

“A very intense and complex balancing act”

A reflection by former *Making Connections* Oakland Director and Local Site Coordinator Fred Blackwell



In the spring of 2001, Oakland native Fred Blackwell began providing technical assistance to a relatively new, Annie E. Casey Foundation-supported initiative called *Making Connections*. Oakland was one of 22 cities where the Casey Foundation was exploring making a long-term commitment to transforming specific neighborhoods with large numbers of low-income families.

Over the next four years, Blackwell helped Oakland and its Lower San Antonio neighborhood become one of the 10 cities on which the Casey Foundation decided to focus. Later in 2001, Blackwell became

Oakland's local site coordinator. In 2003, he took on a joint role as site coordinator and director for *Making Connections* Oakland. In 2005 he left this role to take a job with San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom: deputy director of the Office of Community Development.

Shortly after he left *Making Connections* Oakland, Blackwell was asked to reflect on what he observed and learned from working on this initiative by *Making Connections* Oakland diarist Bill Wong.

As someone who believes that one of the most important “outcomes” of

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Making Connections will be learning about how to make a difference in struggling neighborhoods, Blackwell agreed to do the reflection.

Because of *Making Connections*, Blackwell thinks that “people are starting to adopt a new lens and a new approach to doing this work.” This new lens is coming from the learning that is taking place in the *Making Connections* sites such as Oakland, Blackwell believes.

Indeed, Blackwell has come to see Oakland and the diverse Lower San Antonio neighborhood as a “Petri dish” for future work nationally. *“I think that the Lower San Antonio today is what many neighborhoods we’re currently working in will look like years from now. If we are deliberate about capturing the successes and challenges associated with working in a place like the Lower San Antonio, there will be some very important lessons that others will be able to learn.”*

What lessons did Blackwell learn from his work with *Making Connections* and the Lower San Antonio neighborhood? One is simply that the job of trying to implement a national initiative in a local community is “a very intense and complex balancing act.”

“I learned a lot about how to balance being a person on the ground trying to advance

the work at the neighborhood level while at the same time being responsible for delivery of things to the foundation and being accountable directly to the foundation’s management.”

He learned that you must be “*clear about the limitations of your role, and the fact you are balancing and answering to multiple bosses in some ways.*”

Being clear about your limits “*is really key, so that people at all levels have appropriate expectations around your actions, and an understanding around where your loyalties are.*”

Blackwell also learned a lot about the challenge of engaging community residents in a change initiative. *Making Connections* emphasizes the need to involve residents deeply in the change process.

Blackwell says he learned that engaging community was particularly challenging in a neighborhood like the Lower San Antonio that has a very diverse population and that “is like a sleeping giant in some ways because it hasn’t been very vocal about expressing its own needs.”

One factor that made engaging community challenging, Blackwell believes, was *Making Connections*’ emphasis on producing quantifiable results relatively quickly in its target neighborhoods. He says now that

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these dual goals — deeply engaging residents in the change process and accomplishing specific outcomes — “don’t have to come into conflict. They can be done in concert.

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“There’s lots of work to do to make sure residents aren’t left behind, that they are aware of and equipped with the information they need to make decisions. It takes longer to get decisions made. People mull over it. You have to figure how many places and venues you have to go to before you have a critical mass that’s needed to move forward.”

As he reflects back on his experience in Oakland, Blackwell says that one thing he would have done differently was to insist that the process slow down to allow *Making Connections* to address its “shortcoming” around engaging residents.

“We always felt we were short on the resident engagement side, but at the same time, we always felt like there was a lot of pressure to continue to show movement to the foundation. We thought we could show movement and at the same time invite people to come on board. But while we were doing that, we were leaving residents farther and farther behind.”

“If I had it to do all over again, I would have stopped and addressed our shortcoming around engaging residents...before we started marching forward.”

*“If you look at the *Making Connections* sites that have been the most successful in engaging residents, they have one thing in common. They really took advantage of that honeymoon period in *Making Connections* [when there weren’t expectations around producing results] to engage their residents.”*

“Once sites moved into Phase 2, the intensity of the foundation’s push around outcomes stepped up fairly rapidly. Those of us who hadn’t done our homework on the resident engagement side and who spent the courting period trying to produce outcomes found ourselves entering a new course without taking the prerequisites.”

Blackwell doesn’t disagree with the foundation’s emphasis on outcomes and he thinks there wasn’t much difference between the outcomes emphasized by the foundation and those emphasized by the community.

“Wherever you go, if you are working in a low income community, people will say the same things about what they want to see happen, and they generally line up with what the foundation says it wants to see happen. Everybody’s interested in jobs. Everybody’s interested

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in economic opportunity. Everybody’s interested in brighter futures for their kids. Everybody’s interested in having strong neighborhood institutions that have the capacity to produce the changes the people want.

“Where we come into conflict is in the timing of the change. We also come into conflict around the strategies and tactics.”

One example of this conflict over strategy concerned education. Blackwell says that everyone agrees about the need to improve education; the question is how to accomplish this objective. *“The foundation took a very strong stand that this was not going to be a K-to-12 reform initiative.”* Instead, in relation to education, the foundation focused *Making Connections* on preparing children for school. This created “a little tension” because *“many site people felt you really needed to get into the education reform agenda,”* Blackwell explains.

Another example of conflict over strategy, Blackwell says, concerned the issue of safety, which many community people thought should be a priority but which wasn’t one of the foundation’s core outcomes.

But while acknowledging the conflict between sites like Oakland and the foundation over issues such as timing and strategy, Blackwell says that “95 percent

of what I have to say about how the foundation has managed this is positive.

“This is difficult stuff to manage from afar. Everybody has expectations about what the foundation role should be and thoughts about how they should manage it.

“The foundation deserves a whole lot of praise.... The way the technical assistance delivery has been set up has been innovative and fantastic. The development of a set of core capacities that need to exist in a community in order to deliver outcomes is right on point. The notion that, rather than having an open slate, you need to have a focus on a set of common ground outcomes is great and important. In this kind of work, without that kind of focus, you rarely accomplish anything.

“My criticism on that is that it should have been on the table from day one.”

Why? *“We engaged these communities in a process of determining whether they wanted to be partners with us without giving them complete information about what partnership was. Ideally we would have gone out in the beginning and said, ‘These are the six outcomes we want to achieve.’ To say take it or leave it is kind of crass, but this is what we want to work on. ‘Do you want to work on this with us?’ Rather than saying, ‘We want to work with you, we’re willing to work on the stuff you think is important, there are some things we think are important,’ but not being clear about what these things were.”*

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“That’s my criticism. But I have nothing but praise for the foundation. I think it is a very reflective institution, much more reflective than any other I have worked in. People pay a lot of attention to understanding what’s working and why, and copping to the fact that there’s stuff that is not working. The people who work there are smart people with good intentions and that comes out in the work on the ground.”

Some of the tension that Blackwell senses between local sites such as Oakland and the foundation comes from the approach the foundation is taking with *Making Connections*.

“The foundation is really doing a series of experiments and learning as they go and then trying to apply what they learn in the Making Connections sites.

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“In this initiative, the foundation is sticking with the sites, but it is actually implementing different initiatives during different phases. You went through the first honeymoon phase. The foundation learned some stuff and picked 10 sites to focus on.

“One thing it learned was the need to focus on a few outcomes and develop a better frame-



Fred Blackwell’s community roots in Oakland are deep. His mother, Angela Blackwell (right, with Casey Foundation staff person Danielle Johnson), founded Oakland’s Urban Strategy Council. She now directs Oakland-based PolicyLink.

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work for capacity, so the foundation threw that out there. Now they think the key to making this work is to focus on a set of families and wrap a set of supports around them.

“It’s frustrating for the community to be a part of [these changes], but that is what in my mind is happening.”

This process of experimenting and learning and adapting is one of *Making Connections*’ strengths and gives the work its potential, Blackwell believes.

Blackwell understands the need for *Making Connections* to emphasize outcomes: “When you’re investing this kind of money, you need to know whether or not your investment is making a difference.” But he says the foundation “should be careful about getting stuck on the outcomes.... It isn’t the only way to judge the impact of this work.”

Another way to judge the work nationally, Blackwell suggests, is to look at the impact it has had on people’s thinking. In the case of *Making Connections*, he thinks the impact has been profound.

One example concerns its focus on Family Economic Success. “This FES framework has been adopted very broadly. When I started working with *Making Connections*, I didn’t hear anybody talking about family economic success and the need

to combine workforce development strategies with service strategies with asset accumulation strategies.

“People were talking about all of those issues in isolation. Now, wherever you go in this country, people are talking about putting families on firmer financial ground. You hear people say the phrase, ‘family economic success.’ People here in San Francisco have adopted the language. Other foundations have adopted the language.”

“This is an important thing to recognize as the potential of this initiative. It’s that people are starting to adopt a new lens and a new approach to doing the work. We may not see the results of that for many years. But it’s important for the foundation to claim this and document it as progress and as an outcome.”

Indeed, Blackwell thinks that the potential of *Making Connections* to change thinking around how to transform struggling neighborhoods and achieve “broad scale adoption” of these new ideas can be its most important outcome.

*“What’s powerful about *Making Connections* is that, when they convene everybody across the sites, you are talking directly to hundreds of people and indirectly to thousands of people, and that creates a real ripple effect.”*

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More lessons about engaging residents

The struggle to engage residents deeply in *Making Connections* Oakland taught Fred Blackwell a lot.

“We have to be open to the various ways we can engage people and really understand the continuum of engagement. Some people will come to meetings. Other people will want you or need you to come to them or talk to them in their living rooms, on their turf, in one of their meetings. It is unrealistic to think you can set one table that everyone is going to come to and assume a leadership role.”

Blackwell says that Oakland “came to terms with this fact” and worked to create “a decentralized infrastructure that allows leadership to surface through work groups or other venues.” One local example of this is Oakland’s Family Economic Success (FES) work, where the site worked to “figure out how we engaged people on every step of the decision-making process: where we go, who we engage, who we bring in as partners.”

Blackwell also came to understand that “the most important thing is that the activities of the initiative are guided by and accountable to residents.” To achieve this, he thinks you must build “a broad understanding in the neighborhood of what you’re doing and that what you’re doing must reflect the priorities of most of the residents.” Then, he adds, the people who are collectively doing the work must

be “held accountable in some way to a broader constituency of people who care about the work.”

Blackwell also learned how hard this is to do in a diverse neighborhood like the Lower San Antonio. “It’s a challenge not only in terms of strategies and communications, but also in terms of expenses and staffing. You’ve got to be prepared to spend the money to translate materials, to have translators at meetings, to have staff people who adequately reflect the diversity of the community so they can communicate well with the folks they’ve been working with.

“You also have to be keenly aware not only of the linguistic challenges, but the differences in culture and how these differences affect how you actually approach the work and design your interventions and go about implementation. It’s a huge challenge to me.”

One example involves employment, Blackwell says. “It’s not one size fits all. Program design that works well for immigrant and refugee families may not work at all for families who have been in this country for multiple generations. Employment strategies for somebody who is in poverty but who is in transition is different than a set of strategies for a person who has spent many years in the safety net and has a family that has interacted with the safety net and public support system, sometimes for generations.” He explains that they may have a different set of needs and expectations than an immigrant family.

All of the *Making Connections* sites are experiments in the larger goal of “making connections” among very different ap-

proaches to dealing with poverty, Blackwell observes. There is the approach that emphasizes specific services to people. There

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is the approach that focuses on “building up a particular place” by, say, building more affordable housing. And there is the community organizing approach that focuses on building the power of community residents to impact critical issues.

“What you see over time is that these approaches have often butted heads. This new frame is trying to bring these three together, recognizing that all three need to be working in concert to get where we want to go.”

Making Connections is also learning a lot about the nitty gritty of implementing new approaches locally, Blackwell believes. He says Oakland worked a lot on building the appropriate local infrastructure, “probably too much, trying to figure it out.”

But when he left, Blackwell felt there was *“still quite a bit of work to do around infrastructure. How do the work groups run? Are they staffed adequately? What are their relationships? Who really oversees the work? I never really had a sense we had it right.”*

But despite these struggles, Blackwell feels that *Making Connections* Oakland has some *“innovative projects on the ground that have the potential to have high impact if they go to scale. I think some good relationships have been developed among the community-based organizations that are working together on the ground.... There is more focus around outcomes. There are a lot of things we did well and are still doing well.... The challenge is how to take it to scale.”*

Photos by Mary Ann Dolcemascolo

This is one of a series of reflections and reports about the work of Making Connections, a long-term community change initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The interview for this reflection was conducted by Oakland diarist Bill Wong. It was edited by Diarist Coordinator Tim Saasta. Other reflections are available at: www.DiaristProject.org. For more information, contact Tim@CharityChoices.com.

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