5

Community Narratives

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Seymour Sarason, perhaps *the* formative community psychologist, reflected in his later years that community psychology research and practice had focused too exclusively on specialized psychological concerns (Sarason, 2000). As Sarason wrote, community psychology

> . . . has lost its vision, imaginativeness, and initial purpose, a commitment to an overarching, cohering sense of responsibility to study, understand, and to have impact on communities. (p. 923)

Neither community psychologists nor other community-based researchers, Sarason believed, tended to examine "whole communities." They did not work to find barometers to measure otherwise undetectable changes in whole communities. Sarason (2000) wrote:

> Nothing in our psychological background could serve as a compass for thinking and action. The one thing we knew was that we had been ignorant of how the communities we lived in and worked in changed . . . . we knew that our focus had to be that complexity we call a community. Not this or that segment, subgroup, or problem, but the whole of it and the way it works and changes for good and bad. (p. 925)

Although understanding the complexity of "whole communities" in a holistic way—across people, space, and time—may require volumes of books, there is something to be said for Sarason's striving toward more expansive psychological, cultural, and political methods of conducting community science. Evaluations of a community-based effort can lead to fuller, deeper, and richer understandings of a community's ecology. Such research approaches can tell us better what does and does not work in an initiative, comparing initial goals with what happens over time in the complex reality of a particular community.

Holistic understandings of communities can be aided by statistical techniques, although quantitative approaches alone are insufficient. The holistic nature of communities, we argue, can be captured best through qualitative methods, and here we focus on the use of community narratives to understand whole communities of place. In the chapter, we highlight the importance of eliciting narratives from community stakeholders to capture a diverse range of community perspectives. We first present a conceptual overview of the community narrative approach, followed by sections on its methodology and on its strengths and limitations. We conclude with a case study using community narratives to evaluate Habitat for Humanity International's Neighborhood Revitalization (NR) initiative.

INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY NARRATIVES

Conceptual Overview

Community narratives use qualitative research tools in a collaborative process with community members. The tools include "story" and "narrative" to draw out of stakeholders rich, holistic, and ecological understandings and to eventually paint a picture of a community context or initiative. Too often, quantitative approaches focus on change scores or other indices of improvement, stagnation, or loss, rather than the whole temporal process of

life events. The real changes that transpire in whole communities occur qualitatively, in more complex ways than can be placed on a measurement scale or averaged in a statistic. Standardized "objective" measures struggle to capture the deeper psychosocial complexity that formative community-oriented theorists represent in their work (e.g., Rappaport, 2000; Sarason, 2000).

Formal, quantitative data—even the most complex statistical, inferential, and longitudinal techniques—have trouble capturing the most meaningful changes members of the community have experienced, which is often well represented in stories. Curvilinear time-series analyses do not capture well the phenomena of interest that Sarason (2000) had in mind when he called for better "barometers of change." Such barometers help trace a community's narrative history—the geographic, temporal, and interdisciplinary "whole" and all associated insights. Most keenly unique to this approach are the temporal sequences represented by story (i.e., narrative). Stories begin, progress, involve a middle, and often conflict, up through the end toward some form of resolution. This progression and these ends, as McAdams (2006) has extensively discussed, tend to be characterized by contamination or redemption.

A guiding concept for many community-based researchers has been that of empowerment (Rappaport, 1981, 1987). Empowerment involves all stakeholders in the research and change process taking a collaborative approach to the challenges at hand. Empowering research is about generating processes in neighborhoods that enhance people's control over their lives, their learning, and their growth, working together to open up niches and new opportunities (Rappaport, 1981). When a project is empowering, the roles among community members, practitioners, and researchers achieve a lateral status—mutual interventions and evaluations that are both valid and relational. Empowerment is both an individual stakeholder sense of control and a broader form of personal solidarity with all partners in a research project and the community.

A community narrative methodology captures an empowerment-oriented worldview. The method draws out a community's themes in solidarity with its needs, strengths, aspirations, challenges, and changes. The combination of narratives and empowerment helps community members spread, amplify, and give value to their experiences—to discover and create new stories. Research approaches have long been needed that value truth and objectivity while highlighting strengths.

Story-based questions often generate extensive qualitative responses, particularly compared to more abstract questions about beliefs, attitudes, and values. Participants absorb story-based interview questions and find them intuitively sensible. Stories are about people's lives and being human. Stories, as Rappaport (2000) noted, privilege the voices of the people studied. Compared to formal data, story-based questions send a metacommunication that turns research subject roles into that of co-participants (Rappaport, 2000).

Personal stories are elicited by asking story-based questions consistent with McAdams' (2006) life story methodology. A sample question might read:

> Imagine you are an autobiographer. Tell me about a high point episode in your childhood, a time you remember vividly where you felt extremely positive emotions. When did that episode happen in your life, who was there, what was said, how did the events progress, what were you feeling and thinking, and how does this episode relate to the person you are today?

Story-based questions often ask participants to provide full stories about low points or transitions in their lives. Once the interviewee has warmed up with the story-based questions, more abstract, value- or belief-based questions often follow.

Community narratives, beyond personal narratives, can be derived from a modification of the aforementioned questions, for example, "Tell us a high point in your community." Personal stories become community narratives in at least two ways. One is to ask community participants interview questions about the personal and historical narratives of their particular community. A second is to take a set of personal narratives from members of a community and code them; the themes that emerge across community residents are community narratives. Community narratives are, therefore, derived either from the interviewing process or from the analysis and interpretation process. In either case, they should be offered back to stakeholders and used to further community change efforts.

Through community narratives, researchers can uncover those features of communities that produce empowerment and, by communicating their findings, contribute to the empowerment process (Olson & Jason, in press; Olson & Jason, 2011; Rappaport, 2000). Community narratives help detect the barometers of change of whole communities: the history, structure, and social features of those communities (Sarason, 2000).

We have found this approach to be particularly useful in better understanding community development interventions. When a community attempts a total transformation of a neighborhood, whole-community change barometers in the form of narratives can help detect, analyze, and interpret positive changes. The approaches reveal features of the work that can be enhanced, replicated, and/or reconfigured in future efforts to benefit the whole community and all the residents within it.

Community Narrative Methods

There are several important components of the community narrative approach. They include (a) the choice and design of the interviews, (b) the participants chosen for the interviews, and (c) the methods of analysis. We have adapted story-based interview methods, created by McAdams (2006) within the personality field, to community narratives. Interviewing stakeholders from as many diverse perspectives and roles as possible represents the formative component of the whole community narrative technique.

The adaptation of the McAdams methodology to a community level enables questions about an organizing or change effort and about larger macro-level factors, but the techniques are very similar. The whole community method need not focus on a place-based community. The McAdams qualitative story-based technique varies greatly depending on the project's goals. The community-based adaptation interviews individuals or focus groups, asking (as in the personal narrative approach) about high points, nadir scenes, and transitions. When this methodology is adapted to personal life stories tied to a community effort, interviewees might be asked to provide stories about quality of life, low scenes in the community's history, transitions, strategies, positive experiences, or assets. The more diverse the stakeholders, the more history is revealed. The more interviewees can speak to the community's strengths and critique the community and change efforts being done, the better.

In essence, the researchers ask participants about personal and life histories of the community. Residents are asked to tell about their own lives, about their lives within the context of the community, and about the community's history, challenges, and changes perceived, as well as about the intervention itself. Barometers of change are discovered through dialogue about residents' stories, about family, organization, community, societal, and political interactions over time, all in discrete and vital episodes of their lives.

Even the most personal stories can be coded and triangulated to derive community narrative themes, from before the beginning of an initiative to the end. Any attempt to write up a whole community analysis requires moving back and forth, focusing on essential features of an individual's quality of life within the context of what is known about the broader community, in the hope of uncovering patterns that develop.

The next two phases of the community narrative approach involve data analysis and presentation back to community stakeholders. First, narrative quotes are coded by themes related to individual perceptions of community change. The narrative analyses can, as in any other qualitative study, be done inductively or deductively. Themes can even be quantified by the researcher, constructed either on existing theory or recurring themes in the early set of interviews, with the researcher then applying a numerical coding scheme to separate passages (McAdams, 2006; Olson & Jason, in press). What we have found to be most central in the analyses is to maintain the temporal sequences of the stories. We use the coded themes to help reconstruct the progression of the initiative itself and its important drivers. We find that, as will later be illustrated in the chapter, depicting those themes within a visual logic models is beneficial to discussion of the initial findings with multiple stakeholders.

Second, the rich narratives themselves are shared with stakeholders in order to facilitate greater dialogue and understanding about community aspirations, ecology, and change. The researcher can use narratives to help community members learn from and reflect on the stakeholders' varied perspectives and stories. Such learning

and reflecting can, in turn, facilitate community empowerment and the initiative's future growth.

The rich qualitative data and its manifestation in the visual logic model can help stakeholders make sense of community dynamics, processes, and change efforts. For example, the creation of a logic model that is germane to an organizing or improvement initiative can validate or correct the effort and help stakeholders better understand and communicate what is successful in an approach. The visual logic model and narratives also can aid in uncovering challenges, unheard or missing voices, and areas where a change in the approach is necessary. Evaluation results should utilize community stories in a way that best moves a change effort forward. Thus, we believe that analyzing themes for, and presenting narratives to, community members is an engaging and empowering change process.

Strengths and Limitations of the Approach

The concepts of community narrative and whole communities speak to each other most because they are ecological (Kelly, 2006). The two concepts have great breadth and complexity compared to other measures and focus on communities over time. Whole stories of a community are complex, and the amount of data gathered through story-based interviews can be overwhelming, thus requiring focus on one piece—personal, organizational, historical—at a time. However, the approach, in line with Sarason's perspective described earlier, can help in identifying the otherwise invisible features of a setting, its social bonds, and changes in the community that reveal significant shifts. This approach is certainly not without its challenges and limitations.

Finally, we would note that this method is more impactful when triangulating with additional data sources in order to, as fully as possible, understand multilevel community phenomena or change. Capturing the diverse voices and stakeholders, particularly those with the least engagement or power, is always an important goal and challenge. Narrative interviews are time consuming and necessitate familiarity with a community, access to a broad set of stakeholders, and continued efforts to identify and engage disparate voices. This is not easily done without first establishing trust and taking the time to understand a community and its stakeholders. In the next section, we describe a neighborhood-based evaluation involving the application of the community narrative approach.

CASE STUDY

Background of the Evaluation

Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI) is one of the largest nonprofit organizations in the world, well known for its housing efforts in more than 87 countries. HFHI has a well-established model for bringing people together to build new homes and make affordable homeownership possible. Their work has served as a catalyst for family economic success and community improvement. In 2008 HFHI began encouraging affiliates to focus their efforts in smaller, more targeted neighborhoods, partnering with civic and business groups to establish community plans to improve quality of life across whole neighborhoods. This case study is derived from a larger evaluation of this broader national effort called the Neighborhood Revitalization (NR) initiative.

The shift to NR came from the realization that HFHI affiliates cannot transform neighborhoods alone, one house at a time, particularly in the wake of the 2007–2008 recession and foreclosure crisis. The NR initiative, therefore, strategically targets hard-hit neighborhoods, collaborating with diverse partners to comprehensively improve neighborhood quality of life. Guided by community stakeholder and resident participation, NR is about improving the quality of life for all residents of a neighborhood, whether they are HFHI homeowners or not. The case study that we provide here is an NR community intervention that took place in the West End neighborhood of Roanoke, Virginia. HFHI's NR mission exemplified empowerment values by engaging residents and stakeholders to exert greater control over neighborhood action and improvement. The goal was always for the HFHI affiliate, in this case Habitat for Humanity in the Roanoke Valley (more informally known as Roanoke Valley Habitat), to be one key partner, among others, playing a role in revitalizing the focus neighborhood.

When the effort started in 2008, the West End was struggling with disinvestment and the deterioration of an older housing stock. By 2014, this participatory mixed methods (see Olson & Jason, 2015) evaluation of the NR initiative indicated that it had significantly transformed this

defined geographic community. Even in the stage of short-term outcomes, empowerment processes had led to other tangible and subjective increases in quality of life. Findings from property observation tools indicated that houses and streetscape appearances from NR work had changed the visual landscape of the West End. Community gardens had arisen as sources of pride and healthful forms of community building. Commercial interests in the area had grown. Consistent with the HFHI NR mission across the United States, the local partners, volunteers, and community residents had improved housing stock and neighborhood conditions, bringing about a greater sense of safety, community, and engagement. Eventually this led to increases in quality of life indicators, as evidenced in quantitative community resident surveys.

West End Community Narratives

The Narrative Interviewing Process

As part of the qualitative portion of the evaluation of the NR initiative, the researchers conducted narrative interviews with a diverse group of neighborhood stakeholders. More than 30 community stakeholders in the West End were interviewed individually and/or in small groups. A total of 20 narrative interviews were conducted. This included community residents—HFHI homeowners and longtime residents—and staff from local nonprofit community-based organizations and housing developers, HFHI staff members, local business owners, and city government partners. Each participant was asked about high points, low points, transitions experienced in the neighborhood, past history, relationships with the neighborhood, neighborhood revitalization strategies, and sequences of neighborhood transition. Additionally, interview questions were based on the larger NR initiative and partnership. Based on the original HFHI NR logic model, additional story-based and other questions were asked about initiative progression, partnerships, resources, home construction and repair, perceptions of neighborhood and housing, civic engagement, sense of community, commercial interest, and safety, all of which comprise aspects of neighborhood quality of life. A variety of questions were also spontaneously asked about personal, community, and project histories in the area in order to draw out the narratives.

Creating a Logic Model About Community Change Efforts

Visual logic models aid ecological thinking, helping strategists to appreciate multiple levels of community influence. The logic model is only one of many possible theoretical frameworks for this task, though it has proven useful to us in multiple evaluations. Visual logic models—temporally ordered conceptual diagrams—create simplified working maps of key community happenings that would otherwise be too much to take in and unwieldy to describe. Such models can help us understand the currents of the temporal sequences of stories, moving from beginnings to middles to endings, and interpret and navigate these sources of change and their causes.

Our approach used personal stories and derived community narratives whose collective themes provided a sense of the transformative changes occurring in the neighborhood, consistent with an original NR logic model. Yet it also led to the creation of an emergent logic model, based on narrative themes, of unique, whole neighborhood change that further articulated the intervention's neighborhood process and outcomes.

An emergent model is a combination of the concepts in the ideal/initial logic model and the reality-based and community narrative themes that have emerged from the evaluation. Much can be learned by comparing the ideal, original logic model—a hoped-for or generalized roadmap—with what has actually happened and worked. It also helps to compare how the original conception works differently in different settings. A visual logic model guides future dialogue about the project with participants and stakeholders. The on-the-ground, reality logic model—grounded in community narratives—helps stakeholders better understand which future strategies will help them solve their own community problems. Actively comparing pre- and postintervention logic models facilitates the use of past, current, and future potentialities.

Theme-driven visual logic models help partners identify the best combination of practices for certain contexts and which might generalize to future interventions or locations. Such logic models can be used to seed conversations among all stakeholders to better explain, understand, define, visualize, and act toward common and richer understandings of what has and is happening in a community. The

models, along with the overall evaluation reports, can also be used for communicating with policy makers, funders, and the media.

The logic model in Figure 5.1 summarizes themes from community narratives related to the West End NR effort in Roanoke. Reading from left to right, the model summarizes (a) outputs, (b) short-term outcomes, (c) medium-term outcomes, and (d) long-term outcomes (see Fig. 5.1).

The West End logic model—grounded in community narratives—tells a story of a targeted effort and collaborative partnership. This logic model, along with other qualitative and quantitative findings, was presented back to community stakeholders and has since been used to further the HFHI NR effort in other US communities. Here we discuss how narrative themes from the interviews were used to create and summarize this model. The findings seen in this logic model indicate that, first, resources from multiple sources are obtained for the initiative, represented in the lower left corner of the model. Next, HFHI and its partners do what they do best, which is build and rehab homes, while other partners do additional improvement work. Property improvements and affordable housing bring greater homeowner stability and aesthetic improvements to the neighborhood. Moving farther to the right side of the model, under the medium-term outputs, we see changes on such social and psychological dimensions as social cohesion and civic engagement. We also see commercial development occurring in conjunction with residents' perception of neighborhood safety. Ultimately to the far right of the model, the long-term goal is met, namely, the areas in which community residents interviewed experience an improved quality of life. Given this overview, we now take a closer look at themes derived from the narratives, starting from the outputs and moving progressively through the short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes.

Outputs: Collaborative Partnerships

A consistent theme that emerged from the interviews was the strong importance and appreciation of local collaborations and partnerships. The underlying goal of the NR initiative is one of partnerships within a targeted neighborhood. Consistent with Rappaport's (1987) concept of empowerment, Roanoke Valley Habitat played one small role in a stronger set of high-quality and dedicated partners. The partnership included community residents (homeowners and residents) and landlords, as well as volunteers, such as the Habitat construction volunteers (e.g., retirees and active seniors, younger church group members, and

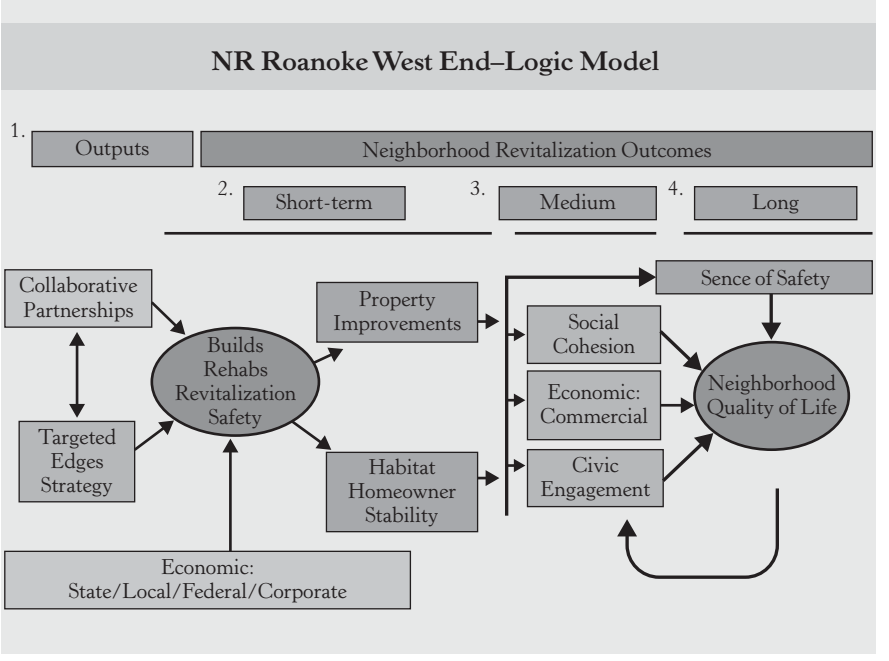

FIGURE 5.1: Roanoke West End narrative-derived logic model.

college students). Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (more colloquially known as Virginia Tech) faculty and student volunteers also provided specialized design plans and general landscaping and streetscape improvements within the West End. Also, students from local high schools participated, with the aims of building their skills and leadership capability while contributing to the community through service. Other major partners included Rebuilding Together, an organization that engaged more than 500 youth to rehab homes for seniors and people with physical disabilities, and social service agencies that provided safe and productive outlets for youth as well as wraparound services for neighborhood members.

Edges Strategy

Another consistent positive strategy that emerged was the importance of targeting neighborhood "edges" for improvement. The West End had long faced high rates of poverty and crime, a high proportion of rental units, and a promising but now dilapidated housing stock. And yet it sits on the "edge," or adjacent to two economically "healthy" sections of town, namely, downtown and a vibrant neighborhood called Grandin. The West End was an important transportation corridor that had the potential to attract Virginia residents seeking a shorter work commute into downtown Roanoke.

The progression from renting to affordable homeownership that Habitat makes possible did create new narratives. Residents found that, compared to renting, owning a Habitat home led to better places for children, a new ability to celebrate with larger families, and opportunities to invite neighbors over.

A broader community theme derived from stakeholder stories was *crisis turned into opportunity*. An existing, unsightly trailer park was located along the Roanoke River adjacent to both the West End neighborhood and the main transportation corridor through the neighborhood. The trailer park was on the geographic edge of the target area. One crisis to opportunity story was that several years earlier a flood had devastated the trailer park. The city took this newly abandoned, undevelopable area and turned it into a new section of the Greenway, a pathway where people could walk/bike through an attractive nature trail and thereby also travel through a portion of the otherwise too often ignored West End.

Economic Resources: State/Local/Federal/Corporate

Partners leveraged funds from the city and federal governments, including, for example, neighborhood improvement community development block grants from the city. Such grants guided immediate revitalization efforts, such as placing the police department on new bicycle patrols to increase a sense of safety, and more long-term revitalization efforts.

Short-Term Outcomes: Home Builds and Improvements

Roanoke Valley Habitat targeted home improvement areas in the West End. Roanoke Valley Habitat and other developers built new homes on vacant land, rehabbed other properties, and repaired small and major features inside and outside of the existing homes. Reflected in many stakeholder interviews and consistent with the NR initiative mission, increased economic resources, landscape improvements, and increased social interactions led to a greater sense of connection to the neighborhood.

Crises always arise in such an effort, and part of understanding the whole story of an initiative is understanding how such a complicated effort is actually accomplished and how variations of the initiative can be replicated elsewhere. Another story reflecting the crisis theme involved the fact that neglected, though excellent, housing stock stood within an historic district. Such historic stock is staunchly protected by Virginia's Department of Historic Resources, the city of Roanoke's Neighborhood Design District Guidelines, and the city's local Historic District requirements. Although the preservation policies cannot be said to be unimportant, they left little architectural flexibility for affordable housing development. Additionally, longtime residents were skeptical of HFHI's home-building efforts due to a perceived incompatibility with local character. Roanoke Valley Habitat embraced this challenge, hiring an innovative architect who developed a new, cost-effective "four square" design, a four-bedroom, two-story architectural design. The new designs were affordable, architecturally correct for the guidelines, and of higher quality than many had thought feasible at such prices. These new, larger homes were well received throughout the neighborhood and Roanoke, being seen as a better fit with

the aesthetic structures within the historic neighborhoods. This flexibility on the part of the Habitat affiliate allowed the partners to weather this crisis and continue to revitalize the neighborhood in such a way that brought even greater respect for HFHI and Roanoke Valley Habitat among partners, local residents, and private investors.

In-depth stories from Habitat homeowners showed an appreciation for being part of this targeted neighborhood intervention. Many immigrant families were served by the program, becoming neighbors with other residents and thereby increasing feelings of social support and a sense of connectedness. Interviewees consistently described feeling fortunate to reside in this improving neighborhood. Simultaneously, partner organizations worked on a host of services and repairs for seniors and those with disabilities, such as curb fixing, nonaesthetic internal features of the houses, and land- and streetscapes. From the perspective of area residents and a variety of stakeholders, the combination of affordable housing and physical property infrastructure improvements led to an improved quality of life. As a reflection of these changes, we heard many stories of rehabs, repairs, and new houses in previously abandoned lots quickly leading neighbors on each side of these property improvements to take better care of their own properties.

Medium-Term Outcomes: Cohesion, Civic Engagement, and Commercial Interests

Stories from residents spoke to increases in neighborhood pride, empowerment, sense of community, social cohesion, and civic engagement. Stakeholders also relayed perceptions of increased neighborhood stability and new commercial and residential investment. Targeting a single neighborhood also led to new efficiencies in how Roanoke Habitat and other partners could build. Supervision could occur at multiple builds simultaneously, and, due to the concentrated proximity of the work, moving people and materials from one place to another became easier because of NR. Stories also made it clear that Habitat homeowners went together through similar education programs on financing and the maintenance and repair of new homes, which helped with relationship building. Another reflection of an improved quality of life was the already-mentioned stories of new homeowners, emphasizing the importance to their sense of community of a having larger, owned space to invite friends, family, and neighbors. Greater pride was also found where Habitat made home improvements. Homeowners, however, did not ignore in their stories continued challenges, such as neighborhood tensions between homeowners and renters, indicating the need to improve engagement with and cohesion among all neighborhood residents.

The NR initiative in the West End caught the attention of private developers, one of which contributed significantly to the initiative. After becoming aware of the partnership's focus on the West End, a private developer moved into the neighborhood and began to purchase and rehab more than a dozen properties in the area. Although collaborating extensively with Roanoke Valley Habitat and other partners, he started to develop higher-priced homes, which served the purpose of revitalization. Although this raised concerns about inclusion and affordability, gentrification remained a very small risk, and this developer did add to the engagement and revitalization in the neighborhood. Interviewees also reflected on the importance of attracting the neighborhood's first financial institution, a credit union whose opening was widely celebrated. A farmers' market soon followed, an event mentioned by interviewees as an important neighborhood symbol and an anchor for future community development.

Long-Term Outcomes: Overall Quality of Life and Sense of Safety

As noted earlier, the police gave early attention to the West End through bicycle patrols. Yet the improved sense of safety mentioned by interviewees was a lengthier, more complicated process. Safety was a clear priority of residents, and organizing efforts were viewed as being successful in bringing about better police responsiveness. Neighborhood associations and watches were perceived as being more alert over time. More pedestrian activity, a greater sense of pride, and increased social connections across neighbors were mentioned as leading to more "eyes on the street." The longer-term end of the collective story involved sustained signs of improvement in the community while recognizing that challenges remained.

CONCLUSION

Community narratives can help researchers and entire community partnerships better understand how interventions impact resident quality

of life. The distillation of the stories, and the visualizations that arise, have worked toward better barometers and drivers of community change, often in change-resistant places. The aforementioned methods, derived from people's stories and community contexts, have helped us collectively play a meaningful supportive role in understanding and helping to facilitate resident-directed change. The steps have been helpful in Roanoke and other HFHI NR cities in which we have worked. We have no doubt that other researchers and evaluators who use the approach and adapt it to their own contexts will find the subsequent developments rewarding.

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