

PARTNERSHIP STEMS FROM SIMILAR VISIONS

Martha Bergin, GateWay Community College

The following interview was conducted with Mary Moore, Vice President of the Lindon Park Neighborhood Association on March 21, 2009

The Lindon Park Neighborhood Association serves a small pocket neighborhood in southeast Phoenix that covers about eight streets north to south and about four blocks wide. To the north is a busy street; to the west are an elementary school and a freeway; at the south are another freeway and a light industrial area; and at the eastern border lies the extended campus of the old Motorola plant, now largely unoccupied. Beyond its parking lots rise the bluffs of Papago Park. GateWay Community College is about 1.5 miles to the south and west. The area as a whole has various pockets of monolingual Spanish and English speakers, as well as refugees from Ethiopia and Somalia. In August, 2009, the service learning partnership between Lindon Park Neighborhood and GateWay Community College celebrated its seventh anniversary.

WHAT ARE SOME STRENGTHS OF THE PARTNERSHIP?

Mary's first response was that the strengths of our partnership stem from similar visions. For example, she says we both think in terms of empowering community members. We see empowerment in terms of changing the dynamics in the neighborhood, such as working with residents to not be afraid of talking about things they might want to change or improve and to be willing to take action, such as volunteering for Block Watch, or stepping forward to get Phoenix Neighborhood Patrol (PNP) training. We are both hard workers. We also share a common vision of finding ways to address communication barriers in the neighborhood, such as creating opportunities for language learning and increasing fluency.

We have also worked together to bring parenting classes to the neighborhood, working with parents so kids have the best opportunities to succeed in school. Together, we have learned a lot about how the first six months of life is very important for a child's future, and we have been able to bring resources from the community college in terms of student volunteers, classes, curriculum, parent play and learning kits, and translator headphones into the community.

An important aspect of Lindon Park Neighborhood Association is the monthly meetings and three major events held in the neighborhood each year. These events serve as outreach to residents. For example, parties for the children, which are offered in the winter and spring, bring residents together so that they can see the potential benefits of a joint effort. These events get neighbors talking about and working toward other goals, such as increased opportunities for kids after school. GateWay service learning students have been partnering to help make the events possible for the last six years. GateWay students have not only

The service learning partnership between Lindon Park Neighborhood and GateWay Community College recently celebrated its seventh anniversary.

volunteered at events and manned health fairs, but also watched children so that parents can participate in parenting classes and neighborhood meetings.

GateWay students helped to plan events, filled at least 24,000 plastic eggs, and made about 160 Easter baskets. From Martha's point of view, these events offer service learning students a crucial opportunity to learn about how and why people build community. While at first glance the events seem merely an opportunity for kids to have fun, a closer look shows various groups in the community working cooperatively together. Children and adults build community identity and shared values, while the kids unconsciously enjoy the fruits of hard work which they take for granted—and which they may someday recreate for their own children. Kids learn how people are expected to treat each other in a public setting, and a largely immigrant population enjoys an open and accepting space in which to interact while creating supportive neighborhood social norms. Martha deeply appreciates the opportunities her students have to reflect on these vital dynamics of a free and civil society.

Mary's neighborhood, which is located on an EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) brownfields site, also works with GateWay faculty Mario Castaneda's water quality students. These students create Geographic Information Systems (GIS) maps of Lindon Park water wells contaminated by toxic industrial chemicals. The goal of EPA funded TAG (Technology Assistance Grant) meetings held by the Lindon Park Neighborhood Association is to present water pollution data to non-technical people in an understandable way, and to discuss the ideas that are being considered with regard to managing and cleaning up the polluted ground water. Even something as simple as getting sociology students to attend the TAG community meetings is helpful, because the effectiveness of the meetings is measured in part by attendance.

"Having the GIS database for the superfund site has empowered the community as nothing else could, because we can query the data about questions that the community thinks are important. We don't have to rely on data we are given; we can look at it through our own eyes. Without the partnership, there would be no project. We have already been able to apply the data to a request for a variance permit. We were able to provide striking graphical evidence that more information would be needed," says Mary.

We have developed genuine friendship and trust over time, and we enjoy being able to sit over coffee and explore ideas and opportunities.

Keeping clear and continuous communication between us across the years has been crucial. Mary has needed to know what opportunities are available through the college, as well as through the city and other sources, and Martha has needed to understand the situation, needs and assets of the neighborhood. We have developed genuine friendship and trust over time, and we enjoy being able to sit over coffee and explore ideas and opportunities. Mary says that knowing someone else understands and cares about the neighborhood's work helps them to keep going and avoid burnout. "It helps us to stay inspired. The college," says Mary, "is a good resource of information and cutting edge ideas."

WHAT ARE THE WEAKNESSES OF OUR PARTNERSHIP?

“A lot of times,” says Mary, “we’re not in a position to take advantage of the resources available to us. A crucial element such as money, time or people may be lacking and we miss opportunities.” The first example that came to mind was related to the semester rhythms of the college, which can offer support only when classes are in session. This is a structural issue which is not likely to change. We do have some opportunities for students to serve during the summer, but the weather here in Phoenix is so hot that people tend to do much less than at other times of year.

One of the difficulties of service learning emerged at the very beginning of the partnership. In 2002, Mary had begun working with Head Start on behalf of the neighborhood. Our first opportunity was to ask service learning students to watch neighborhood children while parents attended parent meetings. This need has always been more difficult to fill than one would expect. It is difficult to match students’ available time with parent meeting times. When students are able to be present, some show a ready ability to help manage a crowd of rowdy children while others are at a loss and become overwhelmed.

Translators are also needed at the parent meetings. Bilingual students are usually happy to translate at the meetings. However, translation is a sophisticated skill, and some faculty disagree about the appropriateness of asking students to translate informally. In general, Mary and Martha think these problems point to the need for clear roles for students to take in the neighborhood. We both agree, “The clearer, the better.”

The development of roles for service learning students that offer both clear-cut duties for the student and meaningful service to the neighborhood is a process that unfolds over time—perhaps years.

The development of roles for service learning students that offer both clear-cut duties for the student and meaningful service to the neighborhood is a process that unfolds over time—perhaps years.

The roles must be discovered as opportunities for service, and then clarified. This clarification involves both imagining the skills sets required, and thinking about the risks they involve for the students and the neighborhood, as well as the contributions they make to the students’ education and to the neighborhood’s quality of life. We place this in the “weakness” category, because we somehow always feel “behind the curve” in this area.

Another weakness of our service learning project is that the meetings where residents explore local underground water pollution issues are currently supported by the federally funded TAG grant that was obtained by Mary. We want to be sure that this project is sustainable. She is concerned that after the funding goes away; there will be no compelling reason for federal and state agencies to meet with residents on these important subjects.

We are currently unsure of the role that our GIS-based information database will play in continuing the meetings, although we are sure that it will be very helpful. The neighborhood’s needs are currently to continue with a series of meetings that are presented by a responsible

party; to facilitate the raising of questions regarding the groundwater pollution; and to sustain the inquiry and facilitate in-depth exploration of these questions.

WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES OF OUR PARTNERSHIP?

If we look at our weaknesses as opportunities, we have many opportunities. You might say we are optimists. With regard to the GIS-based water pollution information project, we can use the information that we are collecting, as well as our experiences in conducting the TAG meetings, to develop roles to give information to the community. We can empower citizens to extract information and find out about the areas of polluted groundwater that they live on top of. Here is a list that Mary and Martha came up with for constructive action:

- Develop better community presentations
- Develop more roles (both short-term, limited and long term)
- Develop better ways to use the information we already have
- Develop a stronger voice for the community (looking at the EPA as an audience in particular)
- Try to have six months/one year of meetings calendared ahead of time, so that we can include them in the syllabi of interested faculty

Mary would also like to use the GIS software to look at health survey data. She would like to look at health risks that the neighborhood has been exposed to, such as vapor intrusion. Vapor intrusion is when toxic chemicals from polluted underground water filter up and pollute the air. Another problem the neighborhood encounters when trying to understand the effects of water pollution is that sometimes people get sick and then move away so they are not counted in health surveys.

We can empower citizens to extract information and find out about the areas of polluted groundwater that they live on top of.

Social entrepreneurship also provides opportunities to neighborhood leaders, and to nonprofits who work with the neighborhood. We have a good relationship with business faculty, and there are opportunities to work together to encourage residents and students to develop business models that can address social problems. We might invite the Maricopa Community Colleges Small Business Development Center (SBDC) as a collaborator.

WHAT ARE THE THREATS TO OUR PARTNERSHIP?

Both Mary and Martha immediately identified the transitory nature of community roles and positions as a threat. We work with many stakeholders such as schools, school districts, city, state and federal government offices, political leaders and their staff, academic professionals and administrators, apartment management teams, law enforcement organizations, faith communities, and other neighborhood groups. Each of these organizations experience changes in staff due to job changes, restructuring, budget cuts, election cycles, promotions, and so forth. Additionally, people continually move in and out of the neighborhood. Often the families who offer the strongest leadership are the ones who move out because they have purchased a home somewhere else.

Keeping good communication with an endlessly changing set of partners is confusing and exhausting. Sometimes new contact people are unwilling to support agreements that their predecessors had created. Sometimes monies dry up. How can we do this work, we ask, when a hard-won program or opportunity can be snatched away or discontinued at any time? Why does it seem that neighborhood issues are a last priority for almost everyone?

A good example of a threat associated with the ever-changing landscape of community work is the issue of liability insurance. There used to be an agency called Neighborhood Partners whose primary goal was to support grassroots neighborhood

Keeping good communication with an endlessly changing set of partners is confusing and exhausting.

organizations and community building. A qualifying neighborhood could get liability insurance under their umbrella insurance policies, and this insurance allowed Lindon Park Neighborhood Association to be an official community partner of our community college district. A couple of years ago, however, Neighborhood Partners was subsumed by another community organization, which discontinued the insurance program. The City of Phoenix could not fill the gap, due to budget woes. Thus, for a while, our partnership was severely limited in what we could do with service-learners. We were virtually at a halt. Mary now has a strategy for the neighborhood organization to become a 501 c.3 nonprofit, and if she is successful, she will be able to get some type of insurance. A GateWay boomer student has offered to do some accounting work for the neighborhood to help the process.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Martha Bergin is a faculty member in communication and sociology at GateWay Community College in Phoenix, Arizona. Dr. Bergin has been involved in service learning since 1997, when she served as Assistant Director of the Center for Public Policy and Service at Mesa Community College, coordinating Mesa Community College's service learning programs. She has also served as vice president of the Maricopa Community Colleges Adjunct Faculty Association. Martha received her Ph.D. in Communication from Arizona State University and her M.A. in Sociology from Sacramento State University. Her current research investigates social networks in Phoenix grassroots neighborhood organizations.