

Introduction: New Connections to Civic Activism and City Life

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We are pleased to present the second volume of *Perspectives on Civic Activism and City Life*, a series of occasional papers on urban anthropology from the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC) at The Field Museum. As with the first volume, this issue contains articles from student interns who participated in the Urban Research Initiative (URI), begun in 1998 by CCUC, with major sponsorship from The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the John Nuveen Company.

The URI is a participatory research project that engages a wide variety of organizations as partners with researchers to explore questions that are both salient to the specific organization and able to be investigated through qualitative research methods that are the hallmark of anthropology. Student interns conduct the research after working closely with their respective community partners and the Center's staff to develop the research questions. Once the research is completed, students write reports for the organization and also delineate a public education project (e.g., an exhibit, a community forum, a video) that could effectively communicate the research results to wider audiences.

The first volume of *Perspectives* contained only selected articles by the students who participated in the first two summers of the URI. In response to comments and suggestions by community partners, we have included in this second volume articles written by our partners reflecting on the value of the participatory research process.

Through dialogues with community partners over the course of the past few years, three salient themes emerged from engaging in the participatory research process. The community partners and the researchers agreed that these themes could help focus the growing network on a common research agenda. The first theme, *the meaning of community*, suggests that communities in Chicago no longer are



confined necessarily to neighborhood boundaries. Rather, citizens and organizations are interested in exploring the ways in which people's actions and changing social relationships lead to the creation of new forms of community. The second theme, *the meaning of place in Chicago*, concedes that while communities may be stretching beyond neighborhoods, people remain highly invested in specific places and are engaged in a variety of efforts to protect and improve localities and landscapes they cherish. Understanding these efforts sheds light on how residents shape the character of the city. The final theme, *the mean-*

ing of being American, wrestles with issues surrounding the construction of American identity. The latest census data indicate the rapidly changing demography of Chicago as new immigrants continue to settle here, and as old patterns of housing discrimination and segregation finally are starting to give way under on-going civil rights efforts. Immigrants today (whether from abroad, from other regions of the country, or even from other places in the metropolitan region), however, are arriving into a vastly changed social context than that of previous times of high immigration such as the early twentieth century and the mid-1960s. New immigrants are much more linked to global economic flows, travel back and forth more often from their homelands, and have a different conception of what it means to settle here. Yet, as previous immigrants did before them, they continue to shape the nature of American identity. Community organizations working with immigrants need to gain understanding of how these processes are working. The articles in this issue explore some of our preliminary findings on these three related themes and they continue to explore the many facets of civic activism as it is unfolding in neighborhoods throughout Chicago. These articles also allow us to gain insights from the perspectives of community leaders as they reflect on how they meet the challenges of neighborhood organization.

The first article focuses most strongly on the theme of the meaning of place in Chicago and relates how the experiences of participating in actions for more affordable housing are carried over into efforts on the part of homeless women to help themselves. It discusses how important having a home is, and how the need for affordable housing galvanized people, in particular, homeless women, to act on their own behalf, first to demand a place in a city-subsidized residential development and subsequently to establish their own apartment building. This article, by Rebecca Burwell, chronicles the way in which the Women's Empowerment Project (a part of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless) was successfully able to organize women in homeless shelters to seek and obtain funding for and to design a new residential facility by helping women find their own voice and build support among each other.

The second and third articles form a set which reflects all three of the research themes, while the theme of the meaning of community is the most salient. These articles discuss the changing character of the Albany Park region of Chicago and how residents, through their organizations, are attempting to create a high quality of life by building on

the diverse social assets located there. Joel Bookman, former Executive Director of the North River Commission, reflects on how the Commission adjusted to the changing demographics of Albany Park, and how the research that student interns undertook assisted the organization to take a more inclusive approach to community development. Gretchen Fox and Hubert Izienicki, the students who worked with the North River Commission, describe their research findings, and how these led them to make a recommendation for taking advantage of the rich cultural diversity of the area.

In the first volume of *Perspectives*, an article by student researcher Victoria Hegner described the diverse responses of elderly Jewish immigrants from Russia to life in a new place. They are themselves struggling with the issues of identity and belonging raised by their journey here. Now, in this volume, Rabbi Philip Lefkowitz, whose synagogue was the community partner for this research project, discusses the insights the research offered him, and how he has been able to further serve these new members of his community as a result. Finally, in the last article, we hear from Jean Carter-Hill, a co-founder of Imagine Englewood...if!, a spin-off of Imagine Chicago which also is a URI community partner. Along with co-author Kathryn Haines, she describes the work of her organization and how they are creating hope and community in a neighborhood mostly characterized in the popular media as "downtrodden," "crime-ridden," and "isolated."

We hope that readers will appreciate the diverse perspectives presented here and begin to see that the city is a vital place of lively debate, strong community-based development efforts, and creative people searching for innovative ways to address the concerns of everyday life. We hope that future issues of this occasional paper series can continue to include reports from community-based organizations about their work, as well as contributions from scholars and activists on the nature of city life. Our plan is to continue this working paper series in an on-line format. Look for us in the future at <http://www.fieldmuseum.org/ccuc/perspectives.htm>. We look forward to receiving your comments and contributions.

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