

# Symposium Focuses on Building 'Blocks' of Stronger West Side

BY MEGAN BUNGEROTH

Block associations are usually, by definition, focused exclusively on their own blocks. But last Saturday, over 100 people from dozens of Upper West Side community groups came together to swap ideas, share tales of woe and success and offer support to one another at the first-ever Blocks for Blocks Symposium.

The event was organized by the Coalition of Block and Community Leaders (CBCL), a group formed last year as a networking and community-building resource for block associations and other groups that comprise the civic leadership of the neighborhood. Groups representing areas from West 34th Street to West 125th Street, from 5th Avenue to the Hudson came together at the Rutgers Church's community space on Saturday morning to participate in breakout sessions and meet other leaders.

Some sessions tackled broad, lofty concepts like how to tackle big projects and get people to care about their neighbors, while others focused on concrete details about fundraising, urban greening and planting and building user-friendly websites.

At a session on how to boost inclusive

community engagement, Tariq Shahid, a member of the West 116th Street Community Association, said he's been challenged to address the needs of an extremely diverse block. His area is home to HDFC co-ops as well as new luxury high-rise condos; there are a church and a mosque on the block.

But he said that what brings people together is the focus on the shared aspects of their lives, despite their differences.

"We decided that we can jointly manage what I term as shared freedom space," Shahid said. "Nobody owns the block. We all do. It's like the lobby of your building."

He emphasized the thing that was most likely driving all the participants to take part in the symposium as the motivation for getting their neighbors to participate as well.

"We all want a decent neighborhood, a crime-free neighborhood, a place where we can feel safe and grow and be free," he said.

Others were inspired to see their own

surroundings in new ways in terms of community.

"I live in an apartment building," said Ron Cohen, a representative from JASA. "Your building is your block. Now I have to address and look at my building as more than just people going up and down elevators."

The organizers of the event said that they were impressed with the turnout and the intense interest that participants showed.

"It just shows the hunger for this sort of thing," said Melissa Elstein, a member of the West 80s Neighborhood Association and

one of the members of the CBCL planning group that organized the symposium. "Hopefully we'll expand to other neighborhoods as well."

Dee Rieber, a member of the West 75th Street Block Association and another driving force behind CBCL, said she felt the event was "extremely successful." She praised the participants for quickly getting past differences between neighborhoods and leaders—people

whom had been organizing their block for decades listened patiently to those who had just gotten started, for example—and said that was why the event worked.

"It doesn't matter because there is still so much to learn," she said. "I'm encouraged and ready to go to the next step."

Next steps will include creating a shared directory of block and community leaders so people can quickly discover who to contact when they have an issue that affects just one stretch of a block or an entire neighborhood. They also hope to organize more frequent, smaller group meetings to keep the momentum and conversations going that started at the symposium.

While the event had the support of local elected officials, CBCL members stressed that they wanted to work from the ground up to generate ideas and identify issues that matter to residents.

"We wanted the inaugural one to be a true grassroots endeavor," said Elstein. "What we wanted to do today was make it an event organized by different block association leaders and community leaders, for other block associations and community organizations."

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TARIQ SHAHID