

My Town Meeting Experience (remembered March, 2019 by Jill Persichetti)

I was privileged to work on the Town Meeting project in the 1970's and have since used the method and experience of awakening communities to their own development, gifts and potential. Now I am in my own 70's and have come to appreciate (almost daily) the lessons those experiences taught me!

It was in 1974-75 that I participated in several weekend PSUs (problem solving units) with teams of 15-20 people working on various aspects of the Town Meeting – developing materials (for both participating communities and facilitators) and fine tuning the method including use of story, song and symbol as well as the central meat of the proposed program – Vision, Challenges, Proposals and beginning Action plan.

When I moved to Texas in Jan. 1976, the nation began its Bi-Centennial celebrations and ICA was ready to launch its Town Meeting programs across the country and later across the globe. The plan was to hold one town meeting in each county of each state in the US. Before holding the town meeting, teams visited many small towns and neighborhoods to meet residents, identify key leaders and gauge their readiness and receptiveness to the idea! That was an experience in itself. We went into communities totally unknown to us and met townspeople and elected officials, uncovered the “hidden” community leaders; helped them set a date and place, invite their townspeople, publicize and prepare for the event. Sometimes it took several visits to the town; other times we found a leader or group ready to take on the task of organizing for the meeting immediately.

Over the next 2 years, ICA teams covered the nation state by state, and colored Town Meeting counties gold! That gave us an imaginative boost and concrete “picture” for the larger vision of “awakening communities to their own capacity and full potential.”

In the meantime working as a “facilitator” to facilitate the meetings became (for me) the “easy part.” As I gained experience in leading these meetings (always as part of a team of 2-3), my confidence also grew. Not only in my own ability to lead a meeting, but also in the local people's ability to determine their own lives and future they wanted for their communities.

During those years, I facilitated well over 100 town meetings of all sizes, in small rural towns and city neighborhoods, in various settings (city council chambers, schools, senior centers, church fellowship rooms, even a bar, throughout several states – Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Each town and town meeting was different, in terms of makeup of the community and outcomes of what people wanted for their town and decided they needed. What constantly remained the same was The Method used and basic components of the 3-6 hour meeting itself -- researched with sound underpinnings designed to elicit wisdom from the group and encourage them to create solutions on their own.

The method became ingrained in my own psyche – heart, mind and probably body as well! Since those initial experiences, I have used it often over the years in various settings – board meetings, family meetings, group discussions, church forums, sometimes just in conversations with friends.

Now, three things come to mind that I learned from these experiences:

- To ask questions, gather input and wisdom from others;
- To listen and not insert my own opinions or prejudices;
- To trust the process (even when I sometimes doubted a meeting would turn out ok and the townspeople would allow me to go home!)

A Town Meeting in a bar in Central Texas

After so many years, I forget the name of the town, but I will never forget the meeting itself! My partner and I had been assigned as facilitators and unfortunately, two towns had scheduled their town meetings for the same evening. Neither of us had been part of the setup of these, and thus we were going in “cold.” My partner dropped me off before heading to the 2nd meeting a few miles away in the next county. I made him promise to come as soon as he could to pick me up afterwards!

... And then I entered the site of the meeting, “walked into a bar” so to speak because the front part was a bar with several Texas cowboys (in their hats) enjoying their beers and having a good time. I announced I was there to facilitate the town meeting planned for that evening, and they pointed to a gathering room in the back with a pool table and some chairs set up. I began setting up and preparing materials for the meeting, and at the same time getting more nervous about what I was in for!

Exactly – Because, after I gave a very short intro to Town meetings in general, the first questions to me were about the ICA – heard as CIA to the participants! A few more longggg minutes were spent in my explaining that I was not part of the CIA, far from it, and explained again who ICA was and purpose of this meeting. Finally with the men folk (still in their hats and probably still drinking their beers, people gathered around and settled down enough for me to begin the town meeting process, asking questions and recording answers on butcher paper.

All I remember about the town itself was that it was an old German town, with a stance of suspicion toward “outsiders” and likely especially women facilitators from the city! More details are clearly fuzzy after all these years!!!!

What I most remember is that the Methods worked their magic – the townspeople participated and ended up with a document of their plans and even a story, song and symbol. All I did was record their thoughts and work. From then on, I decided if these methods could get people talking civilly, hold their attention and capture the hopes and dreams of these initially suspicious Texan cowboys (and gals), then anything was possible.

Pre Town Meeting --Setup Adventures

Setting up a town meeting in each county of every state, presented challenges for those teams assigned to that task. Besides much driving from town to town and a lot of talking to people, it meant also finding places to eat and sleep for the ICA volunteers on a limited budget. Sometimes a colleague in a certain town helped us; more often we found ourselves calling on businesses to “inkind” us lodging or meals. Though feeling awkward, we got used to asking – reminding ourselves that without an “Ask” there was no chance of a “Yes” answer. When hearing of the Town Meeting intent, businesses were overall quite receptive and generous in helping support and even provide for the Town Meeting itself.

No matter where we landed we were asking questions to ferret out community leaders in towns “foreign” to the ICA team assigned. Sometimes the leaders were elected officials such as mayor or chamber member, or school board. Often though, the key leaders, the real “movers and shakers” were hidden from view on public notices, but well known in the community for getting things done. These were the people we looked for and found were the most likely to say yes to organizing a Town Meeting for their town and ensuring it would be successful. In the process we were learning how towns and neighborhoods worked (or didn’t), how to determine who the real leaders were and what the general spirit of the community was. Always an adventure!