



Philadelphia Neighbors Partner With Library to Uncover and Activate Local Assets

by April Doner
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“When I was young, we knew who lived next door and people watched out, talked, and were connected. We felt safe and it was a village. So, I hope that that village starts to really connect again, and my neighbor is my brother and I am my brother or sister’s keeper. We are all in this together and I hope that is lasting.”

Chareese Ford, Neighborhood Ambassador and Consultant

“Do you like meeting new people, finding out who they are and what they like?” asked a 2019 ad in Philadelphia’s *Southwest Globe Times*. “Then Paschalville Library needs you!”

Intrigued, longtime Southwest neighborhood resident Elvira Briscoe showed up to her local Paschalville Library branch on the evening listed in the ad. “I was curious,” Briscoe recalls. The sessions promised details on two new positions at the library called Neighborhood Consultants and Neighborhood Ambassadors. “After I learned more, it sounded like something I would like to do.”

LaShon Jackson, another Paschalville neighborhood resident, also attended. “I saw the information about the Neighborhood Ambassador [opportunity] at the library. The information at the orientation got me glued.”



Resident Consultants and Ambassadors with community members.
Source: Free Library of Philadelphia Community Catalyst Team

The sessions were like no job interview or information-sharing event LaShon or Elvira had ever experienced. Neighbors, sitting in a circle, were invited to talk with each other about their “Gifts,” which were broken down as “Gifts of the Head” (things they know a great deal about), “Gifts of the Hand” (skills and talents they have for making, creating, fixing, etc.), and “Gifts of the Heart” (issues or things they care deeply about). They shared about the resident-led groups of which they were members. They were then invited to apply for jobs going into their community to ask their neighbors the same things.

The experience resonated with LaShon. “It showed me that not only am I able to care about my community but that the organization itself cares about the community.” (Interview, 6/18/20)

Both neighbors got the job. They would be forever changed by the 4-year journey they were to embark upon in creative partnership with a diverse mix of other neighbors, library staff, and staff from a range of local organizations. Together they focused on the gifts, talents, contributive activities, and priorities of the community served by Paschalville Library, located in Southwest Philadelphia at 70th Street and Woodland Avenue.

With support from the [Institute of Museum and Library Services’](#) (IMLS) unique [Community Catalyst Initiative](#) (CCI) award, the project team would experiment together between October 2018 to September 2021 with what it means to uncover and galvanize local abundance, drawing on principles and practices of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model.

Unlike most efforts to improve or engage local neighborhoods, this project’s starting point was unique: looking first to the existing assets, ideas, and initiatives already in the community, while also empowering residents to lead in project execution. Donna Henry, executive director of Southwest Community Development Corporation (CDC) and Paschalville Partnership member notes, “I’m a seasoned grant writer, and this project was unique in that it focused on community assets. Seldom does something make people so proud. We’re reminded that this is a neighborhood of people who are working hard to make things better.”

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*Donna Henry, Executive Director
Southwest CDC*

As the project wound down in late 2020, LaShon reflected on the heart she encountered through this partnership with the library: “Not only am I coming in with my own heart, the organization feels the same way, maybe five times more. It just blessed my heart to be a part of something that can likely change something within the community.”

(Interview, 6/18/20)

Three years after launch, the neighborhood, neighbors, staff, and partners have been undeniably changed. Their work experiences and learnings hold lessons in how libraries and anchor institutions alike can play a pivotal role in contributing to the well-being of their neighborhoods as community connectors, conveners, and investors in resident-driven change. Their efforts also shift an important narrative from one of lack and need for outside help to an enhanced awareness of the richness of capacity, contribution, and innovation within each neighbor, local business, and neighborhood alike.





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*Annette Mattei, Project Coordinator
Paschalville Partnership and CCI Team*

PROJECT ROOTS

The team sought the award as a way to evolve and expand work the library had been doing with jobs and employment. Project Coordinator Annette Mattei explained:

The roots of this go back to something called the Paschalville Partnership: a collaboration that the Free Library of Philadelphia formed in 2013, and I am the project coordinator of it. I’ve been involved from the beginning, but it’s a collective impact initiative that emanates out of one of the 54 branches that comprise the Free Library of Philadelphia. It’s [around] the Paschalville Library, which is located in Southwest Philadelphia.

The partnership was brought together because the library wanted to do a better job of serving the many job seekers who are coming in the door. I mean, there’s only so much that a librarian can do. They’re not trained in job-seeking services and such. So they brought together this partnership of community-based organizations and city agencies to serve this population better.

Following the collective impact model, the library served as the backbone operator and we had a common agenda. And for 3 years with IMLS funding, we were able to attempt to implement the common agenda. And we had some successes but not as much as we had hoped for or were expecting to see. (CCI Workshop, 1/16/20)

When IMLS announced its Community Catalyst funding opportunity in 2018, Mattei explained that “it was a great opportunity for the partnership to step back and think about how we might do a better job incorporating the community.”

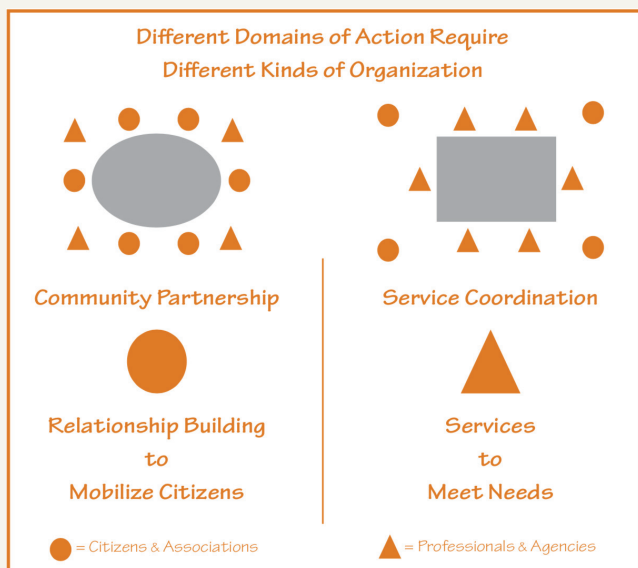
The library also hoped that the project could strengthen community relationships because the Paschalville branch would be undergoing renovations in the near future. By engaging more deeply with the neighborhood, the library system hoped to find ways for residents to continue accessing important information and services, even in the absence of a physical branch.

A SHIFT TO LISTENING

After receiving the award, the team was connected with other awardees from around the country as well as a team of consultants from the [Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#). Together, awardees explored asset-based concepts and practices for engaging with communities by centering leadership, gifts, skills, and priorities of community members themselves.

Encountering ABCD inspired the project team to re-evaluate the design of the work they were trying to build upon. Annette explained:

I think of the ABCD diagram. The table was all triangles, no circles at all. Not even that—the circles weren’t in the back of the room, they were just not in the room. And we recognized that that was a real shortcoming on our part.



An ABCD diagram contrasting resident-centered (L) and service coordination models (R). Source: Mike Green

The Catalyst grant gave us the opportunity to basically go back into planning mode using the ABCD approach. And we decided, again using ABCD, that we would spend the time talking to the community, listening to the community. Not talking to them, but listening and asking two basic questions: What do they see as the assets in the community? And what do they care about? (CCI Workshop, 1/16/20)

Once the team encountered asset-based ideas and the tools for implementing them, they decided to fundamentally shift their approach to the project. They abandoned their original focus on employment and, instead, focused on listening to residents in a way that would uncover assets and discover what issues or possibilities neighbors cared most about. Their goal was now to spark a connection of assets across community members and organizational partners so that the community could mobilize itself. This involved giving up “a plan” as traditionally outlined in most projects and being open to what might emerge. Annette said:

Our overall goal at the end of this process is right now an action plan. We really don't know what it's going to be yet, but it's something that's going to articulate what the community told us is what they care about, something that builds on the assets that they see in the community and, if appropriate, a supporting role for the partnership in this process or in this plan. We decided that while the roots of the partnership are in working with job seekers, that we would set that aside for now and open it up to anything. We're just going to listen for 2 years. (CCI Workshop, 1/16/20)

Thanks in part to the early inclusion in the partnership of a staff person from a local paper, the *Southwest Globe Times*, the community learned early on about the project's launch in an August 2019 article titled “Library Partnership Catalyzing a Community-Led Future.”

In the article, Free Library of Philadelphia southwest community organizer Andrea Lemoins observes, “The Partnership has been able to bring residents into the fold and engage with them in a very authentic way that puts them in charge.”

DESIGNING FOR RESIDENTS TO LEAD

The early project staff took great care to design the project with residents as the central drivers of the work. They began by forming teams of paid Resident Consultants and Neighborhood Ambassadors. The residents' work would be complemented and supported by local organizational partners and the project coordinator and director who were employed by the library.

Annette explained the unique architecture they crafted for the project, beginning with paid positions for residents to lead the work:

First of all, we wanted it to have meaningful involvement of community members. So we formed a Resident Consultant Team. These are people who are community connectors. We are so pleased to have found them or they actually found us, but they're guiding our project.

They're helping us decide who we go talk to, how we talk to people. And when the information comes in, they're also helping us completely redesign all the programs and events that we're doing. Paschalville Library and the other branches of the Southwest cluster, building it all on assets and what the community cares about. And in the end it will be the Resident Consultant Team that [makes] the recommendations for this, what we're calling a community action plan. They meet monthly.

“We decided, using ABCD, that we would spend time talking to the community, listening to the community. Not talking to them, but listening, and asking two basic questions: What do they see as the assets in the community, and what do they care about? We formed a Resident Consultant Team [of] community connectors. They're guiding the project.” Annette Mattei

The Paschalville Partnership 2.0 Catalyzing a Community-Led Future	
KEY PROJECT QUESTIONS	
① What are the assets in our community? ② What does the community care about?	
OVERALL PROJECT GOAL	Create an action plan that prioritizes needs identified by the community, builds on community assets, and articulates a supporting role for the partnership.
RESIDENT CONSULTANT TEAM	NEIGHBORHOOD AMBASSADORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Project Guidance ❖ Program & Event Planning ❖ Recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Community Canvassing ❖ Program & Event Publicizing
	PARTNER RESEARCH ACTIVITIES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Business Outreach ❖ Community Chats ❖ Storytelling Workshops

Then we have also formed a band of Neighborhood Ambassadors and they are out weekly. They've been out weekly since January 2019 so it's been a year now. They are out talking to the community, doing Learning Conversations and, again, asking these two basic questions: What does the community feel our assets are and what do they care about? Local organizational partners were also welcomed to take part.

Then the final thing we're doing is we have many of our original partner organizations involved. I'm calling them research activities, but that's a poor term for it. We're talking to the community but we're trying to do it in creative ways. So, one of our partners is out there talking to businesses, and these are big businesses. The Resident Consultant Team has identified community-based businesses that are doing interesting things and are very community minded. That's been really exciting uncovering those assets.

We have another partner organization that is convening what we're calling community chats as we identify different areas that the community cares about. We're convening community chats to talk about them and delve a little more deeply.

And then lastly, we have a partner, an arts organization, that's convening story circles where we're bringing in community members, again, through the Learning Conversations. We're identifying different themes, related particularly to the community members themselves and their gifts to the community, and we're bringing them in and having them share their stories within a circle, which has just really been a fun and exciting way to engage with community members. (CCI Workshop, 1/16/20)

To recruit the resident consultants and ambassadors, the team took an alternative approach to traditional interviews in the form of "info sessions" at the library. They spread the word through ads in the local paper, organizational partners' communication networks, and flyers posted in the library branch and neighborhood. They took care to conduct the sessions in a way that was welcoming, warm and informal, yet also structured. Attendees were led through a series of ABCD-inspired activities with one another focusing on the "Gifts" (skills, talents, abilities), relationships, and passions in the room.

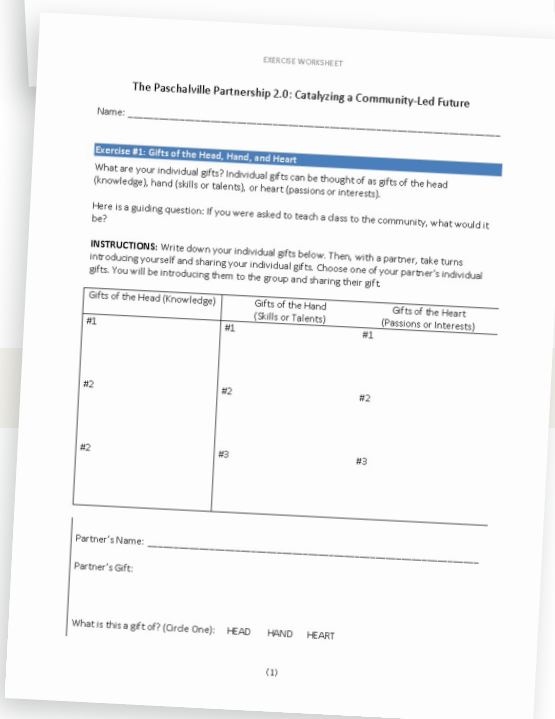
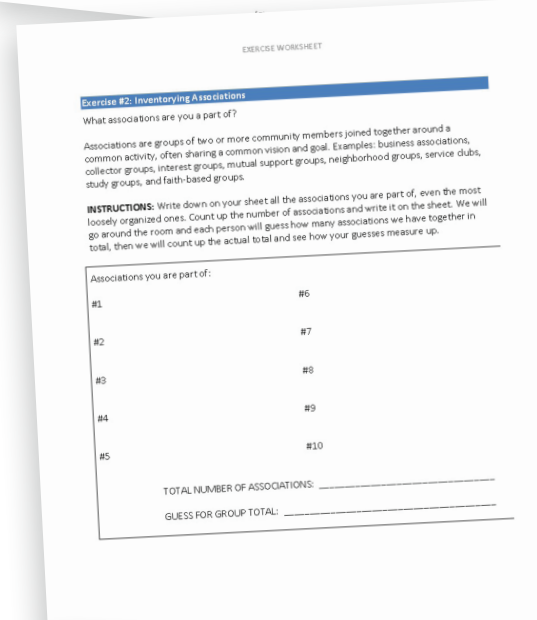
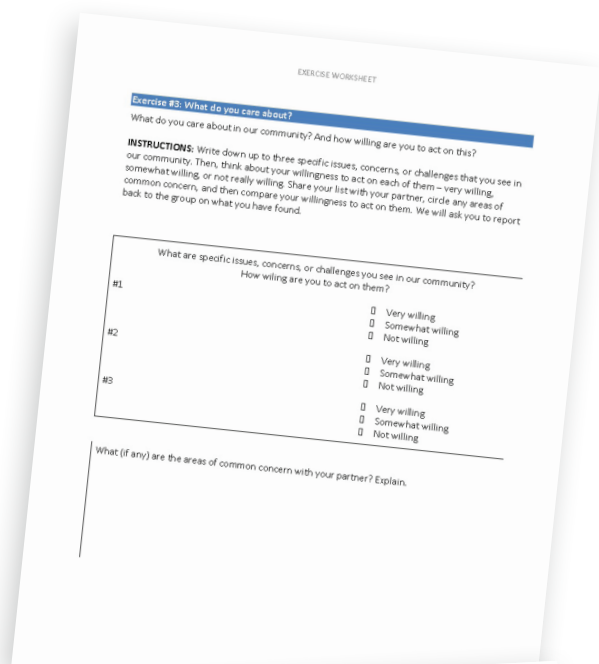
These sessions yielded more than the original goal of revealing the most qualified candidates for the Resident Consultant and Neighborhood Ambassador positions. They also built relationships, joy, and a strong sense of pride. It also inspired them to imagine what more might be possible.

"For the people in the room," reflected Neighborhood Ambassador Elvira Briscoe, "it was interesting to see all their different gifts and talents. When you put it all together, things can happen. You don't realize what you have until you are in a group."

Exercise sheets used during information sessions that project coordinators hosted at the library to recruit Neighborhood Ambassadors and Resident Consultants.

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Elvira Briscoe
Neighborhood Ambassador





LAUNCHING CONVERSATIONS: RESIDENTS LISTENING TO RESIDENTS

Once recruited, Neighborhood Ambassadors began venturing out into their neighborhood to hold Learning Conversations with their fellow neighbors. The teams would meet regularly to share what they were learning and to document the assets they were discovering. Ambassadors held their intentional Learning Conversations with fellow neighbors in a variety of settings and spaces, including local events where residents were already gathered as well as individually scheduled meet-ups. As they held these conversations, the Ambassadors' and Consultants' understanding of the richness within their neighbors and community began to grow in ways that moved and surprised them.

Diane Poulson-Venn, pictured left, a Neighborhood Ambassador, attended “Coffee With Cops,” hosted monthly by the 12 Police District at the neighborhood McDonald’s. There, she met and talked with Mrs. Featherstone, a longtime Southwest Philadelphia resident and activist.

Diane Poulson-Venn with longtime Southwest Philadelphia resident and activist Mrs. Featherstone. Source: SW Globe Times

“When I did the Learning Conversations,” Elvira recalled, “people shared their thoughts and concerns. One lady was homeless and I didn’t realize she was homeless. As she talked I realized everyone has thoughts to share. It was important to hear what she had to say. I was doing more listening than talking.”

LaShon found the conversations illuminating.

When I was a Neighborhood Ambassador, this approach helped me to get to know people. It made you feel more friendly. When you ask these questions about gifts, people will tell you so much, an entire story: what they can do, have been thinking about, what they have been talking about around the block. You’ll not only get an idea of who the person is but an idea of what they want to do for their community. People will speak from their heart. When I asked about concerns, they will share what they can dream of for the community. (CCI Workshop, 1/16/20)

And despite the COVID-19 pandemic shutting down programs, businesses, and activities across the community and country, the Neighborhood Ambassadors had conducted over 120 Learning Conversations. “Just a wealth of information has come in,” reported Annette Mattei. “We’re learning a lot, as [the Resident Ambassadors] discover what the community sees as assets and what they care about, and we’re also starting to build some really meaningful relationships with the community members.”

Annette also noted one unanticipated benefit of the conversations for the library: “The Neighborhood Ambassadors have just been so invaluable in publicizing our programs and events to the community. That’s something that, at the library, we haven’t done so well in the past.”

CELEBRATING ASSETS THROUGH LOCAL MEDIA

The team then began to intentionally celebrate the stories, gifts, talents, and contributions they discovered through the contributions of one of the member partners of their team. Jackson Adams, who worked as a reporter for the *Southwest Globe Times*. Jackson, along with some team members, held interviews and published articles featuring local community-rooted businesses in the newspaper: [Fred’s Water Ice](#), [Chocolate City Hair Studio](#), [The Best Way is the Jamaica Way](#), [Smiles’ Linens – the Anchor of Woodland Avenue](#), and [Maryam’s Mark](#). Jackson reflected:

It was great to hear why people do what they do. The guy from Smiles, Bruce, has been in the community so long. He has hope in the community and looks after tenants. The guy from the bowling alley, Steve, has also been here for a while and hosts special events and prices for people in this community. He does things so people can look after themselves and the community. I didn’t know about the SW CDC and these businesses until we started doing this.

It helped me with my interviewing skills. At first, I was a little nervous. This project helped me to learn to hone in on a topic and figure out good questions to uncover a story. I think I became a better interviewer from this.

Smiles' Linens – the Anchor of Woodland Avenue

February 7, 2020 / Jackson Adams



Bruce Zeiger sitting at the counter of Smiles'

If you've ever been on Woodland Avenue, between 65th and 62nd street, then there is a good chance you have seen Smiles' Bruce Zeiger. The Philadelphia native and current owner of Smiles' has been running the family business for quite some time. It is located directly across from the Woodland Avenue shopping center at 6129-31 Woodland Avenue and has been a long time staple in the community, holding down its current residence for more than 70 years. This may seem like a great deal of time, but it turns out Smiles' (and Bruce's) lineage goes back even farther than this.



I learned that you can't judge a book by its cover. I'm from West Philly and you hear about Southwest and how bad it is there. But there's bad everywhere, but there's good everywhere too. When I sat in on the convening with the crossing guards, I heard them talk about the kids and how they look out for them. I heard them describe how they can tell from the faces of the kids and know how they're feeling and give them words of encouragement. I was able to observe how different parts of the community act in a way to care for each other.

(Interview, 6/17/20)

Resident Consultant Chareese Ford also had an opportunity to exercise her writing gift through composing one of the articles. She shared, "I was so thrilled to interview and write one of the articles for the paper. I wrote an article on Fred's Water Ice. I was so excited because I love writing and to see the story in print. It was exciting for me."

FROM LISTENING TO CONNECTING: STORY CIRCLES AND COMMUNITY CHATS

Through the Learning Conversations, compelling individuals and groups surfaced who were contributing to the community using their own talents and passions. The team then began to experiment with connecting the abundance of local assets to the individuals they were encountering.

One approach they tried was hosting Story Circles. To do this, they tapped into the expertise of one of their organizational partners: the nonprofit First Person Arts, which had a wealth of experience facilitating both live and recorded storytelling across the city. These sessions became powerful opportunities for on-the-ground actors to meet kindred spirits and delight in their similar work while also exchanging valuable stories, tips, techniques, and resources.

Neil Bardhan of First Person Arts explained that he and his organization accepted the invitation to contribute their gift for storytelling for two reasons:

A big part was hearing people's stories in new ways. Another was trying out this Story Circle model. We had not done much previously, but it made sense that we would create this space for people. Something like this where everyone could share was quite powerful. We learned that First Person Arts cares about documenting the stories people share.

(Interview, 6/22/20)

Story Circles were grounded in the belief that "everybody has a story to tell, and sharing our stories connects us to each other and the world." Through these circles, the team could celebrate and connect neighbors and groups who were active in the neighborhood around issues they cared about. Most of them operated outside of a traditional structure of a nonprofit or government program, and instead they acted mostly as individuals using their own resources and networks to do something about their personal passion.

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Staff Writer, Southwest Globe Times

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Bruce Buchanan, sharing a picture of himself as a young serviceman in Vietnam at the Veterans' Story Circle.
Source: SW Globe Times

“You saw these people look into each other’s eyes and listen and share... that kind of emergent community of them having fought in different places, but they understood something about each other as people who served. And they got to, ‘Where are you hanging out?’ Seeing that spring up from that set of conversation was very powerful. People like veterans have had experiences that you might not hear about unless you ask the right questions at the right time.”

Neil Bardhan
First Person Arts Director and Story Circle Facilitator

This first Story Circle was held to celebrate neighborhood “Wisdom-Bearers, Unsung Heroes, and All-Stars.” This circle sought to honor neighbors who fit the following descriptions: “Who cleans the block without expecting credit? Who’s the person who knows everybody in the neighborhood? Where can you find people, and how can they fulfill formal and informal roles in the community?”

In September, the team convened a Story Circle for Veterans in anticipation of Veterans Day, at the suggestion of Resident Consultant Team member Helen Pleasant who was herself a veteran. A local article reported:

At the October Story Circle, veterans candidly shared their acts of heroism, courage, and compassion as they dined on delicious Caribbean entrees prepared by neighborhood restaurant Jamaica Way, located in Penrose Plaza shopping center. Each veteran was given the opportunity to speak about the good times and adverse times they spent in the military, some of them in combat zones. [Pleasant] urged community members to thank those who serve our country in the military and to hear their stories, noting, “Veterans often feel unappreciated for their efforts.”

(Southwest Globe Times, 11/25/19)

Although it “felt a little more ad hoc,” Neil recalled the Story Circle for Veterans was no less successful:

You saw these people look into each other’s eyes and listen and share. I think only two of them knew each other previously. That kind of emergent community of them having fought in different places, served in different ways but they understood something about each other as people who served largely during the 60s and 70s. And they got to, “Where are you hanging out and who are you talking to?” Seeing that spring up from that set of conversation was very powerful. People like veterans have had experiences that you might not hear about unless you ask the right questions and ask them at the right time. (Interview, 6/22/20)

The Resident Consultant Team’s Learning Conversations also surfaced a group of community members who had stepped up as Reading Captains in the local “Read by Fourth.” Consequently, a Story Circle was held to celebrate them as well. At this circle, a common powerful sense of purpose driving the Reading Captains became palpable. Neil recalled:

I saw a number of individuals who felt very called to make a difference. Everybody had come to the project in different ways, but they had the same goal. As a person around Philly, I hear about a lot of programs and may not know fully what they are. But hearing the stories about getting kids reading did something for my heart and soul. (Interview, 6/22/20)

Reading Captains’ Story Circle. From left to right: Andrew Blassingame, Andrea Blassingame, Adrienne Harwell, Pat Erwin, Lapina Burris, Shirley Reynolds, Terica Green, and Neil Bardhan discuss ways to promote literacy in Southwest.

Source: Southwest Globe Times



“We had nine community members show up representing five different associations. These are people who on their own decided they would do something about this issue of food access and insecurity in the community. And they have taken their own steps. Nobody asks them to do it. They didn’t ask for permission.... They were very pleased we had brought them together.” *Annette Mattei*



STORY CIRCLES

❖ **PARTNER LEAD:** First Person Arts

❖ **FPA MISSION:** Everyone has a story to tell, and sharing our stories connects us with each other and the world

❖ **ACTIVITY:** Facilitate six (6) sessions where community members are invited to share stories together, usually around a theme

STORY CIRCLE #1: Wisdom Bearers, Unsung Heroes & All-Stars

Who cleans the block without expecting credit? Who's the person who knows everybody in the neighborhood? Where can you find these people, and how do they fulfill formal and informal roles in the community?

The team also gathered neighbors they discovered were taking independent action locally around food access. Annette explained:

The Neighborhood Ambassadors are out every week talking to residents through Learning Conversations. They're working as a team and they identify where they're gonna go together and have these meaningful conversations with community members. This information they're gathering, entering it into a spreadsheet and the spreadsheet, I bring it to the monthly meeting of the Resident Consultant Team and we go through every learning conversation that the Neighborhood Ambassadors are having.

And what we've found is that we kept seeing things coming up related to the issue of food access and food security as an issue people were caring about or something they were working on. I know the Neighborhood Ambassadors even spent one morning at a food bank embedded in one of the local schools. And so we were seeing this issue pop up again and again and we thought, this would make a great community chat. We will bring people together in a room and have them talk together, not just individual one-on-one Learning Conversations.

We decided with our partner City Lights Network that we would call it a “community convening” instead of a Community Chat, because a community chat seemed a little too informal for such an important issue. We put out the word that we wanted to bring together people for two hours and discuss this. And with the help of our neighborhood ambassadors, we were able to pull it together in two weeks. I still can't believe how quickly we pulled it together.

We had 16 people in our community convening. We had a whole lot of our Neighborhood Ambassadors and Resident Consultant Team show up because they're interested. But we had nine community members show up representing five different associations. These are people who on their own decided they would do something about this issue of food access and insecurity in the community. And they have taken their own steps. Nobody asks them to do it. They didn't ask for permission to do it. They just went ahead and started soliciting donations from supermarkets and restaurants and they just started distributing them at churches or corner lots, different programs. I was so impressed by that in and of itself. And second, they were very pleased that we brought them together and that they could meet each other. They were ready to collaborate and learn from each other and they asked that we bring them back together. (CCI webinar, 1/16/2020)

Organizer Andrea Lemoins recalled this event as a key point in the 3-year project in which she felt the strongest sense of community and how meaningful it was for her as a member of the team who resided in another part of the city:

[A] guy who made fun of me for being from Germantown showed up because I told him about it. It made me feel good. He brought a couple of his friends. People were showing up because I invited them. I was a year into this and it was nice to see so many wonderful people talking about the great work that they were doing with providing food to the community. It is nice when you are in a group when people are happy to see you, hug you, ask what you are doing and ask what you are doing for the holidays. I feel intimately tied to a whole other part of the city that I never thought of before. (Interview, 6/17/2020)



Some attendees of the SW Crossing Guards Story Circle.
Source: Southwest Globe Times

The Crossing Guards Story Circle held in February 2020 surfaced the gifts, talents, and underlying passion of neighbors who had stepped up to safely shepherd the children of their community to and from school. The team carefully crafted the session to reveal commonalities between crossing guards in a way that would forge new and stronger relationships while also digging deeper into the “why” of their community activity and the often invisible impact they have each day on the lives of neighborhood children:

Among the reasons many of them became Crossing Guards, the most common was their love of children. Many of them feel that this job helps them make an impact on the community as well as the children that live there. Since not all children come from healthy home environments, it is apparent when the children the guards see everyday are in a bad mood or something is upsetting them. It’s during these times that crossing guards really shine—going out of their way to interact with the youth so that they possibly change their mood. “Just a few words you say can change a child’s mood and brighten their day,” one of the guards stated passionately.

The crossing guards of Southwest have a strong sense of love and compassion for the children they see everyday—almost as if they were their own kids. Being around has not only allowed them to watch the children as they grow, but the community as well. They noted that the violence in the community is a real problem and makes them worry for their children as well as the ones they watch. They’d really like it if the community had more resources and safe places for kids.
(Southwest Globe Times article, 4/3/20)

The team also hoped to gather an additional circle to connect and celebrate Block Captains, but was forced to cancel this when the spread of the coronavirus caused gatherings to be unsafe in March 2020.

Using Story Circles and Community Chats to convene residents who were active around the same passion enabled the project team to foster valuable new connections among residents that could bolster their individual actions while expanding their impact. Neil Bardhan recalled:

We were all very proud of some of the themes we came up with. I think they are great questions for most communities to ask of each other and share about. The ones that clicked, really clicked. This will go down in history as one of those moments where you just sit in the room and wonder what is happening and think this is awesome in every way. I didn’t know how to handle it and that was fantastic. (Interview, 6/22/20)

Annette noted a pattern she noticed across all Story Circles: introducing neighbors who lived nearby but had never met.

One thing that keeps coming out of every story event we had was that people met each other and they didn’t realize how close they lived to one another, which was really sweet. So they would meet and then find out—this happened twice at one event we were at—someone would say, “Oh, you live like three blocks from me, and we haven’t met!” So that was really sweet to bring people together. (CCI webinar, 7/23/20)

Neil shared how the story circles changed him personally and as a Philadelphian:

From a personal and professional level, it gave me a sense of capability and capacity that I didn’t know I had previously. It gave me a deeper appreciation for a neighborhood that I hadn’t had a relationship with previously. As a Philadelphian, it sometimes feels I see a lot of the town and I’m in a lot of places. But Southwest and particularly Paschalville were outside of my usual rotation and a couple degrees away from where most people I know are. It gave me a deeper perspective for my city that I would not have had without this project. (Interview, 6/22/20)



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Neil Bardhan

Image source: First Person Arts

The Story Circle practice has traveled beyond the immediate work of the project. Resident Consultant Diane Poulson-Venn reported, “I have used the Story Circle technique with many groups such as seniors. This provides people an opportunity to tell their story and discover what people care about and learn about the assets.”

ENLISTING VOICES AND ASSETS TO MAP THE JOURNEY

One and a half years into the project, the team sought to tell the story of their journey uncovering, connecting, and celebrating the assets in their neighborhood by creating a [Journey Map](#), a process the ABCD consultants invited all Community Catalyst awardees to create in order to reflect on and document their learning and experiences.

In true asset-based fashion, the Philadelphia team crafted their map by welcoming together the Resident Consultant Team, library staff, and organizational partners as equals in its creation. With the same spirit the team brought to their Resident Consultant Team interviews, Learning Conversations, and Story Circles, the team also enlisted and invested in neighborhood talent to bring the map to life in illustration form by hiring gifted artist and local resident Maryam Muhammad.

“I was referred by an artist friend who I was working on another project with,” recalled Maryam. “She referred me to Annette. I hadn’t heard of the project. My friend told me about the Library Loud event and that sounded so cool, but I thought it was a prank. Once I learned about the project, I wanted to be a part of it somehow.”

Through a facilitated process that offered several opportunities for feedback and tweaking, a bright, colorful journey map emerged that tells the story—rich with twists, turns, and surprises—of the team’s adventures in community catalyzing.

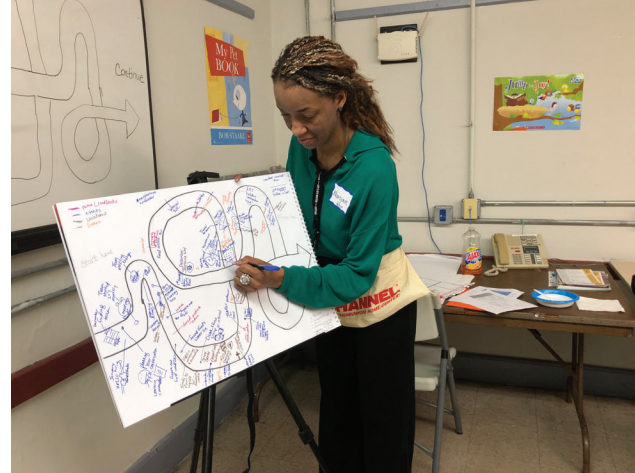
MAPPING NEIGHBORHOOD ASSETS

After the first 6–9 months of the project spent compiling the team and getting activities up and running, the community-library team began to focus in earnest on creating an asset map of the many rich resources, abilities, and actors within the neighborhood. They approached the map both as a way to document and celebrate the work done so far as well as a tool for celebrating what was valuable and abundant in their community.

The Resident Consultant Team (RCT) was primarily responsible for developing the map, with facilitation support from project team community organizer Andrea Lemoins. Annette described their process:

Our Resident Consultant Team meets once a month for 4 hours. And we’ve committed to at least 1 hour of asset mapping in these meetings. We’re taking the raw materials from all these different activities. Right now, we’re working our way through the Learning Conversations conducted by the Neighborhood Ambassadors. We’re discussing them as a group and placing them into different asset categories. (CCI webinar, 1/16/2020)

The team adopted categories suggested by ABCD materials shared by the consulting team: Individuals, Resident-Led Associations, Institutions, Place, Economy, and Stories.



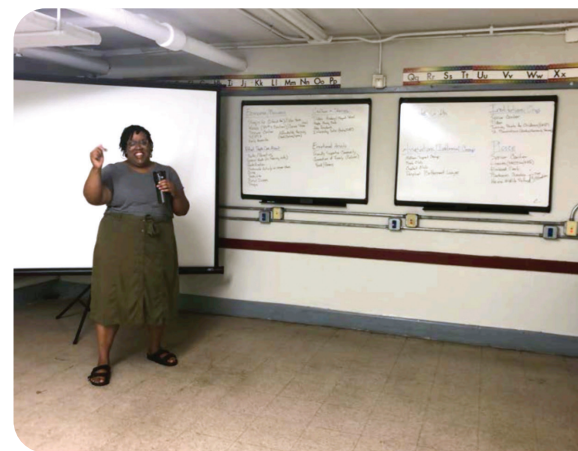
Above: Southwest resident and artist Maryam Muhammad, who was hired to illustrate the project’s journey map. Below: The Project Team’s Journey Map, illustrated by Maryam. Source: CCI Project Team



Six categories of assets found in each community, as described by Asset-Based Community Development. Source: ABCD Institute & Pacific Community Solutions

“As we went through the process of creating [the] asset map, there were some things where I had to bite my tongue because it’s not my neighborhood. A lot of giving up power is about stepping back.”

Andrea Lemoins



Andrea Lemoins facilitating asset-mapping sessions.
Source: CCI Project Team

The team mapped assets in two distinct phases:

The first stage was simple: We would read through (together, and out loud) the content gathered through the Neighborhood Ambassadors’ learning conversations and shared through their spreadsheet. Then we would discuss this content, identifying any assets we heard mentioned and assigning them to one of the six asset groups. We also keep a running list of what community members said they cared about, grouping them into similar issue areas. One person acting as scribe was always at the white board recording this information for the group to see and discuss.

From these discussions, we started to build an asset “inventory,” which started off as a simple list, but then expanded into a spreadsheet we could analyze. For example, we started to note when an asset was mentioned more than once (a proxy for how widely it was viewed as an asset in the community), the geographic location of the asset (so we could plot them on a map), and, when available, information on who mentioned the asset (age range, length of time living in community). (“Toolbox for Catalysts,” p. 8)

One of the first outcomes of the asset-mapping process was to further solidify an “abundance mindset” among participants:

Going through the exercise of asset mapping naturally led the Resident Consultant Team to the conclusion that the community is abundant with assets. For sure, RCT members knew about many of the assets mentioned by community members, but by making them more visible through this process, they found they had a renewed pride for them. On the other hand, some assets were not as well known by RCT members, or they had never thought of them as assets. (“Toolbox for Catalysts,” p. 8)

As the group dug through the learnings from Neighborhood Ambassadors’ Learning Conversations, ideas and possibilities for connecting assets came into focus. While in the midst of the process, Annette provided a window into ideas and possibilities that were bubbling up, as well as the creative energy of the group itself:

We’re already starting to make connections between the different assets. For example, we’ve encountered in our one on one conversations, where we asked about what gifts to the community they may have, [that] a lot of people talk about being gardeners. And it’s interesting how the community where we’re working also has two play space assets that are related to gardens. There’s Bartram’s garden, which is an absolutely gorgeous Colonial Era garden, and Southwest. And then there’s the John Heinz National Wildlife Reserve. So we’re already starting to see connections between the assets, and we’re thinking about how we might tie it in to things that the community cares about, such as blight and littering. (“Toolbox for Catalysts,” p. 8)

Developing the map was an exercise in stepping back and letting go for project staff coordinators Annette and Andrea, neither of whom lived in the Southwest neighborhood. It also served to transform the larger library staff’s perception of the neighborhood. Andrea recalled,

As we went through the process of creating [the] asset map that you see here, there were some things where I had to bite my tongue because it’s not my neighborhood. A lot of giving up power is about stepping back. When we’re looking at the Southwest map, this isn’t what it would look like and there were a few things on here I wouldn’t consider a community asset, but they are considered that by the residents. It was such a learning process for me. The asset map blew my mind. Working with the community for 2 years, this was so powerful.



“It was such a learning process for me. The asset map blew my mind. Working with the community for 2 years, this was so powerful. We shared this with library staff at Free Library of Philadelphia. Everyone was blown away at how beautiful and stunning it was. It’s being cataloged and digitized in the library collection.” Andrea Lemoins

Over the course of 1 year, the map came together, representing a dense tapestry of local community wealth in a diversity of forms.

In its original form, the map was simply a list. But as Annette reported, the team kept working to envision “a better format to put it in, especially a format where we can visualize the connections between the assets and how they can be used to support the community and what it cares about.”

To find this better format, the team once again turned to the gifts of the community by hiring Maryam, the same artist who had visually brought their journey map to life. Maryam worked closely with the team to fashion an illustration that was bold, bright, and joyful. Andrea recalled:

We shared this with library staff at Free Library of Philadelphia. Everyone was blown away at how beautiful and stunning it was. It’s being cataloged and digitized in the library collection.

The team was clear that the goal or purpose of this map was not only to represent assets uncovered through their work, but also as a tool for more community-led discovery, connection, and action. Annette reported:

It’s becoming clear this community asset map is a tool [for the residents], because we’ll print many copies, even once my role ends, for the members of the Resident Consultant Team if they want to keep going, or Friends of Paschalville group or whoever to go into schools or organizations or meet with people. It’s a way to engage with people, give them this and talk about, and it’s a tool to keep the conversation going. While it’s not clear what we will act on, I think eventually people will act on it more, now that it’s clear what’s in the community. (Interview, 6/26/22)

To make the map even more community-facing in hopes of spreading pride and catalyzing even more conversations and connectivity, the team sponsored a colorful insert in the newspaper. The insert featured the map and an explanation of the project along with quotes from residents, partners, and other participants, the journey map, and an invitation to get involved.



ACTIVATING ASSETS: BACK-TO-SCHOOL NIGHT

The mapping process brought into focus the richness of neighborhood assets that Neighborhood Ambassadors had been uncovering with Learning Conversations for over a year. This further inspired the team to begin utilizing these assets in creative ways, energizing their other community-building efforts with a variety of “ingredients” to be tapped into. Annette explained:

We are starting to incorporate what we’re learning into what the partnerships activities are. For example, we are planning our regular back-to-school event at Pascagoula Library in fall. And in this fall event, we’re going to highlight a bunch of all the gifts to the community that we have uncovered. For example, we’ve met a community member who is an amateur genealogist with a wonderful family tree, and we’re going to set her up with a table and have her share her gifts with the community. (“Asset Mapping 201” webinar)

Unlike many library programs, this event was entirely community-generated and community-led. The decision to focus on a back-to-school night originated from the resounding theme uncovered by Resident Consultants’ Learning Conversations and other project activities centering resident voices: The community cared deeply about its children. Thus, a back-to-school celebration emerged as the best place to focus the team’s energy. The team reflects on how the activity came together:

While community open houses are common at libraries, we wanted to do something that was more of a community celebration, so we turned to our growing understanding of assets, especially the gifts residents could offer back to the community.

To reflect many residents’ gift of music, we invited a DJ to “make noise,” which had the added benefit of dispelling the notion that libraries have to be quiet places. We also hired a community artist, who we met through the Neighborhood Ambassadors’ Learning Conversations, to offer face painting to the children. And we invited community members to showcase their talents and skills, including a photographer who set up a background and took photos of attendees in fun poses and an amateur genealogist who shared her skills for researching family trees. All involved with the planning of this event agreed it was one of the most well attended at Paschalville in awhile. (“Toolbox for Catalysts,” p. 8)

Southwest Branch community organizer Andrea Lemoins noted that this event stood out for her in particular as the best example of the impact of this project:

I would tell the story about how we came up with the back-to-school event. We were 50–60 interviews in and we kept hearing about youth and how people care about youth. We thought of a back-to-school event and the Neighborhood Ambassadors just jumped in and pulled people and materials together. The staff was great. It was the most packed and alive that the library had been in a long time. It was wild, there were so many people. It was community driven, community participation and having a good time.

There wasn’t an end goal. I have been reading this article about the protests in Hong Kong. The lead organizers say there is no end goal: It will be messy and will be long. We weren’t trying to get data or interviews. We just hung out with people and had a good time. That’s what this is about. (Interview, 6/17/22)



“Ambassadors just jumped in and pulled people and materials together. The staff was great. It was the most packed and alive that the library had been in a long time. It was wild, there were so many people. It was community-driven, community

Andrea Lemoins

“ABCD rests on the idea that individuals experiencing an issue or living in a community are best equipped to lead its transformation.” Paschalville Project Team

SHIFTING AND GROWING POWER

In their newspaper insert, the team wrote: “We have learned a new shared language that activates our work. Instead of fixating on barriers and deficiencies, we are shining a light on gifts and assets. Instead of letting outsiders do the talking, we are listening to what the community members say they care about and taking note.”

A common thread running through the Paschalville Community Catalyst project has been to shift and grow power in the hands of everyday residents. As the team wrote,

ABCD rests on the idea that individuals experiencing an issue or living in a community are best equipped to lead its transformation. The concept of a “power ladder” is useful in illustrating this: at the bottom of the ladder, residents are recipients; as they move up the ladder, they become information sources and then advisors and advocates; when they arrive at the top, they are in control. ABCD empowers residents to understand not just where they are on the power ladder but, more importantly, where they should be. Organizations and institutions working in a community also can benefit from thinking about where their programs on the power ladder sit (in terms of community participation), and where they could (or should) be.

One component that sets this project apart from many other community-facing institutional efforts was the library’s decision to create paying positions for residents. This promoted recentering the focus of the project from an issue defined by nonresidents (jobs and employment) toward not only listening to residents, but devoting resources and a project structure to support residents as the primary drivers and developers of what was to be done.

Andrea reflected upon how the asset-mapping process was key to making the goal of shifting power more concrete and actionable: “Your asset map tells you who holds power so when you’re ready to give up and share power, you know exactly who to share/give it to.”

ABCD offers a nuanced yet practical approach to shifting power for those working with or within neighborhoods. It shifts the meaning of the ever-more-common term “empowerment” by calling for a recognition and intentional stock-taking of the power already present in neighbors and neighborhoods, while simultaneously encouraging individuals and institutions to commit to sharing with residents the power they have traditionally held: to control local programs and funding, be recognized as experts, and receive compensation for their time spent on local issues. In this way, the expertise and contributions of all parties can be better utilized toward community improvement.

NAVIGATING COVID: THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

Along with the rest of the world, the project team experienced a dramatic disruption of project activities as well as everyday life with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March/April 2020. Unlike many other staff-centered programs and initiatives, however, this work was able to continue thanks to its original grounding in authentic, caring relationships between people as well as its resident-centered structure. Resident Consultants and Neighborhood Ambassadors along with support staff were forced to troubleshoot the need to pivot the format of their activities away from in-person meetings. However, activities continued, fueled by the momentum of community members’ and partners’ passion for their community and value of their connections with each other.



Andrea Lemoins recalled, “ABCD set us up for success. The personal relationships are maintained outside of work and organizations, so we were able to keep in touch with people. I also felt that I was able to have honest conversations with people on how I was personally/emotionally living through COVID-19.”

“It made things easier for us to continue (not immediately, but within our allotted time) our meetings via Zoom with small hiccups here and there,” explained LaShon Jackson. “This was due to us staying in contact with each other before the pandemic began.”

SHIFTS AND RIPPLES: A LASTING IMPACT

The outcomes of the Paschalville team’s work have been many and continue to surface.

A resounding chorus of voices of the people who led, supported, and took part speak to their delight at how it has profoundly deepened their pride and awareness about the abundance of assets, resources, care, and capacity within a neighborhood so often labeled for its deficiencies. By “making the invisible visible,” the initiative brought forth existing strengths while linking various individuals together in meaningful ways that will continue to have impact.

For Resident Consultant Diane Poulson-Venn, “one big impact was that it made me more visible in the community. I was in different areas that I was usually in and I got an understanding of the community. I learned about the needs of the residents. I learned about the assets.” Many of these assets, she noted, were previously invisible, even to a resident as highly involved and connected as herself:

Many I had not considered assets previously. Many of the assets we discovered were not well known, such as the Blue Bell Inn [and] community groups that I wasn’t aware of. There’s a lady who supplies dresses for many of the church ladies who has been around 50–60 years, and I learned about how she cares for people in the neighborhood. I learned about the library and the vast amount of resources there. (Interview, 6/19/20)

Maryam Muhammad, artist and owner of Maryam’s Mark & Company, observed, “When I walk Woodland Avenue passing businesses, I see them differently now that I know their stories and history.”

The relationships forged and deepened between residents, library staff, and organizational partners have become conduits for collaboration and resource exchange and have held intrinsic value to all involved. Neighborhood Ambassador LaShon Jackson reflected on how her work on this project impacted her:

Where do I start? I feel more confident in being more productive in my community. I have less bias than before. I have more avenues to get things done in this community. I have the tools I need to do what I want in the community and I know that I am not the only one who wants things for this community. I know about so many things, groups, and places that are here that I didn’t know before. I found that there are things here that can help me, and they are right around the corner. Most of all, I never knew there is a color of people, a rainbow of people who are doing these things in the community, working here, owning businesses, doing these initiatives, and there are so many stories. (Interview, 6/18/20)



“ABCD set us up for success. The personal relationships are maintained outside of work and organizations, so we were able to keep in touch with people. I also felt that I was able to have honest conversations with people on how I was personally/emotionally living through COVID-19.”

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LaShon Jackson
Neighborhood Ambassador

"I am sure there are others who experience the neighborhood in the same way I do. They are caught up in going home and are not aware of all of the things around you. I think this is a good idea because my go-to is to go downtown versus knowing what is right here. It changes the way I think now.

Philadelphia is so neighborhood-oriented, I think people were missing out on opportunities because they weren't aware of what was right here. This is one of the best things about this approach."

Omelio Alexander, Resident and Digital Resource Specialist, Free Library of Philadelphia

Resident and library staff member Omelio Alexander noted that the project "made me more aware of my own community":

I live there, within 10 blocks of the library. It definitely made me more aware of things that are going on in my community. I am probably not one of the people who would have been called in for this project because I am a "go home and go in my house" kind of person generally. I do not know a lot of the things that are happening. I work at the library so that brings me some information, but I was surprised that all of this stuff is here! All of this is here that I would not have known on my own. I will probably take advantage of it now that I know. I can share this information for others.

I am sure there are others who experience the neighborhood in the same way I do. They are caught up in going home and are not aware of all of the things around you. I think this is a good idea because my go-to is to go downtown versus knowing what is right here. It changes the way I think now. Philadelphia is so neighborhood-oriented, I think people were missing out on opportunities because they weren't aware of what was right here. This is one of the best things about this approach.

(Interview, 6/19/20)

"It had a really big impact on me," reported core team member and organizer Andrea Lemoins:

I was going down this path with my previous job in being a union organizer... around nonprofits and unions. I knew having community support was critical in campaigns. Working with ABCD helped me to synthesize how to reach this logical goal, and the only way you can do that work is to build relationships and do more relational power analysis. You want to figure out what people can bring to the table. It made it more relational for me. It is like working towards social justice and being able to do it in an institutional framework.

(Interview, 6/17/20)



One of the most striking outcomes of the project is the wide range of genuine relationships that formed and strengthened through each conversation, event, and interaction. Team members reflected on how those relationships will benefit them and their work going forward:

"Relationships with individual community members (RCT/NA) and not just working relationships with organizations. Individual relationships are much deeper and more personal." ~ Andrea Lemoins

"We've managed to create extensive relationships with schools, churches, and recreational centers, which helps the library (the base of operation for Paschalville Partnership) create more opportunities for our organization, to help lift up community events and organized gatherings within or around the Southwest Cluster." ~ LaShon Jackson

"We have formed strong relationships with several community connectors and I expect we'll continue to work with them. We also deepened our relationship with several of our community-based organizational partners." ~ Annette Mattei

"Terri and I met a pharmacist who cares deeply about the community who has been very helpful to people. I go visit her regularly. She has such a sense of community." ~ Diane Poulson-Venn

"We've managed to create extensive relationships with schools, churches, and recreational centers, which helps the library (the base of operation for Paschalville Partnership) create more opportunities for our organization, to help lift up community events and organized gatherings within or around the Southwest Cluster."

LaShon Jackson

The initiative also impacted those involved by strengthening their capacity to see, invest in, and adjust in response to what community members can do as well as what they care about enough to take action with others. LaShon Jackson explained:

I feel as if ABCD has helped us both within the confines of our work and the outside where we can simply speak to others with ABCD in mind. Thus it helped us become better speakers and listeners in general. It opened my eyes more in terms of what it means to be an active listener. Usually, in a conversation I'd look for key points to respond. Now, I look for the deeper information when it comes to listening to one's story. I look for the compassion and the drive that inspires a person to speak so adamantly about their story and why would they want someone to hear it. (Interview, 6/18/20)

Organizational partners who participated in the project have also experienced a shift in the way they see and approach the neighborhood and community. Cean James, executive director of City Lights, a faith-based nonprofit that links organizations and grassroots groups in Southwest Philadelphia, observed:

I think it has helped us transition as an organization and make this our primary function. Having participated in this for the past couple years, we made this our primary goal: to get a sense of both the assets and needs in the community and understand they change rapidly, especially with technology. Our meetings have switched from information sharing to information gathering. The genesis of this happened from our participation in this project. We converted to people telling us what is happening. (Interview, 6/23/20)

“I learned that there’s a strong desire in the community to be involved and that people in the community have a lot to bring to the table,” reported Steve Kuzmicki, an economic development program manager at the Southwest Community Development Corporation (CDC). “Like when we interviewed Fred Cooper of Fred’s Water Ice, there was real excitement and sense of community in his story. Many of the meetings I attend are pretty insular, so this was a welcome change.”

The group’s work with ABCD and related strategies has had a transformative effect on the Philadelphia library system as a whole. “The Free Library of Philadelphia is a very large organization,” said Annette, “but we are starting to see adoption of ABCD principles in other work and projects and we are helping to nurture this.”

This is in part thanks to Annette and Southwest Cluster Leader Tiffany Nardella’s intentional and sustained communication within the Free Library of Philadelphia system about the project’s purpose and ever-evolving activities. Their ongoing “marketing” created a buzz around this new kind of thinking and engagement with and by community members. Andrea observed:

First, the library as a whole is very excited about this project. Annette and Tiffany marketed this project to the whole library very well. I expressed it very well. They marketed it to everybody. When I would go to trainings around the libraries, everyone had heard of it and knew what I was doing, and I didn’t even know who they were! People are excited about this work.

Tiffany has gotten all of the cluster leaders onboard. The other organizers are also on board. At all 12 Rebuild sites/libraries community ambassadors will be part of. It has become embedded in the library that quickly. Lapina [one of the Neighborhood Consultants] has been hired and will be part of this.

We don’t know how we will continue to get money to pay the



New relationships at the Crossing Guards Story Circle. Source: Paschalville Project Team.

“I learned that there’s a strong desire in the community to be involved and that people in the community have a lot to bring to the table. Many of the meetings I attend are pretty insular, so this was a welcome change.”

Steve Kuzmicki, Economic Development Program Manager, Southwest CDC

community, but we also know it's a big part. No one is pushing back on that anymore. Everyone believes the community needs to get paid for their expertise. Every grant we are getting going forward at Paschalville includes that. I think that's the biggest impact.

(Interview, 6/17/20)

This model of community listening and asset mobilization was adopted as part of a branch rebuild initiative, to be implemented within additional Philadelphia neighborhoods by paid resident teams inspired by the Paschalville team's structure.

Andrea noted other ways in which asset-based and related thinking has impacted the system: "ABCD and Emergent Strategies concepts/trainings was also used to organize staff in our uprising this summer. It's being shared widely and staff are now using ABCD models internally and externally."

The project's impact has also rippled outward in the form of asset-based tools and practices they learned, as participants carry these with them into new roles, initiatives, and aspects of their lives. Neighborhood Ambassador LaShon noted the power and versatility of the gifts exercise:

The questions about the gifts of head, heart, and hands helped me to understand myself as well as a way to understand other people. This gives a more positive focus on people. In a typical job interview people are looking for your mistakes. Asset-based questions help people to present their authentic self and create an opening to get to know the person. When I get my own business I will use asset-based questions for my interviews. (Interview, 6/18/2020)

"I am very sold on this idea of community-driven and community-led," Annette Mattei reflected, "and I want to keep doing it and bring that into my work." Recently, she reported that she has incorporated "Gifts Conversations" in her new work with the library creating career exploration workshops for the community:

I have started to employ some of the tools and principles and values in other project work that I do. I am very excited to bring this new lens to my work as a consultant working with nonprofits. The exercise with head, heart, and hands really strikes a chord with people.

(Email correspondence, 4/26/22)



LESSONS: LIBRARY AS CONDUIT OF ASSETS AND ACTION

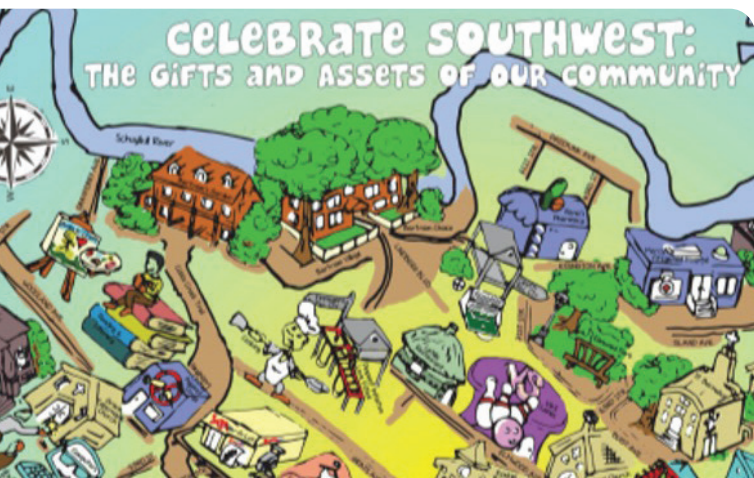
This initiative has brought about new perspective among those involved regarding the role a library can play to catalyze positive action and improve the lives of those whose homes and workplaces surround a library. Project leaders and collaborators agreed that the library's geographic embeddedness and its reputation as a known, trusted, and neutral anchor institution make it uniquely positioned as a powerful connector and catalyst.

"The library played a crucial role with their facility and staff being an anchor," observed Steve Kuzmicki of the Southwest Community Development Corporation. "I think they can continue to play that role. They are seen as a neutral place that is good."

Neil Bardhan described the most valuable role he can now see a library playing in the community:

A "conduit" is the best word to describe it: a conduit to communities and people who are geographically nearby or see themselves as being part of that local area. Specifically, within that sometimes it is the relationships that library staffers have with community members. I feel weirdly fortunate to have had this set of events and experiences. Now I feel like I know a library branch staff far from my neck of Philadelphia. I have my own little branch four blocks from me and I don't know anybody's name there. When I go over to Paschalville when I walk in it's like, hello old friend, it's great to see you again. It provides someone like me outside of the library a great insight into what happens at that library that is not just books. (Interview, 6/22/20)

Resident Consultant Chareese Ford described the library "as a headquarters that can connect all of these resources and the people. It is accessible by many and provides so much."





“I hope it will be utilized by other nonprofits and community programs. I hope libraries will see the priceless work we put in and use the information.”

*Diane Poulson-Venn
Resident Consultant and Neighborhood Ambassador*

Neighborhood Ambassador Diane Poulson-Venn hoped that other libraries and institutions serving communities will take note of the wealth of information their work has revealed:

I hope it will be utilized by other nonprofits and community programs. I hope libraries will see the priceless work we put in and use the information. I want to see big improvements in my neighborhood. I intend to pass on the information and what we have learned to our legislators as well as the police department to have a better connection to people.

(Interview, 6/16/20)

Although it was new to nearly every participant, the asset-based approach toward beginning with assets and centering community control was a welcome shift in focus and language.

“I had not heard of ABCD,” Annette recalled. “It’s been extraordinarily helpful. I view it that it laid the foundation for the beginning for something bigger and better.”

“While it sounds academic,” noted Andrea Lemoins, “ABCD fits libraries and museums.” As an organizer for the Free Library of Philadelphia, she must continually navigate the two worlds between community members and library system. “Professional staff are able to hear and understand it. It’s a shared language.”

As a library professional whose role as Free Library Southwest Cluster Leader carried her throughout the system, Tiffany Nardella found both the lens and practices of Asset-Based Community Development uniquely relevant:

The ABCD approach was essential. It’s essential! Without ABCD I would’ve have had no idea how to move forward. It’s so well organized and clear to understand, and also really open and flexible. Even though you can always tweak any of the resources, I found you didn’t have to, because they were very loose and would work with any audience in any community. (Interview, 6/29/20)

From her perspective, the approach offers a skillset that is critical for library professionals:

This should be a curriculum or class in library school. You can’t run a public library well without knowing community. When I was in school, I took some great classes but nothing like this. I don’t think you can be a public servant in a public library without understanding the importance of this work.

The tools of ABCD are tangible, evolved, real, and warm. I liked the idea of Harwood, but it doesn’t speak now to me. It was more facilitating and this is just listening. [ABCD] created a lot of time and space for people to be who they are. It came across as very welcoming. It didn’t feel like anyone felt like they had to present this sort of job interview but could just be who they are.

Tiffany observed how the kinds of interactions experienced through this process are typically not possible in the everyday, “one-way” operations of a library:

A lot of my work is around operations, but this work is why I became a librarian: It’s about working with the community. It has brought a lot of joy. It also allowed me to meet so many wonderful people who I don’t think I would have been able to meet prior.

Because people like Diane and a lot of others used our spaces, but it was like one way. They received books or attended programs but there wasn’t a set-up for interaction. Getting to know really important, powerful, amazing special folks, specifically women, with this grant has brought a lot to me. And just understanding that if I ever had a little bit more funding or time, this should be the heart of public libraries. (Interview, 6/29/20)



Neighbors building relationships and learning one another’s gifts at the Crossing Guards Story Circle. Source: Southwest Globe Times

“This should be a curriculum or class in library school. You can’t run a public library well without knowing community. The tools of ABCD are tangible, evolved, real and warm.”

*Tiffany Nardella
Southwest Cluster Leader, Free Library of Philadelphia*



When engaging with communities, libraries can risk perpetuating the beliefs symbolized by cultural figure “Lady Bountiful,” defined by Whiteness and the colonial idea that “We know what’s best” for the community. An asset-based approach counters that community members “know best” about issues affecting their lives. Source: Public Domain

“This work is why I became a librarian: It’s about working with the community. It has brought a lot of joy... and allowed me to meet so many wonderful people who I don’t think I would have been able to meet prior, because people like Diane and a lot of others used our spaces, but it was like one way. They received books or attended programs but there wasn’t a set-up for interaction.” Tiffany Nardella

She points out how helpful an ABCD approach to staffing and community hiring would be for the library system and its employees, especially in the form of providing more training in asset-based, relational community engagement skills alongside opportunities to put them into practice:

Before all of this happened, I had been thinking of ways to cultivate skills of permanent staff, who many live in the community, to hone these skills. I think it would be something that would be enjoyable and provide them with flexibility, tools, pride, and joy. By honing these skills, I mean basic community building such as that first interview, that’s a lot of learning right there. You can tell from that if someone finds this work exciting. We have a lot of great staff who we are not using to their potential because they have a specific role, but if we provide an opportunity to expand, it would be beneficial to everybody. (Interview, 6/29/20)

As an organizer employed by the library who works closely with and answers to community members, Andrea Lemoins felt a much-needed liberation in her work as a result of the project’s emphasis on resident leadership and capacity—especially given the tendency of institutions including libraries to move at a slower pace than the ideas and possibilities often bubbling up from the ground level of communities:

The biggest thing I have learned is to stop waiting for the institution. Institutions are really slow to move, very slow to change. I have stopped asking for permission to do things. I can’t remember the last time I asked my manager for permission, probably over a year. I just do stuff. I just listen to the community and do it and no one gives me any pushback. And people are very supportive and I am being praised for the work I am doing. (Interview, 6/17/20)

An intentional, dual focus on growing resident power while recognizing their assets can also help advance issues of racial equity in significant ways. In a Community Catalyst cohort webinar on shifting power, Andrea pointed out a link that has been made between library culture and “Lady Bountiful”—a historical symbol associated with Whiteness, benevolence, and superiority. While “using White women as a morality tool,” Andrea explained, the ideas Lady Bountiful and colonialism promote “the belief in that ‘I know what’s best for you’ role,” which is often instilled in library and other helping professionals.

In contrast, an asset-based approach reverses the “I know what’s best for you” mentality to one of humility toward residents as experts, proposing that, in fact, community members “know what’s best for them.” Making a mental shift can disrupt and replace harmful power imbalances and attitudes rooted in structural racism still at play among mostly White institutions serving communities of color.



One way of visualizing the abundance of assets to be found in any neighborhood that libraries can play a pivotal role in connecting and catalyzing to be more productive together. Source: Mike Green



CONCLUSION

What might be possible, asked Tiffany, if libraries were to embrace the role as connectors and conveners of neighbors and conduits of neighborhood abundance?

At the first [information] session, I was sitting at a table with two women who had lived across the street from each other for, I can't remember, but it was like 10 or 20 years, and had never met. So that, if a library can just do that over and over again, just imagine how abundant and connected the communities could be.

(Interview, 6/29/20)

Rooted in respect for the gifts, hopes, and leadership of caring neighbors, the work of the Paschalville Partnership and Free Library of Philadelphia CCI team provides a compelling example for libraries and anchor institutions seeking to become authentically community-centered.

“We experimented with new ideas,” reflected the team in their final report, “learned from these experiences, and arrived at the end of the process with a firm belief that libraries indeed can be natural catalyzers in the communities where they serve.” Not only has the team’s creative, adaptive crafting yielded a model structure for resident-led engagement, but has also revealed the myriad tangible benefits such activities can generate as evidenced by the resounding, diverse chorus of voices from Resident Consultants, Neighborhood Ambassadors, and participants to the mixture of staff from the library and partner organizations singing its praises.

The energy, pride, real relationships, and lasting mindset shifts that occurred among every kind of participant and leader reflect what is possible with a simple shift from starting with a community’s needs to a community’s gifts and assets, from delivering services to respecting and supporting resident solutions, from directing to listening. As Tiffany stated:

I have told many people, friends and colleagues, about the work and that it is looking at community from the correct viewpoint, looking from an asset space where you leave conversations feeling empowered with action steps, that is about supporting the community, not directing the community. It sounds much more complicated than it is, but in the end it is really just listening and asking the right questions... and listening.

It's not as complicated as it sounds. People in my position or leadership role, you don't have to be innovative, you just have to listen because the community is innovative. (Interview, 6/29/20)

As one of their final efforts, the team gathered their learnings, tools, and techniques into a Toolbox for Community Catalyzers. “In the language of ABCD,” they wrote, “this toolbox is our gift back to the library and museum world.” We highly recommend exploring this valuable resource for anyone seeking to catalyze local connection and relationships in your community.

“It’s not as complicated as it sounds. People in my position or leadership role, you don’t have to be innovative, you just have to listen. Because the community is innovative.”

Tiffany Nardella

Prepared by the ABCD Evaluation Team with the Free Library of Philadelphia/Paschalville Partnership Community Catalyst Grantee Team for the IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative.

For more information, visit:

[Toolbox for Community Catalyzers](#) (Free Library/Paschalville CCI Team)

[“Library Partnership Catalyzing a Community-Led Future”](#) (SW Globe Times)

ABCD Tools: [Power Ladder](#), [Journey Maps](#), [Asset Maps](#)

[IMLS Community Catalyst Initiative](#)

[The Asset-Based Community Development Institute](#)



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