

Under the Radar

Three Rhode Island Women Creating Positive Change

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FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF BOSTON

Grassroots collaboration and a focus on common interests rather than differences can move a state forward.

A drumbeat of headlines about Rhode Island's dropout rate, unemployment, and the like can get residents feeling down. But under the radar, positive energy is building, as three recent interviews prove.

Nancy Whit, "Collaboration Really Works"



Nancy Whit, Pawtucket Citizens Development Corporation (PCDC) executive director, believes in collaboration. As one example of how it creates positive change, she cites RENEW (Revitalizing & Engaging Neighborhoods by Empowering Women).

"In 1995, PCDC began creating affordable housing in Pawtucket's Barton Street Neighborhood," says Whit. "The properties had problems like lead paint contamination, drugs, and prostitution. But in collaboration with Rhode Island Housing, the City of Pawtucket, and neighborhood organizations, PCDC developed and implemented a Neighborhood Revitalization Plan with a Public Safety/Quality of Life action plan that launched a turnaround."

Neighborhood-empowerment outreach helped identify needs. Initially, residents discussed problems that seemed possible to improve, like street lighting and trash pickup. But soon they zeroed in on prostitution. To address prostitution, stakeholders who hadn't always worked together—PCDC, residents, the YWCA, the mental health association, the police—formed RENEW. Each organization had its own priorities but emphasized common goals.

"The focus of outreach to the women," says Whit, "was on trying to understand the why—what had happened that led them to this. If a woman was willing, we'd develop a case-management plan to combat the reasons she started in the first place. We weren't interested in punitive approaches."

In the first three years, arrests were reduced by 90 percent. Police complaints and stings (which once cost up to \$10,000 each) have continued to be low, the neighborhood has improved, and some of the women have gotten out of that life entirely.

RENEW director Colleen Daley Ndoye says that the key was a combination of the outreach and PCDC's success in stabilizing the

neighborhood with 100-plus renovated and new affordable homes.¹

"People who collaborated on RENEW," adds Whit, "have kept working together—on after-school programs, small business assistance, and promotion of Blackstone River Valley assets."

Collaboration continues as PCDC applies its recent TD Bank grant to renovating a historic Pawtucket building for 13 affordable-housing units and a ground-floor nonprofit tenant. It continues as PCDC partners both with NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley (on first-time homebuyer education) and with the Blackstone Valley Community Action Program (on a Youth Build project to create permanent supportive housing for 11 youth aging out of foster care).

Whit sums it up: "You have to be creative in this economy and be open to new ideas and partnerships with those who have a mission like yours to improve people's lives."

Jean Johnson, "Inside Everyone There's Good"



Warwick's House of Hope Community Development Corporation (House of Hope CDC) is a service provider and housing developer for the homeless. For 25 years, a deeply held philosophy about people and a commitment to getting neighbors involved has led to successful rehabilitation of neglected historic buildings for homeless housing. No

one else is doing that with historic buildings, and possibly no other homeless housing has such good community relationships.

"We're a different kind of CDC," says founder Jean Johnson. "We have no large tax-credit projects. We reach out to the chronically homeless and gradually integrate them into our quiet suburb. We brought millions of federal dollars into neighborhoods that for-profit developers wouldn't touch. We're a rare CDC that the city council applauds when we show up."

The House of Hope started out as a shelter. But once families were stabilized, there was no place for them to go. So for the past 14 years, the House of Hope has been building housing.

"We always make sure the neighbors have a say. The historic buildings were neglected eyesores. We asked neighbors, 'What would you like to see here?' We even asked if they had skills they could apply to helping us."

Johnson explains the process of moving someone up from destitution. "One service is an 88-bed facility that's the last resort for chronically homeless men. They don't always go directly into hous-

ing from there. We help them get ready. They might go first to a less residential part of town. When they're ready for independent living, caseworkers keep in touch—just checking in, not supervising. We've created our community based on trust. Housing residents know if they get off track, we'll help them."

Lives do improve. Today, formerly homeless clients may work in the House of Hope boutique, selling products made with a mission and learning retail skills. In another example, a former addict underwent a remarkable and heartening transformation.

Johnson loves his story. Now an independent-living resident, he was originally referred to the House of Hope by a hospital where he'd been treated for injuries from a bizarre accident. He'd fallen asleep in a dumpster and almost died when the garbage truck dumped him out. "Today neighbors fondly call him the Mayor of Apponaug," says Johnson. "He helps an elderly neighbor with chores, puts up Christmas lights, runs errands for neighbors who fall ill."²

Johnson has a theory about why her nonprofit is both successful and popular. "It's our philosophy that there's inherent good in every human being. If you give people the opportunity to find that in themselves, you enable them to be who they were meant to be."

"We're at the point that neighbors think of our residents as just neighbors. In fact, after we rehabbed our last historic property, members of the village association and the local historic commission asked the mayor to help us purchase the house next door. One of the commissioners lives next to that property and the mayor around the corner. Having such support from city government and neighbors enables us to be successful."

Armeather Gibbs, "Bringing New People to the Table"



Armeather Gibbs, manager of Urban Finance and Business Development at the quasipublic Rhode Island Commerce Corporation, has been working closely with the Rhode Island Division of Planning to launch an initiative called RhodeMap RI. The effort is funded by a \$2.3 million U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Sustainable

Communities grant to develop a plan for sustainable development that includes significant input from diverse communities.³

The first step, Gibbs explains, was to select a team to create statewide plans for economic development, housing, and growth centers that would link to transportation, land use, and environmental strategies.⁴ A key piece is an unprecedented focus on public engagement—tapping as many residents as possible, regardless of economic, social, or political backgrounds, and regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, neighborhood, or any other characteristic.

To assist the process, PolicyLink, which describes itself as "a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity," produced an Equity Profile for Rhode Island showing a clear past, current, and future demographic perspective and high-

lighting disparities from transportation to housing to jobs to education. A Social Equity Advisory Committee (SEAC) was organized and will reference the Equity Profile to help ensure all voices get heard.

"The state will increasingly be home to people of color, people who have not always had a voice in government," says Gibbs. "The state must take into account our changing demographics because economic-planning strategies won't succeed without a diversity of voices involved."

Gibbs is optimistic about the approach. "It's the first time I've seen deliberate outreach to parties who have never been part of the discussion. It can be challenging because many residents are not used to being asked their views. You need to do a lot of explaining, but in the end, the input is really valuable."

Gibbs is also on special assignment to a related state-level initiative to help implement Governor Lincoln Chafee's "Promotion of Diversity, Equal Opportunity and Minority Business Enterprises in Rhode Island." The executive order speaks to the importance of inclusion and diversity in government hiring practices and supplier opportunities, just as RhodeMap RI does for planning processes. Both initiatives, Gibbs says, reflect the willingness of community and elected leaders to take on equity challenges and work toward positive change.

"Rhode Islanders are beginning to understand that we must emphasize the assets that make us a great state, rather than spend any more time on the perception that our challenges are insurmountable," says Gibbs. "We can and will focus on possibilities and positive change and make them happen."

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Endnotes

¹ Colleen Daley Ndoye, now with the expanded RENEW at service provider Amos House, notes that clients tend to be desperate women: as old as 65, 70 percent homeless, 95 percent with addictions.

² Apponaug is part of Warwick.

³ See <http://rhodemapri.org>. The grant comes from the Federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities, a collaboration of HUD, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Transportation. Grant awardees must demonstrate how they would help "reduce transportation costs for families, improve housing affordability, save energy, increase access to housing and employment opportunities, and nurture healthier, more inclusive communities which provide opportunities for people of all ages, incomes, races, and ethnicities to live, work, and learn together."

⁴ See <http://www.ri.gov/press/view/19197>.

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