don’t think I’ve ever had a job where I would have come up with something like story circles.”

—Audrey Jordan

the level of creation that these people are experiencing. Because we control our lives. We have jobs. Somebody tells us what to do. We’re going to work on the 2000 Census. We may be creative in how we analyze it, what we say about it. But I don’t think I’ve ever had a job where I would have come up with something like story circles.”

The very process of creating something “is huge in keeping people involved,” Bailey believes. “They just felt free to create and so they started creating.”

It is also much harder to control a collaborative effort. “I think one way you know you have genuine resident leadership is that you’ve totally lost control,” Bailey says with a laugh.

“And I don’t just mean control like, ‘I’m in charge.’ It is that you have no idea how much you are going to get done today. You have no idea what you’re going to be doing tomorrow. There’s no predictability in your work. That is when you realize a transfer has happened. You say, ‘I better find something good in this. Otherwise it’s going to drive me nuts.’”

• **Keep the focus on learning**

Talk to residents engaged in the Learning Network and they all emphasize how much they’ve learned and changed as they’ve participated in this process.

Candace Redshirt said that getting paid a stipend to participate in the Learning Network was good for her family, but what really was important to her was “the value of my learning, the relationships I’ve built, the

Learning from the process

Bailey believes that there was tremendous learning when the Learning Network discussed the proposal from Metro Organizations for People (MOP). MOP wanted support for an evaluation of how they were developing leaders.

“The questions they asked the other night were about how to keep an organization accountable to the principles,” Bailey says. “They realized that their role is not to give money to their friends. Their role is to advance learning and make sure that the learning advances Making Connections. That’s the first time that came up. I wanted to dance in the streets!”

Bailey didn’t explain any of this during the discussion. Her focus was on reflecting back the group’s comments. She believes her role is to help them know what they’ve learned.

“Our role is not to teach them. We coach them. We help them own their learning. ‘Did you hear what you just said? Did you understand what just happened?’”

One important byproduct of this debate about MOP’s proposal was a structure for responding to future proposals.

“They don’t create structure for the sake of creating structure but to meet an immediate need. When the needs change or their understanding of the needs change, the rules change. That’s the way they’ve always operated. It’s in the moment.”

transformation I’ve seen with other individuals and myself.”

This learning and growth in itself is a crucial outcome, Bailey believes. Some people “can’t understand that the process and the learning is the success. Learning is the point.

“I’m getting used to knowing that conflict is energy. It is nothing to be afraid of. It is forces that are meeting. Sometimes good things can come out of that.”

—Candace Redshirt



Learning Network member Phuonglan Nguyen, from the heavily Vietnamese community of Sun Valley.

Of course you are going to fail. We’ve failed 100 times the last two years with this learning partnership. But that doesn’t mean we say, ‘Can’t do that because it can’t work.’”

The learning comes in many ways. It isn’t simply residents learning from data about their communities, though that is certainly part of it. It isn’t simply residents learning by identifying the data they want and helping design and conduct a survey to get that data, though that too is part of it.

It is also learning that comes from being engaged in a process: the process of building the Making Connections website, creating the story circle model as a tool to engage residents, helping design and manage the crime survey in Cole, making a decision about the funding proposal for MOP

(the organizing group that asked for a grant to evaluate how it is training leaders).

A comment by Candace Redshirt captures how Learning Network members have learned from being engaged in a process. She was reflecting on a tense part of a Making Connections retreat.

Asked if she was uncomfortable with this tension, she said she wasn’t. “I enjoyed it. I’m getting used to knowing that conflict is energy. It is nothing to be afraid of. It is just forces meeting. Sometimes good things can come out of that.”

The learning isn’t always about group process or neighborhood issues. It is often about one’s own abilities.

Redshirt says she sees herself completely differently than she did a couple of years ago, when she had no idea she had the ability to be a leader. She remembers first meeting the Casey Foundation’s Garland Yates. She held her head down. She “could barely get out the words.” That is no longer true.

“I’m not scared to speak up at a meeting. I’m not scared to talk about who I am, not scared to share my ideas and my experiences, my positive attitude. I’ve been learning that I have a lot of traits that I think give me opportunities.”

Seeing other residents go through a transformation like this can also be a learning experience. Jacobo talks about how she watches other people at Learning Network meetings. She asks herself, “How can she interact with these kinds of people? Well, let me try it. I listen to Linda. I listen to Tracey.

“I would probably never have been willing to go to a Spanish-speaking meeting if I didn’t have the relationship with Gabriela and admiration for her. How can she come into this country and do this? If Gaby can do this, I can do this.”

—Tracey Saulters

Learning from the process: another example

Recently Candace Redshirt reflected about a Making Connections retreat that had occurred the previous day. There had been a very tense half hour in the afternoon. The tension concerned whether residents who become Making Connections staff members can still speak as residents of their neighborhoods. Some organizers believe strongly that it should never be the role of staff to speak as residents.

To cite the obvious, this is a sensitive issue to someone like Candace, a long-time resident who recently became a staff member. But a little surprisingly, she wasn’t at all upset about the conflict that came out over this issue.

“You can’t be afraid of it. You don’t back down from it. Just confront it. Communication is the key for [that happening].”

“We needed that conversation,” she continued. “At our last staff meeting the resident staff said they didn’t like that title. They wanted to be clearer about their roles.... They saw the title as another label. They didn’t feel that their role had been defined well enough.”



I listen to Phuonglan. It’s just a learning, a learning, a learning.”

Saulters, who is African American, talks about what she has learned by watching Jacobo, a recent immigrant from Mexico who learned to speak English only after coming to this country. “I would have probably never ever been willing to go to a Spanish-speaking meeting or do something different if I didn’t have the relationship with Gabriela or the respect or admiration or envy. How the heck can she come into this country and do this? I admire that. If Gaby can do this, I can do this.”

The residents also learn by watching staff such as Cec Ortiz, Denver Making Connections’ former site coordinator. Saulters says she is amazed by Ortiz’s ability to keep calm in situations where “someone is going off on her.”

She adds: “That’s the role model for me.”

Besides acting as a coach and a role model, staff should also acknowledge and celebrate the learning, Bailey thinks. “I will say, ‘There is learning here. This is really important. Be proud of yourselves.’”

• Build a strong community!

The ability to learn through this work is certainly not the only thing that pulls residents so deeply into this work. Another critical factor is the sense of community felt by the Learning Network’s members.

“We like each other,” Redshirt says simply.

This helps motivate people who have so much going on in their lives, Bailey believes.

“You have to be able to call someone on something and be honest. I see that willingness with Terri, with Gaby, with Cec, with Sharon. I see that with everyone in the Learning Network. They are willing to look at their stuff and do things differently.”

—Tracey Saulters

“You have to have reasons for doing this work that go beyond you as an individual. You do things for your family that you wouldn’t do for other people. You get tired, you miss a meeting, but if it’s family, you come back. People keep coming back because of their relationships with each other.

“We need to find an objective way to help people see that it is the quality of the relationships that makes this effective.”

Having forged strong relationships helps when the inevitable tensions in this work come out. Because two Learning Network members who work as MOP organizers presented MOP’s request for an evaluation grant, the questions raised about the proposal struck nerves. After the initial meeting the group had to spend time to discuss what happened and heal. When one member left the Network’s retreat that summer, a group of members went to her, talked about what had happened and encouraged her to return. She did

People usually don’t leave the group because of the “genuine, authentic relationships” that have developed, according to Saulters.

“I can be angry with Terri. I can get angry with Gabriella. But it’s okay. I can be me. I don’t have to hold it back and hold it in and be something I’m not. I can take the mask off.

“You have to be able to deal with it,” she says later. “You have to be able to call someone on something and be honest.” And that person needs to be willing to be challenged in this way. “I see that willingness with Terri, with Gaby, with Cec, with Sharon. I see that with everyone in the Learning Net-

work. They are willing to look at their stuff and do things differently.”

Learning from this “has been my growth,” Saulters adds.

Learning from each other has built up a desire to share their growth. “It’s why we build toolkits,” Jacobo explains. “I’m willing to share and you’re willing to share. Let’s support each other and share.

“It’s the school that Terri and Matt have created for the Learning Network. If you’re doing it, how can Tracey know about it and learn about it? If Tracey is doing it, how can she share it with others? That’s the school they made in the Learning Network: don’t keep it, share it.”

“Who would have ever guessed,” asks Bailey, “that they would have had such deep and respectful relationships with each other and their role in community?”

“Their self-esteem is built up in sharing, not in controlling,” Bailey adds.

• **Have fun and celebrate!**

The Learning Network has done a lot to build this sense of community. Initially its meetings were held in people’s homes around a dinner. Now the meetings are at restaurants. This gives people an opportunity to socialize as well as work.

Early on, many Learning Network members went together to a national community-building conference in Florida that helped form a bond among them.

Saulters says it was an extraordinary growth opportunity for her. “I saw things in

“Who would have ever guessed that they would have had such deep and respectful relationships with each other and their role in community? Their self-esteem is built up in sharing, not in controlling.”

—Terri Bailey

a whole new light. It opened up my eyes.” It helped her see “how I’m connected to the big picture. Even though I am one little piece, I feel so huge in this. I feel big. I have value.

“I always tell them you have two years of free labor from me just from that trip to Florida!”

The meetings in restaurants are also a chance for members simply to have fun and celebrate their work together. Hamilton talks about one Friday evening dinner meeting when he recognized the difference between a work-related meeting that happened to be in the evening and these meetings, which were more like a family coming together.

“You kind of feel like you are leaving your mom’s house. They give you a big hug.”

Hamilton happened to have baseball tickets that night, so he saw the meeting as work: an enjoyable experience, but work. When it was over, he was off to his game and his weekend. But he realized that, for the residents, the work was secondary. This was an opportunity to be with friends and have some fun.

“This was really a meeting but they all left feeling like they just had a celebration. They got all this work done but they didn’t feel like they’d been working. They felt like they’d been valued. They had fun. They laughed. They drank Margaritas. It was just a totally different feeling.”

“We have fun doing this work,” explains Linda Wurst, a resident who teaches in a local high school. She was talking during an



► *We have fun doing this work,” says Learning Network member Linda Wurst.*

awards ceremony at a downtown Denver restaurant that involved hundreds of residents, many of whom were family members of people involved in Making Connections.

“Look at these families tonight. Being at a restaurant like this, with their family, means a lot to them.”

• **Be willing to be part of this community and build relationships**

Several residents pointed out that Bailey and Hamilton were very much part of this community. They recognized the significance of these two Piton Foundation staff members coming into their communities and their willingness to relate to them as people, not “residents.”

“Terri and Matt were out in the community. You don’t see that often, people willing to step out of the 53rd floor and come into our communities. I can’t tell you how many people have offered us their support but I never see them in my community. Never.”

—Gabriela Jacobo

“Terri and Matt were out in the community,” says Gabriela Jacobo. “You don’t see that often, people willing to step out of the 53rd floor and come into our communities [the Piton Foundation is on the 53rd floor of a downtown office building]. I can’t tell you how many people have offered us their support but I never see them in my community. Never.

“So when you do see people from the 53rd floor, you’re going to return that support they’re giving you. You’re going to do it because they were out there in your community every single month until 8:30 at night and giving you a ride home because they wanted to know about you.”

“They keep themselves vulnerable,” adds Tracey Saulters. “They’re vulnerable to us because they come into our community. I don’t have to blend in and fit in and be something I’m not. You come down here and meet me where I’m at.”

Physically coming into a community is one thing. Emotionally becoming part of that community is quite another. But both Bailey and Hamilton believe this is important to do.

This is another part of this work that requires professionals to stretch, Bailey says. “I had to learn how to have nonprofessional relationships in a professional setting. None of this would have happened if we had maintained a professional distance.”

Resident Tracey Saulters agrees. She says she could not have gone through the growth she has experienced “without people

who are willing to be open to doing things differently. The willingness is not perfect by any means, but it’s the willingness to keep trying, to keep working.”

And, Saulters adds, the willingness to have a relationship. “I love it. I know if I get in a bind, I can call Terri at home. That’s important.

“If I need to have a meeting right now, today, she’ll come through. I know if I went to Terri and said I really need something, she’ll find a way to get it done.

“I was so frustrated one night at a meeting I asked Terri to meet me that night at my house. And she was there. She sat in my house and I just had to vent. She laughed and helped me think it through. It was cool. You got to have that relationship. You have to have the relationship without the judgment.

“You have to be able to speak your mind and know that that is the best part of the learning network and that you are not fired,” Saulters adds.

“I call her my big sister,” Jacobo adds about Bailey.

• **Establish Trust!**

Being willing to enter a relationship with someone helps establish trust. That is not a minor thing for people who have very different roles and backgrounds.

Asked how trust was established within the Learning Network, Saulters says, “My eyes are watching who’s doing the work and who’s walking their talk. That’s where the trust gets built.”

“I had to learn how to have nonprofessional relationships in a professional setting. None of this would have happened if we had maintained a professional distance.”

—Terri Bailey

◀ *“Look at these families tonight. Being at a restaurant like this, with their families, means a lot to them.” —Linda Wurst at a CLN awards banquet at a downtown restaurant.*



Saulters says that, for her, Bailey’s consistency was crucial in establishing trust. “I think Terri’s biggest quality is the fact that she’s detailed and she is a sustainer. Terri is the consistent person we knew we were going to see once a month. You need that.”

Jacobo agrees. She recalled how often Bailey came through with what she promised to do, often pulling together some data the group wanted. “You’re letting me know that you’re doing it, so I’m going to give you my participation and my help. Most of all it’s the trust between the Making Connections Denver staff and the participants, the residents. If you don’t have that trust, you will not get anywhere.”

Because that trust is there, Jacobo says that she trusts that she will be supported in her work, which builds her confidence and allows her to try new things.

While being willing to enter into these relationships can be very challenging, Bailey and Hamilton say it also can be quite rewarding. Bailey talks about a meeting when the residents gave her a very hard time about her “I don’t know” mantra.

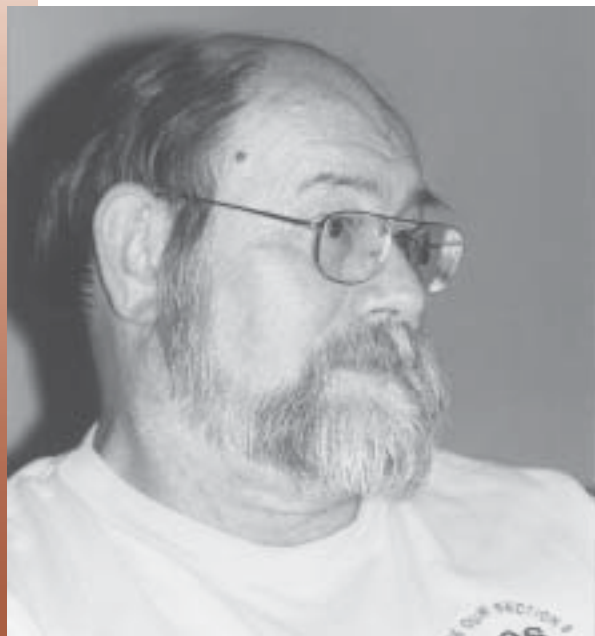
“They were so loving about it. They were like putting me in my place. But they were laughing with me about it, putting their arms around me, going, ‘We slip sometimes, it’s okay. We gotcha.’”

• **Protect residents**

One danger in building trust through having friendships with residents is that it can add to the risk of burnout, Bailey believes. Many Learning Network residents are involved with other Making Connections projects, sometimes several. Some residents have also become organizers or resident staff for the Initiative. They are often the

“We are killing ourselves trying to do everything as residents. At the same time, I’m trying to keep my job as an organizer. I’m tearing myself into pieces to do stuff for my neighborhood.”

—Gabriela Jacobo



CLN member Jim Kittel. ◀

first to agree to participate in some new activity or committee.

“There are serious issues related to burn-out,” Bailey says. “Residents become so involved. They get called on to do so many things.”

When they get asked to do something, they find it hard to say no. “Once you have these meaningful relationships with people, it’s not that they say yes to be polite,” Bailey explains. “They are so passionate about the work and they have such trust in you that if someone asks them to do something, they think it must be important or you wouldn’t ask, so they say yes.

“They take relationships so much more seriously than we do,” Bailey continues. “Professionals have such different relation-

ships than community people do. The residents’ relationships with us are like their relationships with their families. They are very personal. And you don’t say no to someone who’s part of your family.”

Several residents are aware of the danger of burning out. “We are killing ourselves trying to do everything as residents.” Jacobo says. “At the same time, I’m trying to keep my job as an organizer. I’m tearing myself into pieces to do stuff for my neighborhood.”

Doing this work is not like doing a normal job, Jacobo explains. “This is not a hard job. It is just very, very intensive. You have to put your heart into it and when you put your heart into something, it’s like being in love. When you go into a relationship, you get hurt and the pain stays there for quite awhile.”

The key, say Jacobo and Saulters, is constantly bringing in new people. “To keep its success we need to keep the flow of new people” is how Saulters puts it.

“We have to ask, what are we doing as residents to bring in new people,” says Jacobo. “Not just one but three new people because there is always going to be a split of needing to go to a training or needing residents for some information or needing residents over here for [something else]. That’s where we are lacking.”

In many community endeavors, bringing in new people becomes hard because the residents don’t want to let go of their new-found power. Saulters talked about how being the story circle coordinator on the West Side “gives me major strokes. It feeds my ego like you wouldn’t believe.

“I’ve got to get my ego out of the way and say, what’s going to be best for this initiative? Am I willing to walk my talk? That’s why I’m willing to give up my coordinator’s position so another resident can come up. I think it needs that new zest.”

—Tracey Saulters

“But I’ve got to get the ego out of the way and say, what’s going to be best for this initiative. I have to say what I am willing to do. Am I willing to walk my talk? That’s why I’m willing to give up my coordinator’s position so another resident can come up. I think it needs that new zest.”

- **Recognize that keeping this work going can be as challenging as getting it going**

This broadly shared concern about burnout and the need for more residents reflects a broader concern about how to keep the Learning Network growing. “You have to respect that this is very fragile and unique,” reflects Saulters. “We have to preserve and nurture it.”

Bailey worries as well. “Climbing up the hill is easy compared to being at the top. There’s no roadmap for the other side. All your energy goes into getting up there. This is a dangerous point. You can un-do all the good you’ve done. I don’t know how or when to get out of the way.”

She worries that “they still do a lot of looking to me” and that “I can’t always be there. I will be doing other things.” But she also sees that others “are taking on the nurturing role.”

And it’s not just a one-way street. “I feed off the relationships I’ve developed as well,” Bailey acknowledges. “That could create a dependence.”

Another challenge as the Learning Network matures is to keep it connected to the rest of Making Connections, Bailey be-

lieves. The tight bonds Learning Network members feel towards each other could isolate the group from other residents.

Countering this is the fact that so many Learning Network members are active in other parts of Making Connections. This helps the Network avoid becoming a “silo.” And the fact that the Learning Network is part of the Making Connections management team — and that key staff people share the same office — helps avoid isolation.

Perhaps most important, the Learning Network’s residents themselves don’t want to be isolated. “We want to go beyond the learning network in our learnings and sharings and to use our skills to build capacity beyond our community,” says Jacobo.

This budding sense that the residents have the skills within themselves to build a movement to change their neighborhoods is perhaps the most exciting part of the Learning Network’s story.

“We could not do what they are doing,” Bailey says. “Not with more time, more resources, more anything. It is not about time. What they are building has never been built before.

“I do a lot of really creative things and think of myself as a pretty intelligent person but I do not have their skills. I cannot do what they do.”

Says Denver Making Connections’ site team leader Garland Yates: “I’m amazed by their creativity. I’m amazed at the things these people do to put information out to their com-

"Climbing up the hill is easy compared to being at the top. There's no roadmap for the other side. All your energy goes into getting up there. This is a dangerous point. You can un-do all the good you've done. I don't know how or when to get out of the way."

—Terri Bailey



"I'm amazed by what these people do to put information out to their community. The magazine they do [The Learning Connection] is really impressive."
—Garland Yates

munities. The things they do to enhance their neighborhoods' learning capacity."

The Casey Foundation has stressed the need to see and measure results from the Making Connections process, says the foundation's evaluation liaison Audrey Jordan. But as it struggles to measure results, a goal Jordan agrees is important, the foundation also needs to acknowledge the Learning Network's accomplishments as an important result.

"It's a result in itself," Jordan believes. "A 'leave behind.' A set of powerful relationships

with roles and expectations. People who know what to do with information. People have it. They won't let go of it. It is the ground on which other results can be built."

The ground on which other results can be built?

The Community Learning Network is a very interesting model for engaging residents in data and research and for building a resident-driven process. But will it really make a difference in Denver's Making Connections ability to produce results? Isn't it better to have professionals evaluate how the work is progressing and whether the initiative achieves measurable results?

How exactly is the Community Learning Network "the ground on which other results can be built?" How does this idea translate into concrete outcomes for families in Denver MC's four neighborhoods?

Asked these questions, Site Team Leader Garland Yates focuses on the big picture: how the Learning Network fits into the overall MC Denver theory of change. That theory leans heavily on the role that organized residents can and need to play in the change process.

Denver MC believes that this is what can make a community-building initiative successful over time. Organized residents can force the kind of reorganization and re-focusing of resources that can make a difference. "Most people and most agencies aren't going to change unless someone is pushing them to change," Yates believes.

“The Learning Network is a result in itself. It’s a leave behind: people who know what to do with information. It is the ground on which other results can be built.”

—Audrey Jordan

Organized residents can also make sure a change process outlasts a visionary mayor or committed school board president, Yates explains. They can sustain the change process.

Given this crucial role for residents, Yates thinks that a resident-driven data and evaluation process is essential. “Communities have never been in the position to say if the evaluators are focusing on the right results. They’ve never been in the position to say what the specific results should be. To say that the marginal results that usually come from these initiatives simply aren’t enough.

“And they’ve never been in the position of pushing to make sure the change process is actually producing results that will really make a difference in their communities.”

Denver’s Learning Network is all about results, Yates contends. “Community people will push for results.” The key, he adds, is for them to develop the skills to understand, use and generate data. Having these skills gives them the ability to help set the outcomes and then evaluate whether the initiative is achieving them and, if not, to push for changes. Yates believes that the Community Learning Network has given a core of Denver residents these abilities.

They are using these abilities to push for accountability throughout the initiative, explains Terri Bailey. They are doing this by “insinuating themselves” into every facet of Making Connections.

“They are parceling themselves out so they are insinuated in the action. Not as organizers. Not as agency representatives. Not

as policy experts. But as the people who are responsible for learning and accountability.

“It’s always on the table. Someone is always there to ask, ‘How are you going to be accountable to the community for that? How are you going to tell community how you are doing? How are you going to know how you are doing? How can you change what you’re doing based on what you are learning?’”

The Learning Network members are also intimately involved in the overall evaluation of Making Connections in Denver. They examine surveys and other evaluation tools. They help set the specific indicators of success. They help communicate what the evaluation is learning and get these lessons integrated into the ongoing work.

Indeed, because their focus is on results in their neighborhoods, they push for an evaluation that can help Making Connections achieve results. “It is not about doing something at the end that looks back on what the initiative did,” explains Bailey. “It is about something they do in the present that tells us how we are doing. It is not a document that sits on a shelf. It is a dialogue. It is a conversation. ‘You aren’t doing what you said you were going to do.’”

She adds that the Learning Network members are “hugely proud” of their evaluation role. “They see their job as to inform and then force dialogue and decision-making by being in your face with the truth. Are you doing it or not?”

She says this role is traditional in a sense. “They understand that it’s not the Learning Network’s job to succeed. It is the

“Residents have never been in the position of pushing to make sure the change process is producing results that will really make a difference in their communities.”

—Garland Yates

Learning Network’s job to inform success and to be in your face.”

The informing is crucial, Bailey believes. “You must put it out in a way that people understand it and can act on it.” She says the Learning Network members understand that they must move from reporting to accountability. “The report is just the first step. That’s a level of sophistication that most researchers don’t get. They think the report is it.”

In explaining the connections between the Learning Network and results, Bailey also goes back to MC Denver’s theory of change. It sees the need for individual, community and institutional transformation. “The intersection of these three is what creates an environment in which all kinds of results can happen,” Bailey says.

“You have to reflect the results that you want within individuals, within the community and within the institutions. You have to be able to see elements of that being modeled everywhere. They [the Learning Network members] are trying to model the results.”

The Learning Network’s members “are very clear that the job of the evaluation is to transform the individuals that are involved, transform the community through what they’ve learned, and transform the institutions through their partnerships with community. They are very clear that the evaluation has to perform three transformative goals. That’s pretty amazing.”

On the individual level, the changes in the individual Learning Network members are impressive. In part this comes from an

operating principle of MC Denver, which is that jobs and other opportunities that come out of the initiative should go whenever possible to residents. Several learning network members have gotten these opportunities. “The Learning Network is a pretty powerful social network through which its members receive all kinds of benefits while they work to make those benefits available to other residents,” Bailey says.

“Residents need to see an initiative like MC as a way to achieve personal gains, not just community gains.”

The lives of several Learning Network members have been transformed through the role they’ve played as a Network member and through the jobs they’ve gotten. “At the individual level, the stories are everywhere,” Bailey says.

And these stories are not just about individual residents who got jobs, Bailey adds. They are also about the skills and knowledge they have acquired that Bailey believes will change their lives permanently. “They will never again be as vulnerable as they were. It isn’t a job so for now they are okay. That is done. That’s over. They will never go back there.”

Part of the change is the self-confidence that these residents now have, says Candace Redshirt. She recounts the story of going to a meeting of the neighborhood association in her new community, Westwood. “I was going into a community that I knew nothing about, but all the learning I’ve done here, all my leadership skills and all my knowledge and my experience in the work allowed me to stand up at the meeting and tell my story.

“The Learning Network’s evaluation is not about doing something at the end that looks back on what the initiative did. It is about something they do in the present that tells us how we are doing. It is not a document that sits on a shelf. It is a dialogue.”

—Terri Bailey



Learning Network member Elias Burgos. ◀

I’m not scared to speak up and talk about who I am. I’m not scared to share my ideas and my experience and my positive attitude.” Impressed with her knowledge and experience, the group immediately asked her to run for vice president.

“I left there probably glowing because I can remember when I first met Garland [Yates] with my head down and a big lump in my throat. I could barely get out the words. I told him, ‘I’m not a leader.’”

“Wherever I go I will take these skills and everything I’ve learned with me.”

But neither Candace nor the other residents are content with their individual changes. They passionately want to

see their communities change as well, Bailey says.

“All movements start with individual transformation,” she adds. Then these individuals act as change agents for the larger community.

“They are the ones who inform change. They are the ones who provide the information from which people can make good decisions about the changes they want and the actions they need to take to achieve them.”

Learning Network members do this by performing what Bailey thinks is a pretty traditional role. “Their role in community transformation is exactly the rhetoric Casey uses around the learning partnerships, which is providing communities and institutions and partners with the data they need to make good decisions and then to be held accountable for what occurs and doesn’t occur.”

The CLN members also work to transform their communities by providing opportunities for others to be transformed. “Their venue for that is in learning and evaluation and research activities, not through organizing.”

Through the Learning Network’s research, many other residents have gotten short-term opportunities to do things like door-to-door surveys. “People get these jobs as research assistants. They get training. They get skills. They can market that into another job.”

They also get new relationships, which not only builds their social networks, it

“Learning Network members have acquired skills and knowledge that has changed their lives. They will never again be as vulnerable as they were. It isn’t a job so for now they are okay. That is done. They will never go back there.”

—Terri Bailey

paves the way for other community changes. “The residents who did the crime survey in the Cole neighborhood are now in relationship with each other.” This happened because in the process of creating and implementing the survey, residents “had permission to engage in a dialogue,” Bailey explains.

Once the survey was done, the dialogue continued. “Everybody is talking. All hell breaks loose.” The people who worked on the survey began to try to change the problems the survey uncovered. They had many concrete successes (see page 13).

The most dramatic has been the creation of a community court for young people in Cole and surrounding neighborhoods. “For years there has been this building in the heart of Cole with a sign that reads ‘Community Court,’” Bailey says. “It was simply an appendage of the downtown court that had the audacity to call this a community court.”

The people who did the survey looked at this building in a new way, Bailey explains. They began to ask questions about it. They talked to the District Attorney’s office and built relationships with people there who wanted to implement a community-based restorative justice project. The new community court opened in September 2003.

“It’s not just what information does,” explains Bailey. “It’s what the relationships that are formed in the creation and discussion about the data does. That is the combination upon which houses can be built. Courts can be opened. Kids can stay in school.”

The third leg in Denver MC’s theory of change is institutional transformation. For the Learning Network, this has primarily meant trying to transform the institutions they have access to, which are the universities and think tanks. “They have a very definite strategy about transforming them,” Bailey says.

Part of this strategy involves developing a different relationship between residents and researchers. The residents aren’t advisors or subjects, but instead act as the drivers of the research.

Yates talks about research done several years ago for Denver MC by two researchers who were asked to interview residents and compile a report about neighborhood issues. When they came back talking about gentrification, the Learning Network members were incredulous.

“The members said, ‘You may have talked to some residents, but you didn’t write down what they said.’” Yates says that the Learning Network members believed that the researchers did what outsiders often do, which is to come into a neighborhood with their own biases about issues and solutions. “The members killed the study and that set a tone early.”

The Learning Network also made it clear early that the role of researchers and academics was to support the Learning Network’s work on the evaluation as well as Making Connections’ work on neighborhood issues.

The researchers “would be assigned not to do the evaluation projects but the action

“It’s not just what information does. It’s what the relationships that are formed in the creation and discussion about the data does. That is the combination upon which houses can be built. Courts can be opened. Kids can stay in school.”

—Terri Bailey

projects,” explains Bailey. “If someone is working on an inclusionary housing zoning law with city council, the researchers would help residents know what’s happening in other places in the country.”

But the researchers’ role would not be simply to do research like this, but to train residents in how to do it, Bailey adds. “What do you ask? We want to teach people how to do the research themselves. That is transformative.”

Indeed, the Learning Network is working with the University of Denver on creating an institute that will “diffuse” knowledge around specific issues that are being tackled in Denver MC’s four neighborhoods.

Will the Learning Network’s approach help Denver MC achieve concrete results? Bailey is convinced it already has, on all three levels (individual, community and institutional). But to make sure, the Learning Network itself will be evaluated “based on its contribution to results through Denver’s theory of change,” just like many other MC Denver initiatives.

“Where else is a learning partnership holding itself accountable and being evaluated based on its contribution to results? That’s got to be amazing.”

Yates agrees, and he adds that he is not surprised. “Why would you put all this energy into this work and not care about results? It’s all about results to residents. And it’s about results that make a difference. Residents aren’t going to settle for an outcome that calls for a 1 percent increase in



► Learning Network member Sharon Bridgeforth.

homeownership or a 5 percent decrease in crime. They are going to push for outcomes that they can feel in their neighborhoods.

“It just doesn’t make sense to say that an outside evaluator cares more about results than the people who live in these communities,” Yates continues. “I think many people question whether residents are sophisticated enough to do this. I think Denver’s Learning Network is proving that they are. Residents can come to understand things like this a lot quicker and a lot more thoroughly than some people think. They have experience as well as data. That’s powerful.”

“The outcomes aren’t some distant goal,” Bailey explains. “They are living things today that tell us whether we are living up to our promises to community.”

“Residents can come to understand things like this a lot quicker and a lot more thoroughly than some people think. They have experience as well as data. That’s powerful.”

—Garland Yates

Resident Perspectives about Building a Resident-Driven Change Initiative

What have the Community Learning Network’s members learned about developing a resident-driven change process? Judging from interviews with four residents who are CLN members, they’ve learned a lot. Their insights are incorporated throughout this report on the CLN. In addition, the residents made several other points about this work.

Find ways to respond to people’s immediate needs.

CLN members who also perform Making Connections’ staff roles, such as Candace Redshirt, say that “one of our biggest challenges” is finding ways to respond to residents who need help. If you can’t meet their day-to-day “survival needs,” Redshirt explains, you are not going to be able to engage them in a long-term community transformation initiative.

“Sometimes it feels like we’re out there all by ourselves in the name of Making Connections. How do we maintain all these relationships, connect everybody to resources, be there when crises happen? We’re one of the first safety nets in peoples’ lives. It gets overwhelming sometimes and sometimes I think people like Terri and Cec [Ortiz] don’t understand that.

“What do we do when someone says we can’t pay our rent or our phone has been shut off? We’re in a relationship with them, we want to bring them in, but they are in a crisis. When we’re in that relationship we’re helpers.

“It’s just a natural thing we do, but we’re not a social service agency and we’re not counselors. But we can be a resource for them. That’s a part of our job.

“Thank God we’re resourceful women! Most of our resident staff are women. We’re all these natural helper women. We just do it.”

But it’s a challenge, Redshirt adds. “We need to identify and respect this issue and get better on how we deliver resources. We need to be more proactive about it. We need to know more about what resources are available.”

She adds that it would be very helpful to have a small pot of money available “if someone needs to buy a bus pass or someone can’t pay their phone bill.

“Right now Making Connections is not a social service agency, but when someone has a crisis, as a community person, you need to respond to show your good faith in that relationship, to show you are genuine and you are there to help them. That you’re not all talk. You have to build that relationship so they can see that they can eventually make a change on a bigger scale.”

Find more residents who have a strong desire to help others and to build their own skills.

Each resident interviewed talked about the intensity and pressures of this work. “It’s almost like you have this load on your shoulders from every individual from maintaining those relationships, and that’s where burn-out comes from,” is how Redshirt puts it.

The critical task is to not keep relying on a few residents to perform more and more roles, but to keep seeking out new residents. To do that, Redshirt believes that one overlooked key is finding people who feel a need to help others. She believes that need will carry them through their fears and allow them to develop a deep connection to the work.

“I need to be here and do this work,” Redshirt explains. “I think of all the people in prison and people in these vulnerable populations, they are all part of our larger family. I couldn’t celebrate what I have knowing they exist and that I’m not trying in some way to help the greater good.”

“Why would you put all this energy into this work and not care about results? It’s all about results to residents. And it’s about results that make a difference. They are going to push for outcomes that they can feel in their neighborhoods.”

—Garland Yates



► Candace Redshirt and Tracey Saulters are long-term Learning Network members.

Provide opportunities for residents to build their skills.

Every resident interviewed also emphasized the importance of the skills that Making Connections has helped them develop, skills that they know make them more effective at “helping the greater good.” Every resident talked about her personal growth.

“There has been major, major growth for me,” says Tracey Saulters.

“They have helped me grow as a resident and given me the tools I need to move around to look for my best way of helping my community,” says Gabriela Jacobo.

“I’m not talking about money. It’s just them helping me, giving me those tools, training me and then saying, ‘Gabriela, just look yourself and find out what’s the best way for you to help yourself first and then the community.’”

“I see that the investment of time and energy in the beginning with those residents was huge,” says Saulters.

Allow residents opportunities to see the big picture.

One of Tracey Saulters first Making Connections activities involved going to a community-building conference in Florida with several other residents. “I was blown away,” she remembers. “I met people. I saw things in a whole new light. It opened up my eyes. It’s not that narrow vision of my North Lincoln community. I can see how I’m connected to the big picture. Even though I am one little piece, I feel so huge in this. I feel big. I have value.”

When you hire residents as staff, don’t isolate them from their neighborhoods.

When Candace Redshirt first began working for Making Connections as a neighborhood-based technical assistance provider, she spent her first three months in the MC office on the 53rd floor of a downtown office building. She came very close to quitting.

“It was a foreign environment for me. I was uncomfortable. I didn’t apply for a job in a corporate office because I didn’t want that kind of a job. I asked myself how I was supposed to be working for community when I’m sitting in front of this computer for 40 hours. I felt like I was going to meetings and never touching community.” Fortunately Making Connections found a neighborhood office in a church building and that has allowed Redshirt to again love her work.

Keep building trust.

From the residents’ perspective, the fact that the “professional” staff people such as Terri Bailey and Matt Hamilton were willing to come into their neighborhoods and homes and kept laying out information and asking for their perspectives was critical in building trust. “My eyes are watching who’s doing the work and who’s walking their talk,” says Saulters. “That’s where the trust gets built.”

Saulters adds that broadly sharing information is a key way to build trust. “What would help me trust the process is information. My mind is a soap opera: I can come up with the worst scenario. So ease my mind. Be willing to offer the information so that I don’t have to worry about it. I probably don’t care, I probably won’t do anything about it, but at least I have access to the information.”

“Most of all it is the trust between the Making Connections staff and the residents,” Jacobo adds. “If you don’t have that trust you will not get anywhere.”

“We could not do what they are doing. Not with more time, more resources, more anything. It is not about time. What they are building has never been built before.”

—Terri Bailey

The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of publications about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections Initiative. These Reflections come through The Diarist Project, 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 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, diarist for Denver STL Garland Yates and 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.



The Learning Network has pulled together thousands of residents with its “story circles,” including public housing residents, youth and Hispanic men. These are three story circle leaders.

For more information about **The Diarist Project** or to receive copies of its publications, contact:

The Diarist Project,
c/o Charitable Choices,
4 Park Avenue, Suite 200,
Gaithersburg, MD 20877
(240-683-7100;
Tim@CharityChoices.com).

Photos by Mary Ann Dolcemascolo and Tim Saasta.

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