

Community and its Counterfeits

*Part Two of an interview with John McKnight conducted by writer David Cayley
for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Ideas" series
illustrated by Scott Chambers*

David Cayley

This is the second program in our series on *Community and its Counterfeits*.

John McKnight

Why do we have city neighborhoods today where walking on the street may result in your being shot in the head when we have the largest and best-trained police forces in history? Why is that?

We have an idea that there are criminal

justice professionals who can fix our society, fix our communities so they will be safe. That idea has been the principal cause of our lack of safety. We have given away our community, its capacity and responsibility on the grounds that when something is wrong, the professionals will fix it. The result is, we are powerless in an absolutely unsafe community with a powerful police force where the local commander will tell you, "I can't do any more."

David Cayley

John McKnight directs the program in community studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He has devoted a career of nearly forty years to understanding how communities work and he has concluded that as communities grow richer in social services, they grow poorer in competence and solidarity.

Finally, they reach the epitome of futility he has just described: expensive, highly trained, lavishly equipped professionals are forced to admit their impotence to a demoralized and equally impotent citizenry.

This program is about the experiences that led John McKnight to that conclusion. And it's about the ways in which he thinks communities can renew themselves now that industries are shrinking, jobs are scarce, and governments can no longer afford the services on which neighborhoods have become dependent.

Later in the hour you'll also hear from Jackie Reed, who represents a neighborhood organization on Chicago's west side, where John McKnight has worked for many years.

Community and Its Counterparts is a three-part series based on interviews I recorded with John McKnight over a period of several days in June 1993, at his home in Evanston. The present program concerns his time in Chicago, beginning in 1956.

John McKnight

The city of Chicago created the first municipal civil-rights organization in the United States, and so I applied there and I got a job. The job was a very important

experience for me because I had two kinds of tasks. The first was to try to do something about the discrimination of hospitals that pretty systematically discriminated against black patients. Blacks weren't patients because they couldn't get in.

The other, which I think was much more formative, was being sent out into neighborhoods in Chicago — which was a real experience for a kid raised in a small town in Ohio — and told to try and create neighborhood organizations in some places where racial transition was taking place, where white people were leaving and black people were moving in.

Every weekend, as black people would move in, large masses of white people would gather and jeer and throw stones in their windows, and often try to burn the house down. I was often assigned to be inside the house. There were blocks that were changing, racially, in half a year. They would be all-white in January and all-black in July.

This situation was in significant part the result of the flight of black folks from the South, thanks to the collapse of the agricultural economy and the boom in industrial economy in the North. People were coming to Chicago every day from the South. They had to have a place to live and the crowding created enormous pressure within the black neighborhoods. Something had to give somewhere, and it gave at the edge.

There were speculators who were involved in what was called "blockbusting." They had developed their own method for "churning" a neighborhood. They would frighten the white people to sell the houses cheap and

then sell them for twice the price to the black people.

It was devastating, economically and socially. And the black folks who were buying these buildings for twice what they were worth had to overcrowd them. It was just a terrible, terrible thing.

As we experimented with organizing I learned there was a person in Chicago who had a way of really creating powerful organizations, a man named Saul Alinsky. At the heart of his technique was the realization that you were dealing with people whose life experience was, generally speaking, to have lost. He believed that you couldn't organize folks whose experience was of powerlessness and defeat unless, some way, you could engage them in the belief that as small as they may have thought they were, as weak as they might have thought they were, they had a gift.

I remember going one evening with one of Alinsky's best organizers. There was a group of people on a block, in a lower-income neighborhood. People had come together that evening, in one of their homes on the block, and the organizer was going to talk with them. So we went to the home and there were maybe thirty people crowded into one living room.

The organizer sits down, all the people introduce themselves, and then the organizer says, "Well, what's going on here?"

And people began to talk about all the problems. They talked about how the city wasn't picking up the garbage, how they needed stop signs but they didn't have any stop signs, about how there were rats running up and down the alleys, that kind of thing.

This went on for maybe about a half hour.

And then the organizer finally said, "So, what have you done about that?"

And there was silence, a long silence. Then the organizer turned to me and said, "John, let's get out of here; I can't waste my time with these people. They're on their backs, they're a bunch of crybabies. Listen, when you folks are ready to stand up and act like citizens, you give me a call." And we walked out the door and left. [laughs]

And so that's an example of a kind of method that provokes people into recognizing that they are citizens.

David Cayley

John McKnight worked for the Chicago Commission on Human Relations during the heyday of Alinsky-style organizing. McKnight's organizing style and Alinsky's had differences, but McKnight admired Alinsky's genius in adapting the techniques of labor organizing to neighborhood and consumer issues.

Alinsky also had a gift for brash and imaginative tactics, which by the end of the Sixties had made him something of a legend throughout North America. In Chicago on one occasion citizens protested the decaying state of their neighborhood by releasing rats in the mayor's office. For John McKnight it was an unforgettable experience of how people can gain confidence when power is de-mystified and exposed.

John McKnight

There is something that is really magnificent when you see a middle-aged lady who has always been humble putting a rat on the mayor's desk. It's a transformative experience for her and for the mayor.

When folks learn that behind that institution is Charlie the mayor, or Sam the corporation president, and they see him and they confront him, it's a little like The Wizard of Oz, you know? When Dorothy and her troop got to the Emerald City and the little dog, Toto pulled the curtain away behind which the wizard was manipulating all the levers to make it appear that he was a great and fearsome person.

David Cayley

John McKnight worked as an organizer in Chicago until 1960, when he moved to the American Civil Liberties Union as the director of its Illinois section. Then, in 1963, he was recruited by the Kennedy administration's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as one of a group of front-line workers with a mandate to desegregate companies doing business with the federal government. In the later sixties he directed the mid-western office of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

During this period McKnight gained a first-hand acquaintance with massive programs of planned change, like the federal government's "war on poverty." And he came to see the shadows such programs cast on local communities.

John McKnight

The result of that was that more and more service professionals came pouring into the neighborhoods, and they came with their white coats and their clipboards and they did *needs surveys*. They brought the trappings of technical authority and special expert knowledge.

A culture developed in which the multi-service center became the place where things got done, where there were real experts, and there was money, lots of money.

It was a tremendous magnet for the redirection of local folks' understanding of where the resources were, where the real knowledge was, where things could really be done that would change your life.

It made organizing much, much harder — and every organizer knows it. That's why when Saul Alinsky would say "social worker," sometimes he would spit afterwards. [laughs]

Alinsky just despised social workers. And I think he intuitively and, I'm sure, explicitly, understood that there's a competition here as to what is the meaning of your life, who are you, are you



a client or are you a citizen?

The social worker is out looking for clients and making clients and needs clients. The organizer's out looking for citizens. You can't make a citizen; you can allow a citizen, but you can make a client.

David Cayley

The making of clients has a number of related effects which concern John McKnight. Clienthood suppresses citizenship; it focuses on individual needs rather than on the physical, social, and political structure of the environment; and it induces dependency, both on professionals and on precarious sources of public money, which may later dry up.

This in fact is what has happened in Chicago. Once the brawny giant of American industrial cities — poet Carl Sandburg's legendary "city of the big shoulders" — Chicago has undergone the extreme form of de-industrialization that has affected many older North American cities.

John McKnight

The stockyards, the great Chicago stockyards — there hasn't been a cow there in thirty years. It's gone, it's gone a generation.

We have no steel mill in the city of Chicago that's producing any significant amount of steel. The automobile factories are almost all gone. The great International Harvester Corporation that was so much the center of a lot of Chicago's agricultural-industrial ascendancy doesn't exist anymore; it went bankrupt and closed down. It was the biggest farm-equipment manufacturing company in the world! It doesn't exist!

David Cayley

This change in Chicago's economic fortunes has had profound implications for the Alinsky-style organizing on which young John McKnight cut his teeth as a neighborhood organizer in the fifties. Saul Alinsky and his co-workers organized people to demand their rights. They took it for granted that the civic and commercial institutions on whom the demands were made could actually deliver. But this assumption, McKnight says, no longer holds.

John McKnight

Now, in the neighborhood, you might march on city hall, but the problem is that in city hall the till is empty; the mayor can't do anything for you, he has nothing to respond with. You can't march on and demand your consumers' rights with the corporations or the banks because they've moved out, they're gone.

Who are you going to march on? We have, on the west side of Chicago, an area of 600,000 people without a single bank. No chartered bank — they're all gone. I think maybe the last one might have closed twenty years ago.

Who are you going to march on about the school? School, you are not educating my children. Well, where are the schools educating children? Will we look in Philadelphia? Detroit? Cleveland? Where are they educating the children? Where can we demand our superintendent go to find out how to educate our children?

So we have business institutions who are no longer there, government institutions where the cupboard is bare, and educational institutions that are intellectually threadbare

—who haven't the foggiest idea how to educate children!

On what police station do you march to get the police system to do something about crime in your neighborhood? I don't think there's anybody in Chicago who thinks they could hold a pistol to the head of the local district commander and get that commander to do what is necessary to deal with crime because they understand that he can't — he doesn't know how!

Today we're in a world, in the older neighborhoods in cities, of wholesale institutional abandonment. So the idea that anyone is going to develop in a neighborhood the power to confront institutions to give them a just share of their goods and services is much less useful than it used to be.

David Cayley

Faith that a flourishing community can be restored from the outside has died hard. Industry has vanished, the well-to-do have moved to the suburbs, and city governments have grown steadily poorer. But people have, naturally, clung to the hope that prosperity will return. John McKnight likens this expectation to the hope that animated the so-called Cargo Cults in the South Pacific.

John McKnight

In New Guinea, during the Second World War, the allied troops

pulled back to the mountains because the Japanese had taken over the coastal towns in New Guinea. The interior had no towns — there were only aboriginal villages — so the allied troops learned to hide in the mountains and attack the Japanese bases from behind, in guerrilla actions.

To support the guerillas in the mountains, cargo planes would fly over the mountains and drop stuff for the troops.

Of course the native people were amazed by this — all of these wonderful things came out of the air — and many people abandoned their villages and their ways. They came to live on the edge of the runways and became dependents of the landing-strip people.

Then all of a sudden the war was over and the troops left and the cargo planes stopped coming, and there were the former villagers, dependent upon this outside system and its stuff. They began to build mock airplanes on the ground, thinking that if they would build these airplanes it would draw the cargo planes



in, like duck decoys. Then they worshipped at the shrines of the airplanes and developed a whole religion called the Cargo Cult.

After a time they saw that it didn't work, so they decided that probably they had to go back to their village and start planting yams and remember how a community makes a life out of the resources it has in the place where it is. That's what we're facing in our neighborhoods today.

In the face of the abandonment of our cities, for a while a lot of folks decided that what they were going to do was to try to get a Ford plant to come in, maybe a cargo plane would come [laughs] and drop a Ford plant into the neighborhood.

So there were these "enterprise zones" and other kinds of notions about how we might be able to draw them back. And we tried that with minimal success. [laughs] There's yet to be the first Ford plant dropped into a neighborhood in the United States.

When people come to realize that these

ways of trying to draw that big system back, the institutions back, is not working, then they may come to the third recognition and it is this: Whatever will happen here will happen because of us.

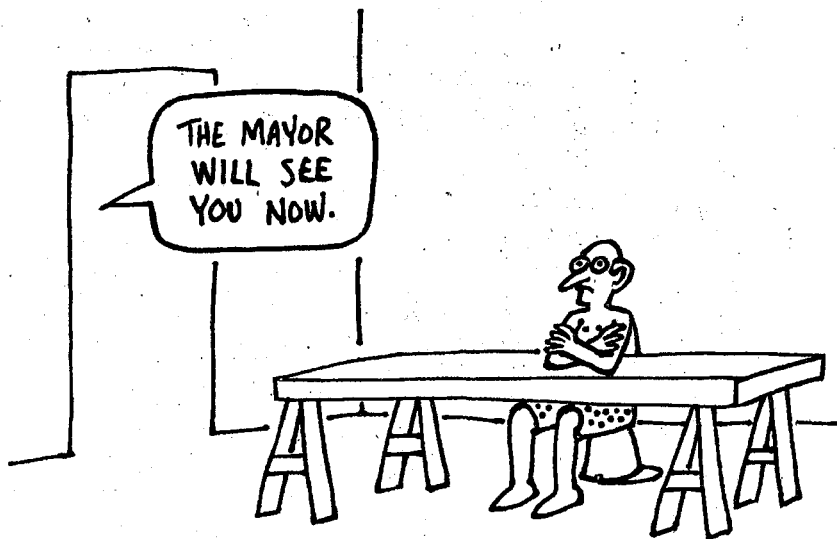
That means a new call to their capacity, through associating with one another, to understand what assets they have, what potential for investment, what potential for productivity, what creativity they can assemble. They come to understand that the heart of their possibility resides with them in that place.

Now, we don't have much experience in terms of knowing what to do in a neighborhood that has become dependent on big institutions, as most did — dependent on the steel mills and the hospitals and the big-city schools — as they become abandoned, just the way the cargo planes stopped.

We don't have a lot of experience with how you reinvent community. And by that we mean a place populated not with clients and consumers, but with people who are citizens with the capacity to produce.

David Cayley

John McKnight believes that many communities are now beginning to face the fact that the cargo planes aren't coming back. He says that at this point nobody can say definitively what an ambitious phrase



like the reinvention of community might mean. But experience is not lacking altogether.

In fact, John McKnight has been involved with neighborhood organizations on the west side of Chicago which have been gradually moving towards self-reliance for many years. It began with an effort to desegregate the local hospital.

John McKnight

The neighborhood organization, an Alinsky-style organization, used power methods to force a hospital to serve the local people. And they did that, you know — they negotiated, they picketed the hospital, they went out to the president of the hospital's suburban neighborhood and distributed flyers to all of his neighbors saying that he was running a racist institution, and the hospital responded to that pressure and began to employ black people, began to appoint doctors who would serve black people, began to hire black nurses, and they put some black people on the board. And after about three or four years the hospital was serving the local population in a fairly good way.

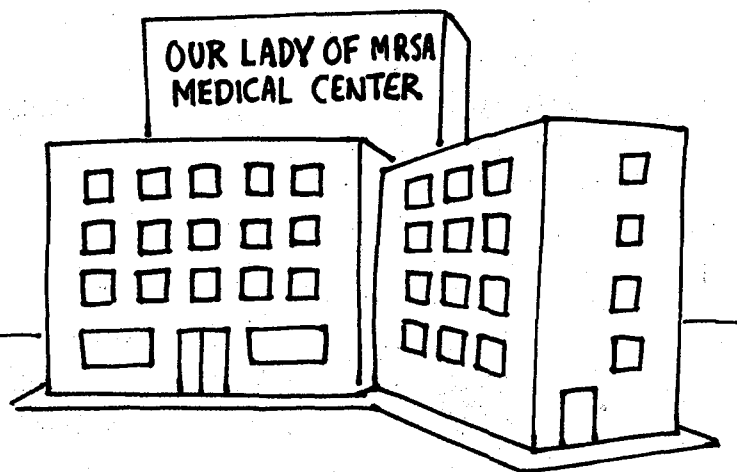
So at the annual meeting of the neighborhood organization, where they made reports on each of their task forces and how they'd done on their goals, the hospital task force that had put the pressure on this hospital to change made a report. They told about how the hospital had really changed, how many people

from the neighborhood were being served, were being employed, how everything was now in good shape. And everybody applauded. This was a very clear, manifest victory.

There was an old lady at that meeting, and I was there too — this is one of the neighborhood organizations we had been close to — there was an old lady at the meeting whose name was Gertrude Snodgrass, and she stood up — she was the kind of person that goes to all the meetings, a cantankerous type — she stood up and said, "If we control the hospital, why is it so many people are sick around here?"

As a discussion developed, people agreed that it sure didn't seem clear that people in that neighborhood were healthier now that they had some control of the hospital. So they talked it over and they concluded that probably it was a bad hospital — if we had a good hospital, people'd be healthy.

That's when they turned to us. They said, it looks that you're from the university, you understand systems, right? And they said to us, "Well, why don't you go in there, McKnight, and do a study, find out what's wrong in that



hospital, why is it we're not healthy. They may be serving us, but they aren't serving us right."

David Cayley

McKnight, as he was instructed, set up a study. He and his colleagues examined the records of the hospital's emergency department and made a list of the seven most common reasons for admission.

They were, in this order: car accidents, assaults, other accidents, chest problems, alcohol, drugs—both medical and recreational — and dog bites.

John McKnight

So we go back to the health task force, we show them this list, and they look at the list, and Gertrude Snodgrass looks at the list and says: "Them ain't diseases, that's community problems."

It was stark when you saw it: here this hospital is full of people, but it has no capacity to deal with the problems that brought them there.

This is what became clear to all of us at that meeting — under the guidance of Professor Snodgrass, not me. We began to see that it was community, not institution, that was going to be the source of their health.

David Cayley

The neighborhood organization decided to take on some of the problems John McKnight's study had turned up. They began with the last item on the list: dog bites. These were caused by packs of dogs running wild in the neighborhood, dogs that people had acquired as pets and then abandoned.

John McKnight

Instead of saying, we'll march on city hall and put the pressure on the dog catchers to come out and catch the dogs, they did something else.

They had an idea about building their own community's capacity. So they had a "Dog Saturday" in which the neighborhood organization distributed pamphlets to all its block clubs in about a mile-square area and said, next Saturday, if you know where a wild dog is or a pack of wild dogs, then you call our office and tell us and we'll come out and get the dog, or dogs, and we'll pay you five dollars per dog, a bounty for each dog.

So lo and behold, what happened that Saturday was that a bunch of kids learned that if you could track a stray dog, you could get five dollars. Kids were out all over the neighborhood on bicycles, locating these dogs, and then they'd get their parents or the people who lived at the house to call in and the neighborhood organization would go out and catch the dogs and take the dogs and turn them in to the dog catcher — and the kids made five dollars each.

So they created the first real urban cowboys, kids who went and rounded up these old dogies, and they got kids involved in building their community, becoming responsible, and knowing what health was really about— not about getting your shots, but a different understanding.

David Cayley

Following that success with the dogs, the members of the neighborhood organization subsequently took on a number of other problems in the same way. For example,

instead of simply demanding that the city do something about traffic accidents, they found out where and why accidents were occurring; they could then demand that these problems be fixed, as they did, on the basis of authoritative local knowledge.

They also inquired into bronchial problems, another item on the list, and discovered that nutrition might be a factor. This led to the building of a rooftop greenhouse to grow vegetables locally. The story goes on. But it began from the recognition that health is a *political* question and depends more on vibrant communities than it does on the availability of medical services.

John McKnight believes that a new politics is taking shape in communities where he has been involved, like the neighborhoods on the west side of Chicago. He believes that some people are becoming aware in their bones that hospitals cannot simply produce health, that schools can't produce education, nor police departments safety. Experience has taught them, he says, that communities can only regenerate from within.

John McKnight

Institutional incapacity is resulting in a new kind of movement that we have been observing, connecting with, trying to convene, trying to understand, that says, "We now do understand that it doesn't make much difference who is the superintendent of schools in Chicago.

"It doesn't make much difference by gender or race, because we've tried them in all colors and in all genders and the disaster continues at the local school.

Therefore, we'd better take back the control from these big systems and the professionals who run them."

So one sees beginning efforts by people at the local level — not to march on downtown and say, you better deliver good education and police services, but to say, "We want control over the local police, we want control over the local schools, we want to redefine the welfare system, so that we bring it back home."

David Cayley

In the spirit of bringing it back home a coalition of neighborhood groups on Chicago's west side has undertaken what they call the "Wellness Initiative," a term intended to emphasize the community's gifts, rather than its deficiencies.



John McKnight introduced me to some people who are involved while I was in Chicago to interview him, and they allowed me to sit in on one of their meetings. Afterwards I talked with Jackie Reed, of the West Side Health Authority. She had chaired the meeting, and she told me how she thinks the attitudes of local community groups are changing.

Jackie Reed

In the past, you know, they have used what I would call "anger-organizing," organizing around issues: let's fight crime, let's fight drugs, let's fight gangs.

The problem is, once the anger dissipates, then what? This project deals with community building on strengths, and instead of using anger we really try to embody a lot of the principles of love, of caring for each other, of sharing with each other, just putting your light on and letting your light shine.

I think people are pretty tired and I think people have seen things not work and are tired of seeing things not working. Particularly in the African-American community, we have had a tendency to depend upon what other people said about us, what other people thought about us, and what their recommendations or solutions were for us, and then the money comes and we basically buy into their recommendations so that we can somehow justify our positions in various organizations.

But by and large we've seen so much continue to happen, so much deterioration continue to happen, despite all the big bucks out here, drugs and crime and problems continue to proliferate. People want something different to happen.

I think that this is a concept, as we've talked to the churches, no matter where we've talked, you know — we had a big meeting with the governor's wife and civic leaders and what-have-you — and everybody basically agrees that this approach is the way to go.

David Cayley

The approach that Jackie Reed and her co-workers have taken involves a patient effort to reclaim public space, expand local economies, and connect local capacities with local needs.

The week before I was there some of the participants in the wellness initiative had received national publicity for an action in which they had displaced drug dealers from their normal places of business by setting up stands selling snow cones and lemonade on those corners.

Another project aims to restore life to the local streets by reviving walking in the neighborhood. The important thing, according to Jackie Reed, is that the community must once again come first.

Jackie Reed

What we have to do is to look at life and situations not so much in terms of problems, but in terms of opportunities.

If you are not working, then it is a good time to do things in the neighborhood. It provides some time for you to use your skills to rebuild the community. Let's get the parkways clean, let's get the graffiti off the walls, let's contribute something to somebody else in our community.

In the process of doing that, you know, getting people who didn't have jobs out of

their houses to volunteer, they end up getting a job. That's been my experience: I can't keep volunteers at the West Side Health Authority's office.

Michael came here in as a volunteer; he heard about the Wellness Project and he said that, you know, he'd be willing to plant grass seed on the 5400 block of West Van Buren for all of his neighbors. We had a good time with it — this was in January — and we had some meetings and Michael basically was driving people back and forth. He was a great volunteer: he was transporting senior citizens to our meetings and before long Michael had gotten a job. One of the seniors had gotten him a job; he knew somebody at Goldblatt's who gave him a job.

So a lot of what happens when people get involved with other people and as people get to know their neighbors and trust their neighbors, their neighbors help them get jobs.

When the chain stores leave our communities, it's an opportunity for the little ma-and-pa store to open back up. And so these are the ways in which people who are working in the community can buy from people in the community who are doing their little enterprises. That is what we hope. I believe we do that when we can organize people to trust each other, to respect each other, and

to support each other.

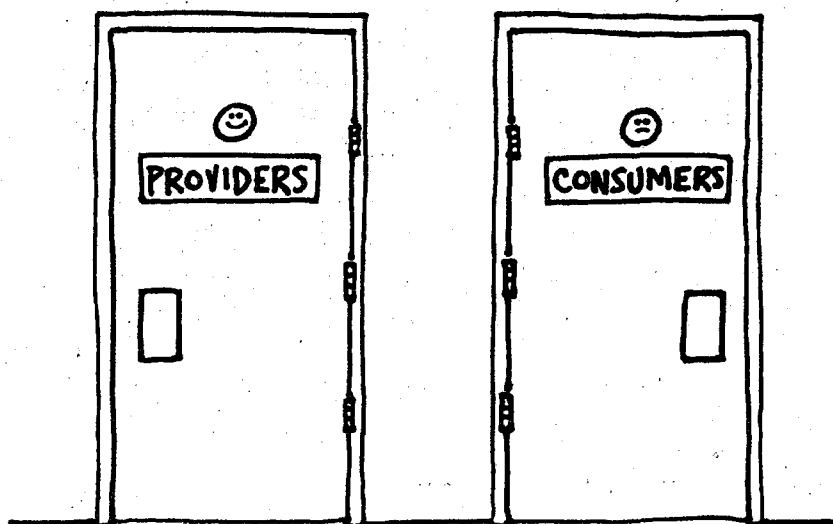
David Cayley

So you're saying that this process — you call it “wellness” or “regeneration” — feeds itself, like a fire.

Jackie Reed

That is exactly right. It will be the pooling together of resources — those who have money, those who have skills — that will basically rebuild our community. I think that is the legacy of the African-American experience. Somehow we lost that, I think, with the expansion of social-welfare states.

But I'm from the South — I'm from Mississippi — and I know that our survival, growing up, depended on our neighbors. When our neighbors went fishing, we all ate fish; when our father butchered a hog, everybody ate pork. It's a collective sharing of resources, and it seems to me that the only way that is being remembered now and carried out, by and large, is through the



African-American church.

It's amazing: if you go in these church buildings, they have brand-new everything in the church building. They'll build a brand new church from scratch and it'll be the only new building in that block. And I find that fascinating because you'll see old women sitting beside the off-and-on ramps of expressways, selling peanuts for that church. They'll have a barbecue dinner one Saturday out of a month for that church.

One lady I know — I bought tickets from her — raised eleven thousand dollars on a fashion show and dinner. She called it an international dinner, but it was for her church. She loves to fund-raise, she likes to do that for her church.

The church has been the one place where people have had an *opportunity to give*, to develop their gifts, to do that. So when people make a commitment to make a difference in their community or in their church, they can do it, and that will be the thing that will turn our neighborhoods around.

David Cayley

Local organizing efforts, like the Wellness Initiative, reflect a political mood which extends throughout the city of Chicago. Its foundation, as John McKnight has already stressed, is a thorough-going disillusionment with the dominant institutions, and it has already resulted in a surprisingly successful campaign to radically decentralize control of education.

John McKnight

An almost impromptu but tremendously powerful movement erupted in Chicago. The

community organization and association leaders came together and said, we want to write a law, and we'll go down to the state capital in Springfield — because the state has the power over our education — and see if we can persuade the Illinois legislature to pass a law.

What we want is to take away from our school system and our central board of education and our superintendent about 90 percent of their powers and give us that power as citizens over our schools. We want a law that says each school will elect its own board members and hire its own principals and its own teachers.

Today it seems almost miraculous, but the state legislature passed such a law, and the wheel has turned completely because we now have some 480 elected boards of education in the city of Chicago, with the power to decide how the budget will be expended. They hire and fire the principals, and soon, I think, they will have the same power over hiring and firing teachers. And out of the local citizens' using their political power they now once again have recaptured within citizens' space an institution that they had lost.

David Cayley

In John McKnight's view the movement that won local control of Chicago's schools is also ready to reinvent community in other ways. But there are still formidable barriers between local initiatives and the public resources which would allow them to be realized.

One such barrier is bureaucratic. The awakened energies of the community are often dissipated in a maze of government

regulations. Resources are tied up in social programs which deliver services to people whose real need is income.

The extent of this problem was revealed when colleagues of McKnight's at Northwestern University's Institute for Urban Affairs did a study of what actually happens to money appropriated for the poor in Illinois' Cook County, which includes Chicago.

John McKnight

We reviewed the federal budgets and the state budgets and the county budgets, identifying all programs that were for low-income people. We added up the dollar value of all of those programs. Then we got the number of people who fell beneath the government's official poverty line.

We now had all the money that was available for people in poverty and the number of people of who were in poverty, so we divided the money by the number of people and came out with a figure of \$6,300 for every man, woman and child in Cook County who lived beneath the poverty line.

That would mean, let's say, for a mother who had two children, about \$19,000, which for a family of three at that time was almost at the median income. That mother would not be poor, back then, with \$19,000.

However, we then did a study of how the money was expended — that is, who got the money at the end point.

And the answer was that 37

percent of the money went to poor people as income, and 63 percent went to people and organizations that were serving them.

But had you distributed to every low-income person their share of the money designated for low-income people, there would have been no low-income people in Chicago in 1984 — none!

Instead, we legislated poverty. We said, your principal problem, as we understand it, is you're poor, so what we are going to do is appropriate enough money to make you un-poor—and then give two-thirds of it to service providers and give one-third of it to you.

Now you're a mother with two children getting \$8,000 instead of \$19,000 a year.



WHEN THE MOON IS FULL, EDMUND IS TRANSFORMED FROM CONSUMER TO CITIZEN.

What is that? It's a system for funding service institutions at the expense of adequate income for the poor.

David Cayley

The way out of this bind, McKnight believes, is to give individuals and communities discretion over the public moneys available to them; let them generate economies rather than building compulsory service economies on their backs.

Governments function best, he says, when they transfer resources that enable people to act on their own behalf.

John McKnight

The best example is the GI Bill of Rights, where what the government did was take its resources and say to individuals, "We're going to give you a piece of paper and if you give it to any college or trade school or university, they'll take it and they'll educate you.

"And here's another piece of paper that will allow anybody that wants to build you a house to build you a house if you have only \$500 to pay for it, and you tell the banker when they get the piece of paper that if you don't make good on the rest of the loan, we'll pay it, we the government." That's the GI Bill.

It was a hugely successful system of equalization and opportunity because it didn't create a separate system. It didn't say, we're going to have housing for veterans and we'll set up a federal veterans' housing administration and a state veterans' housing administration and a city veterans' housing administration and pass the money down through the three and we'll have monitors and evaluators and consultants and a whole bunch of people who

are either in the government or working for the government who will check to make sure that this special system works.

But that's what we've done, now, in latter days, for people that we call poor.

We never did that for people we valued. What we did for people we valued was, we made them valuable to the educational and housing industries in the society. We didn't create any bureaucracy at all of any significance.

David Cayley

It's John McKnight's opinion that social policy should enable individuals and communities to attain their own ends in their own ways, just as the GI Bill enabled veterans to get an education and a home without specifying how or where they should do it.

What frequently happens instead, he feels, is that systems of social service replace the community rather than fostering it; citizens are then forced to participate on the system's terms, as so-called volunteers or on sham advisory councils. Eventually the very idea that there was once a different way of doing things begins to seem fanciful, perhaps nothing more than a romantic rumor.

Today, circumstances are throwing communities back on their own resources, making them, as McKnight said earlier, reinvent themselves. He offers no blueprint for this rebuilding and believes none is required. His aim has been to clear away the obstacles, so that communities can express the vitality he believes they inherently possess. What will happen then, he says, is something that can only be discovered on the way.

John McKnight

I see my life as a continuing journey with people who act as citizens in a place and a time, and I came to recognize in some profound way that life is all about something in particular and hardly ever about anything in general.

I know some places and some people and some groups who believe this thing is possible. Whether or not that vision will become prevalent or manifest I don't know, but I have been around efforts at change by citizens in communities long enough now that I have seen over and over again ventures that I thought didn't have a chance at all [laughs] come to be the way.

I saw a group of straggly-haired young people stop a war.

I saw a group of defeated, degraded public housing residents rise up and throw the managers out and say, "This is our home, we will take this over and we will run it and we will come to own it."

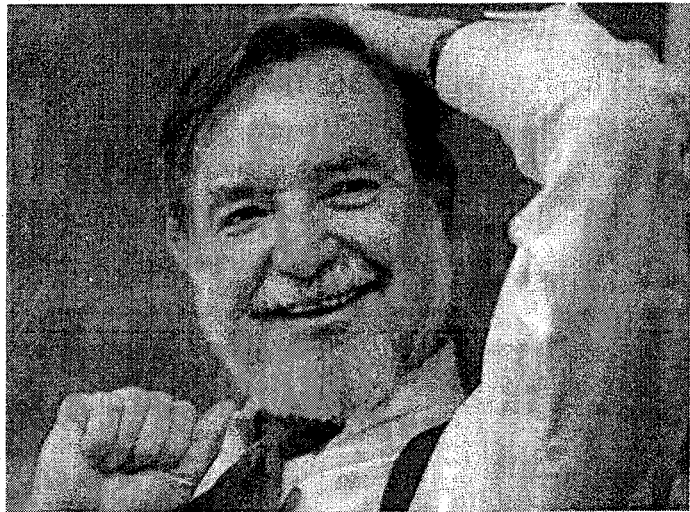
I have seen a group of neighborhood people come to understand that they had the tools and power to control their health and that the hospital as a health source was a great illusion.

So my life has been blessed with a continuing set of surprises, and those surprises have almost always been the result of a group of citizens, in association, who had a vision and made it come true.

And, you know, the other thing if you've been in community organizing for a long time is that in the end it isn't the neighborhood as a place that is the measure. In the end the measure is what happened in the lives of people when

they acted together as citizens and what did that mean to them in terms of satisfaction, purpose, meaning, and value — the value of having their gifts recognized, the value of seeing something more than their own self-interest, seeing the common good, the value of having their gifts shared, the value of believing that they are not alone and that they are not a victim, the value of seeing change, however small.

That citizen experience, that experience in the lives of the people I've known over the years, is I think the greatest jewel in life's crown. ■



JOHN MCKNIGHT

The series concludes next time with ideas for rebuilding hospitable communities, where people who have been excluded can be made welcome again.

To watch McKnight's video, "Community Approach to Health Improvements," go to <http://videos.med.wisc.edu/videoinfo.php?videoid=40>. It is delightful and it is free.