

# Building Participation and Relationships in a Complex Community: Adapting to Change in the North River Neighborhood

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*It would seem that the more participants we engage in this participative universe, the more we can access its potential and the wiser we can become.*

Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*

policing committees, national drug czars—and local gang-bangers. Neighborhood health is influenced by family nutrition, school immunizations, state Medicaid reimbursement policies, and federal milk subsidies.

When Field Museum interns Gretchen Fox and Hubert Izienicki began their research in Albany Park they gave leaders of the North River Commission (NRC) an unusual chance to assess this community located on Chicago's Northwest Side. The Field Museum inquiry amassed fresh, meaningful information based on listening, communicating, observing and participating in the neighborhood. Since its inception, the 40-year-old NRC has developed an intricate network of more than 100 civic groups, businesses, and institutions. With the help of Gretchen and Hubert, a web of relationships evolved to energize and nurture a new wave of participation and a greater wisdom about the community.



## Organizing in the Complex Community

Reviving inner-city communities depends on thousands of daily decisions. Investment decisions are made by multinational corporations, regional banks, public agencies, and neighborhood homeowners. Decisions affecting public safety are made by police superintendents, community

At any time in a community's history, its condition depends on countless environmental factors and "decision-maker" choices that affect the well-being of its residents, businesses, and institutions. The community is dynamic. Its variables always are getting better and getting worse. The essence of a community depends on the perceptions and interactions of its participants and their ability to adapt to their changing environment. The community, in short, is a complex adaptive system—an organized, coherent entity in which physical conditions, perceptions, and the social order constantly change.

Since the 1960s, community organizations typically were formed to solve a problem—for example, to stop crime, to prevent school decline, to eradicate slums, or to attract investment. Their efforts were predicated on a fairly simple, linear, stimulus/response equation:

- A slum building is jeopardizing the community. The community group organizes tenants and residents to pressure the landlord. The landlord is forced to fix up the building.
- Crime endangers residents. The block organizes to pressure the police. The police assigns more officers and boosts enforcement, and crime drops.
- Schools are performing poorly. Residents pressure the Board of Education to open a new school to relieve overcrowding and improve education.

These elementary examples are elegant in their simplicity. The issues are straightforward. Neighbors can unite for a cause that is clear and specific. People get involved in their neighborhoods; they learn to “own” their communities—and to make a difference. Yet this approach is self-limiting. No community world is linear. A narrow focus impairs our peripheral vision. We see only a small part of our environment. The problems, solutions, and the participation of potential problem-solvers are constrained. The world is not that simple.

## The North River Commission View

Since 1962, the leaders of the North River Commission have observed their community through a different lens: a wide-angle view, in which the subject blends into its surroundings. In the NRC world view, all things communal are connected. Process is as important as product. Change comes through learning, relating, and interacting around a web of concern. The NRC approach seeks points of influence, what J. H. Holland calls “levers.” In this model, leaders seek and seed the information, relationships, and circumstances that will trigger reactions that will, in turn, help the community adapt and thrive. NRC is an agent for change.

In the 1960s and 1970s, while many groups around the nation were organizing residents against the oppressive forces of big business, banks, and government, NRC went the other way. Banks, corporations, hospitals, and university leaders sat at the NRC table with local residents to protect and maintain the community. In the fight against blight, neighborhood institutions were seen as colleagues rather

than the enemy. Struggling businesses were viewed as partners in revamping the neighborhood’s economy, rather than parasites sucking the resources from a declining commercial strip. Anyone with a self-interest in an issue was invited to participate, based on the principle that people who live, work, and do business in the community have not only the right to participate in the decisions that affect them, but the responsibility to work together for the common good.

When housing conditions declined in the early 1970s, NRC confounded the conventional wisdom and responded with an economic development program. By reviving Lawrence Avenue, Albany Park’s Main Street, leaders sent a signal of neighborhood faith and investment. Creating the Lawrence Avenue Development Corporation (LADCOR) united residents and business owners. Their efforts created jobs, expanded shopping options, eliminated vacancies, and led to renovated buildings and increased property values. As a result, residential investment grew. Tenants were willing to live behind a viable commercial strip. They paid the rent with income from retail employment. Landlords could charge rents sufficient to renovate their properties. Property values rose, providing lenders with sufficient collateral to give rehabilitation loans. A spiral of hope, investment, and optimism prevailed, thanks to NRC’s sowing the seeds for revival.

## Adapting to Ethnic Change

When the Jewish middle-class left Albany Park in the suburban exodus of the 1960s and 1970s, NRC welcomed new immigrants to its table. Leaders and staff invited incoming Korean residents to join in the decision-making, helped them settle in homes and start businesses, and packaged the development of the 76-unit Moo Goong Terrace Senior Housing. During the last two decades, Thai, Malaysian, Bosnian, Cambodian, Islamic, and Latino organizations joined NRC to plan for a brighter future.

The effort was not without hazards. In 1984, NRC planned with Korean leaders to build a retail-medical office building to serve the neighbors and new immigrants, when a group of previously silent Korean business leaders expressed their opposition. It seems that while NRC was working with an organization that purported to represent the Korean community, there were in fact seven similar organizations, each representing different political factions from their homeland. A project thought to enjoy widespread support was instead opposed by a majority of Korean associa-

tions. Ultimately, the \$2 million Kimball Plaza was built, but only after promises were made to work with each of the major associations to develop similar properties. From 1975 to 1990, Korean businesses in Albany Park grew in number from five to more than 500. It was estimated that 24 percent of the Albany Park population was Korean-born by 1988.

By the early 1990s, however, that had changed. Successful Korean business owners moved their homes to the suburbs, following the paths of their Jewish predecessors to Skokie, Northbrook, and beyond. Many began to move their businesses as well. By 1998, less than five percent of the community was Korean. In their place arose a substantial growth in the Latino population, from approximately 26 percent in 1990 to nearly 39 percent of the community in 2000. A large group of South Asians, Middle Eastern people, and Eastern Europeans also had joined the mix of cultures.

In 1994, NRC and LADCOR were recognized by the National Committee on Immigration and Refugee Protection (NCIRP). State and county officials planned to rebuild the Lawrence Avenue bridge over the Chicago River. For two years, residents, businesses, shoppers, and diners would be seriously inconvenienced, forced to travel several miles out of their way, which in turn would increase congestion on nearby residential streets and interfere with the operation of several dozen businesses employing more than 500 neighbors. NRC coalesced those with a self-interest to meet, advocate, and negotiate with public officials. After a six-month battle, the team forced the state to rebuild the bridge in 43 days rather than two years.

NCIRP recognized NRC, not because of the tremendous victory, but because hundreds of residents and business owners from more than a dozen different ethnic groups had worked side-by-side to effect change and build lasting relationships. They noted that the negotiating team included a Korean furniture store owner, a Vietnamese restaurant owner, a Thai family from the adjacent block, a Jewish merchant, a Latino building owner, and a Palestinian baker. As they shared strategies and coffee, they learned about each other and their cultures. They developed new relationships and new respect for each other, not to mention a means for future planning and cooperation.

By the late 1990s, the Albany Park Chamber of Commerce was identifying the area as a world community in its marketing materials. The world of Albany Park continued to evolve. The social activism of the early years of the NRC had long since dwindled. Residents still would unite

to fight a major crisis—an ill-conceived bridge project, a gang war, or a school closing—but community organizing had become vastly more difficult.

- Communication was more challenging than ever. Thirty-nine languages were spoken at the local elementary school, and many of the parents spoke no English at all.
- The new economy hit Albany Park with full force. Escalating rents, health care costs, and low-wage jobs for immigrants forced families to become two-, three-, or four-wage earner households. The stay-at-home moms who led the fight to fix up Lawrence Avenue in the 1970s were largely nonexistent now.
- Similar to Boston's West End Italian immigrants (described by Herbert Gans in his study of *The Urban Villagers*), most newcomers interacted with the larger community in school and at work as they pursued their piece of the American dream. Yet their social networks were internal to their own ethnic community. They generally were unwilling and unlikely to coalesce with other ethnic groups to improve the broader environment. Instead, many belonged to a church or social service organization and relied on the professional staff of that agency to participate with NRC and communicate their concerns.

## The Research

*If we are seeking resilient organizations, a property prized in self-organizing systems, information needs to be our key ally.*

Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*

The Field Museum research was an opportunity to learn more about community changes and to answer the question, "How to reach people not currently engaged with NRC?" Gretchen and Hubert supplied the conduit for gathering current information and enabled an established group to hear new voices.

As a successful 40-year-old community group, NRC faces a never-ending struggle to renew itself and to represent a rapidly changing community. Veteran leaders bring experience, but they tend to be drawn to residents and other leaders who are more established and with whom they are most familiar. New residents may be intimidated by those with extensive experience, knowledge, or positions of power and prestige. Behavior patterns repeat themselves. Communication channels that have worked well in the past continue to be used, though others might now be

appropriate. NRC is committed to overcoming these challenges.

Gretchen and Hubert sat on the benches at River Park, talking with and listening to strangers. They wandered the grounds of Roosevelt High School, chatting with students and faculty. They stood on the street corners of Lawrence Avenue, noting comments and observations of shoppers and shopkeepers. Unobtrusively, informally, they gathered feelings, opinions, and ideas that NRC leaders could not have obtained otherwise. Some examples:

- Community policing meetings proclaimed the success of “zero-tolerance” policies at Roosevelt High School, lauding the effects of personal searches and rigorous law enforcement. But reports from the researchers indicated that students expressed fear not of gang activity, but of aggressive police who, in their eyes, searched, harassed, and threatened innocent teens.
- A youth theater project enjoyed considerable success in creating forums for performances throughout the community. But participation was limited, they learned, because the brother of one of the actors was in a gang—so others were hesitant to rehearse in a facility deemed “gang turf.”
- Many of the soccer players, strollers, and picnickers at River Park were new to the United States. Most spoke little English. They had some awareness of their own church, ethnic association, or local school, but few knew people from other ethnic groups, associations, businesses, or the larger community. And they knew little about the resources that could help them.

## An Innovative Proposal: The North River Electronic Village

From their research, Gretchen and Hubert suggested creating what they called a “Virtual Community Center” for the North River area (see Fox and Izienicki article in this issue). Using computer technology, they proposed a North River portal that would unite representatives of different ethnic organizations and area schools in planning a Web site to disseminate information for people throughout Albany Park. The site would include information on housing, jobs, education, social activities, and community associations. It would be accessible at stations throughout the neighborhood, including the libraries, schools, businesses, organizations, and CTA terminals. The information would be available, accessible, and instantly translated into six languages.

NRC leaders welcomed the concept. It offered the opportunity to improve communication among and between groups and individuals. The North River “Electronic Village,” as it became known, would transmit information on a variety of subjects to large numbers of people. It dangled a hook—the excitement of new technology that many organizations already were grappling with—to influence far more people in building community.

NRC and Field Museum researchers convened focus groups to consider the proposal. Joining in the discussion were representatives from Korean-American Community Services, Cambodian Association of Illinois, the Malaysian Association, the Latin-American Pentecostal Church, Islamic Center of Chicago, Roosevelt High School Local School Council, Swedish Covenant Hospital, Albany Bank & Trust Company, Albany Park Chamber of Commerce, and North Park University. It was met with interest, enthusiasm, and the desire to pursue it further.

## The Results — So Far

Local organizations have expressed serious interest in the North River Electronic Village. The Albany Park Chamber of Commerce and area businesses are willing to help sponsor the site. North Park University representatives said they would consider assisting through their technology programs, as well as their Centers for Korean, Middle Eastern, and Latin American Studies. NRC leaders are exploring possible funding for research, development, an start-up costs. Each of the community associations is trying to increase their internal capacity to use the new technology. In 2002, the NRC Education Task Force will convene residents, parents, and administrators from eight elementary and middle schools from the North River neighborhood to address overcrowding, capital improvements, school safety, and curriculum. It is anticipated that committed individuals and organizations will test many of the concepts from the North River Electronic Village.

Many social commentators bemoan the decrease in civic participation in today’s society. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam documents the loss in detail. According to the General Social Survey, “. . . in the ten short years between 1985 and 1994, active involvement in community organizations in this country fell by 45 percent.” He adds that, “In the last third of the [twentieth] century . . . active involvement in face-to-face organizations has plum

meted . . . the broad picture is one of declining membership in community organizations.”

NRC stands in the forefront of those who refuse to accept these societal trends as inevitable. The North River Electronic Village symbolizes the commitment of NRC leaders. They are attempting to use new technologies with the old, to expand communication and to increase face-to-face involvement of those who might otherwise remain isolated. They are using information as their ally.

## A Complex Adaptive Community

The answer is to create the conditions for self-organization through simple rules under which massive and diverse experimentation can happen . . . Because the parts of a Complex Adaptive System are adaptable and embedded within a unique context, every change within a CAS can stimulate other changes that we could not expect . . . Therefore, rather than agonizing over plans, the goal is to generate a “good enough plan” and begin to observe what happens. Then, modifications can occur in an evolutionary fashion (Plsek 2001).

The concept of a virtual community center has captured the imagination of several leaders of organizations in the NRC network. From Field Museum research and NRC focus groups, new information was collected and shared. Community leaders gathered seemingly disparate bits of data and distributed them to a wide audience. The free flow of information generated exciting ideas and new relationships.

Representatives from six ethnic organizations, businesses, and institutions began a dialogue that has connected their energy, skills, and influence around a broad array of community issues. Coming together to consider technology, they discussed crime and education, housing and immigration, business and social organization. Their wisdom grew.

Koreans and Malaysians compared funding ideas. Bankers and hospital administrators shared strategies for hiring multilingual employees. From a discussion about the North River Electronic Village, Cambodian Association participants explored how the portal could be used to share information about housing opportunities for members forced from their homes by an explosion of condominium conversions. Together, NRC and Cambodian leaders united in an Affordable Housing Task Force to help new immigrants establish co-operatives rather than face displacement

from gentrification. Others are creating “good enough” plans for quality education.

The North River Electronic Village is in its infancy. NRC has secured high-speed Internet access and expanded its computer capacity. Proposals have been drafted to fund the project.

Field Museum research provided an opportunity to collect new and better information about the changing North River community. Information was shared with new immigrants and longtime residents to increase participation. These efforts have spawned relationships that will help the NRC organize and renew its neighborhood and itself, adapt to change, foster “massive and diverse experimentation,” and seed waves of future participation in its complex community.

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*Photograph courtesy of Brenda Sherwood, North River Commission*