

An Austin “Snapshot”: A Nine-Week Asset-Based Ethnography of a Far West Side Community

Nishaant Choksi

Nishaant Choksi has a B.A. from the University of Chicago, where he majored in Anthropology and International Studies. He is currently conducting anthropological research in India as a Fulbright Scholar.

Introduction

This paper is based on research conducted for Bethel New Life, Inc., a faith-based community development corporation with its administrative headquarters in the Austin neighborhood on the far West Side of Chicago. The research was part of The Field Museum’s Urban Research and Curriculum Transformation Institute summer research program under the auspices of the Field Museum’s Center for Cultural Understanding and Change.

This project was multi-fold and began with mapping out the social assets present in the community. In what ways do residents participate in community life on an everyday basis? How would they like to increase their participation? What resources do they utilize, and how do they link with institutions in the community? A better understanding of the existing assets of residents can allow service providers like Bethel to connect with their constituency more effectively. Special emphasis was placed on entrepreneurship, infrastructure, arts and the demographic groups of youth, senior citizens and ex-offenders.

The next directive was to look at issues of place, family and success. How do residents perceive or determine their culture? What is the role of family within the community? What are the avenues of success, and do they lead out of the Austin area? Included in this research are perceptions of religion and tradition, since religion plays a vital role in family and community life in the Austin area. Within these broad topics, much can be studied, and this research project presents a general overview that may provide direction for further research in these areas.

Tensions do exist in the neighborhood, and an encompassing cultural arts agenda could open up new possibilities for bringing the community together. Other challenges face organizers and institutions in the Austin community, particularly in the areas of communication and collaboration. Austin has a rich history of activism, both in terms of social mobilization and the presence of community-based organizations, yet many people still do not access the programs being offered.

Methods

A number of traditional ethnographic techniques were used in conducting this research, including structured, semi-structured and informal interviews as well as partic-



photograph of Nishaant Choksi by Ivan Watkins

ipant observation. Participant observation included both recordings of the daily life of residents and attendance at numerous public meetings. An ethnographic asset-based

approach was also used, relying on open-ended and informal interviews in lieu of surveys. In some cases, I also conducted informal focus groups.

Neighborhood Overview

The Austin neighborhood stretches from the Eisenhower Expressway on the south to North Avenue on the north along Cicero and Central avenues and Austin Boulevard. Austin is 89.7 percent African American and has a population of 117,527 (U.S. Census 2000). The median income for Austin is \$33,633 (U.S. Census 2000), making it a “middle-income community” in the city. However, because of Austin’s size, it has pockets of growing wealth as well as signs of continuing poverty.

It’s “interesting,” as an Austin resident said, “you got the rich people and the poor people around here.” Many people who live and work in Austin express optimism in the community despite the current economic crisis most of them face. In a community where there are many homeowners, some people say that the property values have been increasing, businesses are coming in, communication between residents has increased, and “positive steps” are being taken to change Austin’s reputation as just another impoverished African American neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago. However, residents temper their optimism with concerns over the continuing presence of crime, particularly in the form of gangs and the drug trade, the lack of jobs, and looming gentrification in certain areas of the neighborhood.

In this densely populated African American community, there is a vibrant street life, with people selling CDs, kids selling sno-cones, seniors selling fruits and people just willing to chat. Public events are popular in Austin, and every weekend a community institution, whether it be a church, a park or block club, will put on some kind of street event. “Normally there’s somethin’ almost always goin’ on here, you just got to keep up with it,” said promoter Ron Smith while chatting with me at the Garfield market. Public festivals include youth fests in the parks, the gospel fests, aldermans’ festivals and the Taste of Austin, which happens every year in August. Public meetings are also very common in Austin, for public meetings occur almost every week in some fashion or another. Alderman Mitts holds a town hall meeting every

month, and other town hall meetings, block club meetings, organizational functions and family reunions are commonplace. People come together for a variety of reasons in Austin, and this trend presents enormous potential for community engagement.

The Austin area is spatially one of the largest neighborhoods in the city of Chicago. There are so many people, organizations and so much distance in the community that it was impossible for me to cover all of it during the internship period. Therefore, what has emerged is a partial mapping of the Austin neighborhood and groundwork for further research in this large and important Chicago community.

Assets: The Residents

When Alderman Emma Mitts of the 37th Ward was asked to describe some of her neighborhood’s strengths, she immediately said, “We have a lot of good people here...I love to show love, if you give it, they’ll [give it] back.” During my time in Austin, I consistently saw people taking charge of their community, whether on a large scale, like organizing a six-block cleanup, or something smaller, like helping neighbors carry their groceries home. As the editor of the local *Austin Voice* said, “the people [of Austin] are wonderful...the people know how to run things.” It is common to hear residents discuss the types of informal help that exist on their blocks. For instance, one resident told me that one of her neighbor’s brothers “comes over every mornin’ and he’ll clean up after people,” sweeping the street and mowing the yards. “I see a lot of people doin’ things like that,” she added.

I met an ex-offender in the neighborhood who cleans up every morning and makes sure that other people on the block clean up behind them as well, whether they are his elderly neighbors or the drug dealers on the corner. This informal help assists in solidifying the community and expanding “networks of exchange” (Stack 1974:35), which are tapped into for grassroots organizing efforts in Austin such as block cleanups.

Reverend Davis, a pastor at a local Austin church, explained that “there is a great opportunity [in Austin] for teaching about entrepreneurship...a lot of people want to start businesses, but don’t have a way to start them.” Many people in the community express a desire to market

their skills or start a business. In the absence of any formal marketplace, men and youth set up stands on street corners selling everything from compact disks to bicycles on Division Avenue. Programs have been suggested to move gang leaders to entrepreneurship because, as the *Voice* editor put it, "They're running small businesses out there on a regular basis." Who's to say that the drug trade, though illegal, cannot teach substantive business skills? Kretzman and McKnight (2003:283), in their asset-based development model, advocate "unleashing the energies of local residents" for "creative approaches" to involve people in economic activity while developing their skills. These approaches are already being undertaken in the Austin community in a variety of ways, offering new and potential opportunities for local residents.

One viable avenue for entrepreneurship is community agriculture. Every Saturday, on the corner of Madison and Central Avenues, Austin has a farmers' market where people from all over the West Side bring fresh produce to sell. LaDonna Redmond, a West Garfield Park resident and former vendor at the Austin Farmers' Market (now relocated to the more upscale Garfield Park market) has large urban agriculture lots near the border of Austin and Garfield Park. She claimed that "an urban lot can grow food for the community, and food to be profitable." According to Redmond, restaurants around the city will pay a good price for fresh produce and there is a lot of "philanthropic support" to "build local food" supplies. Mary Peery, the head of the Austin GREEN team, which manages ten community gardens throughout the Austin area said, "If a young family [could] get in here, they would make good, they could sell their vegetables."

Data suggest that there is no shortage of skilled labor in Austin, and there exists a wellspring of labor potential even in what some people would consider the most marginalized of groups. For example, I met a disabled man, who "was shot up," but still enjoys rehabbing buildings. He showed me the outside of a family storefront property on Division Avenue, which he had fixed up into a marketable commercial property. However, the neighborhood's lack of job opportunities had prevented him from capitalizing on his refurbishing skills and he was moving to Wisconsin to look for work.

Although many Austin residents consider themselves skilled, they lack the requisite contacts to provide

them with suitable opportunities to exercise these skills. This is despite the fact that Austin has numerous "home-grown" entrepreneurial success stories. When asked how his business became so successful, James Cole, who runs a heavily frequented shoe shine and repair shop on Central Avenue said, "I work at it, I'm here all the time...serving the right things, serving the people..."

Connections within the community are crucial for further economic development in Austin. Neighborhood entrepreneurs are valuable resources who may be utilized to advance economic development. These informal networks, in addition to those found among friends, family, neighbors and churches have the potential to blossom into employment networks, as Taylor et al. found in their study of "black support networks" (1997:295). Research shows that "most black Americans (6 of 10) find their jobs through informal sources" (Taylor and Sellers 1997:155). These can facilitate what one Austin organizer calls "creative employment" among underserved populations.

Assets: The Infrastructure

The disconnect between the labor pool and the larger society became clear when a Head Start coordinator was asked to describe her community. She said that it has a lot of "spaces," but lacks "manpower." Nevertheless, her observation about local infrastructure is correct. Predominately white and wealthy people lived in Austin more recently than any other neighborhood on the West Side, and when they fled in the late 1970s much of Austin's infrastructure, including its homes, buildings and commercial properties remained. Due to what residents cite as neglect by the city as well as other factors, a lot of this property has decayed. However, beautiful homes, apartment buildings and commercial corridors still make Austin stand out from neighboring West Side communities like West Garfield Park and North Lawndale. Whereas organizations like Bethel have been involved in *building* infrastructure in communities such as West Garfield Park, I heard many residents and community leaders talk of *acquiring* it in Austin. Infrastructure already exists in Austin, it just needs to be purchased and utilized for good purposes. As Kretzman and McKnight suggest, turning "underutilized space" into community assets is

essential for developing the area's economy as well as fulfilling gaps in social services (1993:311).

Austin residents recognize this, and many are currently working on utilizing Austin's rich infrastructure for community ends. Reverend Treadwell, who runs a five-day-a-week soup kitchen on Lake Street and Laramie Avenue, said that he has been trying to get an abandoned building for a homeless shelter for quite a while. Kitchen frequenters were pessimistic about it, although they said, "we could fix it up for him." A youth organizer at the Westside Health Authority, a social service organization in the Austin area, said that he was working on getting the old 15th District police station building to become a youth center. These are examples of people in the community trying to turn already existing infrastructure into community resources. As one pastor at the 37th Ward pastor's meeting put it, the area has so many "abandoned properties [to be fixed up]...you will be surprised at the young men who will leave the corner" to work on these projects. Mary Peery, a community gardener, said that she had to pester Housing and Urban Development to get houses on her block redone, though they eventually were. Families are now living in these refurbished homes, and property values have risen. In Austin, both the infrastructure and the labor needed to transform that infrastructure are plentiful. It is a matter of connecting the two.

Multi-use public spaces are another valuable asset in Austin. Columbus Park, for example, is nationally recognized as one of Jens Jensen's premier prairie-style landscapes. It has a beautiful lagoon where community residents fish, a forested area, playgrounds, a golf course, a players' green that was created for outdoor dramas, and a beautiful refectory for community events. There was jazz programming there on July 29th, which was highly attended by Austin residents as well as by those who live in the neighboring wealthy suburb of Oak Park. Other parks in the area are LaFollete in North Austin (also large with various facilities including a pool), Levitt Park and Austin Park, which has water slides. Close to Austin is Garfield Park, where the nationally known Conservatory has multiple programs for kids from the West Side. The Austin Town Hall, the old municipal building of Austin Township, is north of Columbus Park. Inside is an auditorium in which community residents enact plays and have musical performances. The Town Hall also has numerous

classrooms, a recording studio and a swimming pool.

There are two public libraries in Austin: the Austin Public Library on Race Avenue (by Central Avenue) and the North Austin Public Library on North Avenue (also by Central Avenue). A new library will be coming up on Chicago and Cicero avenues. The Austin Public Library is a beautiful building with an auditorium. These public institutions are open and frequented by residents of all class backgrounds.

While these institutions are valuable, they are run by the city, which often does not have an intimate understanding of the needs of the community. One Park District worker complained that parks up north and on the lakefront get a majority of the resources. "As long as you own your home and pay taxes, all parks should be treated the same," he asserted. Kretzman and McKnight (1993: 172) suggest that these public institutions become responsive when residents "capture" them, creating accountability and responsiveness to community interests. Parks and libraries are already rich public spaces, and collaboration with these institutions could create "accountability" on both ends with positive results.

Austin residents are attempting to create their own public spaces that are accessible to the community in ways similar to parks and libraries. For instance, Reverend Milton, a community organizer and pastor, linked up with the San Miguel School (a private school on Chicago and Leamington avenues) to open facilities for the Wednesday night service. The one I attended was packed with boys using the gym to play basketball and girls jumping rope. At the same time, according to Milton, "adults are there...we gonna' be right out there monitoring them...build[ing] relationships...they need facilities, outlets...[we need to be] finding places within the community [like] churches and schools." Milton advocates that community institutions perform a variety of different socially productive functions, not just ones that they have been narrowly assigned.

Austin's community gardens are another locally-initiated form of public space created for social interaction. One of the first community gardens in the Austin area was created by a local senior citizen in conjunction with the program NeighborSpace and Openlands' urban garden initiative. A vacant lot on the corner of Huron and Latrobe was converted into a flower and vegetable gar-

den, which she calls Paradise Gardens. While Paradise is fenced off, it is never locked and Peery often complains of people coming in and destroying plants. Nevertheless, she said, whereas other community gardens try to keep kids out, “if I see some children walking down the path [or] ridin’ bikes, I don’t say nothin’, I love it.”

Peery also appropriated the lot across the street for a sculpture garden, which is completely open to the public. It features three sculptures by kids at Austin High School, and children often congregate in the space, playing on the columns. Peery said that she had been accused by some neighbors of creating the sculpture garden for the drug dealers, “but do you see any out there...where people sellin’ drugs, they don’t want people [to be around].” Peery has linked with other senior citizens and together they have ten community gardens in the area, though many people in the neighborhood are unaware of these open spaces. One resident on the Garfield Park/Austin border said that his garden was created and run by his block club, and is perfect for simply hanging out with neighbors: “On the fourth [of July] we had people barbequing out there.” Kretzman and McKnight (1993:318) say that projects such as gardens can be the first “building block” for community renewal. As Peery said, “beauty can be in Austin just like [it can be] on State Street [downtown].”

Local business can serve as what Conquergood (1990) calls “informal community centers” where gossip, job information and friendships blossom. In the small offices of the *Austin Voice* newspaper, kids are always coming in and out, and receptionist Julie Edwards gives them treats. “This is a place where they can come,” she said, “a safe haven.” This type of interaction, as we will see in later sections of this report, can lead into creative employment opportunities and build stable and comfortable relationships with the youth of the community. Likewise, businesses like the Shoe Shine King are places where people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyles can interact. In my time there, I was introduced by Mr. Cole to an ex-police commander, a head of an independent school, and a prostitute. Cole said he accepts anyone, “as long as they ain’t no harm to me or the people around me...I take you for who you are as an individual.” The Shoe Shine King was packed with people, whether they were clientele or just people sitting down chatting.

Assets: The Arts

When Linda McWright was asked about an arts scene in Austin, she said, “there are kids, they got gifts, but nobody knows what they’re doin’.” My data suggest Austin’s art scene is indeed vibrant, but that much of the community remains uninformed about its opportunities. McWright, who has been in the concert promotion business for a number of years, now puts on talent shows in local parks: “I started doing talent shows at Garfield Park, people and kids came to see my showcase...there was nobody else there.” She has put on shows in all of the major parks on the West Side, including Columbus and Douglas, and is constantly scouting out talent. “We get record companies out for public concerts [let them know] that we got talent here in the city of Chicago,” she explained. Also, promoters like McWright recognize that community children love music and dance, but often need an “outlet,” someplace easily accessible where they can perform. McWright has a space at her small Clark Park field house where she lets “anyone come into [this] place and do their thing, I let them right in.” In the absence of sustained programming by the Park District, Austin residents still maintain an artistic atmosphere with private promoters such as McWright working through the public entities to foster the arts in their communities.

Churches are also places where the arts flourish. Church choirs and bands teach youth to play instruments and let adults exercise their talents. Reverend Davis, a local pastor, said that his youth ministry has a “rapping component” and “dance teams” and that the kids were “hyper about it.” Father Reed at St. Martin’s Episcopal Church has local residents do paintings for him, and he even had a local man make the altar when he remodeled the church interior. The church also has jazz services from time to time.

Libraries, such as the North Austin Library, also frequently invite local people to perform at programs. Donna Kanapes, the local librarian and an Austin resident, said she has fostered relationships with local artists for different types of programs, including performance art, music and poetry. The library, she said, “will continue to get local people to do African American programs” and hopes to host an open-mike event for children or young adults. Levette Hayes, who runs the Westside Cultural

Arts Council out of Garfield Park, operates a space at the Garfield Park Market and organizes monthly poetry readings at the Gold Dome. Hayes says that the space is accessible to any artist who wants to present his or her artwork, and she has linked with a number of artists from the Austin area as well as other parts of the West Side. This is an example of “building bridges” (Kretzman and McKnight 1993:185) between public institutions and community resources.

This partial asset mapping suggests that people in the Austin community have an interest in the arts, entrepreneurship and the transformation of space, and they have successfully capitalized on resources to develop these interests. Public institutions permeable to the community act as mediators during the process of development. Programs must serve to help residents capitalize on available resources, make connections and provide training to build on their interests.

Issues: Youth

During my time in Austin, residents repeatedly asked, “What about the kids?” The perceptions of youth that I gleaned from conversations in the community varied wildly, and strategies for assisting youth ranged from chastisement to collaboration. People often seemed to feel that Austin youth had low attention spans and did not like structured activities. Youth were described as having narrow and provincial interests, and it was common to criminalize young adults, particularly men. For instance, one resident said that “the young adults standing out there on the corner, they standing on the corner for two things, either they gangbanging or sellin’ drugs.”

Although it is true that some kids are engaged in illicit activities, this widespread perception often hurts local youth. At a block cleanup, I heard an old lady shouting at a young man who came up and talked to his neighbor. “Man,” he said, “that old lady keep saying I’m on the corner. I ain’t on no corner, I work, I’m not gonna’ give up my freedom for no \$20 [the cut a dealer makes off a saleable amount of marijuana].” The lady’s perception and harassment of this young man made him anxious and angry.

At the same time, present day youth were described as “kids in adult bodies.” Residents, such as Brad

Cummings of the *Austin Voice*, said that due to broken homes and young single parents, many kids raise themselves in these new environments, assuming responsibilities for which they may not necessarily be ready. These assertions are supported by recent demographic studies that indicate more black children today are growing up in single-parent households and in poverty than in previous decades (Taylor et al. 2002:15-17). Chatting with youth at Bethel’s Gallery 37 program, I heard comments such as “most kids have ideas on stuff, but adults don’t listen to what they are saying,” suggesting that youth are not being taken seriously despite their additional responsibilities. Another youth said, “Maybe if adults started acting like adults, we would listen to them more,” an ironic spin on traditional social relations between youth and adults of the community.

Residents proposed a number of solutions to the youth-related problems, but two continually surfaced that offer ways to incorporate young voices in their own programs: creative employment and collaboration. Creative employment involves providing incentives to youth to take part in socially constructive activity that will instill some positive attachment toward their community, and collaboration enables youth to have some say in programs they are expected to participate in (this method could be especially helpful in areas such as cultural arts). Kretzman and McKnight cite active involvement of the youth in community affairs as one of the most important parts of developing a viable asset-based model. Youth offer a “unique energy and creativity,” and can make significant contributions to the community (1993:29).

Many Austin youth express an interest in learning about entrepreneurship. Stan Lewis, program director at the YMCA, said that “the biggest thing for teens are the programs that’ll turn into jobs with them...[they should] be able to develop skills...something to turn an idea that’ll start making money for them.” Lewis gives the examples of catering and using technology as ways in which youth can create opportunities for themselves. Businesses also are engaged in providing kids with jobs. For instance, at the *Austin Voice* newspaper, receptionist Julie Edwards says, “we give them [neighborhood kids] jobs everyday [to deliver papers, etc.] they’ll call me every day and ask ‘Ms. Edwards, do you have work for us’...a lot of neighborhood businesses don’t [give the kids work].” Across

the street from the *Voice* on North Avenue is Curlie's Bakery, where the proprietor has instituted a program taking what he has identified as "troubled teens" from Austin High School into his bakery to teach them about industrial baking and small business skills. "They say there's no work [around here] but we have to find something, create something for [the kids] to do," he commented. The Garfield Park Conservatory has a three-year teen program which takes high school kids and teaches them leadership and horticulture, first on a voluntary basis and then moves the kids to paid positions. This type of informal work, my data suggest, not only creates employment, but instills a sense of caring for the community as well.

Another aspect of the youth issue is what I loosely call youth collaboration. This means letting youth have a voice in what sorts of programs they are involved in based on the kinds of activities in which they have an interest. My data suggest that the youth in the Austin community, like most youth, have sophisticated networks of communication and, as Christie the librarian called it, "camaraderie" which can propel them forward to socially constructive activity. Often, youth are the best people to teach other youth, particularly on issues of interest to them. At Austin Public Library, Christie noticed that when young kids are on the Internet, they network and help each other out quite skillfully, and soon a whole group of kids are adept at using the web. Getting kids excited to teach each other about the skills they know could form the basis of a successful youth program.

Brad Cummings of the *Austin Voice* told me that when they worked at Marshall High School for the creation of a school newspaper, kids were asked what they liked to do, and no child was turned down. Kids who like to draw were enlisted as cartoonists, and even kids who were not the best achievers were accepted to do photography because they expressed interest. Consequently, the newspaper turned out well and students thought of it as their own project. In addition, Cummings and the *Austin Voice*, along with Operation Salvation, have thrown a Youth Fest the past two years, where they enlist youth to organize entertainment, ask for vendors and set the program. The youth make the event their own, learning from their past failures and obtaining valuable skills along the way. A willingness is emerging on the part of adult community members to begin dialogue with the youth on

what they want. One block club president said, "I've opened my eyes some...we're afraid of kids being kids...let's talk with the kids on the corner, see where their heads are."

Issues: Senior Citizens

Many people in the Austin community see senior citizens as having enormous potential. Seniors have skills and experience, two things that they could potentially impart to other community members, particularly youth. The president of a block that is almost 50 percent seniors said, "I love my seniors, they have a 'been there done that' [attitude], and they really have [been there and done that]." She suggested enlisting the seniors to cook and solicit donations for the block club party, which should not be just for kids but for themselves as well. Brad Cummings discussed the senior citizen knowledge base when he talked about how the community enlisted seniors at a CHA residence to teach the kids, and how an old eighty-five year old lady "had them doing real work." Enlisting senior citizen help in imparting skills, particularly people whom young people know and respect, he suggested, could potentially grow into a great program: "You have to have [the seniors] come back and teach because people see themselves in those people." As they grow older, the chance that their knowledge will be passed on to the next generation of community members will diminish.

There was much talk about intergenerational programs in the Austin community, including the provision of senior mentors to youth. Each group can cater to the needs of the other. Stan Lewis had a successful program at the New City Y, where seniors would read to preschoolers, and he would like to institute a similar one in the Austin community. Linking seniors with youth on a consistent, substantive basis would be nothing new in the community, as ethnographic data suggest that senior citizens make up the cornerstone of many families and already play important roles in youth's lives. For instance, Mary Peery was raising her great-granddaughter, who was only six years old. Youth often talked about grandmothers in discussions, illustrating a strong kinship between grandchildren and grandparents. Further investigation and programming will be beneficial in enabling

seniors to become more involved with child care and other related issues.

Issues: Family

Reverend Davis described Austin as a “family-oriented” community, yet within that, local perception of family varies. As previously mentioned, extended families—including grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins—play an important part in the life of the community. It was very common to hear kinship being used as a method of introduction. Common refrains included, “Oh, you know X, I’m his uncle,” or “yeah X is my nephew.” People identify themselves through family, a common “idiom” in other African American communities as well (Stack 1974:45).

Many people in Austin describe the family as undergoing a crisis. “Parents don’t have time, [they’re] not involved,” or “parents feel the education of their kids is the responsibility of schools and libraries,” are just samples of some of the responses I received after raising the issue of family. Family nights at both the library and the parks are poorly attended, and single parent families are on the rise. Alderman Mitts said that we have to “bring the family back to basics, spending time...[that’s] really bad in the African American community.” Nevertheless, personal stories reveal how important family is in people’s lives, and many elderly women revel in how they were, as single parents, able to raise their kids to be successful in their eyes. It was also common for youth to talk about the “way their parents” raised them, and the way their “family did stuff.” Family remains an important indicator of how people measure themselves and measure their community at large. K., an ex-offender discussed later in this report, says that when he “leaves the world, I want my momma to say K. was a good son, my grandma to say K. was a good grandson, my nephew to say K. was a good uncle.” Family affirmation, “my people,” he calls it, remains important to his own perception of self-worth.

Reverend Milton, a community organizer, uses family as a way of trying to instill a sense of community, the “village” as he refers to it. “Somebody is a grandmother, somebody needs a grandmother,” he said in one of his speeches. “Somebody’s a sister, somebody needs a sister, somebody’s a mother, and somebody needs a mother, and somebody’s a father...and let me tell you what, fathers are

sorely missing.” Carol Stack, in her analysis of African American family and kin relations, said that the “extension of kin relationships,” such as that reflected in Milton’s talk, can “allow for the creation of mutual aid domestic networks” (Stack 1974:61), which can solidify community. It is clear that family is functional and significant in Austin, contrary to perceptions of its dysfunction and decline.

Issues: Ex-Offenders

Ex-offenders represent a particular problem, but also a strength, for the Austin community. Many ex-offenders come back to Austin and have a difficult time entering the job market due to societal pressures, restrictive laws and lack of information. Yet, they have to earn a living somehow. Thus, using the connections made in prison, many go back into criminal activity, and subsequently get picked up again. “Recycled scholarships” is how community organizer F., who works with Against All Odds [AAO]-an organization that is made up of ex-offenders, gang leaders, teachers, policemen, and professionals-describes the phenomenon: “Everybody come out thinkin’ they gonna’ help, but...a lot of them not strong enough to keep it...they hungry, and they tryin’ this new thing [service] which they don’t know.” However, ex-offenders are also an asset to the community precisely because many come out of prison with a will to serve, they know how to connect with youth and can impart firsthand experience. Groups like AAO and Faith, Inc.-a citywide, Austin-based program for ex-offenders run by Rev. John Crawford-actively campaign for creative employment opportunities for ex-offenders. “We provide assistance,” F. said, “[for them] to be self-sufficient, some corporations hire ex-offenders, some do side work, cut grass...our job is to hold on and to create [opportunities].” Forums like Faith, Inc., which have monthly meetings, pass on information to ex-offenders and publish resource guides as well.

During my research I encountered ex-offenders who have become dynamic individuals, working within their socially imposed limitations to create something positive in the Austin community. One example is K., a young man of twenty-eight who had been in prison for seven years for murder. K.’s criminal background makes him ineligible for a number of programs designed to prevent

recidivism, yet, as one person at the Faith, Inc. monthly meeting said to a probation officer, “they’re the people that need it most.” K. is currently in a parole period of eighteen months, and has to wear a police monitor which does not allow him to leave a certain radius of his house. Yet every day K. is out cleaning and doing odd jobs, as well as landscaping for neighbors for very little, if any, pay. K. has had a remarkable life. Coming from an abusive relationship, he started dealing drugs at fifteen, and by seventeen he was extremely wealthy and had purchased a house and car. By the time he was finally arrested, his reputation was known throughout the city of Chicago. When he got out he said, “it’s hard now [to reform]...that’s why I gotta help the community out, [I have to] win trust, they would never give me my [parole period] if I didn’t help out the community.”

Now K. is out talking to the youth on his block, both teenagers and younger kids, with whom he has a good rapport (as witnessed by his participation in the block cleanup, barbecuing for kids and block residents for two hours straight). “It’s not like my past is [a] secret, they know my past and they accept me, this community accepts me,” he said. K. wants to start a landscaping business and has purchased three or four lawnmowers, which he lends to kids for free to go out into their neighborhoods and mow lawns for no charge. “Eventually,” he said, “they’ll start getting paid.” The kids can keep the money they earn, and use it for college, while he can continue with the business and hopefully go to college himself. Prison offered K. education and insight, which he is starting to use to work positively in his own community.

Issues: The Church’s Role

Religion and social service, as in most African American communities, are important aspects of the social life in Austin. Many social service providers are faith-based organizations. Austin is unique because, according to local pastors, the area boasts over 400 churches, many of which are located in store fronts. Perceptions of religion vary widely in the community, with many accepting the basic beliefs of Christianity.

But there are voices of criticism that target the church’s underlying conservatism and its incapacity to provide impetus for social and political change, rather

than just providing social services and garnering funds. Pastors I talked to were frustrated with black churches’ and faith-based organizations’ inability to deal with issues of AIDS. “Very few churches [are dealing with HIV/AIDS], I don’t know why, that’s where the problem ends up,” said Reverend Davis. Father Reed said that his church had to make an effort to do what other churches are not, “we have the highest impact of AIDS [in the city]...issues of homosexuals, drugs, AIDS...[churches] don’t deal with that.” In fact, one pastor said that generally, African American communities and faith organizations have a tough time even addressing the issue, “they don’t talk about sexuality...[in church it’s all] no sex before marriage, and little education about the body.” At Alderman Mitts’s 37th Ward minister’s meeting, I did not hear the issue of HIV/AIDS discussed once, even though it consistently appeared as a salient issue in my conversations with community residents.

While the alderman, as well as community organizers, view churches as an asset and rightly so, the proliferation of churches in the Austin area is sometimes seen as negative. One senior pastor said that people are trying to “snatch power, even if they weren’t called.” Also, the numerous storefront churches in the area are seen as halting economic development, “because the pastors ain’t hiring,” as one community organizer said. Churches’ influence on people is waning because many have relocated from other parts of the city, and their congregations often do not live in the neighborhood. There is a perception that churches are “not like they used to be, they don’t get involved [anymore],” as Mary Peery said. Father Reed worries about the staunchly conservative black church’s ability to effect social change, particularly due to attitudes about women, sexuality, and homosexuals. Nevertheless, in Austin, just like in St. Claire Drake’s Bronzeville, in the face of criticism the black church continues to be important due to the “opportunity it gives for large masses of people to function in an organized group” (Drake 1962:424). “The black church shapes values, mores of the black community far more than the people who attend the church,” said Father Reed, conveying that certain values taught in the church can and do pervade society. Religion also brings a fire and a passion to community meetings, and gives organizers a rallying point on which to mobilize constituents for change. Most of the community meetings

I went to, whether Alderman Mitts's Town Hall meetings, block club meetings, ex-offender meetings or community breakfasts, began with people holding hands and praying. Thus was fashioned a feeling of solidarity and community.

Issues: Success

The community presents many pathways to success, both within the community itself and leading outside of it. The reputation of the schools is an issue that concerns many community members, especially the youth. "Austin has but one high school," said the librarian Christie, "and the [reputation] of that school is not very good. As a result, many of the good students, at the end of 8th grade, are siphoned off by magnet schools and private schools [outside the community]." Very few of the youth I met in the neighborhood actually went to Austin High School. Most attended private schools on the West Side, or other high schools elsewhere in the city. A young adult who was working on her master's degree in education, an Austin resident, said she was the only one on her block to go to college: "It depends on parents and schools, often times if you go to neighborhood schools [your chances are limited]." She cited a recent article of the *Austin Voice*, which showed that a number of Austin High School graduates do go to college, but as Brad Cummings said, many of those children overcame the tough odds and could go to college under "any conditions." One student said that if he had not been shielded from the Austin community by his parents, "I probably wouldn't have ended up at U of C [University of Chicago], I wouldn't be doing positive things [right now]." While both these youth left the neighborhood, they have different attitudes about returning. The girl, who had a vibrant community life and whose mother is a block club president, wants to return and eventually teach at a new elementary school being built in the neighborhood. The young man interested in music production wants to leave because there are more opportunities for his interests in places like New York and Los Angeles. "It depends on your experiences," the young woman said, "I never had friends who died in gangbanging. I would say a lot of block kids do say I can go to college so I can get out."

Success can also be judged within the community itself. Successful community organizers, pastors and lead-

ers are recognized as such by having streets named after them and markers attributed to them. For instance, Pastor Obie Hendricks, whom I talked to, had a street named after him, as did other community activists, one of whom lives in the Bethel New Life senior residences. James Cole would probably be considered by many, himself included, to be successful and he stayed within the community. In his terms, success is hard work and knowing your clientele. As mentioned earlier, people like K. thought of success in terms of family and community perception of an individual: if you do good by them, they'll do good by you. A common theme that emerged was the term being "rich." A number of people whom I talked to describe themselves as being "rich." In their terms, "rich" was not referring to material wealth. When people ask Mary Peery if she's getting paid for gardening, she replies, "I know I'm getting paid, in my heart I'm getting paid." These sentiments were echoed by people who have devoted themselves to the community in some way or another.

Arts Making—Bringing the Community Together?

There are many ways that tensions within the Austin community can be resolved, and expanding arts practices is one of the options. There are a large number of homeowners in the Austin community, and tension arises between them and renters who are perceived as not having much of a stake in the community's upkeep. One resident characterized newcomers from the east as not knowing "how to socialize without being stupid," meaning that these people do not participate in social organization in the same way as homeowners. Conquergood (1990:227), in his studies of the Chicago neighborhood of Albany Park, notices that "property ownership separates people more than race or ethnicity."

Another tension is between those, especially youth, who look outwards from the community and youth who stay within the community. For instance, a college student I talked to who lives in Austin claimed that he was proud that he was not "a product" of the West Side, even though he attended school at Providence-St. Mel, went to church on the West Side and lived in Austin. Looming gentrification compounds the issue as well, with the possibility of bringing what Austin resident and librarian Donna

Kanapes calls yuppies, “a person who has money, but no sense of community, neighborhood, or caring.” Although she lives in a stable community and does not see the possibility of “white people moving in,” organizers such as F. recognize it as a possibility.

An artist who collaborates with Bethel New Life told me once that a “cultural arts program is different from a social service provider,” meaning that services should not be provided for arts, but environments created that can foster the arts. As I have outlined in previous sections, the Austin community has an artistic environment, and there exist organizations who are trying to connect artists and provide spaces for artists to come together. As performance artist Sharon Jaddua mentioned, interest in theatre exists for all ages, and a number of institutions, such as churches and schools, could use their space to foster an artistic environment. As Carl Grimms of the Garfield Park Conservatory stated, collaboration and linkages between institutions should be formed before art projects can be undertaken. The Chapungu exhibit—which consisted of stone sculptures from Zimbabwe—was chosen with the West Side’s predominantly African American population in mind, since the previous Chihuly blown glass exhibit had attracted “more suburban visitors”. However, when I toured Chapungu and the Garfield Market, there were a number of non-resident visitors as well as West Siders, illustrating how arts can be a powerful factor in bringing together people who normally do not mingle.

As a Field Museum study by Alaka Wali et al. (2002) has shown, the informal arts can foster a sense of community, bringing people together across racial, ethnic and class lines. My data suggest a similar conclusion, for in Austin, different youth, homeowners and tenants share similar cultural and artistic interests which could bring them together if the environment was suitable. For instance, the youth who wants to leave Austin and was educated outside Austin, is very knowledgeable about alternative music production having started in high school and continued through college. He said that especially since the rise to fame of producer groups like the Neptunes, music production has become an increasingly popular form of artistic expression in hip-hop. He indicated that he would be amenable to teaching people how to produce music outside the dictates of pop culture. The

young college graduate who wants to be a teacher in the community and was also educated outside Austin is interested in poetry. She said spoken word shows around the block would be a great way of bringing youth of different backgrounds together. While cultural arts programs are not always successful, they have the potential to bring in large audiences from a variety of backgrounds.

Challenges and Recommendations: Communication and Collaboration

Brad Cummings of the *Austin Voice* said that it was amazing to him why, as organized as Austin is, not much happens and so much gets left out or ignored: “It’s like the metaphor that young woman used for Austin High School. All the chairs are neatly arranged, they’re just facing the wrong way.” Indeed, the Austin community is extremely well organized, and people and groups are consistently meeting, discussing and participating in social organizations of various types. The community also has a history of organizing around such issues as gang violence and the prevention of the closing of facilities.

Given this history, why do many people find it difficult to attract users of services or get things done? Two issues that have surfaced from my data are communication and collaboration. There needs to be a better network of communication and education about services being offered in the community, and better collaboration between the many community-based and social service organizations to provide services more effectively.

For social service programs, communication, availability and accessibility are key issues for increasing attendance, especially in the Austin community. “I go to a lot of stuff,” said Reverend Davis, “and [there’s] even stuff I don’t know about. There needs to be a better flow of information.” Or, as the unemployed said in a soup kitchen about jobs, “They don’t put the word out, they don’t broadcast it, they don’t put the word out there.” At Emma Mitts’s Town Hall Meeting, a representative from the city of Chicago’s Department of Transportation was there explaining renovations to a bridge. Two elderly ladies demanded to know why information was not available to the community prior to the proposal’s enactment. “Why don’t you have the diagram,” one said, pointing to a poster-board, “on paper so people in the community can

read it...it would be nice if we could get some information.” The city official agreed, and said next time that would be made available. In order for effective debate about the issues to occur, information needs to be available prior to the debate itself.

Residents suggested that literature should be disseminated as locally as possible. A block club president said that she “needs information” so she can pass it on to the people on her block who may be interested. Flyers and literature should not only be posted, but distributed through local networks. Public meetings, whether at the park, church, or on the block, are another excellent way to convey messages. My data suggest that information should be brought to people because people often do not know where to look on their own. Reverend Milton, a community organizer, would always talk to people, even if they were strangers. He would tell them about Wednesday nights at the San Miguel School, or about a block cleanup and free food. Regardless of their interest level, they knew about upcoming events because word was taken directly to them.

An appropriate audience for communication efforts is youth, for they often influence their families. “The push gotta’ be from the youth,” said Stan Lewis of the Y, for youth often make or break programs meant for families. This was evident when I went to a meeting at the Westside Health Authority (WHA), where a number of new participants came because their children played baseball on the WHA’s new baseball team. At Reverend Milton’s service at San Miguel School, I met a grandparent who came because his grandson had heard from other kids that there was basketball and he came to see what it was all about. The YMCA has a similar program with young men, opening up the gym as long as they devote a few minutes to discussing program opportunities and volunteering with the Y.

Programs have to be accessible. People have perceptions of social service providers as elite or inaccessible. As one Bethel worker put it to me, “people don’t want to read and sign all these papers if they’re hungry,” implying that the arduous process of documentation may be a turnoff for people who are just looking for sustenance to get on with their lives. That is perhaps why governmental and social service providers complain that people are not accessing services, when organizations like Reverend

Treadwell’s Soup Kitchen, though financially less sound, have much more participation.

Collaboration is necessary in an environment where there are a number of organizations that have a stake in the community. Mildred Wiley, Bethel New Life community-building director, said that “In Austin there has been a lot of organizations that have [had] a stake in the community for a long time...[any effort] has to be collaborative.” In order to get anything done, Wiley suggests, “conversations” are necessary because, as many community members have said, different organizations often “duplicate” services. Groups are also perceived as “sucking up money” and not providing adequate programming. Some people feel that organizations do not provide enough grassroots activity. One resident said, “these organizations, they all for themselves.” Additional collaboration may allow organizations to integrate with the community, as Donna Kanapes, the librarian suggested: “I think we could collaborate more, market to each other.” Community members suggested that consistent collaboration between institutions and organizations, and a willingness to cooperate by all members, have led to positive results in the Austin community area.

Examples are numerous. As mentioned earlier, the *Austin Voice* collaborated with Marshall School to create a successful newspaper program at the school. The editor and staff were willing to support the school and students fully. North Austin Public Library and Lovitz School have been collaborating and now, according to librarian Donna Kanapes, “Lovitz School’s literacy is higher than other schools in Austin...it’s that kind of commitment you need to have from schools.” Promoters Ron Smith and Linda McWright collaborate with the Park District, and LaDonna Redmond says her Institute has consistently “support[ed] farmers through Farmer’s Market and we’re ready to create a [cooperatively] owned grocery store.” Austin aldermen such as Emma Mitts are available for “dialoguing” and are active in community meetings and seminars. Carl Grimms, who has led the new collaborative efforts of the Garfield Park Conservatory, said that working on the West Side he has learned that “the most important thing is to be creative...use many different approaches simultaneously,” including working with community institutions, individuals, programming sites and neighborhood schools. Though community associations and public

meetings are an essential part of accomplishing goals in a community such as Austin, only through collaboration can these goals truly be reached.

Conclusion

As one resident referred to social science work, this paper is merely a “snapshot” of the Austin community. I have tried to outline some of the assets I saw in my nine-week internship and the important issues I heard and discussed while proposing some programmatic solutions for Bethel New Life and other organizations to pursue. Austin is a community with a history of organization, and most residents are conscious of its social institutions, assets and needs. Many individuals involve themselves in the community on their own initiative, through informal networks, by organizing into block clubs, or by linking themselves with institutions. A number of residents have skills and the interest to make money, and the infrastructure exists to facilitate that process. Austin also has a vibrant artistic scene, and any program geared towards cultural arts should try to incorporate the various arts already underway in the community. Youth, senior citizens and ex-offenders pose certain challenges, but my findings indicate that through recognition and collaboration, these groups perhaps represent some of the community’s most valuable assets in terms of energy, experience and knowledge.

While this paper in no way represents the multiple cultural forms or interpretations that exist in the Austin community, I hope that it does highlight some major themes. I suggest further research be undertaken in order to complicate the conclusions given in this report. I believe only by seriously considering a multiplicity of opinions and views, as well as engaging in long-term debates and discussions with residents, can programs and social engagement truly be successful. I found Austin to be a very vibrant and accessible community with friendly people who are willing to talk if one engages with a spirit to listen. Austin has a number of assets and much potential, and hopefully this report will open up further avenues of exploration for those interested in working with this community.

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