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Working Across Difference to Build Urban Community, Democracy, and Immigrant Integration

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Working Across Difference to Build Urban Community, Democracy, and Immigrant Integration

Tim Sieber and Maria Centeio



Detail from *Peace Mural*

This detail from the Peace Mural on Dudley Street in the Dorchester section of Boston portrays a united, interracial community. Located under the commuter rail trestle at Upham's Corner station, the colorful mural was painted in 2006 by youth from the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Cape Verdean Community Unido, and Bird Street Teen Center. Photo reprinted by permission of Tim Sieber.

Abstract

What factors make it possible for new immigrants to integrate well into established communities of long-term citizen residents, and to establish effective collaborations that unify the community around struggles for neighborhood defense and improvement? In the 25-year history of Boston's Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, the place-based nature of the organizing initiative and its commitment to the democratic participation of all residents in neighborhood planning were key to institutionalization of multiethnic, multiracial collaboration that knit immigrants to old-timers in struggles to improve quality of life for all. DSNI's successful organizing of an inclusive, unified city neighborhood offers a compelling model of best practices that other neighborhoods and communities can emulate.

Boston: Multiracial City, Immigrant Destination

Boston has long been the capital and metropolis of the six-state New England region, one of the nation's least diverse, most white regions, with a shrinking, aging population. Since the post-1965 loosening of immigration restrictions, it has become the destination for a rich array of new immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, who have joined older residents and already existing, long-term minority ethnic communities, changing the city's face. One of the very last of the nation's major cities to make the transition, Boston in 2000 finally became for the first time a "majority minority" city, with whites at 49.5 percent of the population. The city is one-fourth African American, 15 percent Latino, and 8 percent Asian-Pacific Islander (Boston Redevelopment Authority 2001).

These changing demographics have had powerful results—a reversal of population decline, the revitalization of neighborhoods, a recent economic expansion aided by increased immigrant entrepreneurship, as well as a fresh workforce. New, powerful multiethnic coalitions have recently emerged that have raised the profile of ethnic minority and immigrant communities more to the fore in the city's political landscape and in electoral contests. Organizations such as the New Majority, a multiracial progressive lobbying, electoral, and advocacy coalition that allies com-

munities of color with white progressives, and the recent Team Unity City Council electoral coalition, have made Boston a growing model for new experiments in effective cross-ethnic coalitions.

Recent historical experience in Boston thus contravenes some of the most recent pessimistic pronouncements by scholars such as Robert Putnam (2007), who have argued that the increasing diversity in U.S. communities as a result of immigration introduces division, reduces public collaboration, and produces a decline in civic engagement, at least in the short or medium term. The uses that have been made by anti-immigrant forces of Putnam's cautions, of course, echo longer-standing alarm among conservative observers such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1992), and Samuel Huntington (1996) over supposedly destructive impacts of a more multicultural, Latinized, or immigrant-rich America in "disuniting" the nation and damaging its core national culture or identity (Sieber 1992). With its diversifying population, Boston's recent history displays, however, exactly the opposite trends: new forms of revitalized, constructive civic engagement and alliance-building that have deepened grassroots urban democracy at the neighborhood and citywide levels.

DSNI: A Quarter Century of Neighborhood Transformation

One of the most successful Boston-based experiments in cross-ethnic organizing has been the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), a nonprofit, neighborhood-controlled planning and organizing initiative founded in 1984 that serves the one-mile-square Dudley Street Corridor spanning the North Dorchester and Roxbury neighborhoods. The authors studied DSNI's history and organization in order to understand how the Initiative managed to build community across ethnic and racial lines, unifying residents in defending their neighborhood and significantly improving the quality of life. During this time the neighborhood was about 40 percent immigrant. The organization's quarter century of existence as a successful multiracial grassroots initiative suggested the DSNI example should be profiled as a model of best practices in community building, including immigrant integration, in today's city neighborhoods.

The remarkable story of DSNI has been chronicled in *Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood* (Medoff and Sklar 1993) and profiled in an award-winning documentary film, *Holding Ground: The Re-*

birth of Dudley Street (1996), which examines the dramatic first ten years of the organization's work. The organization and its activities are a focus of study in hundreds of universities, in the United States and abroad, in the fields of sociology, anthropology, urban studies, planning, and social work.

DSNI was formed by a coalition of residents and local service providers to defend and revitalize one of Boston's most deteriorated neighborhoods that had become subjected to severe abandonment, redlining, neglect, and arson during the 1970s and early 1980s. By 1984, fully 1,300 parcels of property—almost half the land—had been reduced to rubble-filled, empty lots, many of them sites for widespread illegal dumping. Developing a comprehensive approach to sustainable neighborhood revitalization that included attention to physical, environmental, economic, and social interventions, DSNI led a dramatic redevelopment of the area. It became the first neighborhood-controlled organization in the nation to win the right of eminent domain over vacant land, and coordinated the planning and the rebuilding of hundreds of new units of affordable housing, neighborhood parks, and green spaces, helping to set the stage for the development of dozens of new minority-owned small businesses.

The bricks-and-mortar dimensions of DSNI's success are obvious in terms of physical and economic development. DSNI has won many national awards, in fact, for its community planning and development, such as the City of Boston's "Best Kept Neighborhood Civic Award," the Independent Sector's "Building Leadership Award," and others from the American Planning Association and the Fannie Mae Foundation, as well as substantial grants from the Riley, Casey, and Ford foundations. These awards and grants have both recognized and promoted the Initiative's transformation of the neighborhood.

Less well examined has been its multiethnic organizing model, even though today's leaders openly credit it as an integral part of the overall organizing approach to the neighborhood. *In Streets of Hope*, in fact, Medoff and Sklar mostly take the model's functioning and importance for granted, giving it relatively little explanation (Medoff and Sklar 1993: 256–258).

Certainly the very ethnically diverse character of the target neighborhood, which mixed new Latino and Cape Verdean immigrants with longer-term black and white Americans, gave DSNI the mandate—if

not the necessity—to constitute itself as a multiethnic institution in the 1980s. Now, a quarter century later, largely due to DSNI's successful efforts at preserving housing affordability, using eminent domain and a community land trust to protect the area from real estate speculation and gentrification, the 2009 ethnic mix remains close to what it was 25 years ago. The 23,000 people who live there are 38 percent African American, 29 percent Latino, 25 percent Cape Verdean, and 7 percent white, often older Irish and Italian American families, including many elderly. As explained below, DSNI is principally an organization of community residents, and an impressive 3,700 of them, about 16 percent of the neighborhood, are members.

Boston and Beyond: Multiethnic Neighborhoods as the Urban Norm

This kind of multiethnic neighborhood is not unusual in U.S. cities today. As Fong and Shibuya have noted in their recent review of urban demographics, the data “consistently demonstrate that neighborhoods, especially in major cities, have become more integrated than before. Groups are more likely to share neighborhoods. Consequently, mixed neighborhoods are on the rise, and these neighborhoods commonly remain stable over the years” (Fong and Shibuya 2005: 8). There's nothing rare about such neighborhoods, and they seem to be quite viable in coalescing to solve pressing local problems. Roger Sanjek found this to be the case in the diverse Jackson Heights and Corona neighborhoods he studied in the Queens section of New York City in the 1980s and 1990s, where white and African-American old-timers were mixed with new immigrants from dozens of countries. He concluded a decade ago that this kind of community, in fact, is the “future of us all” (Sanjek 1998).



Dudley Street Diversity

The racial and ethnic diversity of the Dudley Street neighborhood is reflected in this slice of the audience at the 2006 dedication of the Peace Mural on Dudley Street in the Dorchester section of Boston. Photo reprinted by permission of Tim Sieber.

That future has already arrived in Boston, where the typical neighborhood is more racially mixed than ever before, as an examination of recent census figures between 1980 and 2000 demonstrates. Boston is similar to many other locations in the Global North: Population declines from an aging white population have been offset by an influx of new immigrants, mostly of color. It was only in the 1990s that the city began to gain population again after a slow decline that started with increased deindustrialization after World War II and white flight from the 1950s through the 1970s. Long but wrongly imagined to be a collection of separated, culturally homogenous “ethnic villages,” Boston today shows its dramatic diversity in almost every neighborhood. Each one of Boston’s sixteen neighborhood districts was more racially diverse in 2000 than it was in 1990. Latinos and Asians moved into every neighborhood, and formerly mostly white and mostly black neighborhoods have also become more racially mixed.

Even among the city’s recently traditional “white” neighborhoods, in 2000 none was more than 85 percent so (Back Bay/Beacon Hill at 85 percent, West Roxbury at 84 percent, South Boston at 85 percent, and Charlestown at 79 percent). Except for Mattapan, which in 2000 was still three-fourths African American, “minority” neighborhoods tend to be more integrated than whiter ones. A third of those who call Roxbury home, for example, now identify themselves as belonging to groups *other than* African American. Central Boston, with Chinatown, is 21 percent Asian, but Asians also make up one of seven residents in Allston-Brighton, North Dorchester, and Fenway-Kenmore. Latinos are a strong presence in East Boston, where they are two of every five residents, and are one in four in Roxbury and Jamaica Plain, and almost one in five in the South End and Roslindale. The typical Boston neighborhood in 2001 is an integrated one, with six being the most equally balanced in their populations: the South End, Dorchester, Hyde Park, Jamaica Plain, East Boston, and Roslindale (Sieber 2001; Boston Redevelopment Authority 1995, 2001).

Research Methods and Interview Sample

DSNI was studied as part of a wider project examining immigrant integration in Massachusetts’s urban communities. As noted earlier, the authors’ research was aimed at elucidating DSNI’s organizing model as a

set of “best practices” in community building in the nation’s increasingly diverse, and immigrant-rich, urban neighborhoods. DSNI was an active collaborator in the research. The two-person research team included a partner from the Initiative, a youth board member and neighborhood resident, Maria Centeio. During July and August 2008, twenty-seven interviews were conducted by Centeio and Sieber of individuals nominated by DSNI principals as knowledgeable about, and important actors in, the Initiative’s history and development in Boston. Each interview lasted from one to two hours.

Of the twenty-seven individuals interviewed, six were current staff members (including three who were also community residents), and eighteen others were neighborhood residents, including board members, committee members, and others who in the past played roles in DSNI activities. The present executive director, John Barros, was interviewed, as were past executive director Gus Newport (Berkeley, California), and founder and early board leader Nelson Merced (Washington, D.C.). These last two interviews were conducted on the telephone; the remainder were done face-to-face. Three of the interviewees were religious leaders in the community who have been active in DSNI and neighborhood organizing, and who have been residents for decades: Rev. Paul Bothwell, a Baptist minister; Father Walter Waldron, pastor of St. Patrick’s Church; Sister Margaret Leonard, of the Little Sisters of the Assumption; and the executive director of Project Hope, a key community-based organization that serves low-income and homeless women. In all, the ethnic breakdown of the interviewees was: African American, 22 percent; Cape Verdean, 37 percent; Latino, 11 percent; white, 22 percent; and other, 8 percent. Ten were male and 17 female. The interviewees ranged in age from 15 to 85.

Unusual Place-Based Initiative with Resident Control

At its deepest foundation, DSNI’s principles stem from its character as a place-based initiative and its core commitment to democratic participation. DSNI’s boundaries are defined in terms of the neighborhood’s geography, and the accompanying foundational tenet is that all people residing there—literally “everyone”—are DSNI members, real or potential. Resident control, in terms of governance, voting, representation, and decision making, is central. The governing board of the Initiative, un-

like most community-serving nonprofits, is limited to people who live or work in the neighborhood. Staff members are not required to live there, although the majority do, and they are not permitted to vote on decisions unless they also happen to be residents. Defining its scope geographically, as it does, requires DSNI to be inclusive of all kinds of people in this neighborhood so deeply mixed by color, religion, ethnicity, and class.

The focus on “residents” and their right to have a say in their neighborhood’s development has always been a conscious part of DSNI’s organizing strategy. As African-American Renay Peters, a board member of the community land trust Dudley Neighbors, Inc., explained about board membership: “People who serve on the board live in the community. How can you speak about it, if you don’t live in it? They take more pride in it, are more concerned with it, and get more done.” As long-term staff member May Louie pointed out about her training work in the Resident Development Institute, the principle of resident control means “engaging those who are involved [and living in the neighborhood] in direct dialogue about what’s happening. I take with me the concept of residents first. I carry that wherever I go: how do you get authentic voices at the table?”

No distinctions among local people have ever been made on the basis of their citizenship or immigration status, even though the neighborhood historically has been immigrant-receiving, with an estimated 41 percent of residents speaking a language other than English at home, and always displaying a mix of immigration statuses, including undocumented people. Intentionally, in order to unite the neighborhood, the organization has never used the rhetoric of “citizenship” or “citizen action” to describe its grassroots base. It chose “resident control” as a more inclusive concept. There is a remarkable absence of attention anywhere in DSNI activities to what residents’ immigration status might be: Whether you are a U.S. citizen or green-card holder, documented or undocumented, is simply irrelevant to defining your belongingness in the community. As youth board member Joceline Fidalgo pointed out, “They don’t treat immigrants and non-immigrants differently here, maybe because the neighborhood is made up of a lot of immigrants.”

The sense of equality in participation and decision making has also been enhanced by the strong emphasis on broadly based, popular leadership within the community, and by the conviction that all people can

learn skills and capacities necessary for exercising leadership, collaborating with neighbors, and facilitating efforts toward achieving community goals, even people who had not previously been recognized as leaders. As long-term staff member May Louie observed, “People in poor urban communities have really deep wisdom. The residents and other stakeholders can figure out what their neighborhood needs, and that might work better than what the experts might know.” Along with widely shared authority in all neighborhood matters, she also noted, “We’ve approached community building as a project for everyone.” As early board chair Che Madyun explained, the inclusiveness is a way of “building the capacity of the community.” DSNI regularly operates workshops, under the rubric of their Resident Development Institute, that offer training in leadership and organizing skills to those active on committees, boards, and planning groups.

DSNI’s style of leadership resembles what activist Ella Baker, in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, termed “group centered leadership”—that is to say, leadership is widely dispersed, rather than invested in a single or small number of charismatic individuals with followers (Baker 2003: 399–400). This is closely related to the principle of collective resident control. Although DSNI employs a staff, its members never style themselves as the leaders of the organization, but instead credit collective participation from the community for achievements. “When I say DSNI, it’s us. I usually mean the entire community,” explained long-term organizer José Barros, also a community resident. This is not hard to do, since DSNI organizers like Barros avoid claiming professional or political credit for community-level actions spawned by DSNI. As Barros explained, “People might not realize that DSNI is doing it, because DSNI doesn’t impose anything on anybody. They might think that’s just the way you do it.”

Transparency between residents and DSNI staff is fostered by the long-term commitment to bring residents into paid staff positions. Four key staff members—including the executive director—are long-term residents, two of whom also grew up in the neighborhood. A similar commitment, of course, is reflected in the board’s composition. Early executive director Gus Newport observed that, as opposed to most nonprofits serving lower-income neighborhoods, where board members are often cho-

sen for financial or professional considerations, neighborhood residency has always been the key criterion for serving on DSNI's board.

The DSNI offices, as well, are considered by all to be a place that is visible, open, and permeable to visits and interactions with the public. Renay Peters, among others, noted that when she began coming to the office, "I felt comfortable from the very first day." The DSNI offices also have been completely child-friendly, and not because any special activities are provided for children. Instead, as early as they show interest, children are put to work helping on small organizational tasks, such as stuffing envelopes, and their contributions are recognized and valued. Several people who have been active in DSNI, such as Olivia Barros, pointed out to us that her children, Tchintcia and Keila—now adults and active still in DSNI programs—had always loved accompanying their parents to the office.

For creating unity between staff and residents, it also helps enormously that the mission of DSNI is planning, organizing, and advocacy—with a commitment to building community participation and voice, and local control over local development—instead of service delivery, the focus of most other community-based organizations. DSNI sought to avoid any competition with existing service providers who worked within the community and, in fact, sought to draw together those providers as part of the neighborhoodwide coalition that forms DSNI. Thus, choosing *not* to define its mission as service delivery to neighborhood residents meant that DSNI could avoid a number of perennial limitations and challenges that such organizations face in low-income city neighborhoods: the creation of professional-client divides, creeping paternalism around issues of education and class, and pressures to specialize ethnically in terms of client populations.

Institutionalizing Inclusion of Diverse Subgroups

DSNI organizers from the beginning resolved to mirror the neighborhood's diversity in its own infrastructure, permanently institutionalizing several measures emphasizing inclusion. Its elected 34-member board of directors is structured to provide the broadest representation of the neighborhood's ethnic mix, and 60 percent of the seats are allocated to residents. Four of these are reserved for African Americans, four for Latinos, four for Cape Verdeans, four for whites, and three for youth age

15 to 17, whose representatives are usually also ethnically mixed as well. Diversity also usually is present among those who sit on the board representing stakeholder organizations.

DSNI has avoided distribution of power and authority in the organization according to majority rule or any calculation of numerical proportionality, thereby making sure that all ethnic segments of the community, even if they are minorities in comparative numbers, are equally represented. The same numerical representation of the four major racial-ethnic groups means that none can feel that they are at the table as tokens, or minorities, instead of as equals. As Jason Webb, the current staff director of operations who first began participating in DSNI activities as a seven-year old-resident, noted, this plan was “very ingenious” in that it allowed the community to avoid “getting bogged down in race...we make sure everyone has an equal footing at the table....it’s not the same as majority rule.” José Barros said that this system ensures that “each ethnic group has a chance to be at the same level and has its own leaders in the community...there is opportunity for all the groups to become leaders at all levels.” Former director Gus Newport concluded that removing any element of ethnic or racial competition was “one of the master strokes [of DSNI]...because that meant that they were going to focus on the issues, rather than each other” (Medoff and Sklar 1993: 256).

The other remaining board seats are for individuals from other stakeholder groups from the neighborhood: nonprofit organizations (7), small-business owners (2), religious organizations (2), community development corporations (2), and residents appointed by the board (2). DSNI members choose the board, except for the appointed members, in a general election held every two years. It is important to note that DSNI itself is thus an inclusive *umbrella* under whose auspices all types of residents and neighborhood organizations can join together and manage the development of the community in common. Its core mission to promote dialogue and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including those from different ethnic groups, makes working across difference its core organizing task, obviously essential to creating the effective *coalition* that has planned and defended the neighborhood so well.



No Generation Gap

Coauthor Maria Centeio visiting Catherine Flannery at Catherine's home in the Dudley Street neighborhood. Both are board members of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. Reprinted by permission of Tim Sieber.

DSNI makes a concerted effort to avoid identification with any particular ethnic segment in the neighborhood, but instead tries to promote dialogue and collaboration among different ethnically defined and other organizations. This was a foundational commitment of early organizers, as well as the Riley Foundation, DSNI's most important initial funder. In the 1980s, Riley's priority was funding efforts that "have struggled to nourish multi-racial community" (Medoff and Sklar 1993: 39–41). DSNI worked to honor this commitment not only in its governance structures, but also in its roles in mediation and troubleshooting at the neighborhood level. DSNI played a key role, for example, in promoting dialogue and resolution of a dispute between Cape Verdeans and African Americans in the late 1990s regarding whether the Vine Street Community Center in the heart of the neighborhood would become an ethnically based center or one that served the whole community, which was the eventual outcome (Putnam and Feldstein 2003: 93–94). To promote inclusion of all ethnic voices, in cases where DSNI saw that ethnic constituencies did not have their own advocacy organizations, they helped create them, as was the case in its efforts to establish the Cape Verdean Community Task Force. The Task Force has since become today's Cape Verdean Community UNIDO, an important partner organization with strong youth programs located next door to DSNI's own offices.

Considerable attention has always been paid to “walking the walk” with respect to DSNI’s own staff, making sure it is diverse and reflects the face of the neighborhood. Executive directors have included one white, three African Americans, and one Cape Verdean, and the roster of past board presidents is also ethnically mixed. Presently, the staff includes the first Cape Verdean executive director, John Barros, who grew up in the neighborhood and is a former youth leader in the Initiative, and one or more representatives of all four major racial-ethnic groups, as well as an Asian-American.

A truly multiethnic and collaborative, relatively nonhierarchical organization like DSNI, with close engagement between “professionals” and “clients,” labels that are never even used at the Initiative, is quite unusual in the community-level nonprofit landscape. The appearance of the Initiative is so unusual, despite its authenticity and durability, that it is hard for many outsiders to believe. A perennial need is for the organization to defend its image from public perceptions or apprehensions that it has been “captured” by whatever ethnic group happens to be represented by the current executive director. In the 1980s, DSNI’s early Latino leadership caused many to try to define it as a Latino organization (Medoff and Sklar 1994: 47–48), and organizers made conscious efforts to “rotate responsibility and, in particular, make sure the Initiative was not seen as either ‘Latino dominated’ or ‘Black dominated’... [in order] to really have the leadership base of this group be as broad and as diverse as possible” (Medoff and Sklar 1994: 46). Since John Barros became executive director in 2000, the most recent challenge is to defend against the perception that the Initiative has been “taken over by Cape Verdeans.” “Folks still see us as catering toward one race or ethnic group more than others,” said Jason Webb. John Barros reports that he regularly tackles the misperception head-on by joking about it in public meetings.

A Community That Communicates in Many Languages

Another key pillar of DSNI’s success at community building has been the decision to operate as a multilingual organization. The commitment to multilingualism simply echoes what is audible on local streets and in stores, and in the neighborhood’s main Catholic parish, St. Patrick’s, which offers masses every Sunday in each of the three languages

that DSNI recognizes—English, Cape Verdean *kriolu*, and Spanish. At DSNI most official business and communication is conducted in three languages. All formal meetings that include the public have simultaneous live translation with earphones. At DSNI offices, all three languages can be heard during the day, in face-to-face conversations and in others taking place on the telephone. Because meetings, publicity, social gatherings and events, and all publications of DSNI are multilingual, the workings of the organization, and the community dialogues that it promotes, are accessible to everyone.

Early organizers were articulate in stating the reasons for this early commitment to multilingualism. First board chair Nelson Merced noted that it was a necessity to ensure broad democratic participation from neighborhood residents:

It was very obvious to us that we lived in a multi-ethnic and multi-racial neighborhood, and at the first meeting [in 1984] we had interpreters. We wanted everyone to understand what was discussed and being agreed to. We wanted everybody to understand what we decided, and why we decided it. We wanted everyone there to be able to express themselves and give their opinion. To really let people say what they think, they need to be able to do it in their own language.

Gus Newport agreed: “Everyone needs to hear a discussion in their own language and use their own voice, like you do at the United Nations.”

Informed civic action and collaboration, in order to be effective, “requires equity of information across communities,” Merced further clarified. The Initiative’s enlightened, progressive response to linguistic diversity no doubt drew on the wisdom of the immigrant organizations and leaders, both Latino and Cape Verdean, such as Merced, Melvyn Colon, and Adalberto Teixeira, who were prominent in DSNI’s origin and early history. Merced’s words on the topic were echoed by all those involved in DSNI’s early history:

We had a commitment to make sure communications occurred across the [ethnic] communities... so that they could have their opinions and express their voices. You can’t say, “You’re in America, so speak Eng-

lish!” America has never had that requirement....Given language barriers, how could we prioritize a way to be as inclusive as possible, letting people speak in their own language and be heard?

The commitment to multilingualism was thus much more than a symbolic nod to ethnic pride or conservatism: It was a practical, effective organizing tool. Early leaders Merced and Newport acknowledged that linguistic differences can present a challenge. If there is a will to work with them, however, multilingualism can provide bridges to participation, rather than barriers, and promote better identification and responsiveness to community needs. Again, in Merced’s words:

At the neighborhood level we see that linguistic and ethnic community can be actively pursued, and we can be purposeful to see that communication occurs. We can’t assume that everyone’s needs are identical. The only way to assess them is to communicate with them. Everyone’s speaking different languages is not an insurmountable problem when you come down to needs. You can reach out, and hear the voices of everyone in the community. You can’t be interested in the community if you can’t communicate.

Multiethnic/-racial inclusion is not seen as something “extra” or supplemental to the process of full democratic participation by the community, but is an essential part of it. Inclusion cannot be diluted, or weakened, without hurting the entire model. As John Barros told us, “It’s the reason we have been successful in everything we’ve done.” Moreover, multiculturalism—as much as it is valorized—is never fetishized, defined as an end in itself, but always seen simply as a tool to democratic engagement for all. The multiculturalism works so well, as Gus Newport indicated, because it was permanently “institutionalized” in the basic constitution of the Initiative.

Solving the problems of potential disunity, conflict, and miscommunication that can arise from racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences, it is important to note, was not just a matter of creating a happier and more harmonious atmosphere among participants for its own sake. Solidarity was, instead, essential for the neighborhood to be able to develop, show, and defend its unity toward outsiders. Residents had a long his-

torical experience of being “divided and ruled,” of having outsiders and the city play one neighborhood group against another. Activists of all persuasions, moreover, were often accused of being—by those with power and resources to give, whether public or private—“unrepresentative of the community.” As Paul Bothwell, a long-term board member, said: “One of our values is in the collective voice and power of the neighborhood, and so that means that everyone—generations, racial, cultural, linguistic groups, every kind of stakeholder. You live here, you work here. If we’re not together, divide and rule really works.” In Nelson Merced’s words, “cooperation across cultural and linguistic boundaries was important for the city to realize that DSNI’s decisions were ‘legitimate’ and representative of the community.” First DSNI executive director Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar put it well in *Streets of Hope*: “Being inclusive can make building consensus more difficult. But it is precisely that consensus that underpins the neighborhood’s power. By speaking in one voice—the harmony of many voices—the neighborhood demands that it be listened to” (Medoff and Sklar 1993: 256).

Building “the Village,” a Caring Community

In their devastated urban zone, DSNI’s goal from the beginning was to construct what early leaders called an “urban village,” a community that is safe, healthy, supportive of families and individuals, spiritually sound, hopeful, and economically and environmentally sustainable, in addition to being politically engaged on its own behalf. Local economic development, small-business development, improvement in services from health care and education to recreation and sanitation, and the organizing and community planning necessary to make them happen, were also all part of the model. Permeating the vision of the “village” has always been an ethic of caring, concern, and friendliness of residents toward one another. Indeed, many residents are convinced that Dudley is a neighborhood that is warmer and friendlier than any they see elsewhere.

Many people believe that the sense of ownership and pride in the neighborhood that DSNI promotes, for example, a street life that is friendlier than elsewhere. Many at DSNI, such as May Louie, describe it as the “heartbeat” of the neighborhood. Local minister Paul Bothwell remarks that the neighborhood is one where “people say ‘hi’ to everyone, where

people are working together to rebuild the community, and where they care about one another.” Former board member Julio Henriquez says that the neighborhood reminds him of the small town in Panama where he grew up. As Putnam and Feldstein report their conversation with him on this topic:

Both are small communities with one main parish church, where people know their neighbors. A girl walks toward Henriquez. “Good afternoon,” he says. She makes eye contact, and smiles and says hello. “When I first moved into this neighborhood,” Henriquez says, “everybody was a stranger. Nobody said good morning to each other” (Putnam and Feldstein 2003: 89).

Adalberto Teixeira adds that a long history of community projects was what brought residents together, so that they have been able to “connect and reconnect. ‘Now,’ says Teixeira, ‘most people know each other, and they talk to each other. And it feels more like a family than a neighborhood.’” (Putnam and Feldstein 2003: 80).

Partly this is an outcome of how staff members at DSNI relate to residents, including those involved in the organization’s board, and many committees, including the Dudley Neighbors land trust. Staff offer rides to meetings, celebrate birthdays, remember to send cards and make visits and phone calls to the elderly, and answer calls and mobilize help and support for neighbors who are in trouble. Catherine Flannery is an Irish-American in her eighties and a board member, whose family mostly left the neighborhood during the bad years, and she notes that today DSNI provides a fabric for community support that was once the province of the church and the ethnic enclave: “DSNI is a sort of extended family. The parish and the neighborhood once meant a lot to me, you know, in lieu of the family... and now DSNI does.”

Another important dimension of DSNI’s community building is evident in the organizing that the staff does in areas—formerly empty lots—where new housing is being built for qualified home-buyers. Even up to a year before housing is ready for occupancy, buyers are usually selected by lottery and, once identified, begin to meet socially, know one another

er's histories, and plan the details of their block, including landscaping. As Diane Dujon, a neighborhood resident and home buyer, recounted:

They made us neighbors meet before we moved in. They had meetings and we got to know one another's families before we moved in. Only one family has moved out in ten years! We feel connected. They made us feel so much like neighbors. We look out for each other. We care for each other. Next door there are Hispanics, across the street, Haitians, and African Americans on the other side. We're neighbors and we share different experiences and we get to know one other. You can feel the community feeling here.

A fabric of connectedness is created by the substantial inclusion of children and youth in DSNI affairs. The Initiative continually reaches out to youth, puts children and youth to work on an *ad hoc* basis in the office, runs an extensive summer jobs program with other organizations for more than 200 youth, and has youth board members and an associated youth council. A long-term principal in the Initiative's programs for youth, and mentor to hundreds since the beginning in 1984, Ros Everdell points out that in order for DSNI to stay alive, each generation has to make it their own. This takes care and mentoring from the older generations. As she noted, "When we started, we weren't thinking about youth yet. Now that we are, everyone gets to be a parent, or a grandparent, or an aunt, or something..." The remarkable continuity of the Initiative for a quarter century is the outcome, it is clear, of the continual ownership that youth have taken from early on, with the full encouragement of older generations.

Finally, it is important to note that many participants give the conception of community, and of caring for others, which permeates much of the DSNI model, a spiritual or strongly moral interpretation that only makes the principles more compelling as guides for their action. Many of the activists and staff involved in DSNI, in fact, are people of deep faith who are very active in religious congregations of different sorts and are not shy in speaking about the "DSNI values" that give coherence to their work, especially related to mutual respect, community support, compassion toward those suffering, and social justice. Religious diversity is also

strong in the community and among those involved with DSNI, and is viewed as just another dimension of the generally remarkable diversity that can be found there. As Sister Margaret Leonard of Project Hope explained, “It’s wonderful to see the mix of people from different races, languages, and groupings, even religious traditions....Muslim, evangelical religions, Catholic, Protestant denominations, secular humanists who are in touch with real deep values, in touch with their spiritual selves.” She added: “In many ways these are spiritual values and directions that inform DSNI initiatives and leadership.” Another member of the clergy, Paul Bothwell, also sees the spiritual dimension integrated with other kinds of neighborhood progress: “We have...a neighborhood transformed, where the most obvious is the physical transformation, but with a spiritual, social, and human transformation in process.”

Ordinary People Overcoming Social Barriers

A key factor in community cohesion has been DSNI’s faith in the capacity of ordinary people to show vision, wisdom, and good sense in contributing to the collective development of their neighborhood, and this extends to sensitively managing relations across ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious lines. DSNI organizers have always believed that community residents are capable of confronting and working out their differences and misunderstandings across group boundaries. These seem like small problems, in fact, compared to the more serious economic crises that all the residents, together, have faced in the neighborhood they share. As Nelson Merced noted, no matter what their background, “the neighbors are going to stand side by side, because all have been victims of urban renewal.”

DSNI leaders also maintain that it is not so much ordinary people who foment interracial or anti-immigrant tensions as it is their opportunistic political leaders. Gus Newport observed, “Rank and file people are not so hung up on these cultural and racial differences as the elected, the civic, and even the professional people who utilize those tactics to perpetuate themselves.” Nelson Merced argued much the same point: “Professional and political leaders often exploit the people’s ignorance by saying, ‘Immigrants are taking welfare money from us!’ But there’s another way—celebrating birthdays together and eating over at one another’s

house. People want to be together to improve the quality of life in their communities.”

In all the interviews, the general attitude toward immigrants was accepting and compassionate. Staffer Jose Barros, an immigrant from Cape Verde, recognized the pervasive immigrant character and history of U.S. society, something that was echoed in the remarks of many others:

We shouldn't forget that we all and our parents came to the US. We came a long time ago, understanding that others will come later...just keep that in mind. People came to us at different times. It will continue to be what makes the U.S. a great country. It's rich in diversity and culture because it has been able to accept everyone who came.

Catherine Flannery, one of the last Irish-Americans left on her block, and a DSNI board member, also cautioned that ethnic isolation and separatism no longer made sense in today's city, even if they may have occurred in the past:

You can't isolate yourself anymore. The Polish and the Italians and the Irish isolated themselves and stayed in their own little groups. It worked for them, but for their children it didn't work. Now it doesn't work for anyone anymore! Those ethnic barriers don't seem to be there anymore, or that looking down on others...that's gone pretty much.

On the level of interpersonal relationships across the community, residents in all corners of the neighborhood stressed that racial, ethnic, cultural, and language differences need not be barriers, but could be overcome with friendliness, goodwill, and collaboration on common efforts. Catherine Flannery explained, for example, that “Fernanda's grandmother [another elderly but Cape Verdean woman] doesn't speak English, but we can sit down and chit-chat and understand one another.” Renay Peters, an African-American board member of the community land trust, remarked on how pleasant it was to shop in local Latino bodegas, noting how congenial the owners were to her. “The stores here are ‘Mom and Pop’

[that is, owned by local residents and not impersonal chain stores]. I go in every store, and I feel it's comfortable, and they greet me and offer help. That makes me feel welcome so I'll be sure to come back."

Resident and DSNI activist Diana Dujon echoed the view of many others in pointing to the collaboration and cooperation that the Initiative fosters among neighbors, that it works to promote mutual understanding across ethnic and linguistic boundaries. Speaking of the newly built street where she lives, she said:

It helps you understand people from different backgrounds and ethnicities to get to know them as human beings. When you start to work together with people, you get to know them in a different way; you get to respect them in a different way. Then people work together more and more—that's the way America should be! We all feel we're part of the community. We don't look at one another thinking, "You are an immigrant!" The relations are friendly, and even if they have limited English ability, we still find ways to communicate. My neighbors across the street, they're Haitians. They say "hi." They ask about my mother.

As Olivia Barros reminded about DSNI-inspired community relations in general, since "you feel like a family, you don't pay attention to race."

Even when problems arise, the attitude toward dealing with them is constructive. DSNI activists believe that people are capable of learning and change. Many of the interviewees emphasized the importance of talking about issues of race and other types of difference, in board and committee meetings, and noted that antiracism and multicultural training is part of the Resident Development Institute workshops for participants. Most pointed out that issues of race, in particular, require regular revisiting and discussion. Of course, the courage this takes is minimized by no one. On an everyday level, where difficulties do arise, constructive patience and correction from others can also work. José Barros remembered an elderly white man active on the board as "one of the biggest offenders" for insensitive remarks and who always sat next to an elderly friend at

meetings. Whenever “he’d get out of hand,” Barros related, “she’d kick him in the knee.” He concluded, “Those people aren’t bad. They heard those things forever. They don’t mean to say that. They are part of the culture.”

Youth are active participants and serve on the board, and have also offered special leadership in inter-ethnic relations, because, as Julio Henriquez noted, “Young people go to school together and hang around together....It’s the adults who isolate themselves from one another. With the kids there’s not a lot of differences [that they want to recognize]. The kids helped us to see that the neighborhood couldn’t go forward without everyone being on board.” DSNI youth have formed the backbone of the Initiative when it comes to decorating the community with murals that celebrate its values, such as the “Unity Through Diversity” mural completed in 1993 on the side wall of Davey’s Market on Dudley Street, one of many in the area that celebrate interracial and -ethnic unity.

Using Art to Promote a Diverse, Unified Community

Finally, it is important to recognize the powerful way that DSNI uses culture to build community across differences. Many neighborhood murals—for example, most designed and executed with the participation of local youth—display and remind residents of neighborhood history, extol the richness of its diverse cultural heritages, and challenge residents to work for peace and harmony among different groups. As Jason Webb points out:

Murals are powerful symbols of the community for the residents. They project the messages of our past and look toward the future. The youth take a lot of pride in designing them, putting them up, and feel ownership. Our murals have gotten no graffiti in 30 years! In other places, staff-driven CDC [community development corporation] murals with little community participation see graffiti the first week, and when you see that, you know there’s no community buy-in.

The murals have significance, as a historical record, far beyond any simple decorative color they give to local streets. In August 2009, for example, local youth were blocked by the Massachusetts Bay Transporta-

tion Authority (MBTA) from finishing a DSNI-sponsored historical mural on a blank wall that the Authority owned on Dorchester's East Cottage Street, because the plan for one of its four historical panels did not meet with their approval. The panel in question was to show the neighborhood being plagued by arson, disinvestment, and illegal dumping (Bierman 2009), but officials believed it suggested violence. The controversy prompted an editorial in the *Boston Globe*, which wrote: "The Dudley Street neighborhood of Roxbury has a hard-edged history that includes arson and disinvestment by banks and insurance companies. Young artists working on a public mural on MBTA property beneath a Fairmount line overpass sought to depict those tumultuous decades along with the revitalization efforts that began in the 1980s and continue today" (*Boston Globe* 2009). The newspaper concluded that the neighborhood's history "deserve(s) an honest look" (*Boston Globe* 2009). After public pressure, the MBTA relented and gave its permission, but the panel may have to remain blank until the next season for mural painting, the summer of 2010.

Beyond murals, Putnam and Feldstein underscore that neighborhood public art in general, instituted as the result of DSNI efforts, conveys the Initiative's central messages to residents:

Local art shows the community to itself. The metal silhouettes of residents, a "Nubian Roots" mural of locals on the walls of a grocery and auto repair shop, the mosaic Declaration of Community Rights, and the jazz phrase worked into the fence at the commons communicate a cluster of messages: that the people who walk these streets matter enough to be portrayed in painting and sculpture; that talented artists live and work here; that these people we know and these things we care about make us a community (Putnam and Feldstein 2003: 79).

At the yearly summer Multicultural Festival, musical performances, fashion shows, recreational athletic activities, and artwork similarly promote cultural pride, exchange, and understanding. At the 2007 and 2008 festivals and fund-raiser walks, the T-shirts worn by participants carried

the theme of unity, as well, reading “My Family’s Your Family” (in three languages) and “One Love, One Peace, One Community.”

The DSNI annual meeting, followed by a community dinner, always takes place in the basement of St. Patrick’s Church, and the event is usually accompanied by music, poetry, or other performances. In 2008 Alicia Mooltre, a 22-year-old African-American staff member who coordinated the summer youth jobs program, read to the assembled hundreds a poem she had written, titled “Who are these people?” Her poem was open in recognizing the beauty and strength of DSNI’s multiracial membership:

Who are these people,
These black, brown, yellow, pale people?
Who are these people
With those wide, slanted, dark, bright eyes?
Who are these people
That speak Buenos Dias, jason, bon dia, bonjour and good morning at the
sun’s rising?
Who are these people
with their kinky, curly, smooth, silky, and gray hair?
Who are these people
that stand up to giants,
that never let another stand alone,
That scream at the top of their lungs “this power is mine and there is no
way you or you are going to take it from me”?
Who are these people
armed as warriors,
that are scoffed at by outsiders that see them as a nuisance of the
lower ranks,
But are actually kings and queens that carry with them pots of strength,
wisdom and spirit, intangible to the eyes and hands of those outsiders?
Who are these people
Of such great differences,
but of such oneness?
Who are these people?
These people are you!

The Commitment to Democracy

The type of community building that the DSNI model has produced in Boston's Roxbury-Dorchester neighborhood serves as an effective crucible for the exercise of grassroots urban democracy. Mark Purcell, among many other observers of today's urban scene, has convincingly reported the apparent "decline of democracy...in cities," especially the "growing disenfranchisement of urban inhabitants" that is occurring on a global level (2002: 100–101), particularly as regards control of public space (Low 2006).

At DSNI, activists call the Initiative's program of democratic participation "full democracy," in May Louie's words; or "the actualization of block-by-block democracy," as John Barros has put it (Putnam and Feldstein 2003: 97). The DSNI example might be disarming in the U.S. context, but only because conventional assessments of grassroots urban politics have overlooked this kind of democratic initiative that is, in fact, increasingly appearing throughout the urban world on a global level. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has explained, trends toward urban disenfranchisement are a result of globalization, which has set into place a pattern "in which wealthier 'world-cities' increasingly operate like city-states in a networked global economy, increasingly independent of regional and national mediation, and where poorer cities—and the poorer populations within them—seek new ways to claim space and voice" (Appadurai 2002: 24). Based on his studies of organizing among the poor in Mumbai, Appadurai sees a new kind of grassroots politics emerging, one he calls "deep democracy," which he explains is "a new kind of urban governmentality from below," characterized by inclusion, participation, and transparency (Appadurai 2002: 35). Deep democracy is "fundamentally populist in and anti-expert in strategy and flavor," with "methods of organization, mobilization, teaching, and learning that build upon what poor persons already know and understand" (Appadurai 2002: 20).



Painted Controversy

In the summer of 2009, the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority delayed the completion of this historical mural on a wall it owns on East Cottage Street in the Dudley Street neighborhood. Transit officials complained that the unpainted portion, which was designed to depict arson, disinvestment, and illegal dumping in the neighborhood, endorsed violence. Those images are now scheduled to fill, in 2010, the blank panel at the far left. The other panels of the mural sponsored by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative show, from left to right: protest and organizing; new housing, greening, and cleanup; and the groundbreaking of the new Salvation Army-Kroc recreational center. Reprinted by permission of Tim Sieber.

This new type of urban politics in some locations has already supplanted older, more traditional notions of popular citizenship. As Appadurai writes, these “movements among the urban poor...represent efforts to reconstitute citizenship in cities” (2002: 24). A vision of what this new form of citizenship might be is articulated by Mark Purcell, drawing on the prescient ideas of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, especially in his seminal work *The Right to the City* (Lefebvre 1996). Purcell observes that, as Lefebvre argued, the power to create and control the structuring of social, political, and economic relations in the city puts the rights of “inhabitants,” much like DSNI’s “residents,” much more to the fore:

Presently, formal enfranchisement is largely based on national citizenship. Those who are national citizens are eligible to participate in various aspects of state decision-making. In Lefebvre’s conception, however, enfranchisement is for those who *inhabit the city*. Under the right to the city, membership in the community of enfranchised people is not an accident of nationality or birth; rather it is earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city...Urban inhabitance directly confronts national citizenship as the dominant basis for political membership (Purcell 2002: 102–103).

Research has demonstrated to many that community-based ethnic organizations go far toward helping immigrants exercise political participation and even cultural citizenship (Flores and Benmayor 1997), regardless of their formal citizenship status. Theodore and Martin, for example, even identify what they call a large-scale, grassroots “Migrant Civil Society,” which they define as: “community organizations, social movements, hometown associations, churches and faith-based organizations, social clubs, and other organized groups that represent the interests of migrants and operate between markets, households and the state” (Theodore and Martin 2007: 271). They conclude: “Migrant civil society provides a mechanism for political incorporation without citizenship” (Theodore and Martin 2007: 272). At the local level, these mostly nonprofit organizations “are now a platform for political mobilization, making policy claims, delivering social services, and offering alternative visions of...development and community life” (Theodore and Martin 2007: 272).

Even if not everyone can vote, and even if some are undocumented, all residents *can* engage politically—not only on the civic level, as we see in grassroots organizations like DSNI, but even at the level of electoral politics, by attending rallies, working on campaigns, wearing buttons, and contributing money (Leal 2002). Nonprofits like DSNI gain credibility from representing the entire neighborhood, including everyone in it. As noted earlier, organizers understand that the Initiative’s inclusion of all groups strengthened community voice. As Paul Bothwell explained, “In the heart of people, there’s a song of hope. You can take the voice, but you can’t take the song away. DSNI gave the voice back to the community so they could sing the song of hope.”

Local Boston politicians attend all significant DSNI functions and community celebrations, and since 1984 every Boston mayor has been a regular visitor to DSNI offices and activities. This is true even if the crowds contain many immigrant residents, documented and not, who are unable to vote in elections. Politicians actively seek alliances with the Initiative, because they understand and respect the power and the effective citizen mobilization that it produces. It may well be that initiatives and organizations, like DSNI, share something important with social movements: They can organize formidable coalitions of people struggling with common purpose, and they have more force politically than the social and

citizenship status of their members alone would suggest.

In immigrant communities, we have always understood the mediating role of ethnic nonprofits that stand between the grassroots and the state, to advocate for and represent the rights and needs of newcomers who do not yet have rights to full citizen participation. Beyond this, DSNI's history shows that in their mediating roles, community-based organizations can have an even broader effect: They can politically integrate immigrants *laterally*, with citizens, by including them in place-based initiatives where *residence* is the principal criterion of inclusion.

The successes of the DSNI strategy for community building, interestingly, echo the recommendations a large-scale Ford Foundation project of two decades ago. That six-city ethnographic study, "Changing Relations: Newcomers and Established Residents in U.S. Communities" (Bach et al. 1993), yielded a set of "recommendations to foster positive interactions" in immigrant-receiving neighborhoods. Key suggestions echo many DSNI practices, including a "renewed focus on community building," and the admonition that "grassroots organizing is a useful approach in promoting opportunities for interaction among groups at the local level. 'Bottom-up' processes often work better than 'top-down' ones. Leadership training for community members should be encouraged..." (Bach et al. 1993: 15). The report also argued against defining "harmonizing relations" or "negotiating group differences" as goals in themselves, but instead called for bringing people together in "unified activities" and "common projects" that relate to neighborhood services and quality of life. They conclude: "The struggle must not be just for social peace but for opportunity and equality" (Bach et al. 1993: 16).

Pursuit of the fullest democracy possible, particularly *including and giving a voice to everyone who lives locally*, thus emerges as the central organizing commitment of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, in the past as well as the present. With this commitment to grassroots democracy, all involved in the Initiative have a strong incentive to promote power sharing and equality across ethnic and racial lines. With that, immigrant integration follows. The DSNI experience with democracy and inclusion shows that these achievements are realistic goals for any community.



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