Buffalo Community Learning Exchange: The Power of Place.
“KLCC has provided a way for the [Boys and Girls Club of Benton Harbor] to continue to engage youth past the age of 18 when they traditionally move on.”

—KLCC Session II Preliminary Longitudinal Evaluation Report, 2009

College student and youth leader James Gunter is an assistant program coordinator at Benton Harbor’s Teen Center.

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The Buffalo Community Learning Exchange (CLE), held August 6 to 9, provided KLCC Session I host organization Citizen Action of New York the opportunity to showcase what makes its community unique even as it struggles to preserve its heritage and to revitalize its prospects in the face of changing social and economic dynamics. Buffalo is a very diverse community, a source of pride for its residents, but also the source of some tensions. A unique city in many ways, Buffalo has its own unique set of problems.

“In picking the theme for the Buffalo CLE, we wanted to incorporate a time capsule of where Buffalo is relative to racial justice,” says Chy’Nel Lee, Citizen Action staff member and co-organizer of the learning exchange. “Buffalo is still very much a segregated city as far as where people live and the way that they interact with other people.” According to Lee, Buffalo is a tradition-bound city where “people are used to doing the same old thing.” She points out that desegregating Buffalo’s schools is still “a fight in progress.” The CLE organizing team felt their challenge to be exploring a sense of what has happened in the past to bring them to the point where they are at this point in time.

Historically, Buffalo’s industrial life revolved around steel mills and the employment they offered, but the loss of industry has contributed to the economic stagnation that mirrors closely the slow pace of social change in the city. The city’s history has largely been shaped by two central factors that have had an irrefutable influence on the founding, character and ethnic composition of the city. The Erie Canal is a natural symbol of the area, and its story contributes to the concept of place as a holder of the city’s cultural identity. The Canal contributed to the area’s diverse demographic and the establishment of ethnic neighborhoods, but this has had unfortunate implications as well. According to Lee, segregation is so pronounced that whites are heavily concentrated in South Buffalo, accounting for up to 50 percent of the population in just this one area. In the current social and political environment, a city councilperson running for mayor who has a nega-
tive public reputation with regard to race is widely perceived as a potential step backward for the city.

An understanding of the city’s racial dynamic was further enabled at the CLE through: 1) gaining an understanding of the historical significance of Buffalo as a stop on the Underground Railroad; 2) visiting such locales as Harry’s Harbor where black slaves and pirates were permitted to sleep in times past; and 3) learning about the Colored Musicians Club, the first venue in the United States that provided a performance home where musicians could lodge and play freely regardless of race. Musicians from as far away as New York City and Syracuse came to find accommodations at this cultural repository of Buffalo’s history where they would be accepted without rancor.

Introduced to Buffalo through the walking tour early in the CLE, participants from other KLCC sites began to understand how ways of looking at an issue can be powerfully framed by the context of race. Of special note was a visit to the first African American church in Buffalo where escaping slaves from the American south sought refuge at the last stop on the Underground Railroad before fleeing to Canada. The pastor there emphasized the anticipation of freedom that is said to have permeated the little room where the slaves huddled together before embarking upon their future in a new land. Much of Citizen Action’s work has centered on integrating racial equity into their social change agenda, employing actionable methods that engage people in doing transformational work.

Specialized organizing tools help them cast individuals within the context of community change. “We use a leadership development map to look at who people in the community are as agents of change,” says Shanna Goldman, CANY organizing director, “the more people that are engaged, the more power you have and potential you have for change.” The challenge lies in bringing in new people and helping them to become real leaders in the community. Tools help to identify different levels of ability and ownership over an issue or institution, an individual’s existing capacity at that moment in time, which provides the opportunity for leadership development to occur.

At this learning exchange, different manifestations of the development map revealed elements of each group’s cultural self. The teacher group from South Texas, affiliated with host organization Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, created a tree using stickers, pipe cleaners, M&Ms and other creative materials to represent the different leadership levels pertinent to their situation. Teachers like Llano Grande founders Dr. Francisco Guajardo and Dr. Miguel Guajardo were the roots, the holders of knowledge; the young teachers were the trunk; students and their parents were the branches of the tree. Their observation that their trunk was very skinny led them to conclude that they needed to recruit more peers, and they devised a plan for doing so.

In a similar vein, teachers and administrators from Brooklyn, New York’s, PS 24 elementary school selected plates to represent their cultural selves with different leadership levels being represented by rice and beans, pico de gallo, and so on. “We watched people take the tool and make it into something that made sense for them, something they could use as a recruitment tool,” Goldman says. “We presented it and the different groups took and ran with it.”

Cultivating an appreciation for diversity of method, place and race underscored that the Buffalo CLE experience embodied what collective leadership is all about.

Another highlight, from a programming perspective, was two Laguna youth from New Mexico’s KLCC site leading a circle on taking a risk and identifying the source of one’s own power. “It was really great to see 15 and 16 year olds leading the entire group, [One] talked about recognizing his own power as a young person in the community context of deepest respect for one’s elders,” says Goldman, “that was amazingly powerful.” The takeaway seems to be not only providing the opportunity to share what the host community has, but to share tools and collaborative practices, such as gracious space, that can make this all work. The individual communities are the tableaux upon which collective leadership practices are built and shared. “Buffalo is a lot more than chicken wings,” says Lee.
Carrying it With You

Jina Downwind began her career with the KLCC fellowship as a mentor with Migizi Communications, a Session One host organization in Minneapolis, Minn., when they were about one year into the KLCC process. With three fellow coaches, she worked with the fellows to teach them hard skills around organizing for community development work.

When Jina Downwind started with Migizi Communications, she came from a background in community youth development and organizing, having been trained in those disciplines. Although she had been doing that for some time, working with the local community meant she was working for the first time with Native American, Hmong and Latino populations striving to move their communities forward in the face of poverty conditions.

In April of 2007, Downwind attended a leadership conference in Baltimore, co-sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Leadership Learning Community, where she began to understand the national dimension of the KLCC experience and became aware of the applicable tools that she could use in her work of supporting communities pursuing educational equity. “The whole empowerment piece [struck me], building collective leadership among the folks who were there,” says Downwind.

From that beginning, Downwind has found a way to remain fresh in the community change work to which she has dedicated herself. “Learning for me takes place when we are [actually] able to use the tools to further whatever the community change agenda is, but also the learning I have experienced in events and processes have become innate, they stay with you.” Because sustaining enthusiasm over time can be a challenge for people involved in community change work, it is important to have a sense of ownership so that staying connected to the work seems natural rather than burdensome. Customizing tools to fit within a community’s space and place can promote an ownership ethos.

As an essential element in the work of KLCC, relationships among people define everything that KLCC does in community whether with young people, adults or outside partners. “Relationships come with you, that’s how you sustain [the work] across time,” says Downwind, “you start to think about it at a personal level and then move that up … asking yourself ‘how will I start using these processes and relationships to do my work within the organization?’”

When asked directly how to reinvent passion, Downwind answers easily that the team of experts all across the country with whom fellows build trust-based relationships through such means as the Community Learning Exchanges is a constant wellspring of knowledge and support. “The work is mobile, we carry it with us.”
In July, the KLCC Bridge published the first in a two-part series excerpted from the KLCC Session Two longitudinal evaluation. In this issue, we look at how the collective leadership model can facilitate the creation of change in communities. The longitudinal evaluation team asked whether the principles of collective leadership can be disseminated within and across communities to impact the work that the KLCC community-based organizations (CBO) are doing to effect social change. We hope findings from this research will inform future leadership development initiatives.

Change takes place in a receptive environment.
A host community’s capacity for social transformation relies upon the readiness of individuals, the KLCC fellowship and the host organization. This readiness appears to encompass the following: the community-based organization’s (CBO) organizational structure needs to provide ongoing collective leadership coaching; the CBO and the fellows need to create internal and external partnerships; and there should be clear goals that align with community advancement.

Change requires time and patience.
The cycle of change includes the human, organizational, cultural/symbolic, political and economic dimensions of any community, factors that affect whether a CBO can implement and sustain social action work. Findings suggest that individual transformation is central to the collective capacity to create change, and the amending of individual scripts toward a more collective language came rapidly in KLCC Sessions One and Two. Organizational change, however, required more time due to the need to develop collective/shared leadership and to build cultural, social and political capital alongside the individual transformation component.

Core collective leadership elements that are essential to success.
Sessions One and Two provide insight into the elements that require recognition, acknowledgement and attention if community change work is to be successful: collective ownership of problems, goals, processes and outcomes defines civic engagement; building and sustaining partnerships and networks relies upon the skill to build social, cultural and political capital; dialogue and action enable community learning; trust, respect and collective/shared work are generated by good management of the process.

Place-based collective leadership must be intergenerational and inclusive.
Host organizations wishing to broaden their sphere of influence and advocacy must reflect on their history of community service and tailor outreach and partnering efforts to be inclusive across the spectrum of race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, age, language, special needs and more.

Knowledge “trading zones” encourage innovation in knowing and doing.
National gatherings, workshops and inter-site visits are integral to the KLCC leadership learning process. These institutions provide opportunities for networking; learning through differences and similarities; learning new processes and strategies; brainstorming and planning; and accessing needed technical support for sustaining site-based projects.

Work is supported through funding and technical support.
Ongoing technical assistance to support fellows as they learn and act collectively works in tandem with the funding that creates the space and resources to do social change work.

Community support is a key factor in CBO success.
Demographic shifts and acknowledgement of the historic oppression of particular racial/economic groups necessitates that CBOs learn and grow with their diverse constituencies. Learning new social, cultural and cognitive literacies will be essential to the success of community-based activities.

Study findings suggest that community-based, collaborative leadership has many dimensions, including building trusting relationships and alliances, and managing tasks to achieve measurable goals. More specifically: collective leadership changes systems by fostering changes at the individual, fellowship and partnership levels; collective leadership requires individual leadership development, effective relationships and a strong organizational infrastructure; sites adapt the work of KLCC to their own contexts; host organizations have struggled to maintain the work of KLCC; significant change related to the work of KLCC can be identified; and there is evidence that the principles of collective leadership are being replicated within the active communities.

This report presents impressive findings and examples of KLCC impact across sites. Challenges have been faced and lessons have been learned.

This summary was adapted from the report prepared by the KLCC National Evaluation Longitudinal Team, which includes: Maenette Benham, Anna Ortiz, Matthew Militello, John Oliver, and Patrick Halladay.
The James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards

The James Irvine Foundation has announced a call for nominations for the James Irvine Foundation Leadership Awards. The Awards recognize individual leaders who advance innovative and effective solutions to significant issues in California. Four to six award recipients will each receive $125,000 in organizational support, plus additional assistance to share their effective program models with policymakers and other practitioners.

Nominations are welcome from people who know the leader or leadership groups well and can attest to their qualifications. The Web site, www.irvine.org/leadership, provides more information about the awards, profiles of past recipients and answers to frequently asked questions. Nominations are due by October 13, 2009 and awards will be announced in April 2010.

Education Equity Informs Upcoming Minneapolis CLE

The Community Learning Exchange (CLE) is up and running and gaining steam. KLCC Session One host organization Migizi Communications of Minneapolis is in the midst of planning the next CLE, which will take place October 20-23. A central part of the welcoming activities will include a festival of food that draws from the rich local culture of Somali, Latino, Native American and German-Scandinavian ethnicities along with a space for the expression of rural cultural cuisine. The evening’s welcome will be followed by a day of sharing stories of culture and history using the gracious space concept to get grounded and to begin to establish a sense of trust, which is essential to crossing boundaries and facilitating the kinds of conversations that need to take place around the topic of racial equity in education.

More sharing will take place the third day, but this time specifically regarding issues and experience related to education equity in rural and urban communities. The host wishes to encourage the emergence of a collective vision for action plans for further change work, and to explore what that means in terms of space and place. Everyone will leave with a toolbox of collective leadership strategies and tools that explain how Migizi uses experiential learning and their own facilitation strategy for success, as when the organization achieved a Memorandum of Agreement between the Minneapolis American Indian community and the Minneapolis Public Schools to support programming designed to close the achievement and opportunity gap for students of color and for Native Americans. One tool Migizi has developed is a Race and Equity Report Card, which analyzes legislative proposals through a racial equity lens with the goal of analyzing the impact of policy decisions to determine if proposed policies will potentially exacerbate or reduce racial disparities. Such a tool could be adapted to meet the needs of communities around the country struggling with similar issues.

International Leadership Association Conference

The International Leadership Association (ILA) will hold its 11th Annual Conference from November 11-14 in Prague, Czech Republic. The title of the global conference is Leadership for Transformation and it will feature sessions on a range of subjects concerned with leadership research, programs and trends.

According to the ILA Web site, “The International Leadership Association is the global network for all those who practice, study and teach leadership. The ILA promotes a deeper understanding of leadership knowledge and practices for the greater good of individuals and communities worldwide.”

Information on the conference is available at www.ila-net.org/Conferences/index.htm.

KLCC Coordinating Organization the Innovation Center Wins National and Community Service Grant

This past July, the Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development was awarded a grant by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Innovation Center will link service learning to leadership development and civic activism in three communities addressing community health issues of diabetes, violence, and environmental protection through specialized training, online learning networks, and cross-site meetings.

The Innovation Center will focus on building the capacity of three community-based organizations — Tohono O’odham Community Action (TOCA) in Sells, AZ; the Youth Development Training and Resource Center (YDTRC) in New Haven, CT; and the Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey, CA. All three sites plan to use service learning to address challenges in their community.

More than 60% of all Tohono O’odham adults have adult-
onset diabetes, the highest rate in the world. To encourage the healthy eating habits and active lifestyle that prevent type II diabetes, TOCA youth are reviving traditional Tohono O’odham food sources and games. They will plant community gardens, revitalize traditional farming methods, organize sports leagues for traditional athletics, and coordinate hiking trips to collect native plants. This work will not only tackle the community’s health concerns, but revitalize a culture once on the verge of extinction.

Crime statistics show that New Haven’s crime rate is on the rise, while at the same time the number of out-of-school opportunities for youth is decreasing. This grant will enable New Haven young people to take action in their community. As members of youth action teams, young people will design and lead community service projects to prevent crime and violence.

The city of Watsonville, CA, near the Monterey Bay Aquarium, has a strong environmental ethic, but few people know how to restore or maintain the area’s unique ecosystems. With the assistance of the Innovation Center, the Aquarium will partner with other community organizations to sponsor “drop-in” community-based service projects and to mentor youth as they design and carry out their own service projects. With these projects, young people will link their science education to community environmental issues.

“Young people sincerely want to ensure that their hometowns are healthy places, but that is a challenge in so many communities,” says Innovation Center President Wendy Wheeler. “Strategies that bring young people together in service learning, leadership development, and civic engagement unleash a sometimes-hidden power of young people and their communities to create healthy futures.”

Excerpted from a press release from The Innovation Center. ▲
“Resilience is a hallmark of Big Creek People in Action, West Virginia and Appalachia. When you look at their circumstances, the odds may seem stacked against them. When you get to know the people and their deep spirit, the whole equation changes.”

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