

Community Investment Network Conference 2008

Community Philanthropy: Symbolism or Substance

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"My own test of the cultural level of any metropolis is not the monumental height of its museums and civic centers, but the plane at which its leaders and its humblest citizens have examined and agreed to improve the human lives of their community. Cultural centers are fine, but they are not always or necessarily the place to start, and certainly not the place to stop." Paul Ylvisaker

Recently, I have been reading and reflecting on several essays and speeches of Paul Ylvisaker, a notable contributor on the role of philanthropy in our society. His views on civic life, particularly the importance of expanding beyond the notions of improvements to public infrastructure, the naming of culture centers, and participation in elections, promotes civic life that includes citizen-building.

Civic life has become synonymous with increases in voter participation, the tangible improvements to public spaces such as parks, cultural and recreational centers adorned with the names honoring local citizens for service to their communities. While these efforts may be noble in their intentions and accomplishments, they are limited in their ability to capture "how we the people" come together to provide for and promote the general welfare of ourselves and our posterity. According to Ylvisaker, they are less of an indicator of how ordinary citizens, concerned about their neighborhoods, cities, and states, address problems in their community. And, they do not shed any light on how these lofty ideals are achieved or improve society.

For the past two years the National Rural Funder's Collaborative (NRFC) has sponsored the Community Investment Network (CIN) conference. The conference brings together individuals, giving circles, nonprofit and philanthropic professionals in a learning space that focuses on connecting with one another and developing broader civic engagement. This broader civic engagement will not necessarily lead to the forming of cultural centers, museums, and other monuments, but it does offer an opportunity to collectively examine and agree on how we can improve the places where we live. CIN has become the type of

initiative that I think Ylvisaker had in mind when he commented about ways to promote good citizen-building. Citizen-building is about finding a way to connect the energies of the people and link them with a methodology that promotes community vitality.

For many of us, civic participation may be limited because we think there is not a method or place for us to enter into an arena for creating a common good. It is almost as if we are seeking or waiting to be given permission to participate in the vitality of our communities. How do we promote active, civic life that improves the general welfare? The CIN uses the mechanism of philanthropy, beyond good works or charitable acts. Philanthropy then represents the spirit of giving, community consciousness and creation of a public interest in one's own community.

This is important to all communities, but particularly rural communities of color, with limited organized philanthropy or access to other forms of investment. Yes, the dollars are an important monetary measure of investment by a community and can serve as a means to achieve desired ends. But, more important is the organizing of individuals willing to invest their time, talent, and treasure to shape their community's future. This process of organizing assets creates shared interest and mutual responsibility for the general welfare of the community.

At NRFC, we are seeing this process -- organizing community assets, monetary and know-how for the general welfare -- emerge among some of our regional demonstration partners. Through their participation in the CIN's "learning space," our partners have affirmed their efforts at forming models of community philanthropy. Although the philanthropic dollars have not been large amounts or completely organized into giving circles or established field of interest funds at community foundations, there are elements of resourceful thinking about how to pool collective resources for the benefit of others.

Members of the California demonstration, Rai\$ing Change, are also making strides to redirect a share of the philanthropic giving of immigrant hometown associations in Salinas Valley to support new community efforts. One of the efforts emerging from this shift in giving priorities is building goodwill between immigrants and local government.

Collectively, a group of hometown associations pooled resources of time, talent, and treasure to celebrate and honor local government for their role in working with the immigrants to problem solve and address issues that improved better transition into their new community. The group of immigrant hometown associations, nonprofit and philanthropic entities, and local government are now considering ways to partner and address more sophisticated projects related to community development, educational attainment, and other forms of social enterprise. The recognition that there is collective mutual benefit in working together connects the energy of the community with a method that promotes community vitality. This is the citizen-building that benefits everyone, as Ylvisaker contends, and strengthens our unique social experiment in America.

"We the people" has a place in everyone's life, and lacks no exclusivity. But more importantly, we the people are willing to work toward creating a public interest. Simply stated, community residents lead with their money and invest in creating the vision of what their community can be.

The CIN fosters an intersection between organized giving and civic engagement. It can also stimulate the will to be a less fragmented community, and public will from the ordinary citizenry. This is the potential of this work and what NRFC hopes to usher in as a part of its transformational work to improve rural communities of color.