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REFLECTIONS

The recovery of neighboring

Neighborhood residents enjoy the central commons of a proposed Generations of Hope Community designed to support families adopting children from foster care. *Design by Shoesmith Cox Architects. Rendering by Stephanie Bower.*

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Imagine living in a community where:

- *caring neighbors* come together to address some of our nation's most complex social challenges,
- those who are *vulnerable* are also valued community members who participate and contribute, and
- *older adults* find meaning and purpose in their daily lives, even at the end of life, through caring relationships and continuing engagement.

As I've worked to make this vision not only a reality but a "new normal," I've also thought a lot about the significance of neighborliness. I've seen repeatedly just how powerful the simplest acts of neighboring can be, giving meaning and fulfillment to lives while simultaneously healing the invisible wounds carried by those who are most vulnerable.

A growing number of extraordinary individuals and far-sighted organizations are doing this work along with me – though often quite independently. We all aspire to realize the promise of what neighborhoods can become, under the right circumstances, with the right kinds of support.

At GHDC we refer to this "ideal type" of an effective and capable neighborhood, which is dedicated to enfolding vulnerable people into networks of care and opportunity, as a Generations of Hope Community or GHC.

Coming together

Author Charles Murray has described neighborliness as the "widespread voluntary assistance among unrelated people who happen to live alongside one another."

He offers some examples:

> keeping an eye on a house when its family is away, loaning a tool or the proverbial cup of sugar, taking care of a mother's children while the mother runs errands, or driving a neighbor to the doctor's office.[1]

Of course neighborliness can be more than voluntarily providing assistance; it often has a social and emotional component as well, where neighbors come together to express gratitude and pleasure, and to share stories, laughter, grief, understandings, concerns, and yes, gossip.

In a GHC, neighborliness is the daily coming together of neighbors both to provide assistance and to share the ups and downs of everyday life. This results in bonds of friendship and, over time, a culture of neighborliness – of friendliness, kindness, helpfulness, and consideration. Without this cultural dimension of neighborliness, the communities my many colleagues and I are envisioning will never become a reality.

[1] Charles Murray. 2012. *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010.* New York: Crown Forum, p.238.

What it takes

A GHC does differ in at least one critical way from the neighborhoods Murray is referring to, where people "happen to live alongside one another." GHCs are *designed*.

Several aspects of a GHC's design contribute to the formation of bonds of friendship. For example, having contiguous housing is important; so is having all residents share a common purpose and bringing people together daily through planned and impromptu activities. We've learned a great deal in 20 years about how these things can be done.

Less obvious may be the role that GHC leadership plays. Experience has taught me that you cannot bring people together and expect the "everyday magic" of these friendship bonds or caring relationships to automatically emerge. It takes very strong leaders with specific skills to maximize the development of these relationships.

Elsewhere I have written about qualities associated with leadership in a GHC such as trustworthiness, determination, and vision.[2] In order to foster neighborliness it is also important that leaders possess a high degree of empathy, and the skills needed to bring people of all ages and walks of life together to build strong personal bonds. Both of these qualities are components of *emotional intelligence*, a concept first introduced two decades ago by Daniel Goleman in his book by the same name.[3]

A paradigm shift

For too long, it has been common practice to address complex social, emotional, and behavioral challenges related to issues such as abuse and neglect, poverty, and even aging, by offering services that focus on shortcomings, vulnerabilities, and limitations. The individual is viewed as "the problem" – as someone who is receiving from, not contributing to, society.

By emphasizing the significance of neighborliness in promoting everyone's well-being, and by providing opportunities for everyone to make routine contributions in substantive ways to the well-being of others, GHCs represent a critical new departure, a paradigm shift.

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[2] See *GHC Core Principles*. 2014. Available at http://ghdc.generationsofhope.org/principles/, and *Transformational leadership.* 2014. Available at http://ghdc.generationsofhope.org/publications/transformational-leadership.

3 Daniel Goleman. 2012. *Emotional Intelligence.* Bantam Books.

The “new normal”?

What if neighborliness were to become a “new normal,” an integral part of direct services or new supportive housing designs? Programs, policies, and practices would reflect the critical role of neighbors in creating nurturing environments where everyone is valued and feels needed – where all residents feel like they belong and believe they are productive in giving something back daily to the neighborhood. Everyone would be involved in promoting everyone else’s well-being.

As growing numbers of individuals of all ages in this country find themselves becoming more and more isolated and vulnerable, as the limitations of government become more and more apparent, and as the demands on social services become heavier, it is time we seriously consider tapping the power, promise, and the potential of neighborliness.

These goals are achievable – as a society we know how to build affordable housing, provide effective direct services, and develop intentional communities. GHC projects live where all three of these well-established domains intersect, which means we can leverage the expertise of professionals in designing most of the major features and components.

What remains is to find innovative ways to elicit and support neighborliness within this unique opportunity space, building on the best practices within each domain, and using what we’ve learned from the pioneering projects that began appearing 20 years ago, and which continue to proliferate today, to identify those critical differences from business-as-usual that make designing in this space possible.

What remains, in a nutshell, is to recover old-fashioned neighboring as a “new normal.”

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