



MAXIMIZING RETURNS:  
INVESTING IN  
**NONTRADITIONAL  
LEADERS**

BY

Mohammad Dawood, Jerry Ann Hebron, Lisa Luevanos,  
Mary Luevanos and Victor Robinson

WITH

Roque Barros, Janis Foster Richardson,  
Lisa Leverette and Deborah Meehan



*The Community Connections team pauses for a photo at a Grassroots Grantmakers gathering in Cleveland.*

# COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS & INVESTING IN INDIVIDUALS

One woman wanted to teach kids on her block about recycling by making jewelry from things others were throwing away; founders of a community garden wanted to show kids in their neighborhood how food grows by providing gardening classes in the summer; a group of high schoolers wanted to expand their education by purchasing

supplies to help them study for the ACT.

So what did they do? Each group applied for a Community Connections grant.

Since its start in 2006, Community Connections Small Grants Program has funded about 750 projects like these throughout Detroit. For 10 years, a panel of community residents has met monthly

to review applications and award innovative, youth-focused grassroots projects in the Brightmoor, Chadsey-Condon, Cody Rouge, North End, Osborn and Southwest neighborhoods of Detroit between \$500 and \$5,000 to fund their activities.

Not only does Community Connections invest in community projects — it also invests

in community leaders.

The organization has provided many grassroots leaders — including its panelists and grantees — with the opportunity to attend conferences, meetings and trainings locally, regionally and nationally. There, these community members learned new skills and made valuable connections with people involved in similar work.

**For Community Connections, this investment in individuals is crucial to creating the enduring community change the organization hopes to foster. We're here to tell you why.**

# WHO ARE WE?



## MOHAMMAD DAWOOD

**Resident of:** Chadsey-Condon, Detroit

**Community work:** Caseworker for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, English as a second language teacher, and an advocate for the local Yemeni population

Mohammad has been a Community Connections panelist for about two years.



## LISA LUEVANOS

**Resident of:** Metro Detroit, but grew up and works in Southwest, Detroit

**Community involvement:** Freelance photographer, muralist, arts educator and co-founder of the Detroit Latino arts organization Community of Latino Artists, Visionaries and Educators (CLAVE)

Lisa got to know folks involved with Community Connections through her mother, Mary, who is the organization's longest-serving panelist.



## MARY LUEVANOS

**Resident of:** Southwest, Detroit

**Community involvement:** Visual artist, storyteller, arts teacher, in-demand board member who has served with the Detroit Council for the Arts, WDET, Young Audiences of Michigan, Southeast Michigan Arts Forum and more, a former staffer with New Detroit and with the Detroit Parks and Recreation Department, and a lifelong Southwest Detroiter

Mary has been a grassroots grant maker since Community Connections' inception 10 years ago.



## JERRY ANN HEBRON

**Resident of:** North End, Detroit

**Community work:** Executive director of Oakland Avenue Urban Farm, and a cultivator of people, community and food

Jerry has been a recipient of multiple Community Connections grants.



## VICTOR ROBINSON

**Resident of:** North End, Detroit

**Community involvement:** Business manager of the Southwest Detroit Business Association's youth music and arts program, Center of Music and Performing Arts Southwest, committee member for the Association of Fundraising Professionals' Detroit chapter, executive committee member for the Cass Tech Alumni Association's Board of Directors, and a Developing K.I.D.S. board member

Victor has served as a Community Connections panelist since August 2015 and was recently brought on as a social media marketing consultant for the organization.

## ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTORS

### + ROQUE BARROS

**Director for the Ford Institute for Community Building at the Ford Family Foundation**

First in the nonprofit sector and then in philanthropy, Roque's work has always been rooted in resident-centered community building. As a former director at the Jacobs Family Foundation's Center for Neighborhood Innovation, Roque produced multiple Resident Learning Exchanges in which practitioners ▶

throughout the country, including some folks in the Community Connections network, have come together to share their work and best practices.

## + JANIS FOSTER RICHARDSON

**Consultant and former executive director of Grassroots Grantmakers**

For more than 10 years, Janis served as the executive director of Grassroots Grantmakers, a network of place-based funders in the U.S. and Canada who believe that

change begins with residents. In this role, she helped produce On the Ground learning gatherings, where grassroots funders participate in professional development, skill-building and team-building. As a part of the Grassroots Grantmakers network, members of Community Connections have attended nearly all of these On the Ground gatherings.

## + LISA LEVERETTE

**Director of Community Connections Grant Program and of Lower Eastside Com-**

## **munity Grant Program**

Bringing skills from her experience as a social worker, therapist, program designer and program manager, Lisa manages programs, networks and resources to inspire ordinary citizens to achieve extraordinary results.

## + DEBORAH MEEHAN

**Executive Director of Leadership Learning Community**

As the executive director of Leadership Learning Community, a nonprofit organization that focuses on leveraging

leadership as a way to create a more equitable society, Deborah is actively involved in leadership development. Each year, her organization produces the Creating Space gathering, which brings together people invested in developing leaders, including funders, scholars and community organizers. The 2015 gathering, which was held in Detroit and co-produced by Community Connections, was titled “Challenging Leadership Assumptions: Learning From Nontraditional Leadership About Community and Systems Change.”

# WHAT IS ‘CAPACITY BUILDING?’

Simply put, “capacity building” is jargon — language that acts as a barrier, positioning those that understand it above those who do not. This phrase is often used by foundations and other social institutions. In the institutional arena, capacity building is the process of a group developing skills, procedures and resources that will ensure its success. That could mean a group participates in a leadership training, establishes a system of organizing its supplies or recruits a specific number of volunteers, all to make sure their goal of creating positive change in their community is met. A group is not considered “sustainable” — and consequently will not be funded — unless it builds capacity according to this

institutional formula.

These institutions look at success through a macro lens, often measuring it with overall numbers. They will ask a group: How many community members participated in your program? Did you stick to your budget? Has the crime rate decreased or the literacy rate increased in your community because of the work you are doing there?

We look at capacity building differently. To us, capacity building is an opportunity for *an individual* to grow their understanding and their abilities by connecting with community members and professionals outside their circles. It is *an experience* in which a community member

participates — whether it’s a conference or a workshop or a community tour: Sometimes the experiences are held in your own neighborhood and sometimes they are held across the country; sometimes participant community members are funders and sometimes they’re grassroots leaders in a different field or from another city; sometimes the experiences last a few hours and sometimes they last a few days; sometimes you learn about a distant community and sometimes you learn a new technique.

So more broadly, capacity building = opportunities for an individual to expand their knowledge + expand their connections.

Demonstrating that a group

has fully developed their capacity should not be a condition of funding. Instead, funding should include resources for the group to build their capacity — that is to participate in opportunities to expand their knowledge and their connections — over the life of their project. This investment in individual community leaders is crucial.

Numbers aren’t the only way to measure success. We believe it is individuals’ skills that contribute to positive change and individuals’ stories that indicate positive change in a community.

An investment in an individual is an investment in the group is an investment in the community.

**Capacity building = opportunities for an individual to expand their knowledge + to expand their connections.**

# PLACES WHERE WE'VE LEARNED & GROWN

## VICTOR

**Name of opportunity:** Results-based Leadership and Facilitation Training

**Hosted by:** The Skillman Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation

**Date:** December 15–16, 2015 and February 3, 2016

“It helped me to come in and see what they do and kind of **TAKE A HOLD OF IT**, getting outside of my comfort zone and growing.”

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## JERRY

**Name of opportunity:** Resident Learning Exchange:  
Resident-Centered Community Building — What Makes It Different?

**Organized by:** The Jacobs Family Foundation

**Date:** June 2012

“I left San Diego with a brand **NEW APPRECIATION FOR GRAFFITI ART**, realizing that this is not just defaming of a wall or of a building. There are messages in some of those, and they’re very detailed. The art is like somebody’s soul. And there’s an economic opportunity for these artists.”

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## MOHAMMAD. 📍 CLEVELAND

**Name of opportunity:** Grassroots Grantmakers On the Ground

**Hosted by:** Grassroots Grantmakers

**Date:** September 15–18, 2014

“Being there with them, I know whatever there is, we are in this circle — we are one fist. When I’m with them, it’s like **I’M HOME** because I know these guys will back me up no matter what happens.”

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## LISA AND MARY. 📍 WASHINGTON, D.C.

**Name of opportunity:** Latino Art Now! Conference

**Organized by:** The Inter-University Program for Latino Research at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the Smithsonian Latino Center and the Smithsonian American Art Museum

**Date:** November 7–9, 2013

“We’re meeting people — **WE’RE CROSSING MORE LINES** . . . We’re making these connections, and if we need to address something, we call upon these connections that we created.”

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## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

### 2009

- **Youngstown, Ohio:** Grassroots Grantmakers On the Ground Unconference

### 2010

- **Detroit:** Grassroots Grantmakers On the Ground Unconference

### 2011

- **Detroit:** PolicyLink Equity Summit
- **Atlanta:** Grassroots Grantmakers On the Ground Unconference

### 2013

- **Sacramento, California:** NeighborWorks Community Leadership Institute
- **Lansing, Michigan:** Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion Equity Network Conference
- **Detroit:** Detroit Food Policy Council conference

- **Washington, D.C.:** United Neighborhood Centers of America conference
- **Baltimore:** Leadership Learning Community Creating Space conference

### 2014

- **Holland, Michigan:** Diversity Alliance Summit on Race & Inclusion
- **Lansing, Michigan:** Michigan Association for Evaluation conference
- **Detroit:** Grantmakers for Children, Youth & Families conference
- **Detroit:** Youth Development Alliance (YDA) Capacity Building Conference

### 2015

- **Los Angeles:** PolicyLink Equity Summit
- **Detroit:** National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures Regional Arts Training Workshop

# RESIDENTS' ACCESS TO 'CAPACITY BUILDING' OPPORTUNITIES

Lower-wealth communities, particularly communities of color, have historically been denied access not only to monetary resources, but also to knowledge and opportunities to expand that knowledge. It's obvious that foundations and other nonprofits are working to address the problem of access to money by making grants available to these communities. But addressing the problem of access to knowledge — and the people who carry that knowledge — usually isn't prioritized in the same way.

Whether intentional or unintentional, spaces for "capacity building" have been created to accommodate "traditional" leaders (such as funders, nonprofit professionals and government officials) — those from more privileged backgrounds who have not only had longtime access to monetary resources and diverse knowledge, but who are also regularly given opportunities to continue building their capacity. Oftentimes

their employers, whether it's a foundation, a nonprofit organization or a government entity, will pay for them to attend a conference, workshop or training.

"The only people in organizations that even get to travel and go to conferences where they're exposed to new ideas are executive directors," said Deborah Meehan, executive director of Leadership Learning Community. "It's a fundamental problem in the whole sector."

These opportunities for learning are often held during times when people are working. For those whose employers do not fund learning opportunities, attending would mean taking time off, and possibly paying for transportation or child care in addition to any fees associated with the conference or training itself. These are barriers for many residents.

"Institutions and organizations are realizing there are a lot of changes we have to make in order

to make capacity building more accessible," said Roque Barros, director for the Ford Institute for Community Building at the Ford Family Foundation.

It really doesn't require anything more than committing to the value of investing in people, added Lisa Leverette, director of Community Connections Grant Program and of Lower Eastside Community Grant Program. Planning in advance to manage costs and sacrificing in areas that are not as catalytic to growth goes a long way toward freeing up resources to invest in building the capacity of resident leaders.

As grassroots leaders, we might not have known about — or been able to afford — the conferences or trainings we attended had we not been connected to a funder who thought it would be valuable for us to attend.

"We folks don't have the money to be able to go to Washington D.C.," Mary said.



*Victor completes an activity at a leadership development workshop held in Detroit.*

Addressing the barrier of grassroots leaders' access to knowledge — and the people who carry that knowledge — should be a priority. There is so much to be gained by residents attending meetings and conferences and trainings. Traditional leaders are not the only ones who create and affect change. They are not the only ones we should be investing in.

# WHAT DO RESIDENTS GAIN?

## 'BUILDING CAPACITY' = EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE

### 1. WE DEVELOP OUR LEADERSHIP AND OTHER SKILLS IN OUR TOOLKITS.

After living for a few years in Texas post college graduation, Victor knew it was time to return home to Detroit.

"I really wanted to be a part of the resurgence, and I love the city. It's gritty, it's tough, it's hard working, it's tenacious, it's love," Victor said. "I just feel like the city gave so much to me in my development and who I am today that it's time for me to pour back into it."

And that's just what he's doing. His list of community involvement is seemingly endless. He works with the Southwest Detroit Business Association as the business manager of the organization's youth music and arts program, Center of Music and Performing Arts Southwest. He serves on a couple of committees for the Association

of Fundraising Professionals' Detroit chapter. He has a passion for youth development and has mentored teens through Developing K.I.D.S. He was the president of his senior class in 2006 at Cass Technical High School and is now involved with planning their 10-year reunion, which will include a scholarship gala to raise \$10,000 in textbook scholarships for 10 seniors in the class of 2016. And, of course, he serves as a reviewer for Community Connections Grant Program, representing Detroit's North End neighborhood — but he was also recently brought on as a social media marketing consultant for the organization.

Victor is ambitious and is always looking not only for opportunities to get involved

in community work but also to grow his own development. He went to his first learning opportunity through Community Connections — a leadership development conference held at Focus: HOPE in Detroit — only a couple months after he first started volunteering with the organization. But it was his participation in a results-based leadership training facilitated by the Skillman Foundation and Annie E. Casey Foundation that has really had an impact on him. Here, Victor was introduced to a results-based leadership model, and learned how to be more efficient and results-oriented in the facilitation of meetings and the determination of goals.

He felt learning these skills was the most beneficial to his work in the community. Once

he started incorporating some of the principles he learned in that training, the improvement in productivity, in meetings for his Cass Tech reunion for example, was noticeable: "going from banter, where a conference call goes two hours, to making solid decisions and having tasks for people to do moving forward in an hour."

"It also helped me to come in and see what they do and kind of take a hold of it, getting outside of my comfort zone and growing," Victor said. "It gave me another career option — looking at it like maybe I might be pretty good at this and I enjoy doing it, so maybe I can infuse this into the fund development work that I'm doing."

With new skills, new doors are opened. ▼

► Living in communities that have been disenfranchised doesn't stop grassroots leaders from creating change. They're uniquely skilled at improvising, often approximating what other folks are doing — whether it's facilitating discussions, creating strategies, developing programming or fundraising. They utilize their natural talents, cobble together resources and draw on skills learned through experiences they've had at home, such as settling

family disputes or organizing church events.

But the most effective practices aren't always known and don't always trickle down from those who do have access to monetary resources and knowledge sharing.

By taking part in learning experiences where the playing field is level, residents are exposed to and are able to learn some of the skills and practices that would heed the best results for the change they're seeking.

An investment in their learning new skills is catalytic — elevating residents will doubtlessly positively impact their communities as well.

Deborah notes, however, that when thinking about growing skills through "capacity building" opportunities, the focus should not be on individual's deficits — a "what's wrong with you, we're going to fix it" mentality (which is often the mentality in spaces built by funders who have no inten-

tion of learning with and from community members). There's a power structure at play and funders must think about who are considered experts, what kind of expertise is recognized and who is making decisions about who needs what skills.

The focus of a learning opportunity should be on the wisdom that participants already have, the wisdom gained by working together and the wisdom participants can bring to each other.

# 'BUILDING CAPACITY' = EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE

## 2. WE GAIN CONFIDENCE IN OUR OWN ABILITIES AND VALIDATION IN OUR LEADERSHIP.

Mohammad had only been in the United States for about a year and had never been outside of Detroit when he took a trip with some fellow Community Connections panelists to Cleveland. As a recent Yemeni immigrant whose native language is not English, he was nervous to take part in a learning opportunity where communication could be a barrier: "It was my first time getting out of Detroit. I had never been around Americans my whole life. It was like a big jump for me to do that. It's not easy."

He had already encountered difficulty in Detroit at times when trying to take part in group discussions.

"Especially, you know, when you look at them, and they are laughing, and you don't know what they're laughing about,"

Mohammad said. "You're looking at them and they are talking about something serious, and you see all the eyes like this (with furrowed brows), and you're trying to do that to understand. When you lose the link of a word of the sentence, you cannot follow the other sentences, so your mind shuts and you're just dreaming or spacing out, and they're talking about something else, and you say, 'Oh my god, what am I doing here?'"

But upon arriving in Ohio, Mohammad quickly realized he had the support of his group from Community Connections, especially Community Connections' director Lisa Leverette. They would not leave him to struggle with his English alone.

At this Grassroots Grantmakers gathering, Mohammad

felt comfortable. He could tell his English was good enough to take part in activities and make connections with other residents at the gathering. Lisa Leverette too knew Mohammad was capable and, according to Mohammad, threw him into many of the meeting's events.

Mohammad gained confidence not only in his ability to speak English but also in the knowledge that he was a community leader who belonged in this space. Once he overcame his initial fears, Lisa Leverette said Mohammad's presence was pervasive as he took full advantage of the gathering's many opportunities for learning.

"I have not seen anybody more changed by one single event, and it was because it expanded his worldview," she said. "... He just found his tribe." ▼

► Learning opportunities offer residents the chance to grow their confidence. By convening like-minded community leaders, conferences and meetings and trainings allow these community members to witness the power of their peers and therefore see the power in themselves.

For Mary, meeting fellow Latino artists at one learning opportunity was an affirmation that the work they

all are doing is important and far from thankless.

"When we went to that Latino arts conference and heard people say, 'Community arts is where it's at,'" Mary said. "That pat on the back said, 'You're validated; what you're doing is good; what you're doing is important.'"

Conferences and trainings in particular are often meant to showcase success stories, with

speakers who have determined a tried-and-true method or transformed their neighborhood. But in this supportive space, speakers and participants alike often discuss their failed attempts and problems, as well as their successes. Residents, who may have experienced a similar challenge or might have succeeded where another leader had difficulty, realize that everybody doing community work is still learning

and that their own experiences have value.

"They learn that first of all nobody has it figured out, and second of all that everybody is dealing with sort of different versions of the same problems and that they're further along than they thought they were," said Janis Foster Richardson, consultant and former executive director of Grassroots Grantmakers.

### 3. WE ENCOUNTER IDEAS THAT INSPIRE ACTION IN OUR OWN COMMUNITIES.

It started in 2008 in Detroit's North End with only a few pots, some soil and a handful of vegetables community folks wanted to try to grow — greens, beans, tomatoes, squash. Today, Oakland Avenue Urban Farm makes up multiple plots, a house with a commercial kitchen and two hoop houses. Its organizers hold farmers markets in their neighborhood and sell produce at stands in six Chrysler plants weekly. They have youth programming during the summer to teach kids about gardening.

The farm has grown extraordinarily. But still, its executive director, Jerry, is planning to do more.

Jerry is a Community Connections grantee — she's received funding on multiple occasions for the farm's youth programming. Despite being

part of the Community Connections network, Jerry was surprised when Lisa Leverette invited her to San Diego for a learning opportunity — a Resident Learning Exchange hosted by the Jacobs Family Foundation. After all, she was a grantee, not a grassroots funder. But, she went. And when she returned home, she was full of new ideas — including how to turn the alley behind the farm into a street art gallery.

While in San Diego, Jerry and some fellow attendees visited Writerz Blok, a legal graffiti art park that encourages street artists to create on its outdoor walls. She was blown away not only by the artistry but also by the economics of the program. Visitors enter the park through a boutique that sells postcards, T-shirts and more that show off the local street artists' work.

"I left San Diego with a brand new appreciation for graffiti art, realizing that this is not just defaming of a wall or of a building," Jerry said. "There are messages in some of those, and they're very detailed. The art is like somebody's soul. And there's an economic opportunity for these artists."

Now, art is featured prominently at Oakland Avenue Urban Farm. Decorated healing walls and murals can be found throughout the space. They have yet to be tagged over, so Jerry knows there's an appreciation in her community for this work. Now she's just got to figure out how to help the artists profit from it.

"I'm still working on it — how can I introduce something similar to Writerz Blok here in the North End?" Jerry said. ▶

▶ At learning opportunities, residents are exposed to leaders from different neighborhoods and different cities all across the country. Often there are similarities between these communities — whether it's in the systemic inequities they face or in their neighbors' enthusiasm to grow youth programming — so residents can relate.

In both learning sessions and in the interactions in between, residents get to hear from one another about their projects and the logistics. They also get to explore the cities in which the learning opportunities are held and see some innovative community programming in action.

"It's inspiring to see, and I'm thinking in terms of visuals," Mary said. "You get ideas — you see firsthand what you've been reading about and bring some of these ideas back that we can translate to our own means."



Jerry, center, chats with fellow attendees of a garden meet-and-greet held in Detroit.

## WHAT DO RESIDENTS GAIN?

“There’s somebody in Michigan, as close as Battle Creek, in a community very similar to mine dealing with the same thing — the drugs, the crime, the kids raising themselves, the this, the that.”

## ‘BUILDING CAPACITY’ = EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE

### 4. WE UNDERSTAND CHALLENGES IN A SYSTEMIC CONTEXT.

Jerry loves living in the North End of Detroit, a place where neighbors pass by the farm and wave hello to her during the days, and friends invite her to sit on their porches to chat in the evenings.

“I can honestly say that there’s no place like the North End because the North End is

homey,” she said. “People are real and unpretentious.”

Still, spending day after day working to create positive change in a disenfranchised community alongside neighbors whose lives are riddled with hardships can be exhausting — and even isolating.

“You think, ‘Man, does anybody else feel this or deal

with this, or am I in this by myself?’” Jerry said.

But attending learning opportunities has made Jerry realize that she is not alone in this struggle. There are grassroots leaders in countless communities throughout the country facing almost the same barriers and burnout. These problems are systemic.

“It’s like, yeah, there’s somebody in Texas dealing with the same thing,” Jerry said. “There’s somebody in Michigan, as close as Battle Creek, in a community very similar to mine dealing with the same thing — the drugs, the crime, the kids raising themselves, the this, the that.” ▼

► When swapping stories with fellow grassroots leaders at learning opportunities, the reality that the challenges they face are systemic becomes apparent. These barriers are not unique to Detroit or Washington, D.C. or San Diego. These are widespread problems that many members of various communities have encountered.

Lisa Leverette remembers

Mary having this realization at a Grassroots Grantmakers meeting they attended together in Youngstown, Ohio — another Rust Belt town plagued by the decline of the manufacturing industry.

“She got to see that Youngstown had the same open spaces, dilapidated buildings, old neglected factories that had poisoned communities previously,” she said.

With residents in their communities daily trying to survive and thrive, often they get caught up in the weeds of this work. Stepping outside of their routines and meeting other grassroots folks at learning opportunities helps residents understand the bigger picture.

“Things are multifaceted and more nuanced,” Lisa Leverette said. “In those spaces, you get to

explore that. You get to hear that.”

This context helps grassroots leaders to be more effective. They realize it’s not personal, so instead of expending energy pointing fingers at specific individuals in their communities, they can direct their efforts toward changing entire systems. They can also look to — and band together with — grassroots leaders in other communities facing similar challenges.

# 'BUILDING CAPACITY' = EXPANDING CONNECTIONS

## 1. WE STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE IN OUR OWN COMMUNITIES.

When Mohammad talks about his fellow Community Connections grant makers, it's as if he's talking about family.

"Being there with them, I know whatever there is, we are in this circle — we are one fist," he said. "When I'm with them, it's like I'm home because I know these guys will back me up no matter what happens."

His respect for and trust in the group is palpable, and it was a learning opportunity that strengthened this bond. Mohammad's nerves were running high on the way to Cleveland with some fellow Community Connections

folks, but soon he realized there was no reason to worry. Throughout the trip, there was always someone from the Community Connections crew standing by or checking in. Together, these Community Connections panelists experienced the fun, the music, the

activities, the skill-building of this learning opportunity — Lisa Leverette even introduced Mohammad to soul food while they were there.

"They did a lot for me," he said. "That's why I'm very proud of them and to be with them." ▼

*Participants in the Cleveland Grassroots Grantmakers gathering enjoy a meal together "after hours."*



▶ Although residents work together regularly on projects and programs in their communities, their relationships with one another may be rather one-dimensional. They know each other as grassroots leaders, often in a professional capacity, with some small talk or neighborhood gossip thrown in. Learning opportunities are usually immersive, meant for deep thinking and rapid growth with a group of like-minded individuals. Sometimes it isn't until a community's residents have had such an experience together that they really get to know one another and feel truly unified upon their return home.

Bonds are created both

during these events and the time spent together after hours.

"There's an agenda, and then there's the stuff that you can't capture in an agenda: the relationship building," Lisa Leverette said. "The stuff that happens at the bar afterwards; the stuff that happens during dinner where people are really talking about their own work in depth and who they are, and being valued as a leader, not talked down to."

Even just the travel to and

from a learning opportunity is valuable in bringing together neighbors. Janis remembers seeing how a van load of Community Connections panelists at one of the first Grassroots Grantmakers conferences in Youngstown, Ohio, arrived as changed people.

"One of the things that I witnessed happen was just the (impact of their) time together — riding together in the van so they could get to know each other as people and share

stories and talk and get out of any professional role they were in as committee members," she said. "I think that was a very powerful experience."

"You could see alliances forming," she added.

During this time together, empathy is developed, trust is built and communication is improved. When residents return home to their communities, they are more in sync, and therefore more effective, in their collaborations.

## WHAT DO RESIDENTS GAIN?

# 'BUILDING CAPACITY' = EXPANDING CONNECTIONS

## 2. WE CREATE BONDS WITH OTHER COMMUNITY LEADERS.

Mary has been a Community Connections grant maker since the start of the organization 10 years ago: "If I say I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it, and when I make a commitment, I try to stay with the commitment."

She had hardly missed a meeting — that is, until she and her husband were in a car accident that landed them in the hospital. But even then, her commitment to Community Connections was at the front of her mind.

"I called them from the hospital and said, 'I can't make the meeting. I have nine fractures,'" Mary said with a chuckle. "And then we were in rehab for months."

That's when Mary's daughter, Lisa, got to know some of

the Community Connections crew. With her mom in a wheelchair, Lisa stepped in to help with things like transportation during the recovery process.

That's also when Lisa Leverette got the idea to send the mother and daughter to a learning opportunity in Washington, D.C. It just made sense: It would be easiest for Mary to travel with the help of her daughter, and the topic of the conference was right up both ladies' alley: a Latino Art Now! conference.

Mary is a visual artist, storyteller and lifelong Southwest Detroiter. At 75, she is a wealth of knowledge — she knows the names of countless local artists and business owners and community leaders (and proba-

bly the names of their grandparents and of their children too), knows both the history of her neighborhood and about the events happening next weekend, and is involved with a variety of arts and cultures programming in her neighborhood.

Lisa, an artist and arts educator, has followed in her mother's footsteps. She's a freelance photographer, creates murals throughout Southwest Detroit, works in some local schools doing arts-infused education and helped found a Detroit Latino arts organization.

At the Latino Art Now! Conference, Mary and Lisa met Latino artists and arts organizers from across the country — folks doing the

work, just like them. They also saw a large Latino arts exhibit in the Smithsonian, a unique and inspirational site for this marginalized group.

For Mary, making connections with fellow grassroots leaders was invaluable. By coming together at learning opportunities, Mary feels they are starting a movement.

"By linking together we're becoming more global, and by being more global, we're becoming more united in the issues we need to uplift," Mary said.

"We're meeting people — we're crossing more lines," she added. "... We're making these connections, and if we need to address something, we call upon these connections that we created." ▼



► At learning opportunities, those community leaders from different neighborhoods and different cities all across the country have the chance to gather in a space that fosters openness, honesty and connection. Because they are doing similar work in similar communities, fellow community leaders are uniquely qualified to offer each other support — solidarity that not many other people can provide these residents.

Jerry too feels connecting

with fellow grassroots leaders is one of the most important things she gains through these experiences, including her trip to San Diego for the Resident Learning Exchange.

"Just being in the circle one morning when we were all talking about the work that we do on the ground and sharing the issues and the struggles and the successes," she said. "We had some very teary moments there. We cried together and then we laughed together, and what

happened is I still have relationships with some of those folks around the country."

Those are the people Jerry still calls on to share successes and disappointments — the people who encourage her to get back out there because she is making a difference.

Day to day, Jerry's life revolves around Oakland Avenue Urban Farm and the people who are a part of it. It's not always easy for her to admit struggles or get perspective

from the neighbors who are in the weeds of the work alongside her.

"I have to present to them a certain degree of strength, so when I have my weak moments, I cannot talk to them," Jerry said. "I need to go in and send an email to Mary in Texas or Jeremy in Battle Creek or something like that, just to talk about some of the stuff. Then they come back with some stuff that makes me laugh or whatever the case may be."



Mary, who created this piece titled “Abuelita y la Luna,” was inspired by the fellow Latino artists she met at the Latino Art Now! Conference.

### 3. WE ESTABLISH RAPPORT WITH FUNDERS AND OTHER ‘TRADITIONAL’ LEADERS.

At the Latino Art Now! conference, Lisa saw the importance of Latinos gathering together to learn and to connect. The talent and the power of this group of community residents was on full display, and through this learning opportunity, she was reminded of the importance of investing in fellow Latinos: “knowing that we have to involve our own people and give them opportunities that they might never have or never think that they can do.”

That also means investing in herself. In the past, Lisa often found herself discouraged by the community work she saw Detroit foundations choosing to support. It seemed folks from her Southwest Detroit neighborhood rarely received

funding for their projects, so what was the point of going after local grants? But at the conference she met fellow community leaders who had received funding for their initiatives, as well as funders who supported the work of Latino artists.

When she returned from the conference, she felt re-energized: “I said, ‘If I’m not going to try it, then it’s never going to happen, so I’m going to try it again.’”

“That gave her the impetus to go after the grants,” her mother, Mary, added. “It gave her the impetus to connect with those funders, and then because you’re there, you also get support from the people that you meet. You get the connections.” ▶

▶ Not only do grassroots leaders get to connect with other folks doing work on the ground, but they also get to connect with funders at these conferences, meetings and trainings. In these spaces, residents are able to speak with funders, often informally, about their work. These conversations help residents understand funders’ backgrounds and perspectives when it comes to funding community work like theirs.

“You expose the community members to a lot of the (funders’) thinking, and more importantly, you expose them to relationships that they need to develop,” Roque said.

Funders also get the chance to hear directly from residents. Before going to San Diego, Jerry had rarely interacted face-to-face with a funder. But there, she had the chance to sit at

and therefore was not really sustainable. Now that they were in the room together, however, she could show funders how her project was making a lasting difference.

“We proved that they could invest in us,” Jerry said. “Just being in the room to hear about our work and the type of people we are and the type of people that we work with, and why you, the funder, need to be investing in us and trusting us with those dollars, I think has been remarkable.”

In these spaces, residents have a voice among individuals who in the past may not have listened. By being in the room with traditional leaders like funders, non-profit professionals and government officials, not only do residents have the chance to tell their stories, but they also have the chance to uplift others in their neighborhoods and to question funders’ actions. For Mary, that often means asking these leaders at the learning opportunities she attends why there are not more of her neighbors receiving funding or representation on local boards.

“They need to understand that there’s more about us than the numbers and that we do care that they’re funding Latino projects,” Mary said. “When there’s no Latinos on these boards, they need to hear from us.”



Lisa (left) and Mary



Mary, standing left, speaks to the group at a Leadership Learning conference held in Detroit, while Lisa Leverette, right, looks on.

## HOW DO RESIDENTS INFLUENCE 'CAPACITY BUILDING' SPACES?

The meetings, conferences, workshops and trainings where capacity is built are often also where plans are established and decisions are made related to community change.

"I think when funders make decisions to fund community work, they ought to know who the folks are who are working in the community they say they're funding," Jerry said.

But often, funders never even meet with these community members.

"I believe that is a big mistake they make," she added.

By being present in those spaces, residents have the chance to actually push back against even the best-intentioned outsiders, and to address class and race dynamics. They become the educators.

For Roque, having residents in these spaces is crucial. He believes most of the work foundations claim to do for the community is done for the res-

idents, and usually it's done for the most needy in the community. But because these residents are not usually at conferences or in those rooms where the decisions are made, there can be missteps.

"Residents hold us accountable for what we're saying because we may make a statement about the community or the people in the community, and it might not be a correct statement," Roque said. "If the community is in the room, they're going to clarify that or make us clarify if we've misspoken in any way."

Janis added: "If they hear something that doesn't resonate with them, they push back on it, or they hear some jargon, and they question it. Those are the opportunities that I think are really rich with learning."

Residents also provide a link, helping funders understand realities about a community's needs or a program's

success. Deborah appreciates that, in her experience, during resident-centered meetings, attendees hear not only from the creators of programs, who naturally are touting their approach, but they get to hear honest evaluations from these programs' participants as well.

Their experiences are not filtered by program officers or nonprofit partners. Residents are able to tell their stories as they want to tell them.

"It puts not only a face (to our work), but it puts our story out there because (otherwise) we're not heard," Jerry said.

Funders then get the chance to directly ask residents questions and receive feedback. Because they are in the room together, funders and residents make decisions that truly have communities' needs at heart.

"It's a very vulnerable space — a place for thinking, emotions and connections," Deborah said.



*Participants in the Leadership Learning conference in Detroit form a circle for inclusive discussion.*

## CREATING SPACES FOR RESIDENTS' LEARNING

**A**lthough it's important for community leaders to hold space in their own communities and for funders to have time with fellow funders, it's critical to get these groups in the same room to learn together as well.

When Roque convenes funders and residents, he knows he must be profoundly inclusive. His first step is recognizing who are the hard-to-reach or unheard voices in a community and then coming up with a strategy for how to reach them.

But simply inviting these residents to learning opportunities isn't enough to get them involved.

Inviting them doesn't mean they'll be able to attend. Roque recognizes that sometimes it's worth giving residents a stipend so that they can afford to take time off from work or pay a workshop's fee, and sometimes it's necessary to provide them with transportation or childcare.

Or, as Deborah suggested, why not bring the program to where people live and where they're trying to make things happen? Even considering the location of a "capacity building" opportunity can ensure that residents are able to participate.

Having residents in the room also doesn't mean their

voices will be heard. Again, conveners must be profoundly inclusive, and encourage participants to let go of their preconceived notions about their roles and the expectations of others.

After bringing folks who fund the programs, who run the programs and who participate in the programs together, conveners must make sure that "professional" voices don't dominate and that all those participating in a learning opportunity have an equal voice.

For Janis, this has meant having community residents really sit at a table in a "capacity building" space and having funders sit at the edges

of the room in support of the community leaders. It has also meant taking the time for group reflection during learning opportunities and asking residents at random to talk for a few minutes about something that is on their mind.

At one Grassroots Grant-makers gathering, Janis remembers seeing a resident who attended with Community Connections find their voice through such an exercise.

"Somebody had been kind of hanging back, and then they stood up, and it was like, oh my gosh, they are this person we were discovering," she said. "But this person was discovering who they were too."



(From left to right) Victor,  
Mary, Jerry and Lisa

## THE ULTIMATE GOAL? CREATING LASTING CHANGE

Funders and nonprofit organizations often feel every penny needs to be going to the front line of their community work because people are in need. But using some resources to invest in the expansion of residents' knowledge and networks will only make our work — and therefore our communities — better.

"It shouldn't even be a question," Deborah said. "It's not a question in the corporate sector. They know that they have to invest in themselves to

be able to grow their organizational capacity."

The benefits to both grassroots and traditional folks are many, but at its core, "capacity building" is about growing leaders: "You could view it as leadership training because you're really investing in people's potential and exposing them to new ideas," Janis said.

An investment in grassroots leaders is an investment in community change. We come back from these learning experiences with new ideas, new

skills, new systems of support, new plans.

And with these tools, we *will* make change happen. We do this work because we love and are committed to our communities — and our communities are our homes. First and foremost, we have self-interest in improving our neighborhoods.

"I make sure that (changes) are good for me," Mary said. "If they're good for me, they're good for everybody else."

Unlike for many funders

(even the most well-intentioned), this isn't just work for us — this is our lives. Even if grant money dwindles or funders stop taking notice, we'll still be here. We are sustainable — we have to be.

"The grassroots people are the ones that are going to hold it down once they start getting opportunities like that or supplies that they need," Lisa said. "You know they're going to do it, and they're going to get their friends to help. They're going to make things happen."

**"I make sure that (changes) are good for me. If they're good for me, they're good for everybody else."**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Community Connections operates as part of a 10-year resident-led community change effort launched by the Skillman Foundation in 2006. The grant program utilizes grassroots grant making as a tool to encourage resident engagement and to develop and support resident leadership to improve neighborhood conditions for youth, most specifically to improve the high school graduation rate for graduating high school seniors to 90 percent and above.

We are thankful for the bold vision, leadership and investment in neighborhoods, residents and children in Detroit. Thank you for not only having faith in the emerging field of grassroots grant making to contribute substantially to the results but also in a longterm investment strategy that allowed Community Connections to learn from, grow and respond to identified needs and changing conditions in communities. The steady presence, faith and patience of the Skillman Foundation has allowed us to learn from our mistakes and build on our successes over time. We are grateful to the leadership and staff.

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The combined investment of nearly \$3 million in grants of between \$250 and \$5,000 awarded to more than 500 groups and 750 projects over 10 years has made a significant impact on youth, families, grassroots leaders and neighborhood conditions. Thank you!

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This publication is dedicated to the countless voiceless nontraditional leaders who make a difference in their communities every day.



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