

**From Reform to What Works:
Moving from the limits of institutions to a
culture powered by neighbors**

*Thirteen stories of how neighborhood people created a
transforming experience*

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In 1831 a young French Count named Alexis de Tocqueville took a tour of the United States. When he returned to France, he wrote a book about what he had seen and learned. The book became world famous and was called *Democracy in America*.

The manifestation of democracy that impressed Tocqueville most was not the power to vote. It was, instead, the basic method people used to be productive and solve problems. He had a name for these people who came together in all kinds of groups: ASSOCIATIONS. It was these associations that he believed made a unique American democracy because people of all kinds were not just delegating authority with their votes. They were acting authoritatively as they produced the new America. He called the people acting in these groups “citizens” and thought that they were more significant for democracy than the power to vote.

For Tocqueville, being a citizen meant that you voted and came together in associations to create a new society. Tocqueville thought that these associations were the heart of American democracy. In his book he writes:

Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations of America. ... If we discover them, we understand them imperfectly because we have hardly ever seen anything of the kind. ... In democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made (emphasis added).

In the nearly 200 years since Tocqueville wrote his book, a new society emerged that was not based on associational work. Instead, America became a modern, industrialized, professional society. The work once done by citizens in association was taken over by machines and newer technologies as well by institutions of paid workers. Instead of associational production being the central means of democratic creation, that citizen function was greatly diminished so that most

Americans became consumers rather than citizens. As the result of this transfer of functions, Americans lost much of the power to be a citizen-centered society.

As the result of this transfer of functions, Americans lost much of the productive capacity that they once held. Instead of understanding associational citizenship as a powerful means for doing the work of community and democracy, most local residents came to believe that democracy was based solely upon voting, and they delegated the functions they had once performed in association to newly formed institutions of paid workers.

Having largely lost their ability as citizens to be basic producers of the community, associational life began to atrophy – see *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam. This atrophy resulted in a local malaise and residential isolation. The result is that the functions of associated neighbors began to fade away. Many were transferred to institutions that were not designed to fulfill the functions for which associations were initially responsible.

These uniquely associational functions include health, safety, the environment, economic life, food production, child raising, care, storytelling, and spiritual life. These are functions that must be performed wholly or in part by associations because many of the institutions were not designed to perform them. Local residents, having failed to perform the functions that are uniquely theirs, began to distrust institutional surrogates. They would complain, as consumers, that the institutions were failing them. In reality, citizens were failing to perform their responsibilities as creative and powerful members of associations. They began to become consumer advocates trying to buy what only they and their collective neighbors could themselves produce.

There have begun to appear citizen innovations that recover the responsibilities of local people becoming productive problem-solving innovators. This happens when local residents act like citizens with their powerful tools of association. This recovery process has occurred when local residents become citizens and fulfill

many functions lost to institutions. These citizens understand the power of associational functions as the means for renewing and redefining democracy.

The following pages tell the story of thirteen communities that replaced the institutional and recovered associational functions by assuming authority for much of their well-being. Sometimes the authority was transferred from institutions back to democratic citizen associations. In other cases, the failed efforts of institutional services led to the creation of new citizen associational functions.

The first set of stories shows how institutional leaders have led local citizens to take responsibility for new functions. These leaders serve as precipitators of action rather than acting as traditional leaders. They facilitate bringing groups together, but they do not define what the groups should focus on or how they should do their work. Their role is simply to convene citizens in order that these citizens might decide what needs to be done and who needs to do it.

The second set of stories shows how local residents took their own initiative to perform community functions with democratic local associations. Like the institutional leaders, these residents functioned as precipitators, leading by convening and giving focus to associational effort.

Institutional Leaders Precipitating Associational Recovery

One | Over the Wall

Jerry Miller was a professor of social work at Ohio State University. He was a reformer when he was recruited to become director of juvenile protection, which is the reformatory system for the state of Massachusetts. When he got there, he immediately began to institute a major set of reforms of the system. The measure of the effectiveness of his reforms was to be the recidivism rate. After two years,

his data showed that in spite of all the reforms, the recidivism rate was about the same as when he arrived.

His reforms had not been successful in reforming. One night he thought over what other reforms might try and decided that there were no more reforms that would work; he had to do something that would positively affect his juvenile wards. He concluded then that there was no place worse than his reformatories if you wanted to reform young people. Therefore, he decided to close down all of his facilities and let the kids out. He placed them with all kinds of people and institutions in the community who responded to his call for “adopting” his kids. One example was the local university where many of his older young people were placed in dorm rooms and under the jurisdiction of the students.

The result of this community response was to greatly lower the recidivism rate. He wrote a book that describes this process called *Last One Over the Wall*.

Two | Citizen Priests

Tom Ray was appointed the Episcopal bishop of northern Michigan. When he got there, he found that there were half as many priests as there were parishes. Therefore, his predecessor had assigned each priest to two parishes, which meant they shuttled back and forth and were not deeply engaged in the lives of the local people.

Bishop Ray thought the system was so ineffective that he decided to give the power of the priesthood to the local parishes. Within the Episcopal Church there was space to transfer priestly powers to local parishioners so that they became the ordained clergy of their parish. Each parish chose two or three people to be ordained as deacons and they were trained at a weekend school with a seminary-like curriculum to perform the functions of priests. As a result, the parishes were transformed from institutionally controlled bodies to parishes controlled and managed by the parishioners.

This shift in authority activated and brought to life the parishes that were once run by priests. After this transformation the bishop had eight priests who really had no functions. Bishop Ray decided that they would become the historians of the faith and visit the parishes to keep that faith and its history alive.

As the church transformation in northern Michigan became known, more and more dioceses around the world sent delegations to see what the parishioners had done. Finally, so many dioceses said that they were in short supply of priests and wanted to visit Northern Michigan that the visitors began to become disruptive of the work of the local parishes. Therefore, the Michigan parishes set up two weeks a year in which other dioceses could come and learn to transform their own parishes.

Three | Goodness at Work

Mike Butler became the police chief of Longmont, Colorado, a city of about 100,000 people near Denver. His previous experience was with traditional police departments and their standard reform methods. However, he knew how ineffective these reforms had been. Therefore, he began a process in which he affirmed that the purpose of a police department should be to magnify the “goodness” in the community, his police officers, and the people they investigated and arrested.

He began by opening up the police department to anyone who wanted to come into the building and attend any meeting the department was having, including meetings to select new police officers. Then he assigned to each neighborhood a police officer whose job it was to become a part of the neighborhood and magnify its goodness. To emphasize the importance of this police role in goodness, he paid these neighborhood officers more than the other officers.

Then he began to look at the kinds of interventions his department was called on to do. They included detaining people who were labeled homeless, mentally ill,

addicted, and abusive. In each of these problems it was obvious that a police officer's intervention didn't change anything much. Therefore, he began to work with local communities, community groups, and local neighborhoods to see how they could help deal with these "deviant" people. He transferred police intervention to the local neighborhood and its organizations, as well as to some agencies that seemed to be effective. As a result of his transferring police functions to neighborhoods and their institutions, he reduced calls to the police from seventy to five a day.

This freed up time for police officers to work with neighborhood organizations in taking more and more responsibility for the chronic issues that usually consume most of police time. Finally, when the neighborhood police officers were involved in an annual review, they had to bring with them representatives of the local community who could describe how the officer had provided assistance and implemented a policy based on the goodness of local neighborhoods, the officers, and the "offenders."

Four | Outsiders Become Insiders

In the Northern Canadian city of Prince Albert, a service agency ran a program for people who were labeled "mentally ill." The men's program involved them coming to a building where they played cards, drank coffee, and smoked. One day, a new social worker was assigned to administer the "program." He felt that he was just watching the men waste their lives. Therefore, he thought it would be helpful if the men had something constructive to do, rather than merely pass the time. He decided that the men could form a club and offer their abilities and capacities to the city.

He got the group to meet with the mayor whom they asked what they could do to improve the city. The astonished mayor thought of several city improvement projects the men could undertake, for example, building and installing park

benches. Each city project improved the city and the men's lives, and the men charged nothing for their work.

After they had completed the city improvements, the men decided that they could start a business together, and so they bought a lot of pink plastic flamingos. Then, they rented the flamingos to appear at night as a surprise in the front yards of people who had just had babies. They also offered this service to newly married people.

This was the beginning of their unusual enterprises, for which they became well-known in Prince Albert for the novel services they provided. This never would have happened had it not been for a creative social worker who let his "wards" be seen as productive and respected neighbors rather than people who were being serviced.

Five | How a Failed King Discovered the Power of Citizens

Henry Moore was the assistant city manager in Savannah, Georgia. He administered the federal block grant programs designed to enhance and engage neighborhood improvement initiatives.

Henry had spent several million public dollars on neighborhood improvement programs and concluded that his effort was largely a failure. Therefore, he decided that he ought to try something else rather than continue his failed activities. He decided to work in the lowest income quarter of the city where he had been unable to activate residents to take on many renewal activities. Therefore, he sent a letter to each household in the area.

In the letter, he noted his failure and said that he had small grants that could be used by local residents who had an idea about improving their block. He asked the recipients of the letter to describe an improvement idea they had and identify two other residents, or a local association, that were prepared to join him/her in carrying out their program. They were asked to submit their proposal on no more

than one page. Henry noted that he had up to \$100 to implement each block proposal. He received about eighty proposals.

He named this program The Grants for Blocks Program and became the administrator of the new idea.

These grants were given over the summer, and an incredible amount of work was done by each of the awardees. They started a daily play program for the children on the block and began planting trees and shrubbery on the parkway to beautify and cool the neighborhood.

At the end of the first year, Henry sponsored a dinner at the best hotel in town for all the people who had been involved in creating ideas and implementing them on behalf of an improved block. Before the dinner, Henry had encouraged each block to put up a display in the lobby so that everybody who had received a grant could see what other people had created and done. This stimulated a whole new set of proposals for the next year.

At the dinner, Henry said that when he had all the money and made all the decisions, he had thought of himself as King Henry. At the dinner, he said that all the people who were there were the new kings of the neighborhood. Later he observed that the real leaders who could make real change were the people in the room, and it was his job to support them to take on ever more responsibility.

Almost all the first round of proposals had been funded for less than \$100 each, making the total initiative cost less than \$8,000. Henry got more change at the neighborhood level that summer than had occurred when he spent millions of federal block grant dollars.

Six | How an “Idea Slam” Created a Method to Activate Citizens

There is a neighborhood in the city of Vancouver, Canada, with a community center and a small staff that were creating and administering programs for the

local residents. They tried several approaches to get local people activated in the development of their neighborhood, but none were really successful. Their ideas just didn't inspire the local residents to act.

One day, the director of the center had a revelation that the people living in the neighborhood might have good improvement ideas and be willing to carry them out if they could be stimulated effectively. The director created a process that came to be known as "Idea Slam." Through their networks the staff let the local residents know that they were going to initiate an "Idea Slam." The ideas would be created by the local residents and be carried out by the residents themselves.

On the "Slam Day," a neighbor could come to the Community Center, but the price of admission was that they had to have an idea about what people in the neighborhood could do to make it a better place. Therefore, everybody in the room had an idea about doing or producing something. This energized the gathering. Each person with an idea was then asked to present their idea to the other Slammers. Once everybody had heard the ideas, the floor was opened for people to begin to gather around those Slammers whose idea they liked best and were willing to work on.

In only one morning neighbors coalesced around the ideas they had and would be willing to work on to make real. As a result of "Slammer-created" neighborhood initiatives, the neighborhood came alive as a place owned by residents rather than authoritative programmers. What had been a neighborhood desert became a community garden of new relationships.

Neighborhood Local Associations Taking Authority and Responsibility for Community Well-being

Seven | An Association of Drug Users

There was an area of the city of Vancouver in Canada where many drug users were located. The response of the government was either treatment or incarceration. These two systems had almost no effect on the drug use in the neighborhood where many drug users lived on the streets. A local woman named Anne Livingston, and her colleague, Bud Osborn, began to recognize that most of the drug users were always viewed as people who needed to be reformed and the reforms weren't working.

Ann had some experience in organizing and so she thought it would be a good idea to organize drug users rather than try to reform them. Therefore, she and Bud worked with local drug users to form an organization called the East Vancouver Drug Users Association, later called the Vancouver Network of Drug Users (VANDU). This empowered the members to have a voice in decisions about their lives. They used their organization to create a policy framework called "Harm Reduction." This allowed them to create a world defined by their capacities rather than deficiencies. Their organization gave a voice to the voiceless, creating a pride among the members. Their policy depended not on incarceration or treatment but on their organization's ability to show other ways of dealing with their lives.

Eight | An Invitation to Citizenship

Prince George is a city of 100,000 in the northern part of British Columbia. There, the "disability agency" carried on a typical set of institutional programs designed to manage the disabled people under their care. This management created a

series of programs that surrounded a disabled person with services but isolated them from connection with the community where they lived.

A group of citizens in influential positions came together to see if they could open the door for the service institutions and introduce the gifts of disabled people to individuals and organizations in the community.

At the start there were five people in the self-forming group, including the best-known television commentator in the town, the head of the symphony orchestra, and a leader in the large Ukrainian community. When these people gathered, they each had large networks of relationships and friends with whom the isolated disabled people could be connected. They met with many labeled people, discovered their gifts, and connected them to people or groups or institutions where those gifts could be recognized and used.

This process multiplied so that many people in the community were connected with isolated people. Prince George became a community that could say, as William Butler Yeats said, "There are no strangers here, just friends we haven't met."

Nine | The Power of Associated Mothers

Mrs. Lane lived on Chicago's West Side. Her daughter became a teenager and spent most of her time with the teen girl next door. Mrs. Lane noticed that they began to take "the wrong path," and she felt she should do something about that. So, she met with the mother of the girl who lived next door, and both of them agreed that these girls needed to do something that was constructive. They began to think up local activities that would interest the girls. When they had a lot of ideas, they arranged a meeting with six other block mothers and agreed that it would be a good idea to get all their daughters into constructive initiatives.

First, they identified all the people in the neighborhood they knew who had artistic talents. Then they arranged for the girls to meet with the artists and spend

at least a day learning how to engage in various artistic activities. As a result, several of the girls began to meet regularly with a local artist and some ended by making art their career.

Second, they thought it would be useful to help the girls learn about business opportunities. In the neighborhood, there were many small businesses, and the mothers persuaded those businesspeople to meet with all the girls and show them what they did in their businesses. Several of the girls were attracted by the work and began to become helpers in local businesses which led to their becoming entrepreneurs and making their own money.

Third, they agreed that they would make a flag for each household in the neighborhood. The girls went door to door and got symbols from each house that represented the family. Then, working with a local seamstress, the girls made a flag for each household on the block. One Saturday, all the households gathered and talked about their story and their families' histories. To this day, all the households have flags. Whenever a new member moves in, the girls make a flag for them.

Finally, Mrs. Lane said, "We have broken the line between the mothers. We have broken the line between the girls. We have broken the line between the mothers and the girls, and we are a real community now."

It is especially significant to note that all the resources used by that local community were already present. It only took connecting what they had to create a transformed community.

Ten | We Have the Right to Clean Our Streets

In a Dutch city, it was the tradition for householders to clean the streets in front of their houses every morning. This historic activity was not just street cleaning. It was the time when, over the years, the residents all got to know each other personally.

The city government bought some street sweepers and began to sweep the streets weekly. When the street sweeper came to the neighborhood that had cleaned its own streets, the neighbors were outraged. They “marched” on City Hall and demanded that the city stop taking over their functions of creating clean streets and enabling good friendships. After some resistance, the city decided to exempt this one neighborhood from having its streets cleaned by large machines driven by paid people. And the neighbors on that block continued to fulfill their functions as friendly street-cleaning residents.

Unfortunately, more and more neighborhoods accepted the machine that took community functions away from neighbors. In many of these neighborhoods, instead of cleaning their own street, the neighbors’ function was to become “complainers” who were upset about the quality of machine cleaning. Nonetheless in that one small neighborhood they continued to be citizen-friendly actors with real functions in the city and a group of community friends.

Eleven | Every Block a Village

In a neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago, the city attempted to sponsor block clubs. This effort was not very successful. Therefore, the people in the neighborhood created their own organization, called Every Block a Village. This was a unique organization where local residents took responsibility for each other’s care.

The neighbors created their own productive activities, such as repairing local housing, nurturing the sick, creating and tending to gardens, and being responsible for the local children and their care. Instead of being a program, it was a community that took responsibility for its well-being. It was these functions that were manifested by care rather than programs. It is this care that creates a community rather than a structure that provides programs, for example a safety program which has a structure and is powered by the structure.

Care is personal and says, “We take care of those who are ill on the block.” What an institution is, is a structure for service versus what we're talking about here: a community of care that is personal. That's what the difference is between Every Block a Village and an institutional program.

If I get so close to you that I am feeding you meals, that's different from an institutionalized Meals on Wheels program. If I take responsibility for a part of the education of the children on the block, that's different from operating a school. There's a difference between a school, which is a structure, and a village that raises its children.

Twelve | Residents Discover Their Problems are Assets

A neighborhood leader on the West Side of Chicago saw how the city wasn't solving their problems. For starters, they had a lot of brownfields, abandoned industrial blocks.

The second thing was they had a lot of seniors who received very little care and were in great need.

The third was trash, paper, waste material all over the neighborhood.

But the neighborhood leader looked at these three problems, three unsolved city problems, and saw each of them as assets. So, she gathered her neighbors from the area, and they looked at how they might deal with the “problems” as neighbors.

First, they contacted a company that cleaned up brownfields and got them to train local unemployed residents to be effective brownfield cleaners. Second, as they became experts about brownfields, they also learned about the trash recycling business. So, they decided to create a recycling business of their own and trained people to process and sell trash. This activity resulted in conservation and economic development. Third, there were many older people in the

neighborhood who were acting as caregivers and there were many seniors needing care. There was in the neighborhood a church that was closing down and had an apartment building that it owned. Therefore, the neighbors created a new elder home that provided jobs for many who were able to provide care rather than service.

The key was that the neighbors saw their area as a resource to be developed.

The city had seen the area as a broken-down, high-cost dilemma. Because neighbors could see what the city could not, neighbors were able to transform their neighborhood into a caring, conserving, productive place. Where the city saw a costly deficit, the neighbors saw that they were surrounded by wonderful opportunities for transformation.

None of this would have happened except for one woman in the neighborhood and their neighborhood organization. But this woman saw all those possibilities, all of those opportunities and assets.

Thirteen | Growing Vegetables Creates a Neighborhood Organization

In a suburb of Washington, D.C., a local resident was a woman who was a retired teacher. Her house was on a hill above the local elementary school, and she wanted to be connected with the school. She had an idea. Between her house and the school was quite a bit of vacant land. She was a gardener and thought it would be a good idea to teach the kids how to become gardeners.

There are quite a few schools that create a community garden where the kids can watch, learn, and sometimes participate. The schoolteacher had the notion that the school could teach people all over the neighborhood how to become gardeners, rather than just creating a space for gardening.

To achieve this end, the schoolteacher bought a lot of packs of lettuce seeds. Then she got the school to agree that she could use a part of their land to teach

their students how to grow lettuce. After the students had learned about lettuce growing, she gave every one of the students a pack of lettuce seeds to take home and teach their parents how to grow lettuce. As a result, almost every household had lettuce because of the incentives the kids had to show off their new skills at home.

When the gardener was asked why she used lettuce to introduce the kids to gardening, she said, "Because it's so easy. I can teach somebody how to grow lettuce in 10 minutes. And now we have everyone growing lettuce."

By the end of the spring, almost every household had lots of lettuce. Therefore, the neighborhood gardeners arranged at the school to have a salad party. Each family was encouraged to bring lettuce from their garden for a party featuring mixed salads. A local chef joined them in developing a dressing that would make the salads especially good. Most of the people attending the salad party were meeting each other for the first time and were very grateful to meet their neighbors personally.

The next year, the neighborhood gardeners taught all the children at the school how to grow carrots. Then the students taught their parents how to grow carrots, and the salad for the second year's salad party was even more magnificent. Because people had begun to meet each other on salad day, a small group decided they could start a neighborhood organization that would be especially focused on what a neighborhood could do to teach children how to produce their own food.

So, the retired schoolteacher created gardens in almost every household and that led to people coming together to learn from their children and create a neighborhood organization.

A lot of neighborhoods are big on the idea of having a community garden, a place, but these programs usually don't grow throughout the neighborhood and grow salads as well as a community. But what the retired teacher did was introduce neighbors to neighbors and got their kids to be productive and become teachers

for their parents. Then they created a neighborhood organization.

Conclusion

As noted in the beginning of this exploration, we have come a long way from the associational strength that Tocqueville observed when he visited the U.S. We live in a time when the functions of associated neighbors have faded away. Many of those functions have been transferred to institutions which, well-meaning and focused as they might be, are not designed to fulfill the functions described in the stories told here. They are not designed to nurture citizens in fulfilling what only citizens can deliver. Most of these examples deal with problems beyond the reach of institutions: like youth offenders, churches without priests, safety of vulnerable neighborhoods, addicts in an urban park, fragile teenage girls, and vacant lots full of trash.

In many of these stories the transformed community was precipitated by institutional leaders. The leaders were people who acted to connect citizens but did not prescribe the purpose of the newly formed group and did not take part in the action of the group. Many other efforts were initiated by local community people without institutional initiation.

No matter where the effort began, the transformation in each of the stories is about relocating functions to the local citizen sphere from the managerial sphere.

All of these stories are about democracy in action to and within the capacity of citizens to solve problems and implement new creations.

This monograph was prepared in April 2024 by John McKnight, Co-Founder of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute.