

A Story of Making Connections Across the Divides of Race, Class and Culture

Nearly everyone doing community change work acknowledges the importance of race, class and culture. But how do you tackle these sensitive subjects?

The journey of one *Making Connections* Des Moines staff person—a self-described “white person from the suburbs”—suggests some answers to this question.

The changes that she and others in Des Moines went through also suggest why addressing these subjects is so important. Many in Des Moines have come to believe that building meaningful relationships among diverse people should be the first step for any initiative designed to make a difference in struggling communities.



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REFLECTIONS

on Making Connections

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Stories of change in initiatives like *Making Connections* usually focus on changes in the lives of people living in low-income neighborhoods. But not this story. In Des Moines, one of the most interesting transformations occurred in one of the “professionals”—Communications Lead Ellen Wonderlin.

Her changes came through a process that echoes the name of this long-term community change initiative—*Making Connections*. Through the relationships she developed during group meetings involving residents and the staff of a community organization called the Neighborhood Health Initiative, Wonderlin developed a much deeper understanding of poverty and of the consequences of race and inequality—an understanding that she says has transformed her life and work.

Others in Des Moines also experienced big changes in how they see the communities their organizations are trying to support, including the head of the local United Way.

Wonderlin and others have come to believe that initiatives that want to transform struggling communities need to find ways to break down the separation that exists between the initiative’s leaders and staff and the people whose lives are supposed to be helped.

By Kristin Senty

A reflection on the meaning of Ellen Wonderlin’s changes and the importance of building relationships across the divides of race and class.

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In 2001, Ellen Wonderlin left a comfortable career in corporate communications to stay at home with her four children.

While her career had been satisfying, she’d always felt there was something missing. “You could say that I had always been looking for meaning in my work, but I didn’t really know it,” she says now.

After four years at home with her children, Wonderlin was eager for a change and considered going back to work. Then she received a call from a former co-worker, Margaret Wright, who was now serving as Local Site Coordinator for *Making Connections* Des Moines, a long-term community change initiative begun by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“Margaret called and needed help for a month to do a communications assessment,” says Wonderlin. It was late 2005 and *Making Connections* was pushing for a more strategic approach to communications in all of the sites. Des Moines had struggled for some time, and several communications leads had come and gone. The assessment led to a job offer to serve as Communications Lead.

Wonderlin accepted the position, yet admits that at the time she had “no frame of reference” for what she was “getting into.”

“It was not a corporate setting, and it involved a whole other way of working with people with lots of different expertise,” she says. “But I wanted to get back to work, and going into it I knew I had skill in creating communications. But I had no idea what I

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didn't know, and how emotionally challenging that would be.”

Wonderlin hit the ground running, working to make residents partners in the communications work, to quickly understand the issues of low-income communities and the workings of nonprofits, and to frame a message that would resonate with the *Making Connections* community.

“There was a lot of pressure and expectations from many people, and immediately we were involved in some fairly complex projects,” she says. “Normally in a corporate setting we had more planning and support systems, but in this case we had to come up with our own structure. That was challenging in and of itself.”

Like anyone starting a new job, Wonderlin knew she would need to form new relationships and adapt to “office dynamics.” Admittedly “quiet and reserved,” she felt that it was “hard for residents to relate” to her.

As part of a culturally diverse staff—many of whom had grown up or currently lived in the *Making Connections* neighborhoods—she perceived that she was viewed as a “white person from the suburbs,” whose life experiences had clearly been quite different.

“I think sometimes the other staff members looked at me as really from someplace else, which may have impeded my ability to connect,” says Wonderlin. “They'd talk about how people would bend the rules to make due or skip payment on a



■ “You can't engage people if you're not willing to be vulnerable and listen like Ellen (center) did,” says Des Moines' Tony Wilson.

bill, and I wondered how close people were to falling off the edge. I wasn't in that kind of financial situation, so sometimes it was hard to participate in the discussion.

“Sometimes I felt I was coming face-to-face with the dynamics of race, class and culture, and the question of who I am in all of it,” she says.

This was not the first time Wonderlin was confronted with those dynamics. In college she wrote for the student newspaper and was assigned to review an on-campus theatrical production of “A Raisin in the Sun.” Her review struck a nerve among African American students, who described her interpretation as “naïve” and potentially “racist.”

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Wonderlin was asked to engage in a conversation with African American student leaders and invited to participate in an African American women’s studies class, both of which she did willingly. In class she began to understand the anger she was confronted with.

“I hadn’t understood that the hurt that black people feel—and especially black women—can come out as anger at times,” she says.

A similar issue came up early in Wonderlin’s first year with *Making Connections*, when she was in charge of selecting individuals to tell their story in a local version of the video, “Waging a Living.” She had to decide whether to include the story of an African American single mother who was on welfare while she attended community college.

While the woman wanted to gain the education she needed to find work that supported her family, Wonderlin kept hearing her “hurt and anger” at the system, and wondered if it might come across to many as “a woman with a chip on her shoulder.”

“We were trying to connect with a harder-to-reach audience like local business people, who might want to hire *Making Connections* residents. But I was concerned that her story might reinforce some of the negative stereotypes that people have about welfare,” she says.

So Wonderlin made the decision to use other storytellers in the final production, but she was conflicted about her decision.

Several months later she attended a cross-site *Making Connections* communications workshop at UCLA, where she presented the video and chose to talk about the decision publicly.

“I talked about framing, and how sometimes the person telling the story is not the person the world is ready to hear from, because it reinforces certain things and then they tune out the important points,” she says.

Many in the audience at UCLA reacted negatively. “The feeling I got was, ‘You white people have done this to us black people forever, and now you have done it again.’ There was a lot of hurt,” she says. But there was also praise for her willingness to engage in an honest conversation about race in poverty.

“In a lot of ways we live in very different worlds. I know my world, but what I realized is that there are other perspectives that I can only begin to understand or appreciate. The fact is, I’d made a choice as a white person and what do I know? I’d made a choice about who should speak and why.”

While the experience at UCLA had been a difficult one, Wonderlin says that “standing in front of others, accepting their criticism and learning some new things bolstered my confidence in a strange way.”

Back home again, she started to feel a shift in herself as she continued to work at developing relationships with *Making Connections* staff members and residents. Sometimes during her conversations she could hear the same kind of “hurt and anger” that echoed from these

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past experiences. Instead of focusing on their differences, she decided to make herself accessible for conversation about such difficult things.

“I think these experiences tempered what I heard when people were angry, and left me more open to listen. I could start to understand where my co-workers were coming from when there were conversations around race, class and privilege. I no longer felt afraid to try to have a dialogue.”

“That openness was the beginning of the crack in what happened to me.”

When *Making Connections* Des Moines began the transition to having a local organization manage the work, Margaret Wright left her role as Site Coordinator and nearly all of the staff members that Wonderlin had started with also left.

The United Way of Central Iowa was chosen to manage *Making Connections*' financials and logistics, while the Neighborhood Health Initiative—a community-based organization located in the heart of the *Making Connections* neighborhood—was selected to manage resident engagement.

With Wright and many others gone, Wonderlin knew that she needed to get to know the new players. So she started to sit in on NHI's staff meetings, immediately noticing a big difference in their approach to engagement and community building.



■ Wonderlin has evolved from a corporate communications career to the coordinator of her church's Latino Ministry.

“It was such a different kind of staff and a different kind of environment. This next phase of the work for me was really about going deeper into the work, and into the neighborhood,” she says.

NHI's workers directly mentored residents, following a philosophy of self empowerment, where residents were capable of handling life's challenges with some basic supports. Of those first several months, Wonderlin says she “didn't write anything specifically about NHI, but just spent time at the staff meetings and in the office taking things in.”

She noticed that NHI's outreach workers were “open to having relationships with other people,” generating a feeling that it was “safe to be yourself.”

“I started to hear the stories of the people I was working alongside with, and sometimes what they would go through was mind boggling. Yet they had an incredible faith in the possibility for change.”

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■ Wonderlin learned that faith is part of the community’s vernacular, with churches on nearly every block.

Says Wonderlin, “There was a great deal of caring and encouragement and acceptance for the person that you were, and a lot of building up of the other—‘There is nothing wrong with you, yes you can, you can do that.’ A lot of people who came to NHI were beat down—yet it was an environment where everyone’s gifts were recognized.”

She continued to develop general communications products, and worked with NHI staff on a marketing plan for the newly developing resident leadership certification program that *Making Connections* developed with the local community college and several other partners.

“As we started working together on these projects, I could see that I was sitting alongside people who were really doing the work

authentically. I started to hear their stories, and sometimes what they would go through was mind boggling. Yet they had an incredible faith in the possibility for change.”

Wonderlin grew up the daughter of a Lutheran minister, so faith had always been an integral part of her life. She continued to attend church regularly, but admits that she had some unresolved feelings that centered on old family struggles and the pressures of being a minister’s daughter.

NHI is located in the heart of the African American community, with a church or faith-based organization on just about every block. Faith was part of the community vernacular, and Wonderlin noticed that it regularly found its way into workplace conversation. This was different from her corporate work experience, yet it also felt familiar because of her upbringing.

The conversations, experiences and stories that were now a growing part of her work life started to affect her in different ways. On Sunday when she attended church, she says her minister’s words took on new meaning, as the notion of “crossing barriers and boundaries and going to places where you normally don’t go in order to build community” came to life in the context of *Making Connections*.

“But the pastor also talked about the fact that you don’t go there to fix things—you go with a spirit of accompaniment, and you also go to receive,” she says. This was a message similar to what she heard from NHI outreach

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workers, who saw their work with clients as strengthening, even when it challenged them.

“As I started to listen to my co-workers’ stories, I felt this profound feeling of what people were struggling with—often it was racism—and it was hard,” she says. “Suddenly an energy or a spirit began to flow in me. As I received their stories, I saw a whole new fabric of a society and a community that I never knew existed.”

Wonderlin says that “at that point, my work with *Making Connections* became this unique opportunity to see life from a very different vantage point than what I had ever considered.

“I had always felt fairly attuned, but I started to realize that I was living with a community that I often didn’t see or know was there. I could imagine the hurt that they must feel—the hurt is, ‘I am right here and you don’t see me because I am black, poor, Latino or here illegally.’ What falls from that is hopelessness and despair—of not being able to get out from under that and get out of poverty.”

Wonderlin had never expressed herself in a personal way through her communications work. But one day she was challenged by Tony Wilson, NHI coordinator and the leader of *Making Connections*’ resident engagement work, to write about what she observed at NHI.

At a weekly meeting of “Health Realization”—an open group led by Wilson that

offered unconditional support and encouragement to attendees to work through their personal struggles—he challenged her publicly to write about what she saw and heard there.

At first Wonderlin felt put on the spot, but then she accepted Wilson’s challenge. Like a floodgate that was given permission to open, she wrote a personal reflection entitled, “A Story of Transformation and Redemption at 16th and Jefferson.” She says it “came out very quickly.” Inspired by Mykala, a buoyant young woman at the meeting who shared with the group the negative consequences of her anger in her son’s life, Wonderlin also offered her view of why she was there and what she hoped to gain. She writes:

I am the only white person in the room. I am conscious of it and wonder if people wonder why I am there. What could I possibly need?

I say simply, I have come to listen. And to learn. I think, but do not say, I have also come to become transformed. For inspiration. For hope. For humility. To be reminded of what matters and what does not. To become real.

Wonderlin describes what she revealed in these words in community-organizing terms as “calculated vulnerability.”

“It was an act of vulnerability because no one really knew me before that and just saw me as a distant person. This had always made me sad, because I am naturally quiet and reserved, yet I wanted to find a way to make a connection.”

“It started to feel like a journey shared, being in community with people who are in poverty, and not about what we do for them, but what we can do together.”

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The following week, Wonderlin took a risk and shared her writing with NHI staff members. The result was something that she never would have expected. “It made people cry and suddenly they saw me differently,” she says. “I became one of them. It changed the way people looked at me and themselves.”

She says it was an “ah-ha moment” that did more for her than bring her into connection in a meaningful way with members of the NHI staff and *Making Connections* community. It also helped reconcile some of the old hurts that she’d felt growing up as a minister’s child.

“For a long time I had been looking for meaning in my life and work, and a way to put to rest some old baggage from the past, growing up as a preacher’s kid and the dynamics of that,” she says. With her new feeling of acceptance—and a renewed vision of faith that she was drawing from the relaxed expression of her co-workers—Wonderlin felt she could now “reconcile the past” and let these feelings go.

A “joyful” feeling began to develop in her family life and in her relationships at work, and unfold in the message she heard when she now went to church. “I felt a presence and possibility in life now, not later,” she says.

“It started to feel like a journey shared, being in community with people who are in poverty, and not about what we do for them, but what we can do together.”

Wonderlin felt a freedom to write stories now about the people she met and their shared experiences. Many were personal, and offered a view of feelings and perceptions that once would have felt risky to share, but now came out with a power to connect and create change.

But the power for her wasn’t just about being able to write stories. Instead, through her stories, she “became a part of the story.”

“I could have just told about the people, but I could no longer be separated from them,” she says. “Through my stories I made a conscious effort to invest in those around me.”

One of those investments Wonderlin made was in a woman with schizophrenia named Darlene, who started to attend Tony Wilson’s weekly group at NHI. Darlene had spent time in prison, and struggled with poverty and the affects of untreated mental illness.

Wonderlin wrote a story about her and, the following week, Wilson chose to share it with the group.

“At first I could see that Darlene didn’t understand the point I was trying to make in the story, and I really wished he hadn’t read it,” says Wonderlin. “So I started to explain to her that she is a gift through her presence here, and that it doesn’t matter where she’d been.”

The group then surrounded Darlene, and each individually expressed their unconditional caring for her. “Here was a community of strangers, telling her that they loved her, and that it didn’t matter what she had done,” says

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Wonderlin. “In that moment I felt a wave of energy that moved from person to person, and something seemed to break into that hell of hers. When had anyone said to her, ‘I love you?’”

Says Wonderlin, “That was the gift of the people at NHI—that they could take people as they are for what they are in grace, love and acceptance. No one can ever measure that.”

Late in 2008, when *Making Connections* Des Moines transitioned to a “strategic investment site,” many positions were eliminated, including Wonderlin’s role in communications. Back at home again with her family, she realized her work expectations and interests were quite different than when she first joined *Making Connections*.

“I had always been looking for meaning in my work, but I hadn’t really known it,” she says. “I never would have thought that *Making Connections* would be a job that I would love. I never would have imagined that this was the job that would offer me more knowledge about what to do with my life, and show me what I really care about.”

The chance to connect every day with the outreach workers and clients at NHI whom she’d grown to know and love had ended. But Wonderlin knew that those connections and the issues that she’d identified in the process were there to stay.

“When I sifted everything down, the part that had the most meaning for me were the relationships in the context of faith, and when people started to build this feeling of commu-

nity,” she says. “I knew clearly that I wanted to continue working in an area that is human related, where there is poverty and racial division, and a faith component.”

Volunteer work she’d taken on at her church with a Latino ministry led to a new role as a coordinator for outreach. It was welcome work for her, where she says she’s “taken everything from my *Making Connections* experience” and is “trying to put it to use.”

In the time she’s been there, she’s seen relationship struggles emerge similar to those in *Making Connections*, now between long-time congregation members and members of the Latino ministry as they work to bridge cultural differences. But it’s no surprise to Wonderlin, who feels prepared for the dialogue.

“The strength I have now is that I know it will simply be like this. It’s not fast or predictable. I know something about the dynamics of poverty and how people think and handle things emotionally. I know it’s possible to eventually have authentic relationships between people who are different, as well as transformation in a community. But that takes time.”

The lesson of her own transition—and her willingness to connect with others on their own terms rather than stay at a distance—are the gifts she hopes to help others realize.

“What kind of community are we going to be here? Will we be true to who we say we are? We need to go into the community and be present where people are and immerse ourselves. That’s when positive change can happen—for everyone involved.”

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A reflection on the meaning of individual transformations and the importance of relationships across race, class and culture

“By building the relationships and even disagreeing, ultimately I became more sensitive and aware of the issues of race, class and privilege that are so much a part of poverty.”

—Shannon Cofield

President, United Way of Central Iowa

For Ellen Wonderlin, the meaning of her transformation is obvious—it’s changed the direction of her life and work. She’s become committed to working with people who are struggling, becoming the coordinator of the Latino Ministry in her church.

But is there meaning to Wonderlin’s story beyond the changes in her life work? She thinks there is, as do many others in Des Moines who witnessed her changes and who themselves went through a process of meeting with and developing relationships with residents.

These people see many lessons in the changes experienced by Wonderlin and by others who built relationships across race, class and culture.

One lesson is simply how important relationships across these divisions can be. Several people said that these relationships can stimulate growth not just in residents, who build their confidence and find their

voices, but also in “professionals,” who begin to see residents and low-income communities differently. They begin to understand more clearly the differences. But at the same time, they begin to see the similarities.

Over time, these relationships can improve communication and build a sense of cooperation. They can even lessen some of the stark power differences that exist when funders and institutions sit at a table with residents.

For the “professionals” at the table, relationships like these can help them see much more clearly the day-to-day reality of the communities in which they are trying to make a difference, deepening their understanding of the multiple challenges many families face and of which strategies and policies may work.

They begin to see much more clearly what residents can bring to this work and why their role is essential.

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They can also see their own role differently. Coming to know and care about individual people who bring their own stories, professionals can discover a motivation for change that they didn’t feel before.

They can also find a deeper sense of accountability. The work they are doing together begins to require more than simply coming to meetings and representing their organization’s or their neighborhood’s interests.

This motivation and sense of accountability can in turn lead people to take the kind of risks that are needed to change how their own organizations or groups do their work.

People in Des Moines also learned a lot about *how* relationships across divisions like race, class and culture can be built, one lesson being simply the need for the time it takes for any meaningful relationship to develop. A weekend workshop on race and class doesn’t allow that kind of time.

Wonderlin has thought a lot about how building relationships across differences helped transform her life. Indeed, she has come to believe that a key result of a community change initiative like *Making Connections* should be the relationships it helps develop.

“It’s through relationships that you see people as people rather than as objects or groups,” she explains. “Assumptions and

stereotypes begin to break down. That is how you as an individual begin to change.

“Initiatives often focus on what ‘out there’ needs to change, but individuals also need to understand that they too need to change.

“Churches are notorious for this: ‘We are good people who are giving.’ But as long as it’s us doing for you, the power shift doesn’t happen.”

Investing the time to develop *personal* relationships—not just formal agency-to-agency, partner-to-partner, funder-to-community relationships—is what can start a power shift, she thinks. Why? A shift happens because personal relationships need to be reciprocal, with each person “giving” and



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“Being in relationships changes it. It changes it from being hierarchical. If you’re talking about community, if you don’t do that, everything else is bogus, such as ‘hearing resident voice.’ If there is still an idea that ‘I know better than you,’ then we aren’t getting there. That’s why it’s important.”

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“getting,” in the language of social networks. By being reciprocal, personal relationships allow a little more equality around a table where power differences are often stark.

“In relationships, you see people as they are and you see yourself as you are, and then that changes the way you look at things.

“It changes it from being hierarchical,” Wonderlin adds. That’s critical because, “If you’re talking about community, if you don’t do that, everything else is bogus, such as ‘hearing resident voice’ and ‘bringing people to the table.’

“If there is still an idea that ‘I know better than you,’ then we aren’t getting there. That’s why it’s important.”

What makes Des Moines very interesting is that, during the last stage of *Making Connections* in this city, the relationships that developed between residents and professionals transformed more than just Wonderlin. United Way’s President Shannon Cofield, for one, also talks about how this process affected her views and work as well.

Cofield says now that she was surprised to find that “genuine friendships” formed during this long and often contentious transition process, friendships that were indeed reciprocal. “I gained a wealth from people I never would have connected with.”

She said that these friendships changed things in her. She didn’t feel as compelled to structure every part of her work. When she

needed to announce her decision to leave the *Making Connections* transition process, she didn’t rely on carefully-prepared notes but instead decided “to rely on my gifts and the heart and spirit of the people there, able to receive me.”

She also talks about how this process and the relationships it developed changed her work within United Way.

Perhaps even more important are the changes in Cofield’s perceptions about poverty. “By building the relationships and even disagreeing, ultimately I became more sensitive and aware of the issues of race, class and privilege that are so much a part of poverty.”

Why relationships across race, class and culture?

Building relationships like the ones Wonderlin and Cofield and others built may be rewarding for the people involved. They may lead to changes in the way these people do their work. But given the time, commitment and risk entailed in building these relationships, is doing this really worthwhile? Shouldn’t “professionals” simply keep their eyes on the work at hand, on accomplishing their goals as best they can?

No, say those who think building relationships and direct connections with communities is essential—if you’re really serious that your goal is community change,

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the only way to reach this goal is to engage much more deeply with the communities you want to change.

“You can do a lot of things on the fringes,” says Tony Wilson, who coordinated *Making Connections* Des Moines’ resident engagement work through its transition period. “But the real change happens when you allow yourself to be vulnerable.”

You do this in part, he thinks, by engaging directly and deeply with a broad range of people, not just a small group of professionals. “If you want to get involved in change, you need to get up close and in person.”

By doing this, you can work through what is often a history of tension and distrust between local institutions and low-income neighborhoods, a history that Wilson thinks can undermine an initiative if it isn’t put on the table and discussed.

By doing this, you can slowly build back trust and then a much deeper commitment to the change process. This commitment to change is essential, many say, because the process of changing how people and agencies do their work is extremely hard. People already have demanding jobs and lives. They already have organizational or neighborhood agendas. People promise to do things at a meeting but then just don’t have the time to meet these commitments—too many other things are higher on the to-do list.

But if you have personal relationships around that table, if you have relationships with people from the communities you’re try-



■ United Way’s Shannon Cofield says that she began to see that she could be a “bridge” between communities and her United Way board and staff.

ing to change, then your sense of accountability to the group can grow.

You can also develop a stronger sense of what needs to be done, one that combines what someone has learned from their training and experience with what that person learns from people they come to know who live and raise families in these communities.

“One of the things that has always really struck me about how we approach poverty in this country is that the people who are doing the thinking and funding and the policy-making are almost always not people who have direct connections to poor people and poor communities as they exist today,”

“You can have all the compelling facts in the world, but if you can’t look people in the eye and lay your weapons down and talk, you can’t connect.”

—Shannon Cofield



■ Tony Wilson acknowledges that changes in individuals are hard to measure, but asks, “Why do we think we need to measure everything?”

reflects Garland Yates, a former Casey Foundation senior staff person who directed the foundation’s Communities Mobilized for Action and Results (CMAR), which worked with the Des Moines *Making Connections* site team.

“They may take site visits like I used to, but that doesn’t connect you with poor people and communities. Maybe it connects you with a handful of ‘leaders’ from these communities, people who have learned to sit at a table with a funder, but that doesn’t really connect you to their communities and to the families who are struggling in these communities.

“You can end up developing a big picture view of poverty and poor people that sometimes can be out of touch with the day-to-day reality of poverty and poor people.”

Wonderlin puts all this very simply: “You can’t change the community until you’ve looked at the community.” And to really look at the community, she thinks you have to look at more than data about that community—you need to look at and come to know the people who live in this community.

Interestingly, United Way’s Cofield said something very similar. “You can have all the compelling facts in the world, but if you can’t look people in the eye and lay your weapons down and talk, you can’t connect.”

Through connecting, Cofield came to understand “the issues of race, class and privilege that are so much a part of poverty.”

The complexity of poverty—the connections among the issues that people face day to day—also becomes much clearer. You begin to understand that any one strategy—no matter how important it may be—will never be enough to “move the needle” for more than a few individuals.

Better understanding the issues that face residents of these communities can lead to changes in how these issues get addressed. For Cofield, it led to a push to get parents on the board of a new charter school targeting to low-income students, “a lens I wouldn’t have had without *Making Connections*.”

In another discussion involving United Way funding, she tried to make it clear that residents “are capable of being empowered to take care of themselves.

“If you want to change the community, it happens one person at a time. Going to scale happens because these individuals have influence in their worlds and it starts spreading. It’s almost like the flu—one person gets it and then it spreads.”

—Tony Wilson

“I started to see that I could be a bridge.” To get her senior staff to start to see low-income communities differently, Cofield asked Tony Wilson to talk with them about a bridge out of poverty. “She wanted them to get a better view of poverty,” Wilson explains.

For a communications expert like Wonderlin, better understanding things like the source of the anger she was feeling in many residents helped her understand that *Making Connections*’ communications goals needed to go beyond communicating specific stories and messages to particular audiences. Instead, she came to see that communications can itself be a tool to help accomplish an initiative’s broader goals. It can do this, she thinks, by having “residents carry the message, because they’re perfectly equipped to do this.”

Plus, by carrying the messages, “residents build their own voice and sense of power.”

She witnessed the impact of this at the end of *Making Connections* in Des Moines, when residents were deeply involved in the transition of *Making Connections* to local management. “Some people got it and started to run with it and demand things and debate things. There were difficult conversations, but I think this was part of the process of residents understanding their own power.”

From a communications perspective, developing a deeper understanding of these communities can also change the message being communicated. The anger that Wonderlin initially avoided because she thought it would turn off the audience can become a tool to get that audience to question

why someone feels this anger. Is their poverty a result of their anger, or is their anger a result of their poverty and the inequality they see all around them? Wonderlin began to ask the audience, “How would you feel if you experienced what she has experienced?”

To Tony Wilson, a change like Wonderlin’s has meaning beyond what she can accomplish in her new work. He thinks her transformation shows how change happens—how developing deeper relationships with a community can lead to a much deeper commitment to change.

“What we were trying to do is transform people and let them go out into the world and help others change. This is exactly what is happening to her. She got caught up in the work.

“It says to me that, if you want to change the community, it happens one person at a time. Going to scale happens because these individuals have influence in their worlds and it starts spreading. It’s almost like the flu—one person gets it and then it spreads.”

Wilson acknowledges that the impact of changes in individuals is hard to measure, but he is convinced that it is real. “Why do we think we need to measure everything?”

While *Making Connections* in Des Moines is seen as a disappointment by many people, it still had big impacts, Wilson believes. He points to the changes in United Way’s Cofield. “Now United Way is being impacted with some different expectations.”

“As soon as you start working on a common goal together, you stop looking at the differences and see the similarities. Once you’ve been in the fire together, there is a brotherhood and a sisterhood that forms.”

—Tony Wilson

He also points to changes in many people who were impacted by *Making Connections* in addition to Wonderlin. “What is Lena doing at her church? What is Allissa doing at Mecca? What is Almardi doing at Oakridge?”

He also points to changes in the internal culture of the Department of Human Services, with the people who interact with residents beginning to better understand the stress that these people are feeling, stresses that often mean that they are angry. He asks these staff people—“Why would you expect them to come any differently?”

Changes like these “are where the real measures are,” Wilson believes.

But deepening people’s commitment to change is not just important as a way to get individuals to do things they think will lead to change. It is also a way to help a comprehensive, community change initiative like *Making Connections* to accomplish its ambitious goals.

The underlying idea of most community change initiatives is that the problems poor people face are interconnected, thus the programs that are intended to help poor people need to be connected. This seems obvious. But unfortunately, it is a lot easier to say than to do.

It’s hard to get a range of people and agencies to work together precisely because they come from different backgrounds and have different cultures and experiences. Each indi-

vidual and each agency brings its own set of priorities. Often agencies with different priorities compete with each other for support and recognition. The individuals involved often have histories together.

The challenge is to not just get people to sit together in a room to work on a specific issue, but also to begin working together over time—and to get excited about the potential of working together. That happens when people develop relationships with each other. It’s what Wonderlin saw happen in the group she was part of. “People began to care about each other on a deeply personal level.”

Wilson says something similar: “As soon as you start working on a common goal together, you stop looking at the differences and see the similarities.” Over time, the connections between people working together grow. “Once you’ve been in the fire together, there is a brotherhood and a sisterhood that forms.”

These connections pull people in and get them to invest. People begin to feel accountable to each other. They become more open to trying to change the way they work and, ultimately, the way their organizations work. To take the risk of making changes like these, you have to be committed to what you are doing and to the people you’re working with.

That commitment also is important for another challenge of community change initiatives—the amount of time that change demands. To actually make a difference in a community that has experienced deep poverty for generations inevitably requires a very

“Working together over time can be a lot more challenging. The short-term benefits are less obvious. This is where you need to work through the differences and build the relationships that can help keep people working together over the long period of time needed to really change a community.”

—Garland Yates

long-term, sustained effort—a “two-generation strategy” in the words of *Making Connections*. People need to be willing to sit together around a table for a long time.

“People can usually come together around a specific issue or campaign,” reflects Garland Yates, the director of the Casey Foundation’s Communities Mobilized for Action and Results. “Each person and each organization can see their short-term interests in working together. They don’t have to work through their histories together and their differences.

“But working together over time can be a lot more challenging.” It’s more challenging because the goals of working together are more than, say, getting a specific piece of legislation passed.

“The short-term benefits are less obvious. This is where you need to work through the

differences and build the relationships that can help keep people working together over the long period of time needed to really change a community.”

To achieve this level of change, you need to be comprehensive in at least two distinct ways, believes Yates, who visited Des Moines several times to advise *Making Connections*’ leaders about working with residents as well as with organizers. It’s not just that you need to figure out ways to meet the varied and interconnected needs of children and families living in these communities, Yates says. You also need to figure out how to change the way every agency, funder and policymaker affects this community.

“You can’t just focus on changing poor people, or changing poor communities, or even changing specific policies that affect poor



■ This is after a *Making Connections* Des Moines Community Impact Agenda meeting in 2006.

“You need to find ways to change the entire complex system that has resulted in the kind of deep, long-term poverty we have in this country. And that system includes the funders. It includes the policymakers. It includes every agency that touches these communities. They all need to be open to change.”

—Garland Yates



■ Through relationships with residents, United Way’s Shannon Cofield came to understand “the issues of race, class and privilege that are so much a part of poverty.”

communities,” explains Yates. “You need to find ways to change the entire complex system that has resulted in the kind of deep, long-term poverty we have in this country. And that system includes the funders. It includes the policymakers. It includes every agency that touches these communities. They all need to be open to change.”

What happens, Yates and others believe, is that many people try to simplify a complex problem like long-term poverty. They see one aspect of the problem—usually the aspect that they have studied or worked on the most—as the key. So they focus on this one aspect of the problem—say, access to jobs, or early childhood education, or the behavior of individual poor people themselves. They compete for resources and attention with those who pursue other strategies. Funders choose to focus their resources on certain strategies, contributing to the competition and lack of connection among these strategies.

“We all have to be open to understanding complex problems like poverty in new ways and to changing how we work based on this deeper understanding of poverty,” Yates believes. He thinks this can happen through direct connections to struggling communities and their residents.

But policymakers and funders often don’t feel this need to learn more and to learn through direct experience. “Many people who are funding this work or writing about it or developing policy around it don’t feel a need to learn more and to change. They are the experts. They’ve studied the problems of poverty. They have the knowledge. Why should they change?”

“You could make a pretty strong argument that one reason so many community change initiatives have struggled is that the funders and policymakers themselves don’t do what they need to do to really connect to the problems and the people they are trying to change.”

Making these connections involves more than the occasional site visit and interactions with the local leaders of an initiative, Yates believes. It means doing what Shannon Cofield and Ellen Wonderlin did, which was to sit down over time with a diverse group of people and to be open enough to develop relationships with them.

The key is that relationships in themselves can produce change, as they did for both Wonderlin and Cofield. You can come to see people differently, as more than “the assumptions and stereotypes,” as Wonderlin puts it.

“*Making Connections* made me more mindful of all the perspectives around the table, and when your own perspective shifts, you can really begin to change one person at a time.”

—Shannon Cofield

As people change, becoming more comfortable and more open with each other, these changes can lead to changes in others. As Cofield put this, “*Making Connections* made me more mindful of all the perspectives around the table, and when your own perspective shifts, you can really begin to change one person at a time.”

“If you are in a meaningful relationship with someone and that person changes, that is going to result in a change in you,” says Yates. “That’s a profound understanding that comes out of family therapy.

“But if you’re not in relationships, you don’t have to change. You can just stay the way you are, with your same set of beliefs and assumptions, the rest of your life.”

How do you build these relationships across race, class and culture?

For Tony Wilson, the main answer to this question is that people need to be willing to enter relationships across divisions, and to do this they need to be vulnerable and be willing to listen and observe, not just teach and lead. At one point in his work Wilson decided that he needed to do this himself.

“I knew if I was really going to grow, I had to be vulnerable. It was a challenge. To be willing to be wrong and be criticized—that is vulnerability—but it also allowed me to be authentic.



■ A mural from one of *Making Connections* Des Moines’ target neighborhoods.

“This woman disrupted everyone but what she said was rather profound. She said, ‘I know I am rough around the edges, but just hear my heart.’ Can we learn to stand in the fire with her and truly listen?”

—Tony Wilson



■ One challenge of community change initiatives is to get people to work outside the “silos” of their individual agencies. These silos are near the *Making Connections* target area.

“You can’t engage people if you’re not willing to be vulnerable and listen like Ellen did, and put your own belief system aside for a little while. You need to acknowledge that there may be another way of looking at things.”

Wonderlin made herself vulnerable by reading her writing aloud to the group and by acknowledging that she was the only white person in the room. By doing that, it gave

people permission to talk about the reality of race in that room.

Cofield also acknowledged that being part of this process and building relationships across differences was “scary” because it made her “vulnerable.” But she pushed on.

Pushing forward through the tension that is inevitable when diverse people come together is the key, Wilson believes. “When you’re being authentic and vulnerable, those kinds of experiences are going to happen because my belief system is going to clash with yours, and we’ll find out through the struggle that you’re okay and I’m okay. When people allowed themselves to get involved in the struggle, that in itself changes them.”

Another key, Wilson thinks, is to accept and listen to the anger that some residents will express, not just try to respond to it or exclude people who haven’t learned to filter what they say.

“There are people like that in the community.” Wilson says these people are often “marginalized” and then “disposed of,” with no one actually hearing what they are trying to communicate.

He remembers one resident who spoke out at a meeting on foster care placement. “She disrupted everyone but what she said was rather profound. She said, ‘I know I am rough around the edges, but just hear my heart.’ Her passion came from the love she has for her people. Can we learn to stand in the fire with her and truly listen?”

“Leave room for something to happen that you don’t expect, and be comfortable that it may not be quantifiable or the results immediately apparent. We don’t know yet with this experiment. But we do know that it has had a profound effect on our individual lives.”

—Ellen Wonderlin

To marginalize these people because “they are difficult to work with” cuts you off from the voices of many people, voices that have a lot to communicate about the realities of these communities, Wilson thinks.

Being vulnerable also means letting go of the role of staff person and expert—acknowledging that it’s not just the experts who understand poverty and that it’s not just poor people who have needs. In an initiative like *Making Connections*, it’s important to acknowledge that everyone is getting something out of it.

“In a community change initiative, we think we’re going to fix *those* people,” Wonderlin explains. But, she asks, are those the only people who have needs? She thinks not. “In my own story, I needed something too. I needed acceptance and love. There was a healing in this for me.”

When you see the same things in yourself that you see in others, then you see your similarities rather than your differences, she thinks. You broaden your definition of community and your role in it.

“Ellen got comfortable in other cultures,” thinks Wilson. “She probably saw that there was just a minute difference and that they were all people.”

You see these things by letting go of your role as the expert at the table and really listening to what others are saying, Wilson contends. “It’s people sticking with it, establishing a rapport and respect and a willingness to listen to what is being said.”



To do this, the agency or funder needs to accept the need for a process like this, Wonderlin believes. “The presence of a power structure that isn’t pushing and pulling, but just journeying side by side” is crucial.

She says it’s interesting that these relationships developed during a period in *Making Connection* Des Moines when there was less structure and certainty to the daily work—“a space” where something naturally evolved.

“Leave room for something to happen that you don’t expect, and be comfortable that it may not make sense or it may not be quantifiable or the results immediately apparent,” she says.

“It may not even be something that you can see until the next decade, and we don’t know yet with this experiment. But we do know that it has had a profound effect on our individual lives.”

“It’s difficult to build relationships with anyone. But when you layer on top of that differences in economic status, race and culture, I think it was really quite remarkable that this community formed. People began to care about each other on a deeply personal level.”

—Ellen Wonderlin



- Another challenge of community change initiatives is to connect policymakers with the realities of low-income neighborhoods. This is a reflection of the state capital building in Des Moines, near the *Making Connections* target area.

Another key about how to build relationships across divisions is time. As Wonderlin’s story shows, the process of connecting with a community involves much more than attending a few community events or inviting residents to a few meetings. It involves building relationships, which can only be done over time, especially relationships with people who have had very different life experiences. As in Wonderlin’s story, there is a lot of distance and distrust to overcome. People on both sides of the relationships need to reach a little beyond their comfort zones.

Many initiatives try to deal with race and culture and class issues in a long weekend workshop. The problem is that relationships don’t usually develop in the short time span of a workshop. And without relationships, anger

and challenges can alienate more than they educate or change people.

“It’s difficult to build relationships with anyone,” Wonderlin says. “Our society is so fractured that community doesn’t happen naturally, not like 50 years ago when people were homogenous, the roles were clear and people stayed in one place.

“But when you layer on top of that differences in economic status, race and culture—each comes with its own view or baggage—I think it was really quite remarkable that this community formed. People were from so many different places and had relationships with one another that weren’t just work related. People began to care about each other on a deeply personal level.”

“*Making Connections* was the reason we got the chance to do this. It provided the funding for us to be at the table and struggle through community change work.”

—Tony Wilson

Unfortunately, just as people in Des Moines began to come together across these divisions of race, class and culture, *Making Connections* came to an end, with the Casey Foundation narrowing its support to a few “strategic investments.” This timing suggests another key lesson about how to build these relationships: Do it early.

Doing it so late in the process in Des Moines meant that this slow process of building relationships across these divisions was layered onto the hard process of figuring out *Making Connections*’ future in this city. United Way’s Cofield found it “very challenging” to balance the timeline for the transition set by the Casey Foundation with the deep changes requested by the residents. She says she often felt “caught in the middle.”

United Way’s role in these neighborhoods was challenged by some of the residents at the table, a challenge that Cofield came to understand was getting at a deeper issue, the realities of “race, class and culture.” In the context of the *Making Connections* transition, she says that focusing on this issue became a “barrier.” After much consideration, she decided that United Way needed to step back from taking over local management of *Making Connections*.

In hindsight, says Wonderlin, it would have been much better to have started *Making*

Connections by delving into these tensions around race, class and culture. “Couldn’t we invert the Casey theory to start with relationships? It all started with numbers and theory and data.”

She acknowledges that *Making Connections* always had a “component” of relationships. But she thinks the focus wasn’t initially on building relationships across cultures and classes but just to reinforce existing relationships. “It started with who knew whom in Des Moines.”

For Wilson, while this relationship-building process should have started earlier, the progress made during the transition meetings was extraordinary and needed to be recognized.

“I think the foundation was looking for one type of thing so there was no chance for them to see something else.”

Despite the disappointment of *Making Connections* ending its work in Des Moines just as it was beginning to break through these deep, long-standing divisions, Wilson thinks this initiative played an important role.

“*Making Connections* was the reason we got the chance to do this. It provided the funding for us to be at the table and struggle through community change work.”

“By building the relationships and even disagreeing, ultimately I became more sensitive and aware of the issues of race, class and privilege that are so much a part of poverty.”

—Shannon Cofield. President, United Way of Central Iowa

The Diarist Project

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

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

This story was written by Kristin Senty, the *Making Connections* Des Moines diarist. The reflection was written by Tim Saasta, diarist coordinator, and Senty. Photos by Kristin Senty (pages 1, 2, 5, 11, 14) and MaryAnn Dolcemascolo (pages 6, 13, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22).

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 neighbor-



Shannon Cofield

hoods in 22 cities is now an intricate network of people and groups committed to making strong families and neighborhoods their highest priorities.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF.org)

works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families.

For more information about **The Diarist Project**, contact:

Tim Saasta
c/o Charitable Choices
4 Park Ave., Suite 200
Gaithersburg, MD 20877

Tel: 240-683-7100
Tim@CharityChoices.com

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