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The Institute
of Cultural
Affairs *in the U.S.A.*

INITIATIVES

2019

Thirty years ago, the Institute of Cultural Affairs worked with Case Western Reserve University to research the inner life and workings of ICA. The case study began with the metaphor that organizations are “miracles of human interaction, the mystery of which deepens as we probe more into them.” To probe the mystery, the research team conducted an appreciative inquiry, a methodology that seeks to “locate and heighten the ‘life giving properties’ of organizations” by seeking the best of what is to lay the foundation of what might be.

ICA and Case Western identified five “life-giving forces” as the best of what is, as the “unique structure and processes of the organization that makes its very existence possible.” They can be summarized as **consensus decision making, corporateness, teaching and learning orientation, service mission, and spirit life.**

Thirty years later, the current board and staff at ICA felt it was time to take the pulse of what is, now. While much has

changed, ICA has taken care to carry forth lessons from its past. In seeking a new articulation of our core values, we once again posed an appreciative inquiry.

Board and staff members began by interviewing one another. Each was asked to name their peak experience, the values they cherish that give life to the organization, and their vision for the future of ICA. The aggregated responses inspired months of group processing before crystallizing into four “core values” that attempt to bridge what is and what will be. They are **radical collaboration, embodied justice, continuous learning, and profound care.**

Subsequent descriptions and demonstrations of the four values are forthcoming, but already these values can be seen in our recent works. Throughout this issue of Initiatives, we’ll follow the thread of these values through recent local, citywide, and national work, as well as our organizational legacy and our international colleagues.

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LOCAL

In 1979, Maxine Florell, Jeanette Hupp, and Janet Sullivan began operating a women's center in Uptown with an aim that differed from many social service agencies of the time—to accept each woman as she was. To embody this value, they implemented a few rules as needed to create a safe, peaceful, and respectful space. In the beginning, that space was a second-story apartment with a handful of regular clients. It would later be named Sarah's Circle for the cat that spent time with women in the center.

To accommodate the growing need to address homelessness among women, Sarah's Circle moved in early 1997 to the building that would come to be known at ICA GreenRise. The larger space allowed them to expand in scope as well as capacity, recruiting a case manager and providing “educational programming, culinary arts training, computer services, and case management assistance for every woman who walked through the doors.”

By 2011, Sarah's Circle was operating an interim housing program that provides basic needs for participants while helping them to find safe, permanent housing and jobs. In 2013, the organization completed construction of a new

building comprising 10 units of permanent supportive housing just half a block north of ICA GreenRise, where they continue to operate interim housing services.

In order to better serve their clients, Sarah's Circle is now developing a new 35,000 square foot building on Sheridan at Leland, a block south of the ICA GreenRise, that will add 38 units of permanent supportive housing for women with histories of chronic homelessness. Once completed, Sarah's Circle will be relocating out of the space in ICA GreenRise that has anchored them for more than 20 years.

As a neighborhood hub, ICA GreenRise supports sustainability in all its forms. Its doors remain open to organizations and groups looking to nourish the Uptown community. It's home base for our local programs, which in 2019 have included our Annual Uptown Garden Walk, an electoral candidate forum, a women's networking mixer, and a volunteer-made film about the endangered piping plovers that nested on Uptown's coast this summer. As we seek to embody justice, to build a better society from the ground up, we must begin with how we use the ground on which we stand, upon which our physical foundation rests.



PHOTO BY MAURA PARKER

CITYWIDE

In 1995, Alvyn Walker was sitting in a Giordano's restaurant on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago, engaged with friends in a conversation that would influence the rest of his life. "We started to brainstorm about what type of a goal would you set for yourself and how do you think that particular goal would be achieved," he says.

"I had a vision that we needed to stop responding with force. We need to build coalitions of people and be able to converge on problems using a more thoughtful approach to solving problems." That conversation at Giordano's took place just before Alvyn was deployed to Bosnia as part of a military career that took him around the world and gave him a robust training in infrastructure and logistics.

It was back home in Chicago where his vision really began to take root. Today, Alvyn is the Property Team Lead at Windsor Park Lutheran Church in South Shore, where he organizes a community garden, food pantry, youth programs, Tai Chi classes, and more. Working with Leave No Veteran Behind, he helped install a router in the church steeple that beams internet to the surrounding blocks. He also participates in Sierra Club's Ready for 100 campaign, Faith in Place's Green Team, and the One Earth Film Festival. When an ICA staffer

remarked that he always seems to have a new project in the works, Alvyn grinned and said "speaking of new projects..."

For five years Alvyn has been deeply engaged in our Chicago Sustainability Leaders Network (CSLN). He hosted the first network meeting of the year and helped organize the Nourish (comm)Unity events series, which debuted a resource-sharing cooperative he's been planning with another CSLN member. After helping ICA organize a Listen. Lead. Share. clean energy forum in South Shore, Alvyn began working with another member to make clean energy more accessible. He connected with One Earth Film Festival through ICA colleague Dick Alton, who he met at a CSLN meeting. That partnership has also introduced Alvyn to our ToP methods, which he says have greatly improved his facilitation skills.

His level of engagement is not just impressive, it's radical, and it's all made possible through collaboration. Alvyn is unequivocal about how ICA has supported his work, saying that "CSLN has allowed me to put to use some of the skills that I have been given through military schooling and through civilian education to be able to have a conduit for using those skills to make a difference."



PHOTO BY GORDON WALEK

NATIONAL

Darnell Shields' dreams of a dynamic, bustling, and alive Austin, a community on the West Side of Chicago. As the Executive Director of Austin Coming Together (ACT), Darnell and his team have worked diligently on building a system that supplies the resources and support that local residents and organizations need to address the barriers they face. The role of community "has to be better acknowledged and valued when it comes to community development initiatives," he says. "Developing resident capacity on the ground in neighborhoods into interconnected systems is the only way you can have harmonious allocation and distribution of resources in a place."

ACT has had an incredibly successful few years. They recently completed their Quality of Life plan, which aims to "restore Austin and to create something new, building on Austin's many assets and cultivating new expertise and investment" by "creating deeper relationships and working together in a coordinated way like never before." The plan is a result of a community planning process that engaged hundreds of people through community forums. The City of Chicago, MacArthur Foundation, and numerous local organizations and residents are all ready to support this community-centered and led plan.

ICA connected with Darnell and ACT through the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC) which supports lead

organizations in communities creating Quality of Life Plans, including ACT. For more than five years, ICA has trained LISC's community partners how to use our Technology of Participation (ToP) methods to co-create plans with residents.

ACT is a network convener that works by bringing residents, organizations, and other stakeholders together in a shared process. "Having the opportunity to take advantage of ICA's ToP tools was so beneficial for us," says Darnell. "We have the ability to get everyone on the same page through Consensus Workshops and Focused Conversations. The tools have empowered us to be able to increase our capacity to take on larger collections and better decide who we can leverage, how folks can gain access, and who our work is helping."

The planning process, Darnell says, has created a "culture of relationship-building through our values to where we as a community can come together to collectively design a tool that can inform any and all that we are committed to helping create a thriving Austin community."

Although we are not currently leading any major comprehensive community development projects as ICA has throughout much of its history, our tools, wisdom, and depth understanding of community ownership are still impacting and supporting grassroots development today.



LEGACY

Meida Teresa McNeal grew up in the Fifth City neighborhood of East Garfield Park on Chicago's West Side, where her parents participated in ICA's Fifth City community development project in the 1960s. Curious about her own memories and her parents' stories, Meida began to explore the history of Fifth City. Her journey eventually led her to our Global Archives project, where she connected with ICA colleagues Jean Long, Karen Snyder, and Pam Bergdall, among others. The wealth of information—records, reports, and stories—in the Archives helped Meida develop her solo performance project, *Fifth City revisited / Imaginal Politics reimagined*, which she performed four times in Chicago this past June.

“Digging in ICA’s archives has created a next level of richness to the project and the storytelling in the work,” Meida says. “I am inspired and intrigued by the complexity of the work at the human scale. I find myself seeing many parallels in the work I do as an artist-administrator-educator and the core principles and methods ICA uses around consensus, creativity, experimentation, collective labor, contextual/historical information, facilitation, and dialogue.”

Fifth City revisited weaves together interpretive dance, spoken word, symbol, audio, video, props, and dynamic lighting into an hour-long meditation on the implications of the Fifth City project on everything from her childhood

and family to discriminatory policy, urban planning, and contemporary movements for social justice. It is a stunning work that draw a bold line from ICA's early days to its influence in the present.

Earlier in the year, another storytelling experience brought ICA's past to bear on the present. In January, fourteen ICA colleagues were invited to share stories of their work and life with ICA at the ToP Network Annual Gathering in New Orleans. As ToP continues to reach newer and younger audiences, more and more people come to the methods without fully learning about the history and context from which they emerged. ToP Trainers saw this as an opportunity to deepen understanding by positioning colleagues torchbearers who would pass their stories along to those willing to carry that flame into the future.

This year saw the passing of colleagues Jean Long and Sally Stovall. Jean dedicated her recent years to the organization and cultivation of the Global Archives, which she championed vigorously in weekly conference calls with remote colleagues. Sally was partner of colleague Dick Alton and founder of Green Community Connections and One Earth Film Festival. Hundreds came out to her memorial services, a demonstration of Sally's leadership, enthusiasm, energy, and unwavering dedication to environmental work.

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A NOTE FROM THE BOARD

Inspired by the work of philanthropic consultant and ToP facilitator Jennifer Vanica, ICA board and staff members conducted a series of conversations with nine foundations from November 2018 through April 2019. Our aim was to explore innovative community development strategies recognized by the national philanthropic field. These conversations covered the spectrum from participatory engagement and equitable development to process-based organizing and community voice in policymaking.

What we heard from these nine foundations largely mirrored our own beliefs. Ideas such as “those most impacted should be the ones most engaged in shaping change,” and “backbone organizations can support on-the-ground leaders” are inherent in our mission to strengthen the capacities of individuals, organizations, and communities to build and implement innovative plans of action that draw upon assets and social capital in a collaborative manner.

While philanthropic theories of change can be influential, our work depends on a groundswell of individual supporters. If you, like the many people featured in this issue, have been inspired by our work, we ask that you make a contribution.

You can donate online at ica-usa.org/donate or by mailing the enclosed donation envelope to

ICA-USA at 4750 N Sheridan Rd, Chicago, IL, 60640