Rebuilding a Neighborhood from the Ground Up

It wasn't easy. It took nearly a generation. It isn't complete. But signs of change in Boston's Dudley Street neighborhood are everywhere: in the new housing, the street life, the neighborhood businesses, the schools.

These remarkable changes in a once-forsaken neighborhood point to the powerful potential of a long-term, comprehensive, resident-led approach to transforming inner-city neighborhoods.

Dudley Street resident and DSNI staff person Maria Guerrero with her two children and her brother.

People involved from the beginning say it took at least seven years before residents could really see change and know that the process was going to work. But today, the change is apparent even to outsiders.

"I used to think of this area as the Bermuda Triangle," says long-time resident Eileen Kenner of the Boston neighborhood defined by three roads that form a triangle. *"It's the middle of Boston, but it was an abyss. It was lost."* It was lost just as planes and ships would mysteriously disappear in the Bermuda Triangle area of the Atlantic Ocean.

The people in the Dudley Street neighborhood were so invisible that, in the late 1970s, trash trucks began using the neighborhood's 1,300 empty lots — and even some of its streets — as illegal dump sites. Others used its streets — too seldom patrolled by police — to do or to deal drugs.

After touring the neighborhood in 1984, Robert Holmes, an attorney and a trustee of the Riley Foundation, said one street "looked like Beirut," as if it had been bombed. "We were all astonished at how much vacant land there was," he told the authors of a book on the neighborhood, *Streets of Hope*.

"We were at the bottom of the pit," remembers long-time resident Paul Bothwell. "Houses were burning up. People were burning up. We were desperate: what can we do? We had been beaten down by the banks, by the city, by environmental people. Everybody said: 'You don't matter. We don't care about you.'"

But while the people in the Dudley Street neighborhood may have disappeared in the minds of Boston's leaders, long-time residents such as Eileen Kenner, Sylvia Gaynor and Honario Correia did not disappear. As bad as their neighborhood became, it remained home, often by choice, sometimes because residents simply couldn't afford to live anywhere else.

Eileen Kenner, who has lived in Dudley for more than 25 years, says her neighborhood "has had a 360-degree turnaround."

These residents stayed and began to fight back. And remarkably, in the face of extraordinary challenges, they have won. "This neighborhood has had a 360-degree turnaround," says Kenner, who has lived here for 23 years.

The story of how residents and local community groups turned around one of the most devastated inner-city neighborhoods in Boston, with a population that is part African American, part Latino, part Cape Verdean immigrant and part white, is both inspiring and instruc-

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—Paul Bothwell

tive. It demonstrates the resiliency and ability that exist in all neighborhoods, even those that have been as neglected and abused as this one.

Dudley's transformation shows the power of the ideas at the heart of efforts to transform struggling neighborhoods, efforts such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Rebuilding Communities and Making Connections initiatives.

These "Comprehensive Community Initiatives" focus on a broad range of issues (jobs, housing, inadequate services, failing schools, crime) and try to involve many "stakeholders" (residents, community groups, political leaders, local businesses, public agencies).

The Casey Foundation initiatives also believe that, while being comprehensive is critical, it is not enough. To achieve fundamental change — and to *sustain* that change — a community's residents must be deeply involved in every part of the change process, from planning to implementing to evaluating.

Dudley Street is a great place to see these ideas in action, in part because its community-driven transformation process began 20 years ago. People involved from the beginning, such as Paul Bothwell, say it took at least seven years before residents could really see change and know that the process was going to work. But today, the change is apparent even to outsiders.

You *see* the transformation as you drive into the Dudley Street neighborhood, past blocks of new, attractive, affordable row houses and small apartments, along streets that are filled with people, including many children. You see it when you reach the northern point of the Dudley Street triangle, at the intersection of

These affordable row houses were the first of several housing developments that have helped transform the look of the Dudley neighborhood.

"Everybody watches out for their neighbors. We think about each other. We care for each other. People get along. Things work when each person cares for it. When people don't think that, 'It's not my business.'"

—Sylvia Gaynor

Dudley and Blue Hill Avenues. Where once there were abandoned cars overgrown by weeds, there is now an active and attractive town common, landscaped with day lilies, shrubs and trees.

You can *hear* the transformation of Dudley Street, not only in what you *do* hear — such as the sound of music from a celebration being held by a local organization in the common — but also in what you *don't* hear — the once nightly sound of fire engines coming to the latest insurance fire.

You can even *smell* the transformation of Dudley Street, the smell today coming from bunches of sweet basil being sold at a farmers' market in the common, a market that sells produce not grown on some farm two hours to the West but right here, in the Dudley Street neighborhood, on two acres of reclaimed "brownfields," as well as in residents' back yards, by urban gardeners such as Sylvia Gaynor.

The smell of basil is a striking contrast to the acrid smell of burning buildings. "Fire engines used to run up and down the street every night," recalls a woman who moved her family to Dudley Street in 1978. "You could always smell smoke." Most of the fires were the result of arson, often arranged by owners who wanted to collect insurance on abandoned buildings they couldn't sell.

Gaynor, who has lived here since 1956, says she is "proud to say we can feel comfortable again" in her neighborhood because "crime is down." Why? "*Everybody watches out for their neighbors. We think about each other. We care for each other. People get along. Things work when each person cares for it. When people don't think that, 'It's not my business.'*"

Sylvia Gaynor, a Dudley resident since 1956, sells her homegrown produce at a weekly farmer's market in the Dudley Town Common.

Literally hundreds of Dudley residents have made it their business to rebuild their community. Their success shows that struggling communities *can* be rebuilt from the bottom-up, in a process driven by residents, following a vision they have created together, but fueled by partnerships with banks, developers, city agencies, the police, churches and many others who have resources.

"Everybody here knew we had to learn to work together or we were dead. Everyone knew we had to figure out how to build enough of something here that it really made a difference. Nobody preached it: it was intuitive. People knew it."

—Paul Bothwell

It's a story that begs to be told. Despite a decade of prosperity, there are still more than 200 inner-city neighborhoods with very high rates of poverty. More than three million children growing up in these neighborhoods face at least four risk factors, such as poverty, absence of a parent, lack of health insurance and parents without full-time jobs, according to the Casey Foundation KidsCount *Data Book*.

If the lives of the millions of children growing up in these neighborhoods are to improve, these neighborhoods must become much more supportive of families. But this clear need to do something is undercut by a widespread sense in the country that nothing works, an attitude that is hard to hold once someone has seen the transformation of a neighborhood such as Dudley Street.

The Dudley story also needs to be told because it points to *how* these communities can be transformed. It suggests answers to questions with which many people who care deeply about struggling low income communities have been asking for years:

- How can you get a rebuilding process started? Who needs to be involved?
- How do you get a range of people and agencies to overcome differences and work together? How do you overcome the sense of hopelessness that often pervades long-neglected communities?

Paul Bothwell has been involved in the Dudley Street transformation since its beginning in the early 1980s.

- How do you "get to scale" and have a broad enough impact that you do more than help a few children and families? How do you reverse years of disinvestment and get resources flowing again into the communities?
- How do you *sustain* a rebuilding process?

All these questions and more are being addressed in the Dudley Street neighborhood, as they are in the other neighborhoods where the Casey Foundation is working. Dudley Street is different from these other sites mainly in that the rebuilding process started earlier, in the mid-1980s. Because a rebuilding

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process demands so much time, Dudley Street offers a window into what can happen if the process is able to continue.

Like most struggling inner-city neighborhoods, Dudley Street is a classic example of a community that lost its base of resources and services. Local factories closed, eliminating hundreds of decent jobs, leaving behind abandoned buildings and a legacy of pollution. Banks stopped making loans for mortgages and businesses. Basic city services — police, street cleaning, transportation, infrastructure repair — were withdrawn. Other services — grocery stores, Laundromats, restaurants – disappeared.

As people lost their sense of safety and security, they either moved away or withdrew into their own homes and families, eliminating the sense of community that most long-time residents of these communities remember quite vividly.

Many residents gave up hope that change would ever come. "We were desperate," explains Bothwell, a minister who had first moved to the neighborhood in the 1970s and who had already worked for years on several mostly unsuccessful efforts to deal with the neighborhood's struggles. "We had been beaten to a pulp."

But out of their desperation, "something began to gel," Bothwell recalls. "Everybody here knew we had to learn to work together or we were dead. Everyone knew we had to figure out how to build enough of something here that it really made a difference. Nobody preached it: it was intuitive. People knew it."

Theresa Glynn signs a pledge that commits all DSNI board members to support the rights of residents, including the right "to shape all plans, programs and policies affecting our quality of life."

The process began with a community meeting called by the Riley Foundation and some local agencies, a meeting called to get reaction to a proposed structure for a new organization. Residents spoke up at the meeting, pushing for resident control of this new entity. This meeting led to the creation of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Organization, or DSNI. The idea was *not* to provide one more needed service or program. Instead the idea was to try

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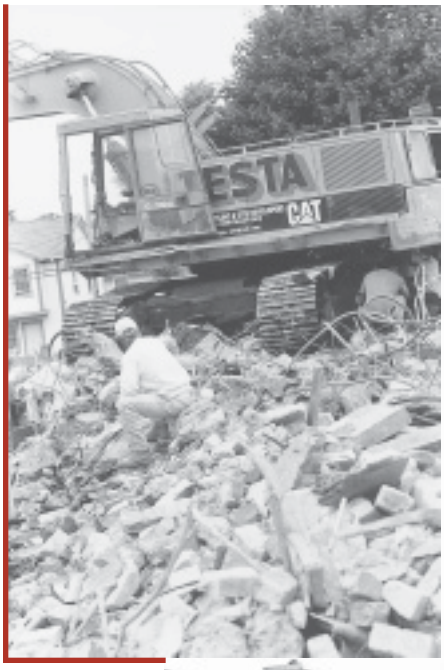
to figure out a way to fundamentally turn around the long process of deterioration that had been underway for at least two decades.

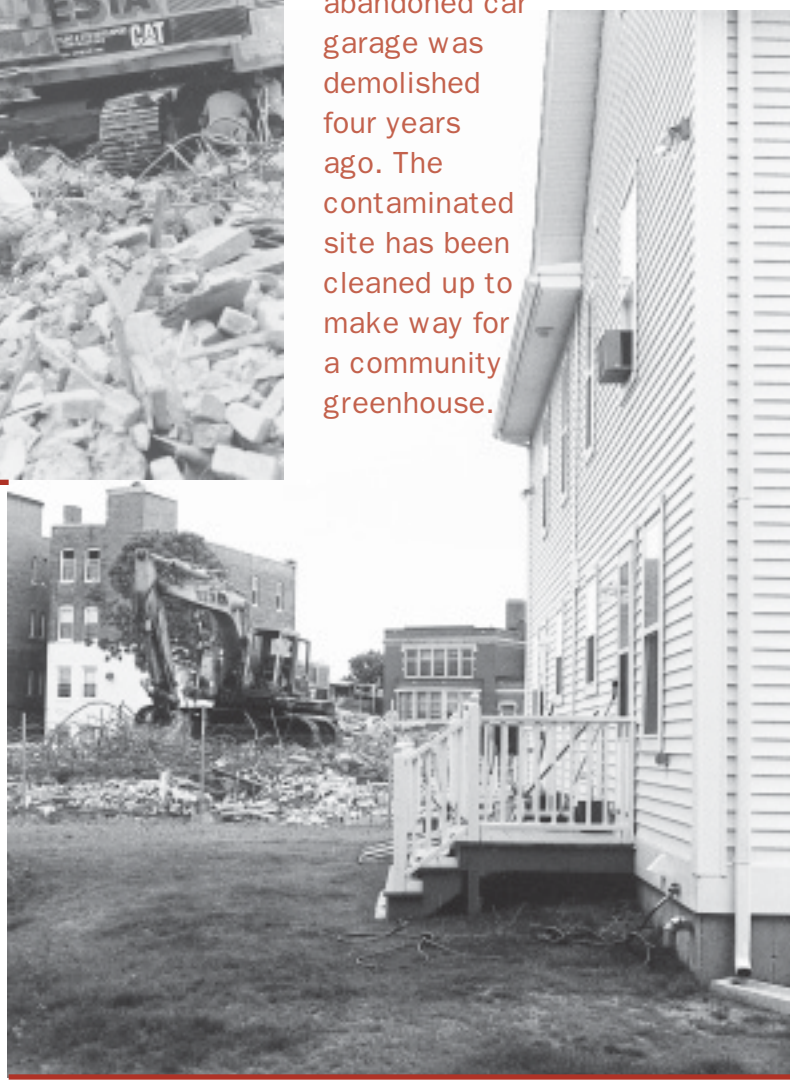
Bothwell says that many people were willing to step back from the day-to-day crises and think about what could be done. "What is it that dismembers a community like this one? How could you turn it around? We knew we had to learn more."

Fortunately the trustees of the Riley Foundation, shocked by the bombed-out look of parts of the neighborhood, also wanted to find a way to rebuild this community. It agreed to commit a large part of its grant-making to helping the neighborhood develop and carry out a plan for change. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative became the community-based planning and organizing body that shepherded the change.

DSNI is not the only organization that has played an important role in the neighborhood's transformation, notes Charlotte Kahn of the Boston Foundation. "It's a more complicated story than how it is normally told. It is a complex mix of ingredients, of actors." But, she adds, DSNI has played a key role in holding the transformation process together and keeping residents engaged.

"For years it seemed to go nowhere," Bothwell says. "But we were building a foundation. People kept giving it their fire and passion." And, despite the inevitable tensions, people kept working together, across racial and even language lines, long-time residents





The transformation of the Dudley neighborhood is continuing. A long-abandoned car garage was demolished four years ago. The contaminated site has been cleaned up to make way for a community greenhouse.

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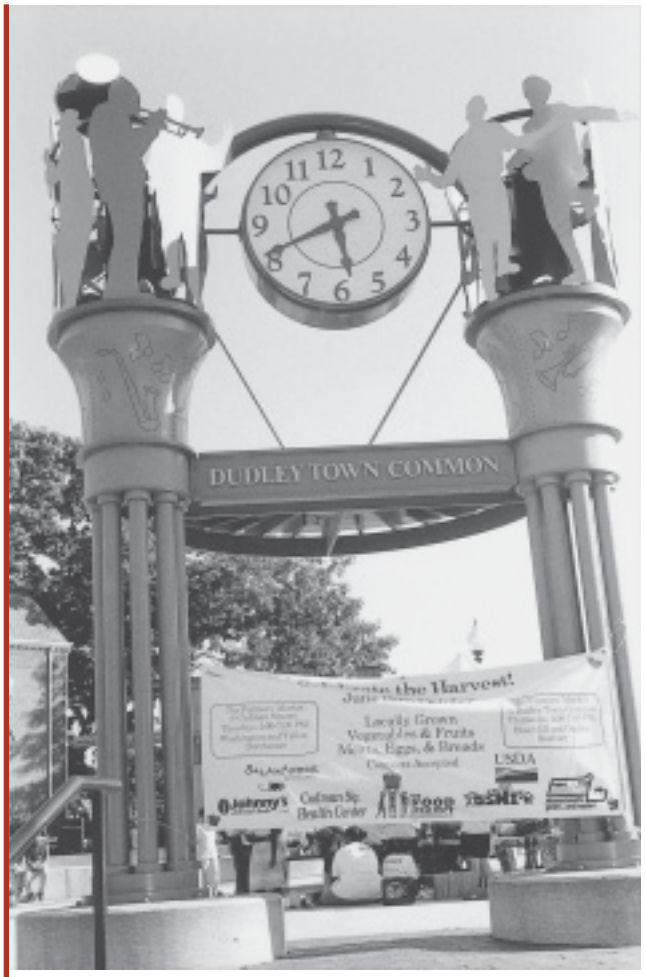
with new immigrants, people with much formal education and those who had not graduated from high school. "We had to learn to trust each other, respect each other, honor each other's way of thinking," Bothwell explains.

The key, Bothwell believes, was having a shared vision they had developed together. With that vision motivating them, residents and local groups kept learning more about what had caused the deterioration and what they could do about it.

After about seven years, Bothwell says, enough had been done, residents had developed enough power, they had opened enough doors, that he and many others could sense that the neighborhood was going to succeed. "Thinking changed. People were more positive."

When the Casey Foundation's Rebuilding Communities Initiative chose to invest in Dudley Street, it gave the process a huge boost, Bothwell says. For one thing, it allowed the community to again take the time to "think about what's happening here and come up with new strategies and a new vision. It's been a tremendous exercise in developing a shared vision."

"It's so easy to get caught up in the day-to-day problems," explains DSNI's former executive director Greg Watson. *"RCI gave us the room to do some very deep thinking."*



The space around this clock tower – once a trash-strewn lot – is now a much-used Town Common.

It also forced people to recognize "how much more capacity to make change that we still had to build in the neighborhood itself," adds May Louie, who directed DSNI's Rebuilding Communities work. The planning process supported by RCI helped Dudley Street reach further into its community, Louie explains, "bringing all types of people together."

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— Gertrudes Fidalgo

"Visioning" and planning sessions were conducted in Spanish and Cape Verdean Creole in addition to English. The process "not only deepened residents' understanding and commitment to the change process, it also led to more complex group thinking," Louie believes.

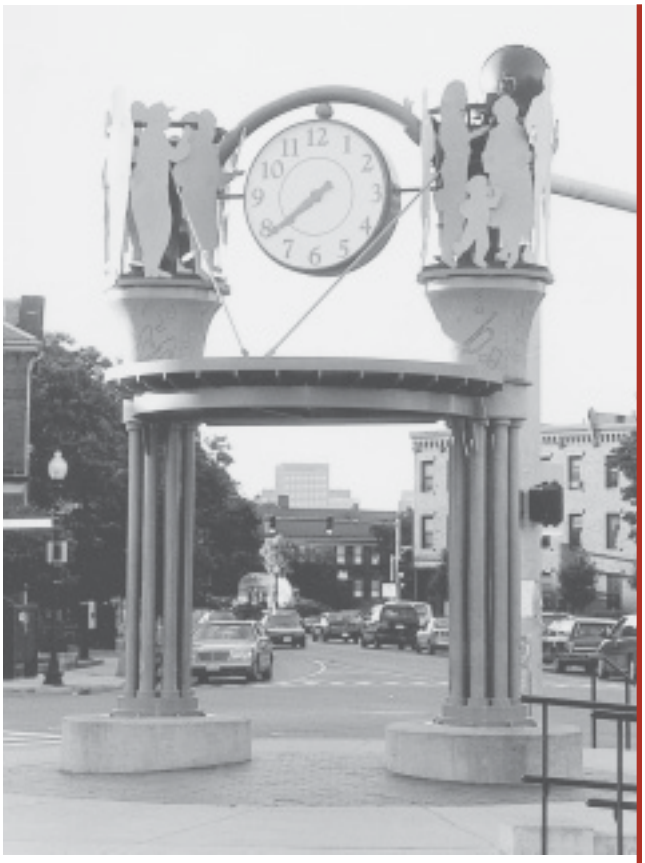
People could begin to see how one change often leads to another, often unanticipated change. Put a grocery store at a corner and you increase traffic on that side street. Put enough businesses close together on a street and you increase the number of people on the sidewalks.

It is being able to see connections like these that is critical. This is why the Casey Foundation has come to believe that being comprehensive is so important. One change, one program, one leader is seldom enough. A transformed school means little for a child forced to leave that school because her family has to find cheaper housing. Good job training means little if residents have no way to get to the jobs.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has looked for ways to address every need in its community.

- *To increase investment* and help families achieve economic self sufficiency, it has developed a sophisticated "sustainable development in an urban setting" strategy. It has gotten money to clean up polluted "brownfields" and support businesses that don't pollute, such as a new community greenhouse. It has helped many families get the Earned Income Tax Credit.

- *To improve housing and infrastructure* the Dudley community achieved an unprecedented breakthrough in 1988 when the city agreed to give it the power of eminent do-



Looking out from the Common through the clock tower, you can see the skyline of downtown Boston. It's a reminder of how close this neighborhood is to the city's business center.

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main so it could acquire vacant land for housing. In the1990s DSNI decided to jump start the process by building housing itself, something it had not done before. Residents have developed plans for more housing as well as improvements to two community centers and several school playgrounds and neighborhood parks.

- *To engage residents* it has created many opportunities for residents to participate both in the overall community planning process as well as in planning specific changes, such as how a school playground will be rebuilt and what a community center will look like. DSNI's board is elected every two years by residents. The board must have a majority of residents and these residents must represent all neighborhood "stakeholders." To keep residents engaged, it has developed a Resident Development Institute that will continuously train new leaders, organizers and activists.

So what has all this planning and organizing and "capacity building" produced? Certainly it hasn't eliminated poverty from the Dudley Street neighborhood, nor has it eliminated all the boarded-up buildings and empty lots.

But the ongoing planning and organizing process *has* paid off in some dramatic changes in the neighborhood during the past few years:

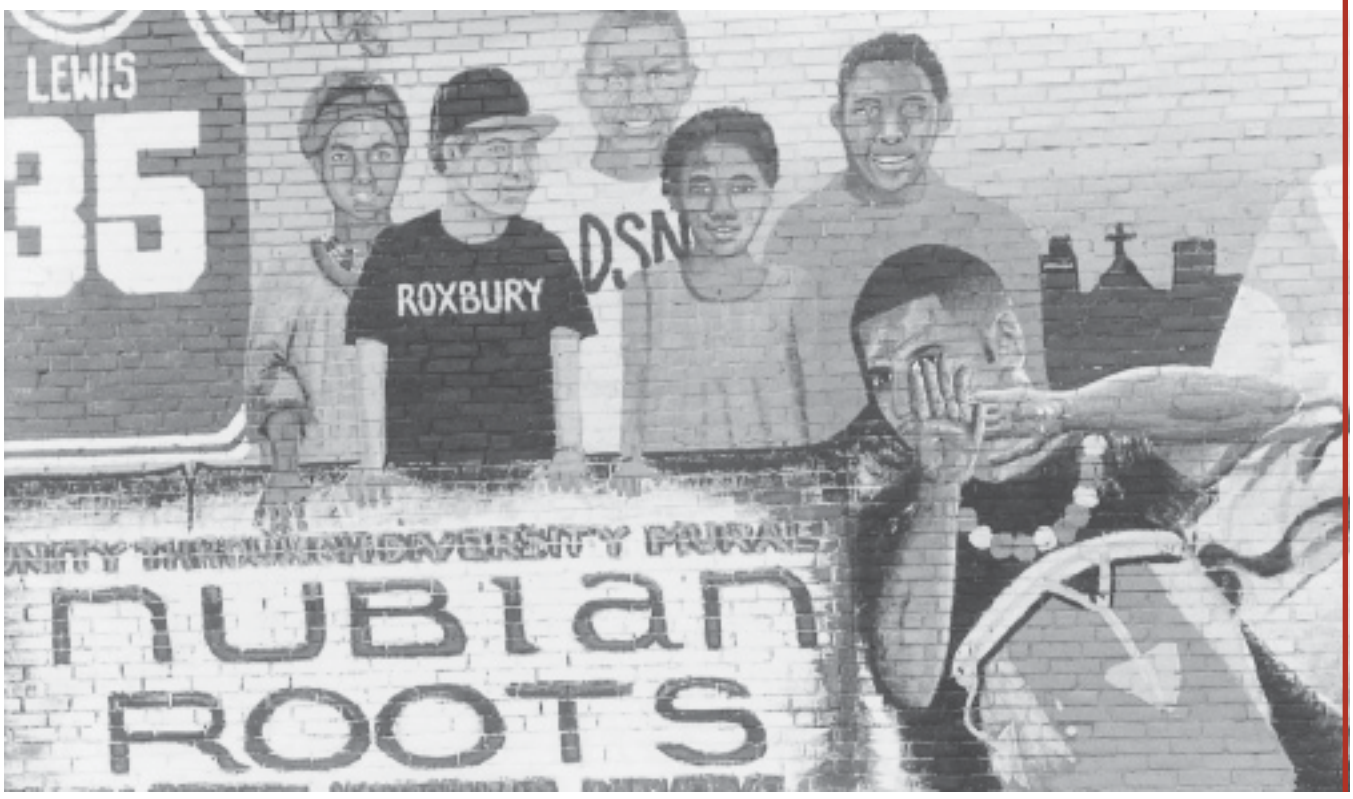
Marie St. Fleur, who has been active in DSNI for many years, now represents the community in the state legislature.

- More than 600 once-vacant lots have been permanently improved.
- More than 250 units of affordable housing have been built or rehabilitated.
- There are nine new community gardens. Two new community centers. A new Early Education Center.
- Four schools have had their playgrounds improved.
- A long abandoned factory has been transformed into offices for several service agencies and for the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative itself.

"I think we've turned a corner. There have been enough real changes that people really believe that good things can happen. If we want something to happen, we're going to be persistent and make it happen. And it is happening."

—May Louie

A mural designed by a DSNI youth group — Nubian Roots — shows the range of people who make up the Dudley community, from young to old.



"When we have our annual clean-ups, everybody chips in. We live here. We don't allow vandalism. We don't allow graffiti. Everybody has come together. We're connected as a big family...the way it's supposed to be."

—Neuza Sequeira

- A new town common is the site for a twice weekly farmer's market and many other community activities.
- A new greenhouse is being built in conjunction with a state agency.
- Taking note of all these changes, the Fannie Mae Foundation designated the Dudley neighborhood as one of 10 "Just Right" neighborhoods in the country for its balance of affordability and capital investment.

Just as dramatic has been the change in attitude in the community, which you can sense simply by talking with residents. *They know their neighborhood has changed.*

"Everybody sees a big difference," says Neuza Sequeira, who was elected by the community to DSNI's board. *"Everybody wants to see it keep moving forward. They want to see how it is going to look."*

It is the broad participation that impresses Sequeira, a long-time resident. *"When we have our annual clean-ups, everybody chips in. We live here. We don't allow vandalism. We don't allow graffiti. Everybody has come together. We're connected as a big family...the way it's supposed to be."*

The fear today — voiced by resident after resident — is not that Dudley Street will go back to the devastation it once experienced. No, the fear today is that it will go too far forward and start attracting outsiders pulled by its proximity to downtown, attractive housing and open spaces, its newly revived sense of community and its available land.

"No other place in Boston has this much open land," worries Greg Watson, DSNI's former executive director. The clock tower in the new town common frames the view of a downtown skyscraper, a reminder of how close this neighborhood is to the tens of thousands of people who work in downtown Boston.

But that same clock tower — at the edge of what was once a trash-strewn lot — is also a reminder of how far this neighborhood has come. And the way that transformation happened – with residents helping shape and lead the change – may help insulate the neighborhood from gentrification. Because they have been so involved in their neighborhood's transformation, many residents feel a deep commitment to preserving their community.

The main reason so many Dudley residents believe that their neighborhood is being transformed is that they are part of the process. Through experience, they have come to understand that *they* can make change happen.

Change in their neighborhood is not simply the result of a sympathetic mayor, a generous foundation or a forward-looking bank president. Instead change is the result of a process in which hundreds of residents have participated. It is the result of their work protesting illegal dumping, pushing the city government

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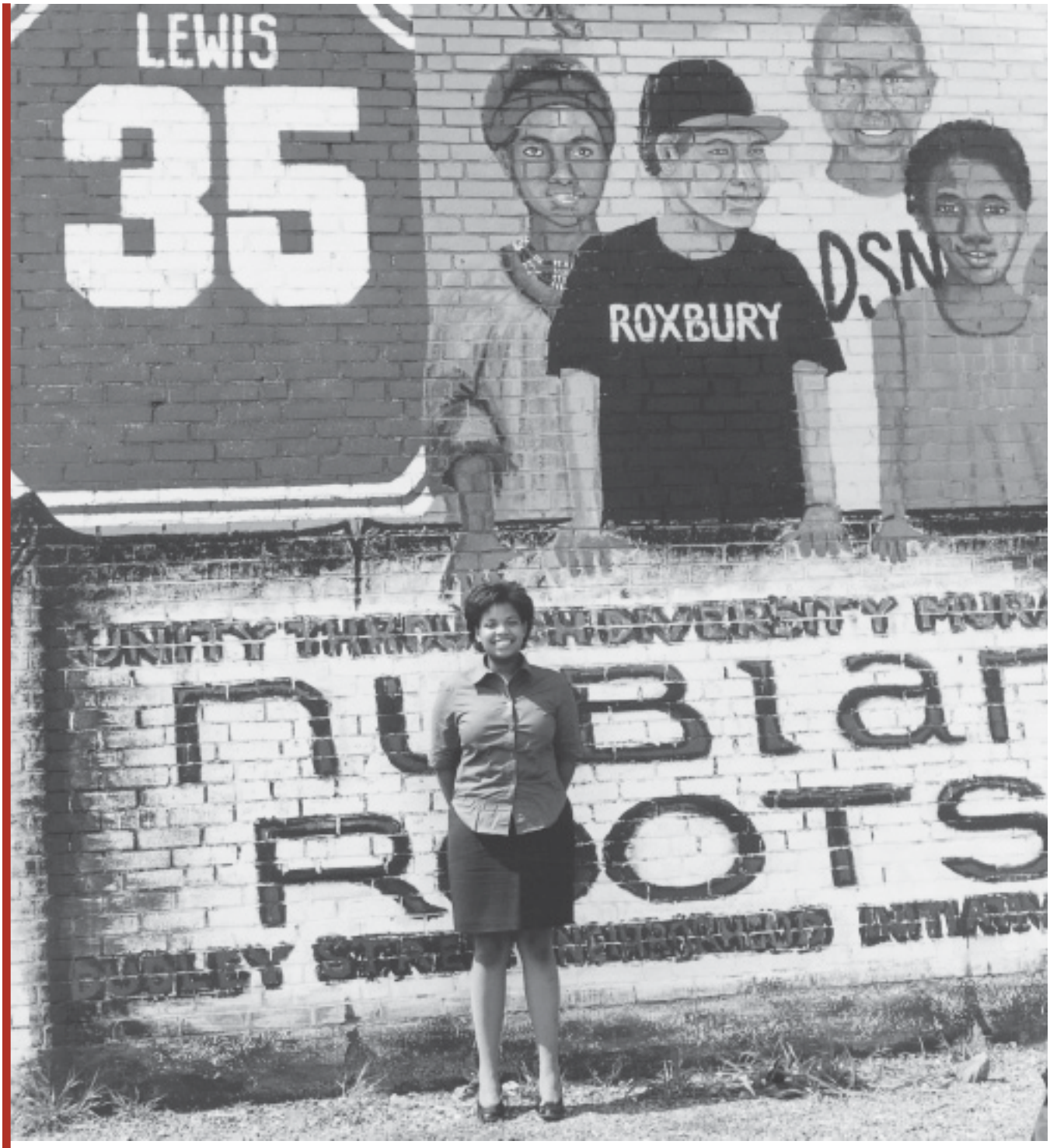

As a member of DSNI's Nubian Roots youth group, Carline Dorcena helped plan and paint this striking community mural. She stands beneath her image.

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to give them control over abandoned land, planning what would be done on this land, forcing the developer of new housing to build fewer units and make the project better "fit" the neighborhood, participating in the annual clean-ups, convincing the post office to install two mailboxes so people wouldn't have to walk a mile to send a letter, and engaging in dozens of other actions and meetings that, taken together, have truly empowered people.

Outsiders sense this. Whereas once people simply came in and dumped their trash, no questions asked, now outsiders know they must subject themselves to lots of questions if they are going to do something in this neighborhood. And while some don't want to be bothered by the process, others are willing.

As people have developed their confidence and capacity to change their neighborhoods, they have also set in motion a process that can sustain change.

The driving force of that process is a shared vision, according to Paul Bothwell. *"Developing a shared vision is absolutely crucial. By developing a shared vision, people come to sense that anything is possible. People really came to believe that."*

That vision comes out of the experience-based knowledge and wisdom that Bothwell believes is in every community. This idea is easy to say but hard to accept, especially by many highly educated outsiders. DSNI's Gertrudes Fidalgo, who grew up in the neighborhood and was one of its early organizers, tells the story of someone calling from Harvard's school of design. He wanted someone from DSNI to speak with students about its work as a "Community Development Corporation." When she explained that DSNI is not a "CDC," he wouldn't believe her.

DSNI staff member May Louie directed her organization's work with the Rebuilding Communities Initiative.

"For some reason people from the outside just think that we don't know what we want. They think it is up to the experts to tell us what we want. But that is not true. We know what we want. It's our reality. We have to live with it."

—Gertrudes Fidalgo

"He kept telling me we were a CDC. He actually thought he knew better than us what we were. I couldn't believe it." Experts can make valuable contributions, Fidalgo believes, but they first *"have to respect and take into consideration what people who live in the community need and want.*

"For some reason people from the outside just think that we don't know what we want," Fidalgo reflects. *"They think it is up to the experts to tell us what we want. But that is not true. We know what we want. It's our reality. We have to live with it."*

Many other principles underlie the transformation of Dudley Street: the need to take the time to develop a truly shared vision for a neighborhood's future, the need to involve a broad range of "stakeholders" in the change process, the need to be comprehensive and not try to find one magic bullet that will turn around a struggling community, the need for resources, the need to involve young people, and many more.

But the idea that residents themselves can transform their neighborhood is the driving force.

"You wouldn't believe how excited people in this community were when we got two extra mailboxes," remembers Fidalgo.

"People realized that we can make them listen as long as we work together. We could see how important our voices are."

Experts "have to respect and take into consideration what people who live in the community need and want" says Dudley resident and DSNI staff member Gertrudes Fidalgo.

Once enough residents recognize this, a neighborhood has been transformed, Louie believes. *"I think we've turned a corner. There have been enough real changes that people really believe that good things can happen. If we want something to happen, we're going to be persistent and make it happen. And it is happening."*

The Dudley story needs to be told because it points to how struggling communities can be transformed. It suggests answers to vexing questions such as how to start a community-driven rebuilding process and how to "get to scale".

This article was written by Timothy Saasta, coordinator of The Diarist Project, an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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.

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 Diarist Project is a new approach to learning from the *Making Connections* initiative. Diarists work to capture the strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. They also document crucial parts of this work.

The interviews and photos for this article were done for the Rebuilding Communities Initiative, a Casey initiative that preceded *Making Connections*. The article was published in January 2004.

The Dudley neighborhood now has a number of small stores and restaurants.

For more information about the Casey Foundation and its Making Connections initiative, visit www.aecf.org.

For more information about The Diarist Project, contact Charitable Choices, 4 Park Avenue, Suite 200, Gaithersburg, MD 20877 (240-683-7100; Tim@CharityChoices.com).

For more information about the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, visit www.dsni.org.

Photos by Mary Ann Dolcemascolo.