

# Piecing Together the Fragments

Leadership for Social Change in  
North Central Philadelphia 2004–2005

A Leadership for a Changing World Collaborative Ethnography

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### **About this project**

This collaborative ethnography is part of a series of ethnographies implemented by the Research and Documentation component of Leadership for a Changing World (LCW). Collaborative ethnographies offer in-depth and rich portraits of leadership within selected LCW organizations and communities. Locally based ethnographers and awardees negotiate the research questions and design the research in ways that will contribute to the awardees' organizational objectives and leadership practices. Therefore, each ethnography is unique in its focus, method, and writing style. Some incorporate creative forms, such as photography and video, which are nontraditional forms of representation in research. They all provide detailed information about the history of organizations, their leadership dynamics, collaborations, transformations, and development. (<http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/ethnography.html>)

LCW's Research and Documentation component is housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University. (For a description of LCW and RCLA, please see the inside back cover.) LCW uses three parallel streams of inquiry—ethnography, cooperative inquiry, and narrative inquiry—to explore questions related to the work of leadership. The program is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as the core of the research process.

RCLA is proud to present this work to the LCW community and other social change leaders.

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# Grassroots Leadership in Urban Renewal

*In the midst of overwhelming  
abandonment and decay, there are  
parks of arresting beauty. Truly,  
the sacred in the mundane.*

This collaborative ethnography explores grassroots leadership as an ongoing, emergent process in the neighborhoods of North Philadelphia. It is a study of the nature of leadership at the Village of Arts and Humanities, a community-greening and arts-based organization providing education, neighborhood development programs, and many other social services to people who live in inner city North Philadelphia.

The ethnographic study came at a time of major transition for the Village. A full text version of this study is available online at: <http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/publications/>.

In June 2004, Village Founder and Executive Director Lily Yeh retired after 18 years, leaving her organization under the guidance of a new director, Baltimore theater artist Kumani Gantt. In preparation for her retirement, Yeh threw herself into an ambitious project that would culminate her work at the Village—the Shared Prosperity Initiative. This alternative approach to development would renew North Central Philadelphia by supporting and building on the strengths of the community already in place.

“For me,” Yeh explained, “it’s about sense of place, and the creative act is to launch this project. I could see the future of the whole Village being tied to the neighborhood. Instead of building a million-dollar center, you build the Village horizontally.”



*The first sculpture was a mosaic tree in Ile Ife park. Photo by Mary Hufford.*

## THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES: A BRIEF HISTORY

*“Oh, it was so beautiful, it would keep you spellbound! And I was just praying that it would come up to Lehigh. All that art.”*

—Miss Mazie Tucker

In the summer of 1986, renowned African American cultural worker Arthur Hall invited Lily Yeh, a professionally trained artist who was born in China and raised in Taiwan, to clean up an abandoned lot in North Philadelphia and transform it into an art park. What started as a summer project funded by a small grant grew over time as neighborhood children, and then adults, became involved. Yeh returned summer after summer. Today, Ile Ife Park—named after Hall’s Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center, which once occupied the sight—contains mosaic sculptures, gardens, pathways, an outdoor stage, and a dominating, three-story mural, which depicts Yeh’s first guardian spirit. In this way, Yeh sought *“...the sense of what the tradition calls a luminous place, a place where I could locate the sacred in the mundane.”* She saw the Village and North Philadelphia as a space shining with the potential for material, social, and personal transformation. She explains:

*“The reason I did the Village is because there was broken land. Nobody claimed it. I did not need permission. No one would come there. And so, all the wrong reasons were why the Village lived. All the weaknesses that I had became my strength. The broken community members like Jojo and James ‘Big Man’ Maxton (former drug addicts and early neighborhood participants in Village activities), they stood on their strength and their life was changed, and in the process, I found my life.”*

Out of the Ile Ife park project, the Village of Arts and Humanities grew. The heart of the Village encompasses multiple blocks in a neighborhood that once contained primarily trash-strewn, vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and drug-ridden, dangerous streets. Now these same blocks are home to art parks, mosaic mural-lined alleyways, community gardens, a vegetable farm and a tree farm, new-construction homes, rehabbed houses that contain administrative offices and other multi-use spaces, and a main arts and education building. The Village provides art, education, and neighborhood development programs, social services, and many other services, all through an emphasis on the arts and a mission to “do justice to the humanity of people who live in inner-city North Philadelphia and similar urban situations.” In the midst of overwhelming abandonment and decay, there are parks of arresting beauty. Truly, the sacred in the mundane.

The foundation for Village leadership has been built one relationship at a time over the past 18 years. “The Village has built community leadership,” observed Kelly Tannen, director of development, “through individual relationships.”

The parks that Yeh built with the help of people in the community opened up a space of difference within North Philadelphia. This space became a place of encounter for people within the neighborhoods and also among residents of the neighborhoods and growing numbers of non-resident volunteers, professionals, and even tourists—a meeting ground for people interested in alternatives to current dominant models of human and economic development.

### A Parting Gift

Yeh’s final official day of work at the Village on June 30, 2004, was also the day of an important Shared Prosperity meeting. At the meeting, Yeh illuminated the way to Shared Prosperity with the words:

*“Today is my last day at the Village, so to have the Shared Prosperity meeting to hear you, to see how you’re engaged, and tell your concern, this is a tremendous parting gift for me. I’m walking out, not bringing anything with me, because I feel that it has been a gift for me to work in this beautiful neighborhood, lots of beautiful parks and gardens were created, and [there are] children in our program, and health, and now we see officers sitting on the stage, you know?”*

*And I feel the reason we launched Shared Prosperity, it is not for the Village... I feel the people of North Philadelphia, together we have a tremendous future... For me, this is not about Village or this or that, it’s about people—people taking power to make things better for themselves. If we wait for the city to do things for us, it will not happen... And do you have to know a lot? No! Look at me. I did not know much. I*

*only know how to paint. But with the desire to do something, and to transform the deficits into resources, that's how we begin...*

*Our challenges are our strength. We are so close. We are together and for me, as a gift for this parting director, please, please, under all circumstances, hold this place together. I need to know, is there a way to have prosperity that can be shared? We have development, but not an equitable and just development, and how can we reach there?"*

In a few strokes, sweepingly and urgently, Yeh had evoked the needs, desires, perils, and possibilities facing the citizens of North Central Philadelphia.

Because Shared Prosperity repositions the Village within a larger context, it has changed the function and identity of the Village in North Philadelphia. Shared Prosperity has marked an important shift from individual to shared community leadership, and this shift has not been seamless, and not without conflict and struggle.

In the Shared Prosperity initiative, the Village plunged into the task of building community for the purpose of revitalizing North Central Philadelphia. This was not something the Village could do alone. Rather, it needed significant backing from outside funders, an unusual kind of engagement with experts in urban planning and design, and a steering committee composed of North Philadelphia community leaders. Having persuaded the Wachovia Regional Foundation to support the effort in spite of the Village's lack of planning experience, Yeh engaged two teams of experts to serve as consultants: one from the urban planning program at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn Praxis), and the other from the School of Architecture at Temple University.



*Ile Ife mural, next to Ile Ife Park. Photo by Rosina Miller.*

## THE SHARED PROSPERITY INITIATIVE: EQUALIZING RELATIONSHIPS

*Shared Prosperity marks an important shift from individual to shared community leadership, and this shift is not seamless, and not without conflict and struggle.*

The Shared Prosperity Area is bounded by 5<sup>th</sup> Street on the east, Broad Street on the west, Allegheny Avenue on the north, and Diamond Street on the south. Measuring 99 square blocks and just under one square mile, it serves as home to about 19,000 residents.

A \$100,000, one-year planning grant from the Wachovia Regional Foundation in 2003 supported the development of a comprehensive plan to revitalize the area. (Subsequently, grants from the Ford Foundation, through NYU's Leadership for a Changing World program, and the National Endowment for the Arts also supported this planning process.)

Though the Wachovia Regional Foundation does not typically fund arts organizations, it supported the Village because of its long-term engagement with local residents—an essential element of the planning. Evaluation Officer Lois Greco commented, “Their relationship with the residents is so genuine and compelling.” It was a harder sell, however, to convince the Wachovia Regional Foundation that instead of contracting with a planning firm, Shared Prosperity would work with faculty and students from the University of Pennsylvania (Penn Praxis) and Temple University's Urban Design Studio. This bold move, which we might call “academic in-reach,” was a cornerstone of Yeh's approach: incorporating into the process a training component aimed at producing the next generation of professionals through their engagement with communities, in a way that allows communities and professionals to learn from each other. Yeh recalled:

*“I felt it would be good to engage so many young people under the supervision of professionals in two universities. The enthusiasm and eagerness of the students gave opportunities for community residents to really express and define ourselves. Under the guidance of professionals, the two studios turned up many drawings and ideas which were stimulating and exciting to the community. These actions made community people realize that this planning process is not just talking, it is creating results. This helped to cut through some of the hesitation and cynicism. It generated hope and open discussion and actions among the participating stakeholders.”*

In the fall of 2003, during the months leading up to the start of the ethnography on which this report is based, Yeh laid the groundwork for Shared Prosperity through a series of meetings with local, municipal, and state leadership. She invited local leaders of community educational and social service institutions, community development corporations (CDCs), churches, and community residents to participate. She also hired a project coordinator, Brian Kelly, who assembled a Steering Committee. Constituting a Steering Committee out of the neighborhoods themselves was crucial to creating a community-based plan for Shared Prosperity. The Steering Committee has evolved with the planning effort over the past year and a half, with 25 members listed in the most recent planning document.

After six months of research, fieldwork, and meetings, the Steering Committee and the planning and design teams convened a large public meeting at Hartranft Elementary School.

### **Community Planning Principles**

The meeting at Hartranft Elementary School modeled three key principles used in Shared Prosperity for community-based planning:

- Equalize the relationship between experts and clients;
- Engage organic leaders from the community in the planning process; and
- Stimulate a flow of talk that will connect people and keep them connected.

The gathering kicked off the series of Shared Prosperity meetings and actions that unfolded over the next year and provided additional data for the revitalization plan produced by the consultants and the Steering Committee.

In the months that followed the event at Hartranft, Brian Kelly worked with the Steering Committee to pull together a group of neighborhoods into a regional political force, which is essential in order to gain a place at tables where decisions are made. The task of Shared Prosperity was to build a collective presence that would engage the larger body politic. Such a presence would be important for gaining cultural recognition from the rest of the city, which in turn would help North Philadelphians to leverage the resources needed for economic revitalization. The strategy, then, was to revitalize culturally from within in order to garner the necessary support from without.



*Ellen Arttaway, Doretha Bigsby, Ann Hayes, and Brian Kelly. May 2005. Photo by Rosina Miller.*

# Five Resident-Led Activities That Initiated Shared Prosperity

*“Shared Prosperity has been that connection—bringing people together, making people feel like they do have options and there is something bigger than what they’ve been doing.”*

In order to form a bloc that can influence City Hall, communities need to unite. Yet the 99-block area of the Shared Prosperity zone is far larger than a typical neighborhood. By what process do people living in the southeast quadrant of the zone come to care about what happens to people in the northwest quadrant, not to mention people just beyond the pale of their own neighborhoods? To work for shared identity and commitment, the Shared Prosperity Steering Committee held a series of public meetings throughout 2004 at Cookman United Methodist Church, during which people identified major areas of concern that transcended neighborhood boundaries, and reported on progress made in tackling the problems from within.

Outside the monthly Shared Prosperity meetings at Cookman United Methodist Church, several resident-led initiatives took shape:

- Painting the Security Screens on Germantown Avenue (with GAMA)
- “Back in the Day”: Oral History and Community Health (HEC)
- Environmental Justice Working Group (with Americorps and EPA)
- Neighborhood Walks (Block Captains)
- Community Self-Assessment, Planning, and Management of Resources (with Americorps)

### **The Hallmarks of Village Practice**

Resident-led initiatives, conceived during small group planning meetings outside of Shared Prosperity meetings, exemplified ways in which some Village principles and practices were adapted to the aims of Shared Prosperity, and each represented ways in which Village staff could engage leadership for social change. Evident in all five initiatives are hallmarks of Village practice, including:

- turning deficits into assets;
- re-humanizing spaces that have been dehumanized;
- adding value to spaces that are already humanized;
- inclusiveness, collaboration, and openness to serendipity;
- leveraging of a variety of resources; and
- self-documentation.



*Storyteller Linda Goss assembling children for Kujenga Pomoja ceremonies. Photo by Rosina Miller.*

## 1. PAINTING THE SECURITY SCREENS ON GERMANTOWN AVENUE

*“We don’t want to just go and paint it. We want to engage you. This will be a process of working together.”*

—Lily Yeh

Germantown Avenue is the heart of the Shared Prosperity area. As its main commercial corridor, it bustles throughout the day with people walking up and down the sidewalks. At twilight, the merchants close the stores and pull down the utilitarian, corrugated metal security screens, knowing as they drive home to some Elsewhere that they are protecting their investment in a marginal neighborhood for another night. But who are the merchants? What do they know about their neighbors? One merchant, Steering Committee member John Ballard, began as a vendor with a street cart, and his business grew eventually into a store, “Watches, Rings and Things.” Two years later, when he was elected president of the merchants’ association, Ballard saw that stores were beginning to leave. He recalled:

*“It seemed like nobody wanted to put any time or any money into the Avenue, and everybody knows in the community that everything centers around Germantown Avenue. Without that, we wouldn’t have very much of a community, in that we would have to go outside of our community to do our basic shopping needs, for food, for clothing, and stuff like that. So we figured we had to come up with something that everybody could participate in, and each go our individual ways, but we would move as one group.”*

At a Shared Prosperity meeting with the merchants’ association on June 3, 2004, the merchants and the Village staff talked about strategies for revitalizing Germantown Avenue. Visions appeared and coalesced. The avenue could be a place where the lights are bright, the storefronts renovated, and the trash in the trash cans—where adults sit on benches in the shade of trees and teenagers have things to do.

*The security screens were transformed from barriers to buffer zones, serving like Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” as a boundary that grows into a meeting place.*

They could start with a simple project, perhaps painting the security screens. Yeh detailed a proposal for such a project, and as Yeh’s proposals tended to be, this one was rich in social complexity. Teens from the community would design and paint the screens, in close consultation with merchants and professional artists. “To fill the Avenue with our own images, with what we feel is valuable,” Lily had said at an earlier meeting. “So the unknown people become known. To get the merchants who aren’t part of the community to be a part.”

Then came the negotiation: Who among the merchants would lend their security screens to this project? Some merchants wondered whether it would look good, especially if not everyone would go along with it.

Ballard announced that he has 100 percent participation from his side of the street. The merchants agreed that this would be good for the Avenue.

This was far more than a cosmetic plan to decorate the Avenue. It was not focused simply on appearances. It was a plan that would turn the painting of security screens into only the most visible part of a process of building relationships. The security screens were transformed from barriers to buffer zones, serving like Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” as a boundary that grows into a meeting place. Tending this space together, the neighborhood and business community built a relationship. The painted screens articulated, protected, and celebrated the relationship that had been transformed through artistic engagement.

Two screens were painted in the summer of 2004. To get the screens painted, teens from the Village and from Cookman United Methodist Church interviewed the merchants who owned the stores, and developed a concept for each painting with an artist

named Daniel Hopkins, aka Pose II. A graffiti artist in his younger days, Pose II incorporated the 23 bus that goes down Germantown Avenue into the backdrop, with a young boy in the foreground pointing to graffiti-style letters that spell out “Promise”—an allusion to the hope of Shared Prosperity, according to Steering Committee member Brandon Young, who mentored the teens:

*“It gives the avenue color at night. The kids talked about how when the avenue closes it’s dead and this gives it some life. It’s not visible during the daytime—it’s something that’s there mostly for the people who live there... It means, ‘Keep the promise to take it to the next level’—so it really is about Shared Prosperity.”*

The interaction between neighborhood teens and merchants asserts and holds open a space of affirmation: the screens are an artifact of positive recognition between different groups with a stake in the neighborhood. They make visible a dialogue between inside and outside, between self and other, which is foundational to human and community development.



*Security screens near intersection of 10<sup>th</sup> and Germantown Avenue, designed by Cookman teens, and painted by graffiti artist Daniel “Pose II” Hopkins. Photo by Mary Hufford.*

## 2. COMMUNITY HEALTH AND ORAL HISTORY: “BACK IN THE DAY”

*“Haunted places are the only ones worth living in.”*

— Michel de Certeau

The city’s model for redevelopment often proceeds by destroying the blocks that look devastated. In doing so, the city squanders the very resources that could help heal the social body by evoking memories. As Shared Prosperity Steering Committee member El Sawyer pointed out, urban spaces eloquently memorialize human life. Erected to serve as dwelling places, the deteriorating houses now poignantly preserve spaces from which people once viewed the world. When we see those spaces, we are haunted by the perspectives they evoke. Sawyer said:

*“All the houses that were torn down, I think every one of those houses has a life in it, you know, spirit of that family or generations of families that have been there—the people who have been pushed out due to whatever the case may be.”*

Without places and people to serve as prompts, much valuable social memory is irretrievable. Through Back in the Day workshops, which were sponsored by the Health Empowerment Center, a partnership between the Village and Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, elders were encouraged to explore their memories of North Philadelphia, scanning places remembered for signs of continuity, conferring value on what might yet become the foundations for revitalization from within.

On a hot evening in August 2004, in the Philadelphia Parent Child Center on Germantown Avenue, elders examined the history of the Shared Prosperity area. They asked, “What does Germantown Avenue remember?” It remembers Doc’s Drug Store, “where you could get a fountain soda for less than a dollar.” It remembers Marty’s children’s clothing store, where one of the women got her first job at the age of 14. The Castle Bar, the concrete corner, the old-fashioned butcher shop. The names of the places summoned up a time when Steering Committee member Esther Wideman had to put on Mary Janes, hat, dress, and gloves in order to visit Germantown Avenue with her grandmother.

During the discussions at Back in the Day workshops, crumbling buildings were hauled back from the brink of amnesia. All of the musicians who ever made it big from North Philadelphia came through the Uptown Theater at Susquehanna and Broad Streets. There were so many factories that jobs were easy to come by. Marian Santiago remembered:

*“Right here on the corner of Broad and Lehigh, used to be Botany 500, the garment factory, and a lot of people from the neighborhood used to work there. Some follow the factories, some people go with the jobs. I remember my mother could stop working here, and the next morning she’d have a job somewhere else. She was like that all the time.”*

Remembrance can heal by reconnecting pieces of the dismembered social body, and a new whole becomes a context for continuing human development. Finding those pieces and putting them together is a fundamental move.

Sawyer found the wisdom of elders in paintings by prisoners from Graterford that graced Memorial Park during the 2003 Kujenga Pamoja festival, the Village’s annual fall harvest festival. He told Rosina Miller:

*“A lot of people that did those paintings are elders from this particular community. And I think that there is a gap, and one thing that ills our community is pretty much the breaking of the lineage. For whatever reasons, whatever the case may be, that they went to jail or whatever, there’s a gap there nonetheless. So we can’t forget about people. They might be in prison, but they’re still alive.”*

As an important aside, reincorporating members into the community after they have served time in prison is one of the stated objectives in the five-year plan for Shared Prosperity.

At the culminating event for the Back in the Day project in May 2005, community members gathered in the auditorium at Cookman United Methodist Church to hear the stories of elders and ponder the meanings of these memories for the future. Miss Mazie Tucker stood before the community and talked about how it has changed since 1959, when she first arrived:

*“I’m a former evangelist. I can preach. I can teach. But when you get old, you slow down. I’ve slowed down physically, but not spiritually. I love our community very much. I’ve watched it from 1959 until now. Our community is going down.”*

She then shared three stories of healing and one of conversion. The healing stories were wrapped around home remedies. Red vinegar or apple cider vinegar can be used to cure fever, headache, high blood pressure, obesity. “Some women call it ‘Hot Flashes, say good-bye,’ and ‘Stress, say good-bye,’” she said.

Gene Rucker, a businessman who owns Furniture Artisans on York Street, came to the front after Miss Mazie. He faced the community and began to relate another part of its history and moved toward a diagnosis:

*“Thirty years ago, it was mixed. The neighborhood was peaceful, there were no gangs yet, but people were too busy making a living and began neglecting their kids.”*

Ellen Arttaway read a poem, crafted with the help of Kumani Gantt out of words she uttered at a meeting. Entitled *Can We Talk?* it is about communicating with neighbors and building on that communication to make a difference. After these presentations, Shared Prosperity Project Manager Brian Kelly reassembled everyone into a circle and launched a discussion that arrived at the meaning of the memories of elders for Shared Prosperity.

“It’s all well and good,” he said, “to talk about the past, but what does it have to do with the future of this community?”

Brenda Kennedy was ready with an answer: “If you didn’t watch the heartbeat of Philly growing up, you aren’t going to know where to lay the next brick!” Then, with determination, she foretold the community’s future: “We’re going to make something out of this community, and it’s not going to be a dirt road!”

### 3. TOWN WATCH: BLOCK CAPTAINS AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD WALKS

*“People are realizing that our community is a great resource. We are a gold mine. We are like a piece of coal. Diamond in the rough.”*

**—The Rev. Clarence Hester, Steering Committee Member**

A key objective of the Shared Prosperity Steering Committee was to activate a network of block captains throughout the Shared Prosperity area. This network would provide the civic infrastructure for getting the city’s attention. Shared Prosperity Project Manager Brian Kelly, urging residents to use the network, explained during a public meeting:

*“The block captains are trying to get together to say that as residents and homeowners and taxpayers, you have the right to say to the city, ‘Look, we are paying our taxes, we want the city services that are due us.’ And the problem is that the city has not followed through with their responsibilities.”*

Currently, there are about 20 active block captains on the mailing list.

The block captains developed the idea for neighborhood health walks during the summer of 2004, following several meetings at which police officers spoke. The officers advised community members that one of the most effective ways to deal with drugs is to take back the streets. Walk in them. Sit on the corners. Sit on the stoops. At the organizational meeting for the walks, held one evening in the Village, a group of residents, block captains, and police officers negotiated the structure and meanings for the series of walks, which would be an exercise of the Town Watch they formed that evening as well. In addition to tackling issues of safety, trust, and guardianship, they connected health with community well-being.

Steering Committee member Brandon Young, reporting on the walks at the September 2 Shared Prosperity meeting, said:

*“Now you say, ‘Well, walking four blocks.’ We call it health walking. We call it health walking because our health is involved. We’re looking for different drug spots and trying to get something done about it. So we do this every Tuesday and Thursday.”*

Walking became a political act, particularly a strategy for tying together the quadrants of Shared Prosperity and for incorporating lapsed public space back into the community, for re-occupying the commons of the street. A collaborative story emerged:

*“Since we were out walking, we came up on this guy at 11th and Dauphin that turned this little drug house into a computer refurbishing place. So we got to talking to the guy, and he said that what he started doing was playing gospel music.”*

*“And it kept the drug people away,” Sally Hammerman, a community nurse, said. “The gospel music kept the drug people away.”*

*“What he did,” Esther Wideman elaborated, “he got a black church and a Spanish Church last Friday. We waited until it got dark and all the drug dealers were in the area. We had a praise and worship service on the corner. And they ran! The louder we got the praise and worship service, the faster they ran. And in the end, we did have two souls that came into the Kingdom.”*

*“Amen!” exclaimed someone else, to whistling, stomping, and clapping.*

This interruption of secular time by salvation history was, for the community, an exuberantly luminous moment: the wholesale disruption of the profane by the sacred.

## 4. RECHANNELING POWER AND AUTHORITY: THE PLACE OF VOLUNTEERS

*“I think that one of the things that I have learned here is a different approach to community building. It has to come from within a community.”*

—Kaija McIntosh, Americorps Volunteer

A significant part of the leadership of Shared Prosperity has been exercised by Steering Committee members in the leveraging of outside resources and the integration of those resources into community life. An important aspect of this work involves modeling volunteerism from within. At public meetings, members of the Steering Committee spoke of the importance of a personal commitment to getting out and picking up trash on their blocks. Even so, the magnitude of the cleanup required is daunting, and cleaning up and maintaining vacant lots relies heavily on volunteers who come to the Village from outside the community. While some in the community welcome the volunteers, there is also a great deal of ambivalence and even hostility toward them, as their motives in general are highly suspect. Steering Committee member David Gooch voiced a widespread sentiment when he said:

*“It really is volunteers getting to feel good that they helped the poor people. And whether the people in this neighborhood feel like they were actually helped or whether they even feel like they sort of got spit on. You know? When we’re doing projects, we need to have better relations with the community, more inclusive processes, and that’s where we could begin to have a process of engaging outsiders in work in this neighborhood, and it would be a much more meaningful experience for both parties.”*

The Americorps volunteers who worked for six weeks under the supervision of Steering Committee member Brandon Young provided an example of an emerging reconfiguration of the relationship between volunteers and area residents. Brian Kelly laid it out at the Shared Prosperity meeting on October 7, rehearsing the development practices they were trying to change. He announced that the Americorps team would do a survey of the entire area:

*“...to document what are everybody’s issues on the particular blocks, so that when the city comes in, when a developer comes in and buys something, we say, ‘Well, actually, we already know what’s in our community here, we already know that these abandoned lots are right here on our block. What we want is to make sure that these abandoned lots are the ones that are fixed up and that people from the community are able to buy houses in the community at affordable prices.’”*

However, the presence of outsiders who come into the community to work or to volunteer, but who live elsewhere, can be a thumb in the eye to the community. Changing the relationship between residents and volunteers is something that Village staff and Steering Committee members are accomplishing through work at the boundaries—orienting volunteers and drawing members of the community into interactions with them.

Young described the orientation they gave to the Americorps volunteers, who had been warned that many in the community would be less than welcoming:

*“We did a lot of work with them when they first got here, talking about what are the issues, and basically told them that they’re not really wanted in this community, because like, ‘Here comes another group of people, looking at and surveying our community, and you don’t look like us, and what are you going to use this information for, and such and such, and the community isn’t going to be holding out its arms to embrace you.’”*

Providing a space where volunteers from within the community can gain access to volunteers from elsewhere, the Village has been in a critical position to change the way in which volunteers encounter North Philadelphia, and vice versa. As Americorps volunteer Kaija McIntosh reflected:

*“There’s all these different things that you don’t even think about before you come into a situation like this. And we had to sit down for one day and: ‘You don’t say this, and you don’t say this, but you can say this.’ It was just really interesting to find your place and figure out how you’re going to get your job done without stepping on boundaries.”*

## 5. LAND TRANSFORMATION: GREENING IN THE TIME OF SHARED PROSPERITY

2509 Alder Street is the Land Transformation Office, headquarters of the Village Greening Effort. The tiny row house, which supports a banister designed and hand-built by architect Rex Ingram, contains Dave Gooch's desk; a bookshelf stuffed with volumes on gardening, horticulture, birds, urban forestry, and ecology; and in early spring, racks of fragile seedlings flourishing under grow lights. The back door opens onto a postage stamp of a patio, surrounded with chain-link fencing and piled with perennials, saplings, hoses, rakes, shovels, and wheelbarrows. Organic life continually circulates through 2509 Alder Street en route to destinations in Village parks and neighborhood yards. Gooch, who grew up in a rural community near Portland, Maine, has a degree in human ecology from College of the Atlantic. As an undergraduate, he spent time studying post-Soviet agriculture in Cuba. El Sawyer grew up in North Carolina, in a tobacco-growing region, where families all helped each other at harvest time. He is a videographer by profession, but gardening is his passion. "Gardening," he said, "is life."

In spite of a widespread sense that North Philadelphia, as planning consultant Jim Kise observed, "is off of everyone's map," sometime in the 1990s an interesting change appeared on the official street maps of Philadelphia. The former brown field next to Fotterral Square now appears as a patch of forest. This is cultural visibility, a place in the public sphere. A new meaning: a space that signified the end of development is now at the beginning of another cycle—a space for replenishing the urban forest. This urban forest, however, will be an effect of a process directed toward healing the social body, not a technical process of re-foresting and managing trees.

This is not textbook ecological reclamation. As Gooch commented:

*"It would be selfish of me to be a strict environmentalist in the role that I have. Planting the tree is just a dot along this line of activities that we're doing. It's more about the social things that are going on. There's all this that leads up to the planting of that tree and then that carries on after it. Sure, you can look at it from an environmental perspective (how it's going to cool the buildings in the summertime, and it's gonna reduce rainfall and absorb that, but that's really, I think, a very minor piece of what we do.... There's other things that we're talking about—the social benefits of the acts of planting the trees and the people that can come together to plant the trees in the community from different communities. Those are the things that are definitely a lot larger and far more important."*

How does the planting of a tree, the cleaning of a lot, the sharing of vegetables from the garden become a social and political act? Consider the meanings that Sally Hammerman and Marian Santiago assigned to littering during one Back in the Day meeting:

*MS: "Some of the communities, they have a lot of litter. People come from different neighborhoods and you tell them, 'Don't put the trash there,' and they still dump it! Like I took a piece of cardboard and I painted a sign on it, and I had my son-in-law nail it to the telephone pole, you know, telling the people, 'Look, this is not a city dump.'"*

*SH: "About a week ago on the bus, some kid on the bus had a soda, he was done with it, and when the bus door opened in the back..."*

*MS: "...he just throws it."*

*SH: "He threw it out! I said, 'What are you doing that for? You live in the city, you're treating the city like it's a garbage pail!' He said, 'I don't live here. What difference does it make?'"*

Greening, Village-style, locates land transformation at the nexus of social relations. Restoring the environment is a means of healing the social body and vice versa. "Lot stabilization," for example, is not only directed toward arresting the deterioration of buildings and the accumulation of trash, but toward reversing the disintegration of community life by enticing former neighbors to return and remain.

What happens when people spend time gardening? They talk to their neighbors, who begin to choose their routes in relation to the gardens or trees or parks they will pass through. Greening cultivates social interaction. Planting is part of the project of wresting

brown lands and abandoned lots back into community life. It not only works to expunge trash and weeds, but also to repel drug activity. It produces the ground for community life. It attracts people and is conducive to social interaction, communicating respect, and evoking the foundational sentiment of gratitude. As Gooch took us on a tour of the gardens, a passing pedestrian called out, “Thank you for making our community beautiful!”

People who cultivate wildlife sanctuaries create the environment and then watch hopefully for signs of fauna—the finches that come to the feeder, the rabbit that comes to drink at the fish pond. But this would not be enough in North Philadelphia. John Dewey observed that, “Through the culture of nature, the community appropriates itself as art.” The cultivation of community space is not complete until the space is vivified by the community life that is the effect of art in North Central Philadelphia.

But how can patches of earth ruined by industry, laced with lead, and rendered untillable by rubble be integrated into a metropolitan service economy? That is precisely Gooch’s dream: to leverage the land transformation initiative into a training ground that prepares residents to operate an income-generating landscaping service out of the Village.



*El Sawyer, center, introduces volunteers from North Carolina to weeds in the community vegetable garden. Photo by Mary Hufford.*

# Four Legacies and Keys to Success: A Summary

*Anybody in the neighborhood who  
wanted to help was welcome.*

The Shared Prosperity project necessitated a shift from individual leadership, in which “a single person emerges...to offer a way for the group to understand itself and its challenges—exemplified by Lily Yeh during her early years at the Village—to a more collaborative style of leadership, wherein citizens “choose to work through the meaning-making process as a group,” as Ospina and Schall have written.

To further the goals of Shared Prosperity, the Village has radically democratized its methods of planning and decision-making, while adhering to four principles that have distinguished Village practice from the beginning:

- Keeping the process open;
- Leveraging support;
- Building relationships through shared commitment to place; and
- Articulating alternatives to dominant economic practices and social policies.

### 1) Keeping the Process Open

Though not explicitly committed to consensus building, the Village has always invited participation in its projects. As Shared Prosperity Steering Committee member John Ballard said of early Village projects:

*“Everybody and anybody in the community who wanted to help actually could participate. And that was unusual there. Because most of the time they only pick certain people. But anybody in the neighborhood who wanted to come help was welcome.”*

The Shared Prosperity project formalized an open process by constituting a steering committee of leaders from surrounding neighborhoods. These political, religious, and community leaders kept the process itself open and on the table for discussion. Their active engagement with Shared Prosperity initiatives drew community members into the process, eased competing interests, and enabled members of diverse groups to work together.

#### **Key to Success: Cultivating resident leadership**

Shared Prosperity Project Manager Brian Kelly worked to keep the process open by continually seeking resident input and participation. And as Pastor Donna Jones argued, it is important for community residents to be able to express their needs, and in so doing, develop the capacity for leadership from within.

### 2) Leveraging Support

What the Village of Arts and Humanities brought to the Shared Prosperity project was a visibility outside of the community and a reputation that attracted outside funding for years. Lily Yeh generated interest in the Village among funders and city officials who saw the organization as a model for community revitalization. In addition, the Village has a long history of collaboration with a wide variety of organizations, including public agencies and programs, community organizations, and universities.

#### **Key to Success: Equalizing relationships**

Outside support for resource development is crucial to this community. Shared Prosperity’s innovation has been to engage people from different sectors in collaborative problem solving, placing residents on equal footing with professional “experts.” This process involves recognizing and respecting the expertise that accrues through the experience of living and working in the neighborhoods.

### 3) Building Relationships through Shared Commitment to Place

The Village has grown organically, one relationship at a time. Building social relationships by working together to produce and sustain community space is key. Village practices that not only build but celebrate the relationships among community members and between the community and its places include sharing food at nearly every event, producing place-based art (visual, dance, theater, poetry) that recognizes and celebrates particular individuals and groups in the community, and designing rituals that reflect upon and validate this community in this time and space.

#### **Key to Success: Building trust and respect on very personal levels**

Brian Kelly’s dedication models a leadership that begins with listening deeply. He built trust among community members by being there constantly, following through on agreements reached in conversation, and continually engaging residents whose voices had not been heard. He built relationships around activities that kept people talking about and connected to their neighborhoods.

### 4) Articulating Alternatives to Dominant Economic Practices and Social Policies

In contrast to market-centered development, which destroys the humanized spaces while clearing away the devastated ones, Village practice has been to strengthen spaces that are already humanized by community life and presence. Transforming wasted lots and abandoned buildings into parks, gardens, and affordable housing, the Village creates spaces that enable public life and that back-talk the negative stereotype.

#### **Key to Success: Back-talking business as usual**

Village projects have deliberately sought to turn the disadvantages facing the community into advantages, weaknesses into strengths, division into cohesion, and despair and apathy into hope and action.

### **About the Researchers and the Center for Folklore and Ethnography at the University of Pennsylvania**

To produce this ethnography, NYU engaged researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Folklore and Ethnography (CFE). Through ethnographic research, coursework, archiving, public events, and publications, the CFE engages students in the study of vernacular creativity and meaning making, and the bearing of these on the renewal of community life and place. Mary Hufford, who directs the Center for Folklore and Ethnography, has published extensively on culture and environmental crisis. *Piecing Together the Fragments* is the second ethnography produced by the Center for Folklore and Ethnography for the Leadership for a Changing World program. For more information, see [www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/center/Research.html](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/center/Research.html).

Rosina Miller, now an affiliate of the Center for Folklore and Ethnography, holds a doctoral degree in folklore and folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation, *Performing the Urban Village*, is a study of place-making through performance at the Village of Arts and Humanities. As faculty advisor at The Philadelphia Center, an off-campus study program serving the Great Lakes Colleges Association, she teaches and mentors undergraduates studying and doing internships for a semester in Philadelphia.

### **About the Research Center for Leadership in Action at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University**

The Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) promotes practice-grounded, social-science based, interdisciplinary research that will help strengthen both the theory and the practice of leadership in public service. The Center for Leadership in Action is based at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. It was launched in August 2003 with support from the Ford Foundation.

### **About the Leadership for a Changing World Program**

Leadership for a Changing World is a program of the Ford Foundation that recognizes and supports community leaders known in their own communities but not known broadly. In addition, it seeks to shift the public conversation about who are authentic leaders to include the kinds of leaders participating in this program. Each year, Leadership for a Changing World recognizes 17 to 20 leaders and leadership groups. Awardees receive \$115,000 and participate in semiannual program meetings, collaborative research, and a strategic communications effort. LCW is a signature program of the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Advocacy Institute and RCLA, NYU Wagner. Visit [www.leadershipforchange.org](http://www.leadershipforchange.org).

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**For more information about Leadership for a Changing World and the Research and Documentation Component, visit [www.leadershipforchange.org](http://www.leadershipforchange.org) or call 212.998.7550.**

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