

Sharing the Learning

A Special Publication from Grassroots Grantmakers

The Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation's first step for community engagement – the "Living Room Meeting"

"I feel everyone has a role in their community, and it's our responsibility to find that." — Roque Barros, Director of Community Building

A groundbreaking, resident-led effort to transform a blighted, ten-acre brownfield into a vibrant cultural and commercial center began in living rooms across the Diamond Neighborhoods of southeastern San Diego.

Residents and neighbors came together to talk about what their community needed, and then worked together to make it happen.

Today, Market Creek Plaza hosts shops, restaurants, a grocery store, banking facilities, space for community meetings and activities, multicultural public art, and an outdoor amphitheater. It's hard to envision the area as part of an underinvested community - or what had been an abandoned factory - but these are the scope of changes that were possible when local residents took ownership of change in their community.

Not only did Diamond residents develop the plans and processes for change, but they also own the community asset that Market Creek Plaza has become.

The role they've taken and the road they've traveled was supported through a partnership between residents, the Jacobs Family Foundation, and the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation. Since 1997, the foundation has committed to working

alongside Diamond residents in support of their ownership of the plans, implementation, and assets of neighborhood change.

Roque Barros, Director of Community Building, initiated the resident involvement process. His goal was to listen to the needs and interests of 600 individuals and 200 businesses in the 10 neighborhoods, and then partner with teams of residents to make those changes happen.

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One of Market Creek Plaza's engaging outdoor public spaces. Wall tiles in the background were created by children from the surrounding Diamond Neighborhoods.



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A comfortable place to talk



Barros hosts a meeting in the community.

"Normally resident input is the last part of the process, but we decided to change that practice."

— Roque Barros

Barros says that the approach of getting residents invested and involved in the changes was different for a foundation, which typically would fund a non-profit to lead a project of this kind. "Normally resident input is the last part of the process, but we decided to change that practice," he says.

To begin, constructive conversations and the development of trusting relationships needed to happen. Barros and his project partner, Lisette Islas, came up with a simple plan to make conversations comfortable and informal.

They focused first on the setting and decided to host meetings directly in the community. But rather than choose a local community-based organization or a church basement, they went straight to the source and met in residents' own living rooms.

Barros and Islas identified residents they knew in each neighborhood, and then asked them to recruit ten friends for a meeting they would host in their own home.

"We wanted to make these meetings comfortable and fun, and for me it was no different than the idea of having an informal party in your house," says Barros. Participants were familiar

with the host and the setting, and as a result, attendance was consistently high.

Just like renting the basement of a church, Barros would pay individuals \$50 for the use of their living room space, and add another \$50 for food. He'd ask the house host to recruit their friends, but was always there to help.

His goal for the host was to make the process easy and relaxing, emphasizing the simple fact that the group would just sit and talk. Says Barros, "All I wanted to do is find out what they like about the neighborhood and what they would change."

Culture-specific meetings were held to make people feel most comfortable. Barros would bring a good translator, and made sure he learned the customs and habits of the host culture. "I had to admit to myself that I knew very little about Samoan or Lao culture. So I needed to learn things that were specific like taking my shoes off in a Lao home, or that women cannot shake hands with the monks," he said. "You need to start by being sensitive to the customs of the culture you're working with."

What started as a simple idea for listening and outreach eventually transformed into a formal

strategy for resident engagement. Barros says they didn't really know what the living room meetings would evolve into, but he could quickly see that for many residents it was the first step in listening or community building.

Setting the tone

The approach to the meeting itself became just as important as the setting. Barros focused on relationship building during initial visits, and steered away from any complex ideas, questions, or strong expectations.

"We'll just sit and talk," he says. "All I wanted to do was find out what they liked about the neighborhood and what they would change."

He kept questions simple and didn't rely on a PowerPoint presentation or handouts. He encouraged facilitators at this stage of the interaction not to worry too much about the information they were getting, as the top priority was to build a relationship.

"We were not getting into really detailed conversations because that would happen later on - we just wanted people to verbalize. I always say, 'let it evolve, and the people will guide you.'"

“You can't think everyone is going to be engaged in the same way, but everyone has the potential to contribute in a way that has value.”

— Roque Barros

Barros recommends only a well-trained facilitator for such a role. “You have to be able to motivate people and help them feel comfortable sharing openly, and if you're not good at that, don't do it,” he says. He cautions that meetings can easily spill into gripe sessions or blaming when personal and community tensions are suddenly revealed.

“Sometimes it can get ugly,” says Barros. “But there are real things that people feel angry about and they need to be heard. It takes a good facilitator to know how to do this, look at those issues, and shift it to create a vision.”

In culture-specific meetings Barros relied on a translator, and for an icebreaker, brought photographs from their homeland. “They started to talk about memories and stories, and then they were opening up in ways where they learned about each other,” he says.

Experienced community leaders or people with a greater tendency to get involved in group planning were often at these meetings. But Barros kept his focus on individuals who didn't have those qualities because of their potential to grow.

“I feel everyone has a role in their community and it's our responsibility to find

that,” he says. “You can't think everyone is going to be engaged in the same way, but everyone has the potential to contribute in a way that has value.”

Establishing goals

Barros knew that he'd listened enough in a particular neighborhood when he saw the same themes come up meeting after meeting.

“If you hold meetings in a specific neighborhood and capture 100 to 300 people, you see a pattern develop in the information you've gathered. Now you know it's time to take that and do something about it.”

But the message to meeting participants at this stage wasn't that Barros or Jacobs were there to solve the problem. “People would ask us when we were coming back to make those changes. We said, ‘we're not going to make the changes, but we'll help you make them.’”

Help started with small goals that a group could accomplish quickly, and then celebrate. Typically it was a one-day activity that related to a primary theme that came out of the meetings.

Says Barros, “If it's more than a one-day commitment, it can get overwhelming.”

During such an activity, residents could get involved at different levels of comfort and see the results quickly - and also find a role for themselves as a participant in building and changing community.

Formula for change

Throughout all of their ongoing work, Barros says he always keeps forefront in his mind the idea that “awareness, plus participation, equals change.

“If people become aware of something new and then participate, then some kind of change will happen as a result,” he says.

“All residents have a vision of what they would like to see in their community, but lack the opportunity to be asked or heard.

“Throughout this process, residents in the Diamond learned something new about themselves, and now they are motivated to involve others and change their community.”

Organizing the meeting:

- Focus on one neighborhood at a time with the goal of knowing 200 people in a short time. Think in these terms: *If I know 10 people who can do a meeting, and they invite 10 of their friends, it is an automatic 100.*
- Look for hosts who aren't pushing their own agenda in the community.
- Pay hosts a reasonable amount for the use of their home, recruitment, and food. It's the same logic as renting a church space - \$50 for the space, and \$50 for food.
- Offer to help your host with the recruitment.
- Language can be a communication barrier. Host meetings in the language in which residents are most comfortable.
- Learn culturally appropriate customs for interaction – cultivate sensitivity.

Personal story: Bevelynn Bravo



For nine years, Bevelynn Bravo and her children lived in Lincoln Park in an apartment that overlooked the site where Market Creek Plaza would one day take shape.

But before that transformation, what they saw there every day was an abandoned building - "nothing out of the ordinary in the neighborhood," says Bravo - and an image that was not so different from how she felt about her own life.

"My life wasn't very uplifting, and I felt like I'd abandoned my own goals and dreams," she says. "We were living in an area once known as the 'four corners of death,' and I never knew it could change. I just felt that all I could do was to live for my kids."

In order to offer her children something more than what she felt the neighborhood provided, she bused them to a more affluent suburb in San Diego with better schools. She attended PTA meetings there but struggled to make connections with the other parents, feeling like an outsider. Regardless, Bravo says she continued to participate in order to make sure she had a presence there, so her children would "not get treated differently."

"I'd always thought that I was waiting for someone to come and change things - but what I really learned was that I was waiting for myself."

**— Bevelynn Bravo,
Community Coordinator**

Around the same time she met Roque Barros. He was connecting with residents in Lincoln Park and other neighborhoods around the Diamond to learn about their desires for community change. He invited Bravo to host a living room meeting, which she enjoyed – but when it was over assumed "that was the end of it."

But Barros contacted her again and asked her to attend a series of other meetings to learn more about the politics of the district, and to spend time getting to know their councilman. This time, however, Bravo chose not to attend.

Several sessions passed, and a friend phoned and finally persuaded her to join the group. Once at the meeting, Bravo liked talking with local officials and police as "regular people."

An important personal connection for her also took place. Says Bravo, "We started talking about the importance of valuing the community and how that was good for the kids. I was open to anything that was for the kids, so that was a turning point for me that really got my attention."



***"When I started to remember my hopes and dreams, it brought back my confidence. It made me see I could still accomplish those things I wanted for myself."* — Bevelynn Bravo**

As the group worked through a series of exercises to consider personal goals and dreams, Bravo says she had another important discovery. "I started to remember what I had let go of in my life, and thought was out of reach," she says. "Just having a conversation like that opens your eyes and you start to remember the plans you have for your life."

With her life's possibilities reignited, and a new image of a community where her children could thrive, Bravo received yet another call from Barros. "He said he wanted to start this program where you come and work in your own neighborhood, and know your neighbors. He wanted to hire for three positions."

Barros encouraged her and others who'd attended the sessions to interview, but she had her doubts. "I had to think and think about setting up an interview," she says. But she chose to move ahead, which paid off. Several days after her interview, she was phoned again and told she was "a good fit" for one of the positions.

In 2000, Bravo started to work as a Community Coordinator for the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation, where she would play an important role in the development of Market Creek Plaza. Now as a participant in both community and personal transformation, she not only saw her neighborhood improve, but also realized many of the personal goals she'd let go of. Today Bravo owns her own home and has returned to school.

Those changes all started with a simple living room meeting. Says Bravo, "When I started to remember my hopes and dreams it brought back my confidence. It made me see I could still accomplish those things I wanted for myself."

"I'd always thought that I was waiting for someone to come and change things - but what I really learned was that I was waiting for myself."



Bravo (center) at work in her community.

During the meeting:

- Don't use a PowerPoint or hand outs as devices – just focus on basic conversation.
- Ask simple questions – *What do you/don't you like about your community?* The goal is to get people to talk and develop familiarity.
- Don't worry about the information you're gathering, but focus on building the relationship. When you build trust, you automatically gain good information and sharing.
- Bring photos of peoples' homelands to use as an icebreaker – usually they'll talk about what they remember growing up, which helps develop comfort and familiarity.
- Make sure to have a good facilitator (and admit when you're not one). Sessions can become sensitive, so you must have someone skilled to help people focus on the positives.
- Give people a chance to communicate angers or hurts – hear them out, and then focus on what they can do about it.



The Joe and Vi Jacobs Center reflects the same vibrant architectural style as the surrounding Market Creek Plaza.

Learn more about the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation, or Market Creek Plaza
www.jacobscenter.org

Learn more about the Jacobs Family Foundation
www.jacobsfamilyfoundation.org

For additional copies or information on the network for place-based funders who work from a “we begin with residents” perspective:

Grassroots Grantmakers
 361-798-1808 or 515-288-3389
info@grassrootsgrantmakers.org
www.grassrootsgrantmakers.org

After the meeting:

- Start from this premise: everyone has a role in the community – and a facilitator’s responsibility is to help people find that role. There are many different ways to get engaged. Identify what’s unique about a person, and help them develop that in relation to the community.
- Focus on building capacity with people who are less involved in their community, because they have greater potential for change.
- Approach participants at a level of involvement where they’ll feel comfortable. Don’t plunge someone new into a major commitment. Start with small and tangible goals that are accomplished with ease.
- When an individual or group is ready to take action, start with short term goals - then celebrate their accomplishments! Don’t feel that larger problems must be solved immediately – instead, take small steps toward a solution.
- Don’t wait too long to do something constructive with participant feedback, as energy and enthusiasm will be lost.
- Look for patterns of information that emerge – you might talk to 100-300 people in one neighborhood and see similar themes. This is usually a sign you’ve engaged enough and it’s time to move toward action steps.
- After you identify a theme for action, plan a one-day activity around it. A one-day activity is less overwhelming and participants can stay engaged. During this activity you’ll be able to identify likely individuals who could serve on a team focused on long-term projects.

Principles to follow:

- Don’t force things to happen – listen, let things evolve, and people will guide you.
- Consider the formula: Awareness + Participation = Change
- Everything starts with listening – you don’t need to know it all or figure it all out in advance.
- Outreach, organize, and mobilize!

“I always say, ‘let it evolve, and the people will guide you.’” — Roque Barros