

## STORIES FROM WEAVE THE PEOPLE

TO: Board of the ABCD Institute  
FROM: Jim Diers  
RE: Report on Weave the People Gathering  
DATE: May 16, 2019

John McKnight asked me to write a brief report on the Weave the People gathering that we both attended in Washington, DC from May 14-16. I'll offer my perspective, but if you want a more complete and less biased record, you can visit the website at: [WeAreWeavers.org](http://WeAreWeavers.org)

Weave is a project of The Aspen Institute under the leadership of New York Times columnist David Brooks. In his new book, *The Second Mountain*, Brooks describes the crisis of hyper-individualism and bemoans how "America's social fabric is being ripped to shreds by distrust, loneliness, alienation, inequality, racism, spiritual emptiness and tribal enmity." After reading *The Abundant Community*, he was inspired to travel throughout the United States to uncover stories of people who are working to build social connections. He calls them the weavers. The purpose of the gathering was to bring those weavers together so that they could meet and learn from one another, deepen their practice, and begin to build a movement for greater social cohesion throughout the country.

About 250 people attended at Brooks' invitation, and it seemed to me that there were five different kinds of constituencies represented. There were quite a few journalists who wanted to learn from the weavers and explore how they could be helpful whether it was by reporting on positive community stories or by doing more solutions journalism in which articles on social problems are accompanied by examples of community approaches to addressing them. Similarly, representatives of many foundations were present, listening to the weavers, and exploring ways in which they could be more supportive.

The seemingly most dominant group were representatives of organizations that described themselves as serving the community. Many of them were heroic individuals who had overcome some kind of trauma and were now rescuing other individuals who faced similar trauma. They were doing valuable work, but it was difficult for me to see them as weavers. Most of these people whom I met said that they either didn't have time to be engaged in their own neighborhood or that they related to a different kind of community which was often defined by whatever trauma they were addressing.

A fourth group was comprised of staff from organizations providing consulting services to other organizations. Many were experts at facilitating conversations to bridge the divides in a community. Each one had its own approach and some were actively marketing their services.

The fifth group and perhaps the smallest was the one I had expected would be the most prevalent – people who were building place-based communities. That more of them weren't represented was a major disappointment. Nevertheless, I met some amazing individuals and heard some great stories.

There was Mac McCarter, a minister who was concerned about the breakdown of community and the accompanying rise of crime and blight in Shreveport, Louisiana where he lives. McCarter began by focusing on the most distressed neighborhood, but he was soon working citywide. His organization, Community Renewal, has now recruited and trained 1600 block coordinators. 54,500 people have

pledged to do something to help someone else and, when they do, they get a “We Care” sign to display in their yard. The organization has also built ten Friendship Houses in “low income, high crime neighborhoods” where more than 2000 volunteers and staff provide tutoring, mentoring, life skills, conflict resolution, parenting classes, and family support. They also sponsor monthly barbeques and other events for the neighborhood. This Community Renewal approach is now being replicated in eight other cities across the United State. McCarter says that he was inspired by the writings of McKnight.

Another great example of asset-based, community-driven development is the Nebraska Foundation that was well represented at the gathering. They have spawned 100 local foundations controlled by their communities. Ronda Graff, a mother of seven, described what she and her neighbors are doing in their small town in southwestern Nebraska in order to make it the kind of place where young adults will want to stay.

LB Pevette shared the story of how her town in North Carolina was in danger of losing their one gathering place, a coffee shop. She and her neighbors worked to save the coffee shop. Now, they are also actively programming it and other found spaces (including a lawn) with events for youth, the LGBT community, and neighbors in general.

Although most of her extended family lived in Atlanta, Asiaha Butler purchased a home in Chicago’s Englewood neighborhood in 2002. She loved to hang out on her front porch, but that became increasingly difficult as her neighborhood succumbed to increasing violence. When a bullet pierced her front door, she was tempted to move to Atlanta. But, who would care for the neighborhood if she left, she wondered. So, she founded an organization called Rage that gave her neighbors the tools, resources and voice they needed to turn their neighborhood around.

Janet Topolsky started the Black Belt Community Foundation to address the needs of her impoverished rural community. There were no deep pockets to tap so the residents contributed generously with whatever resources they had.

I’m sure that there were other participants with great stories to tell, but it was difficult to connect with them due to the format of the gathering. Most of the time was spent hearing from and responding to speakers on a stage. The time for small group discussions was very limited, and there was some criticism that those for whom the gathering was intended had not been consulted in designing the event.

Nevertheless, there were parts of the gathering that I found useful. When someone gave a talk about the need to listen and love those who disagree with you, a lively discussion ensued about the challenges of weaving an inclusive community in the face of racism. (“How do we weave if we can’t afford a loom and we aren’t an equal part of the fabric?) That discussion also got me to thinking about divisive issues such as abortion, climate change, police brutality, and gun control. How do you take action on matters that you are passionate about but tend to divide at the same time that you are trying to build an inclusive community?

Eric Liu of Citizens University in Seattle didn’t speak to this question directly, but he did talk about America as an argument. He pointed out that there has always been a tension between rights and responsibilities, state and federal, individual and collective, liberty and equality, etc. He emphasized that the tension is healthy. Without it, the country would go too far in one direction or the other. “We just need to have better arguments.”

Someone pointed out that diversity work needs to focus on more than the differences you agree with. Monica Guzman described how, after the last presidential election where hardly anyone in Seattle voted for Trump, she took a busload of 18 residents to a small town in Oregon where the residents had voted exactly the opposite. Through a facilitated discussion, the participants found much more to agree on than to argue about.

The Search Institute was represented. I have often differed with them because it seemed like they were most focused on the assets that youth are missing. But at the gathering, they described the four S's that they initially use to engage youth – what are your sparks, strengths, struggles and supports? It seems to me that might be a good way to frame the questions we typically ask in our learning conversations.

Here are a few quotes that I heard during the gathering that will stick with me:

“It doesn't do any good just to clean the part of the pool that you're swimming in. You need to clean the whole pool.”

“Community is based on love for one another. Tribalism is based on hate for the other.”

“Relationships grow at the speed of trust. Social change moves at the speed of relationships.”

“In order to weave, you must start not with the need but with the dream.”

“Focus more on what gives you energy than on what takes your time.”

“People want to be asked.”

“We need stories lubricated by love.”

The agenda we were given for the final half-day was to plan for building the movement. Some actions were identified out of small groups, but again, there was little time for that after the speeches from the stage. I'm not too optimistic about the prospects for a Weaver movement since people seem unwilling to abandon their own brands in favor of a Weave the People project that they feel little ownership of. But, the main objective is to change the culture and I believe that the continuing efforts of Brooks and Aspen will provide fuel for the many existing and emerging grass roots community building initiatives whether or not they are tied to the Weave the People project.

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