

Organizing Together: The Library as Community Organizer

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Abstract

This article examines how the opening of a new public library branch in an underserved neighborhood helped members of that community organize to improve the quality of their lives. Building the branch required the library system to connect diverse groups and interests.

Keywords: community organizing, branch closures, branch openings, New Haven Free Public Library, Courtland S. Wilson

What is Community Organizing?

Community organizing has become a household term as a result of the 2008 presidential election. In the debate over whether or not President Obama's work as a community organizer prepared him to lead a nation, pundits discussed the qualities necessary to be a successful community organizer. Very few, however, devoted much time to defining community organizing. As a practice, community organizing is the process of arranging relationships, identifying issues, mobilizing around those issues, and maintaining an enduring organization (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Saul Alinsky, widely regarded as the father of community organizing, believed the process should focus on communities organizing to take control of political power (Reitzes & Reitzes, 1987). Another form of community organizing, called the women-centered model, views the process as one of building relationships among community members to bring about desired change (Stall & Stoeker, 1997). Both models link individuals who are isolated from the larger community, then use these personal relationships to change the circumstances of their daily public and private lives.

Coupling this definition of community organizing with reflection on the evolution of the public library makes it easy to view a local library as a community organizer. Both entities share certain values. The key principle of community organizing is to make lasting connections between people, information and institutions. This helps develop a participatory culture in which communities that are often marginalized take authority to make lasting change (Neighborhood Funders Group, 2001). Thus, a community organizer must be able to develop alliances between groups or institutions and establish cohesion among members of a community.

One of the founding principles of the public library is that information should be accessible and free to all, so that libraries can promote self-education for the betterment of the individual. Since the mid-1960s, there has been a sense of the library serving as a social change agent by engaging in outreach to promote literacy and equitable access to information in underserved communities (Gertzog & Beckerman, 1994). Leading attributes of library outreach include collaborating with other institutions or agencies and engaging in effective promotion of library-based programs or services designed to meet the educational or social needs of the neighborhood. Library systems today may find themselves building partnerships with outside organizations to solve problems by engaging as both listener and resource provider in deliberative discussions about complex and demanding issues. When a whole system employs such techniques in order to restructure civic involvement within a community, it is acting as a civic change agent (Willingham, 2008). However, when a library system finds a particular constituency that has been isolated from the benefits of the library, then it needs to organize and understand library services within that community and to work with those constituents to determine what is most needed and valued. This ensuing dialogue helps shape the breadth and delivery of library services while at the same time empowering the community to act as its own civic change agent.

By expanding from active outreach into community organizing, the library shifts from being the focus of the movement to being its facilitator. The difficulty with this transformation is that libraries are typically government-sponsored institutions, yet community organizing strives to challenge and change the nature of government. The loophole for public libraries in this conundrum is their hybrid structure. Although most libraries are maintained by a local government, they are usually guided by the vision of a library board. This board more closely resembles that of a nonprofit than it does a local school board. As a result, libraries can find themselves behaving like a nonprofit within a civil service culture. In this capacity, libraries may engage in practices usually associated with community organizing nonprofits, including advocacy and service, conversion of the nonuser/nonbeliever, nurturers of networks, and artist at adaptation (Crutchfield & Grant, 2008).

While community outreach has always been central to the mission of the library, the next step, building the library as an institution while strengthening the lives of

those it serves through active community organizing, has not been widely examined. Perhaps this is because outreach work and community organizing are mistakenly lumped together. They are different. Outreach is vital to educating people about the library's purpose and opportunities inherent to its mission. Community organizing uses the value of the library as an institution to build relationships between individuals, community stakeholders and the local government to transform the community's daily life. A study in Australia in which a health librarian sought to improve the quality of medical care and patient knowledge found that librarians played a trusted role in their community (Yeoman, Cooper, Urquhart, & Tyler, 2003). Patrons saw librarians as a nonjudgmental source of knowledge. This trust in the librarian enabled patrons and healthcare providers to seek one another out in the neutral space of the library. It set the foundation for patrons, the library and healthcare workers to come together to examine how each party could help one another in altering health outcomes for the community. The powerful lesson learned was that by using the library's relationships and its perceived neutrality, discussion led to action. The opening of the Courtland S. Wilson branch in New Haven, CT provides another great example of how community organizing created a dynamic role for the library.

From Center of Attention to Facilitator

The opportunity to grow into the role of community organizer came both unintentionally and out of necessity for the New Haven Free Public Library. It developed out of the closing of one library branch and the creation of another. In 1986 the city closed a dual purpose public/school library in a district known as the Hill. Residents saw it as the final symbol that the city had given up on them (personal communication, Hill Forum, 2008). Then and now,¹ the Hill was known for its escalating crime, high poverty and probation rates, and poor school performance.

Historically, the Hill—a racially diverse, low-income, working-class neighborhood—served as a melting pot for immigrants. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the neighborhood began to change. Industries, such as textile factories, left the city. Urban flight and blight took hold. The Hill suffered the ill effects of the urban renewal movement when a highway connector and frontage road replaced existing homes, social institutions and businesses (Harrison, 1995). The Yale–New Haven medical complex expanded, creating what some in the Hill call a “medical zone”. As one long-time Hill resident put it, “We just kept getting pushed away to ourselves more and more” (personal conversation with J. Bell November 2008).

¹ According to the U.S. Census of 2000, the neighborhood is almost equally African American and Hispanic. Almost half of recorded households speak a language other than English at home. Almost one third of the population lives below the U.S. median poverty rate and only half of the population is actively employed. The median age of a Hill resident is 28. (*U.S. Census, 2006, OnBoard Neighborhood Navigator, 2008, and ePodunk, 2003*).

As is all too common, when the library system closed the dual purpose library it left a generation in one of the city's most socioeconomically challenged neighborhoods without a branch of its own (Koontz, 2008). What might be uncommon is that soon after the closure of the branch, the library Board of Directors and senior management began to think about where, why and how to re-establish a branch in the neighborhood. Such thinking suggests advocacy of the importance of a branch not only to patrons of the library but to the nonprofits, agencies and local institutions it once served. Two of these institutions—the Yale New Haven Hospital and the Hill Development Corporation—shared a common leader.

This leader was New Haven native Courtland S. Wilson [1918-2000]. An African American, Mr. Wilson oversaw the desegregation of the Yale Medical School and worked at Yale-New Haven Hospital in the Office of Government and Community Relations. During the later half of his life, Mr. Wilson worked at creating stable neighborhoods by promoting homeownership and economic development. Bringing the library back to the Hill was central to Mr. Wilson's goal of revitalizing the neighborhood through public investment (Act for Libraries, 2006). In a 1992 memo he wrote about the need to organize local political, business and church leaders to back the creation of a new branch for the Hill and urged the city to use anti-recession funding to support the project.

His enthusiasm proved contagious, especially to Michael Morand, Associate Vice President of Yale University for New Haven and State Affairs. Mr. Morand organized a Patrons Board to help raise monies for a new Hill branch. This Board acts as a development resource for the library and includes leaders from New Haven's business, civic, philanthropic and nonprofit worlds. During the planning and development of the Wilson branch, members could trace their own connection back to the Hill neighborhood--some had grown up there, some had worked there, and others had served the community with Courtland S. Wilson. The Patrons Board raised one million dollars through a campaign in which all New Haven residents were able to participate. This show of support helped to leverage both state and local government funding (Act for Libraries, 2006).

While breaking ground for construction, City Librarian Jim Welbourne and the two boards understood that the Hill neighborhood needed to own the branch, not just physically but emotionally. Here the library system needed to convert nonusers and nonbelievers. It began by listening.

Active Listening Builds the Strength to Organize

Using the power of personal relationships, library staff ranging from Mr. Welbourne, to the coordinator of Hispanic Outreach, to librarians and circulation

specialists, to the part-time library aide worked with alderpersons, library patrons, and neighborhood leaders to bring residents to community meetings so that the library staff and the architects could prioritize their needs and uses of library services. Hill residents were ripe with ideas for how the new branch could reflect their needs and interests.² At a meeting held in 2003, Hill residents were asked to share their thoughts on how the planned community space should be used. Responses included space for local groups to meet, a place for kids to hang out after school, areas devoted to public arts, music and cultural events, and opportunities for classes in technology and reading instruction, as well as the provision of English as a Second Language courses.

These meetings proved crucial to the library's planning for services the branch would provide, how public meeting space would be configured, and how technology would be promoted to the public. As a result, a visitor to the branch today will note that there is a separate level for community meetings, with rooms of different sizes and configurations available. Public computers are available in a classroom setting, a study area, and general use areas. This visitor might also notice that many of the programs offered at the library aim to serve the educational and cultural needs of families, not just individuals.

To meet their mission, the library staff and Board members now had to nurture their networks of support. Part of this nurturing means supporting as a mutual stakeholder other organizations or institutions working with the same community. Sometimes the stated goals of these other organizations may seem at odds with those of the nurturer (Crutchfield & Grant, 2008). In this situation, however, the library was able to support a grassroots organization called the Hill Forum. The Forum received philanthropic support from the Greater New Haven Community Foundation. At a meeting hosted by the Foundation, Hill residents were asked to prioritize actions needed to address social and economic conditions in the neighborhood. Other than the library and Foundation principals in attendance, all of the meeting's participants were Hill residents randomly selected and invited to attend. Collectively, they indicated that the greatest priority for their neighborhood was to provide meaningful activities that would help young people further their education or employment prospects. Above all, the Hill residents were hungry for a space that could serve as a community center, and they viewed the proposed library branch as meeting some of these needs (Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, 2008).

The library staff answered some of the residents' concerns by calling upon them to help create the services needed to meet their own demands. In some cases this

² "...Library should be user-friendly; parking is very important; be a real community meeting place and draw people in; children's services very important; library should be inviting and accommodating to children; meeting rooms should be multipurpose; young adults should have a separate area near the adults; latest technology and a lot of it for those who do not have computers at home..."(minutes from library sponsored meeting, 2001).

meant recruiting neighborhood kids to help with library card registration for the new branch; in others, it required residents to submit ideas that the library could pursue as grant-funded programs. Neighborhood agencies and institutions—from the local police substation, to the Boys and Girls Club, to the Yale-New Haven Medical Center—were asked to think about how they would use and promote the library. Following from this, the City Librarian was able to secure five grants to introduce library services to Hill families while meeting elements of the stated needs of those families. These awards included a Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK)³ grant; a grant to fund a library-based career and college exploration initiative and resource center called Connecting Youth to the World of Work (CYTW); sponsorship for a library-designed basic computer education course for Spanish speakers known as Conexiones⁴; the chance to participate in a National Institutes of Health grant examining the outcome of using the public television early literacy show *Between the Lions* and library programming and collections in helping further family literacy skills; and a partnering grant with the neighborhood school to bring children's author into the community for readings and activities. All of these programs were primed and ready to begin the first calendar year the new branch opened, 2006–2007.

Flexibility and adaptation to community needs became an important component of these granted and library-partnered programs. For example, Conexiones introduces basic computer literacy to Spanish-speaking adults, many of whom had never used a public library in the United States. By coming to the library for the computer class, some of these patrons discovered that the library hosts English as a Second Language classes and now attend these as well. The library has responded by building a strong English as a Second Language literacy collection and a large primary Spanish collection for users of all ages.

Parents of teens who have attended CYTW programs report that they have come to the library because their child told them about creating a resume on the public computer. These patrons sign up for their first library cards not just to borrow from the collection but also to use the computers. Branch staff have noticed that because most of these patrons have had little experience with libraries, they require special attention and instruction in using the Internet and locating books; therefore, the staff has shifted from speaking “librarianese” to using more common terms for such things as taking out a book or finding an item.

Once on the computers, parents often make use of the branch staff's expertise at using the Internet for seeking employment. Many of these same adults seek reference help to learn about Connecticut's legal codes for renters and landlords or to research their own special projects. These parents often have younger children in

³PACK/Parents and Communities for Kids is a program that aims to provide out-of-school learning activities for kids and their families with the goal of promoting a lifelong love of learning (PACK, 2006).

⁴ This ongoing program is funded by Rick Mayer's JFM Foundation.

their lives whom they bring to the library for help with school work or to attend a story-related craft time. In response to family needs, the branch's youth specialist created a homework zone in conjunction with a neighborhood organization, the Hill Youth Action Team. Older teen volunteers help teach younger students and their parents how to use library resources to solve academic challenges.

When working with these patrons on an individual basis, library staff benefits in two ways. First, by directly working with neighborhood patrons, staff cultivate relationships with community members. This relationship-building helps inform the staff of the interests and needs of the patrons and builds trust through shared experience. Then, the library also benefits as a member of the community when it helps a local resident gain employment, helps a family avoid eviction or housing discrimination, or facilitates the development of a cultural program for the community⁵.

From its inception to its current daily operations, the Courtland S. Wilson branch has relied on the strength of the Hill community to support the core of its mission. The Boards, the City Librarian, the administration, librarians and paraprofessionals mobilized support for the branch from a variety of stakeholders and converted nonusers into supporters of the library. This is evidenced by the increase in library card registrations, circulation statistics for the branch and community attendance at programs in the Hill neighborhood as recorded in quarterly statistical reports prepared for city administrators and for the Library Board throughout 2007 to 2009, as well as anecdotally by new patrons.⁶

Once relationships were established with individual Hill residents, neighborhood agencies and institutions, the library nurtured its networks to develop programs and collections that were relevant to the stated needs of the community. Now that the library is running these programs and lending this collection, the staff must adapt to the learning needs of the novice user. True to the community organizer's role of helping to build relationships and bring change, the library looks forward to developing programs and collections that will strengthen its relationship with the community.

What Does Daily Organizing Look Like?

Because a library is an institution with its own historical operational mission, there is always the possibility that it will use only its own values or interests to guide

⁵ For example, one patron has used the collection to develop skills in a new art medium and to research grants to help fund her education and business development. She is now designing a library program to introduce neighborhood girls to sewing while introducing fashion design as a career choice.

⁶ Library card registrations and circulation statistics for the neighborhood can be tracked by Millennium Integrated Library software systems. Community attendance for programming is kept by the library staff.

daily practice. In fact some of the programs and systems used daily at the Courtland S. Wilson branch represent standard library programming or collection development. What makes these programs different, however, is that the library invested time in initiating relationships with local residents and other organizations in the city. Through these relationships Hill residents provided input about what was important to their neighborhood. The library's administration and staff took that as an opportunity to teach the community how to use library resources to meet their needs. Community input provided the template for the services the library delivers.

In order to achieve this level of engagement with our patrons, all members of the branch staff have become active participants in the community, either formally by joining the board or informally by spending leisure and business time in the community. Informal staff involvement might take the form of attending neighborhood picnics or visiting with residents. More formal staff involvement includes participating in grassroots organizations or serving on boards of neighborhood nonprofits. In a community that is half native Spanish speaking, the majority of the staff is bilingual. Furthermore, one quarter of the staff members live within walking distance of the library.

Physically, the library provides a venue for bringing together individuals with community groups. Meeting space and teaching space are used by healthcare clinics, humanities or arts groups, mentoring organizations, national nonprofits, Public Allies Connecticut of the AmeriCorps, local shelters or homeless advocacy groups, hospital social workers, literacy volunteers, volunteer federal income tax preparers, labor groups, and others. Most community meetings are open to anyone in the neighborhood who would like to attend or participate. As much as possible the library staff orients the hosting agency to the library resources available to the group and its targeted participants. This has resulted in hosts borrowing from the library to enhance their programming and in audience members registering for library cards.

The timeliest example of the library branch's daily work in building neighborhood relationships comes as a result of the nation's deep recession. When system-wide the library's publicly opened hours were reduced due to budget constraints, it was not librarians and staff who struggled with the reduction—as an institution, the library adapted to these constraints. Rather, it was the residents of the neighborhood who gathered outside the branch's door even when the library was closed. These same residents made poignant requests of the staff, especially those who reside in the neighborhood, to find ways to reverse the closure so that they could use library resources to find employment.

While similar reactions were happening at other branches, the effect of the Hill resident's demands upon library staff was instructive. The patrons demonstrated

the obstacles that Monday morning closures created for job hunting. This information helped form new strategies for helping patrons deal with the current economic crisis. The branch librarians and technical staff determined that adult patrons used the morning hours for job hunting and maintenance of unemployment benefits. Monday mornings, in particular, are crucial because new employment classifieds appear at the start of the business week. Discussing the closure with patrons also gave staff an opportunity to assess other needs, including a requirement for basic computer instruction and introduction to using electronic library resources to aid in preparing applications and taking tests required for certain jobs. In response, the branch staff has reconfigured individual responsibilities to assure that a basic computer class in English can be offered, while a monthly program slated to begin in the spring will introduce patrons to such electronic resources as *LearningExpress*. These programs will help improve job preparedness in the community while bringing jobseekers and neighborhood advocates together. Furthermore, development of an informal current events and employment discussion group is underway, with anticipated participation from local employers, professors, professional mediators and neighborhood patrons. Because many patrons are looking for jobs as health care companions or nursing assistants, when an outside organization that matches families of disabled kids with companions asked if they could conduct a job fair at the branch, staff seized the opportunity. These and other responses helped the branch manager work with colleagues and library administration to have the public Monday morning hours reinstated.

The experience of one of the branch's staff members illustrates the benefits of this type of community organizing. Her background is typical of many of the branch's patrons. A Hill resident, she was born right after the 1986 closure of the dual library. She confessed at a branch retreat that before coming to work for the library, she never gave a thought to the public library because she had never known one that seemed like it was hers. Now that the library was part of her daily life she could not imagine doing without its benefits. As a young mother and wife, she is learning through the library how to connect with educational, social and professional opportunities that will benefit her family. And from her, the branch staff is learning how to listen, reflect and create appropriate programming and collections for the neighborhood. She plays a leading role in connecting the library staff with the neighborhood. Most recently this relationship played out to everyone's favor when a bike was stolen from the library. The victim of the theft wanted to take matters into his own hands and did not want any type of police involvement. Fearing the consequences of such action, the branch staff quickly called upon this staff member's knowledge of the victim's family to get word out for everyone involved in the incident to work together to help both the thief and the victim. Perhaps this is the most powerful aspect of community organizing—that those involved in its practice can bring out the best in one another to improve every community member's life.

Since its opening in October 2006, the Courtland S. Wilson has begun the process of reintroducing library services to the Hill community while the neighborhood continues to shape the scope and content of these services. In that time five grants have commenced and concluded, each one bringing patrons, library staff and local organizations and institutions together. As in any relationship, this coming together leaves its imprint on all participants. The imprint on library staff is easy to see in the types of programs implemented, in collection development decisions, in the use of staffing, and in the neighborhood collaborations forged. With time, the imprint on the Hill itself will be easier to see. Hopefully it will include better economic conditions and higher literacy rates for neighborhood residents. Further inquiry into the library's success as a community organizer will have to take into account those outcomes, examining not only anecdotally but also through employment, literacy and quality-of-life data whether or not the library has brought about lasting change for the Hill.

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