Introduction

Working against the Odds

Mobilizing Three University Teams to Collaborate with an Activist Community Organization

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In August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast of the southern United States. With many of New Orleans's neighborhoods flooded and evacuated, Wade Rathke, the founder and chief organizer of ACORN, the nation's largest low-income community organization, reached out to potential partners (Rathke 2011). Might they work together to protect and rebuild the devastated neighborhoods of tens of thousands of African American residents of New Orleans? Rathke had contacted Ken Reardon, long-time community planner and then-chair of the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University: Could Cornell and other universities provide technical assistance for relief, recovery, and rebuilding? Like those at many other universities, the students, faculty, and staff at Cornell were shocked by the images and stories that emerged from the Katrina disaster, and they were searching for ways they could respond.

Their conversations and meetings led over the next year to the ambitious, innovative, and risky work of two closely related university-community collaborations. On the university side, under Ken Reardon's leadership, were planning students, faculty, and staff at Cornell, Columbia, and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. On the community side were ACORN, under the leadership of Wade Rathke, and its affiliate, ACORN Housing, under the leadership of Richard Hayes. The ACORN-University Partnership (AUP) was oriented to mobilizing political support for Ninth Ward residents' benefit. The ACORN Housing–University Partnership (AHUP) was oriented to planning analysis and recommendations to the same ends. Working in parallel, these partnerships could leverage the community organizing power of ACORN, the housing development work of ACORN Housing, and the applied research expertise of

the three universities.[1] Since October of 2005, over 150 students, faculty, staff, organizers, and development professionals from these partnerships provided the residents of the Ninth Ward with quality planning, design, and development assistance. By August 2006 AUP-AHUP had become an official player as district planning consultant in the city's Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) process. By January of 2007, the AUP published *The People's Plan*, a comprehensive recovery strategy for the city's Ninth Ward. But the plan did not stop there; in the next several months, that product of university-community collaboration was formally adopted by the New Orleans City Council and the New Orleans Planning Commission. Not just that: when recovery czar Ed Blakely and Mayor Ray Nagin announced the city's plans to spend roughly a billion dollars of rebuilding and development funds in the coming years in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita's destruction, they also said they would send $145 million to the target areas of the AUP. Gone were the threats and fantasies of those who wished to prevent Ninth Ward residents from rebuilding their communities.

This book tells the story of these innovative and ambitious partnerships. Born of necessity after disaster, the partnerships brought together unlikely bedfellows. To begin to understand what worked and what didn't, what happened, and what it might mean for the future of university-community engagement, we have asked central players in the AUP-AHUP to share their experiences and perspectives and to reflect on the lessons they learned. We see not just how minds but hearts as well have changed. We see why more than a few university participants describe their participation in these partnerships as "transformative," a deeply significant part of their educations, perspectives, and practice.

These chapters candidly present the views and insights of those who did this work, especially those who worked under the banner of the New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop at Cornell. Drawing on the accounts of undergraduate and graduate students, community organization leadership and university faculty, we see both real hope and despair, both the politics of postdisaster recovery and its frustrations and political successes. We see successes as well as failures, and we can learn from both. We confront challenges of mutual suspicion and distrust, practical issues of timing and data, and struggles to make sense of a seemingly incomprehensible event. We recognize opportunities for making powerful public presentations and the dangers of political surprises too.

These and other complexities are hardly unique to post-Katrina New Orleans. These challenges will continue to confront those in universities—students, faculty, and staff alike—who wish to make "university civic engagement" a real promise, not empty rhetoric. Practically, too, these challenges will confront community leaders and activists who might wish to partner seriously with university staff, students, and faculty.

The story of these partnerships, then, is a complex drama in which the players did not always have time for each other. They did not always trust each other. They certainly did not always agree. Their differences are at least as important as their shared commitments to social justice, to community well-being, to tak-

ing advantage of the best available expertise to serve the needs of low-income communities of color.

We can learn, too, from more than the internal conflicts and coalition building of these partnerships. Our story also informs four related fields of study and practice: service learning, community planning, community organizing, and disaster recovery and community resilience. The accounts of the students that follow are so striking and moving that they cry out for further analysis: How can university and college programs more generally provide similar opportunities for student engagement, reflection, and learning? As we see, conflicts arose, alliances formed, nerves frayed, and feelings got hurt. This was all a testament to the importance of the task at hand and the impossible time pressure under which the work was being done—both suggesting just how much was at stake. At the same time, deep and everlasting friendships were formed and mutual respect and understanding eventually flourished. For many, these partnerships were transformative: they forever changed the ways project participants saw planning and its role in shaping the world around them. So, first, these chapters help us rethink the significance, depth, and possible limits of service learning as a component of what university engagement with communities can be (Stoecker and Tryon 2009; Angotti, Doble, and Horrigan 2012).

Second, the accounts of staff and students lead to important questions about how we might reimagine successful community planning. They move us from the outdated idea of expert plans sitting unread on shelves to planning processes cogenerated by local residents and drawing on the best expertise they can involve. In this way community development and planning might bridge local knowledge and scientific expertise, bridge traditional ways and innovation, and nurture in real time and place grounded practical judgment and real hope for social change and physical betterment as well. As we shall see, this work struggled to combine deep commitments to listening to affected residents, marshalling the best technical expertise the universities offered, and hardly least of all strengthening the power and influence of our community partner. In these ways, the project sought to integrate threads of community dialogue, technical debate, and action-oriented power, the three central elements that, when interwoven, become a "critical pragmatism" (Forester 2009, 2012a, 2013b).

Third, the accounts of the project leadership raise many questions about organizational relationships, about team building, about cross-cultural and multicultural work, and about the qualities of coalition building and the demands of bridging cultures as distinct as those of housing activists and faculty researchers. The stories here vividly illustrate the "fog of war" of postdisaster recovery, in which information is scarce and often conflicting, needs and priorities shift rapidly, old alliances are shattered and new ones rise up to take their place. As the recovery unfolded, no one person or organization could see the whole picture of the contentious politics of post-Katrina recovery (Olshansky and Johnson 2010; Vale and Campanella 2005). Our story shows how that fog of war crept into local politics and decision making and how planning under

such conditions of uncertainty led to inevitable conflicts. These chapters begin to teach us too the politics of community organizing, a politics to which university partners can be vulnerable if they do not deeply appreciate the needs and cultures of community organizations and their leadership.

Finally and hardly least of all, throughout all these accounts, we learn about both postdisaster recovery and the significance of predisaster social capital of trust and reputation, networks, and local knowledge that can enhance residents' prospects of recovery and rebuilding. We see that recovery and resilience is about the physical stuff that makes our cities, but it is equally about the struggles of families and communities to repair a social fabric that was torn apart by more than just a hurricane. The accounts we present raise important and sensitive questions of the appropriate roles of outsiders in community-based planning processes. The devastation wrought by Katrina was the catalyst for these partnerships, but the fight over the direction of recovery and rebuilding was firmly rooted in the city's long and complex history of racial and class conflict (e.g., Allen 2007; Hartman and Squires 2006; Tierny 2006; Trotter and Fernandez 2009; Leong et al. 2007).

At the core of any disaster recovery is a fundamental tension between the need for both speed and deliberation—a basic struggle between our desire to see things done quickly and to see things done well (Olshansky, Johnson, and Topping 2006; National Research Council 2006; Wisner et al. 2004). The voices of the community lent urgency to the task at hand, to make clear the rights of Ninth Ward residents to return home and rebuild their lives and livelihoods. At the same time, participants in the AUP felt obligated to learn from the mistakes of the past in order to plan for a safer future. At times, this tension created rifts in the partnership and complicated relationships among the participants. AUP participants struggled to be sensitive to history but not paralyzed by it, to empower communities to make decisions about their own recovery while carving out a meaningful space to contribute their own knowledge and expertise. So our story provides rich material to be mined by those who know that planning for postdisaster recovery and community resilience can be neither all top down nor solely bottom up.

But we want to provide one central story here of these partnerships, and we have resisted the temptation to take many side roads, to try to provide four or five books in one. We hope to tell the story in ways that will educate our readers, move them to understand and consider more, and stimulate them to learn from and build on our efforts. We provide links to related literature in the hope that critical readers will follow out those rich threads (e.g., Romand Coles 2004; Block 2006; Marquez 2000). But we have chosen to avoid the danger that one reviewer of this manuscript thankfully and forcefully pointed out: hundreds of footnotes would undermine, not help, our telling the story that needs to be told. We have tried, then, to keep our eye on the ball, to tell the story and, in a series of commentaries along the way, to note and provide guidance to important related scholarship and theoretical work.

Our plan of the book is simple: a drama in three parts. We want to let the participants speak, and we follow with commentary. In Part I the two senior project organizers, Cornell's Ken Reardon and ACORN Housing's Richard Hayes, tell their stories along with the analysis of Andy Rumbach, doctoral student at Cornell and one of Reardon and Hayes's go-to guys coordinating the details of student work.[2] Crystal Lackey Launder provides an initial view of the project's fieldwork in New Orleans. All four chronicle the bumpy ride of the project's progress, and none of the four hold back either their sense of frustration or exhilaration.

In Part II we take a look at the executive summary of *The People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues: A Comprehensive Strategy for Building a More Vibrant, Sustainable, and Equitable Ninth Ward*—the easier-to-read, visually attractive short form of the two-hundred-page compilation of the same name, the planning analyses produced by the diverse student-faculty New Orleans Neighborhood Planning Workshop teams. We balance this attention to possible futures of the Ninth Ward with a visually compelling recognition of living, breathing Ninth Ward residents: Brian Rosa's photodocumentary portraiture introduces us to the infinitely richer, fuller stories of community members, their families, their neighbors, and the thousands of residents displaced from their homes. We want readers, of course, not just to think creatively about planning possibilities but also to recognize and honor the community members whose lives any plans might affect.

In Part III we return directly to the accounts of project participants. Their stories are deeply felt, poignant, and surprising. Virtually every one provides an account of unexpected learning, of hard-won recognition of important realities—racial stereotypes, disappointments about all-knowing leadership, obstacles to teamwork, the significance of experiential learning, and more. These personal testimonies do air some of the project's laundry—revealing some of its less flattering sides—but the result of more candor, we hope, might be greater realism and perhaps a measure of wisdom for those attempting similarly complex work. We hope the book offers those preparing the next generation of community planners and urban designers a realistic introduction to the thrills, chills, and spills of resident-led recovery planning and the complex organizational and political challenges of undertaking such work.

In the year after *The People's Plan for Overcoming the Hurricane Katrina Blues* was done, ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) became the subject of a series of national print, radio, and television news stories focused on the alleged involvement of ACORN leaders in multistate voter fraud, improper tax assistance activities, and the cover-up of a theft of donor funds by a family member of one of ACORN's founders. This coverage prompted many long-time ACORN funders, including the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, to withdraw support for the organization. That, in turn, led ACORN's national board, hoping to put these stories to rest, to demand the resignation of ACORN founder and long-time chief organizer Wade Rathke.

Severely wounded by these stories—regularly celebrated by conservative talk show hosts such as Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Bill O'Reilly of the FOX Network—and the loss of Rathke, ACORN ceased operations and filed for bankruptcy in 2010. This happened even though none of the city or states attorneys investigating ACORN's alleged illegal activities found sufficient grounds to prosecute, and findings by the General Accounting Office in 2009 and 2010 cleared the organization of criminal wrongdoing.

Although ACORN no longer exists, a growing network of grassroots citizen organizations representing poor and working-class families remains deeply and practically committed to the direct-action organizing philosophies and methods of Saul Alinsky, Fred Ross, Cesar Chavez, and Wade Rathke. The increasing involvement of activist organizations like the Industrial Areas Foundation, Citizen Action, Gamaliel Fellowship, and PICO National Network in complex environmental, economic, and social justice issues and campaigns—as well as postdisaster planning efforts—will require both inspired, skillful organizing and high-quality, mixed-methods social science research like that carried out by AUP and AHUP. This makes the experiences and lessons learned from the intense collaboration of New Orleans activists and university scholars described in this book ever more relevant and worthy of careful study.

In the coming years, the growing income, wealth, and power disparities within American society will increasingly dominate the policy agendas of citizen organizations representing poor and working-class families. These organizations will have to gather and interpret increasingly large and complex data sets related to the policy issues affecting their members and allies. Public and private colleges and universities that have increasingly embraced Ernest Boyer's 1997 call for engaged scholarship can be important allies for these groups. But building nonexploitative partnerships of low-income activists and university-based scholars, partnerships based on reciprocity and mutual benefit, has never been easy.

Forged in the high-pressure environment of post-Katrina New Orleans, the AUP and AHUP experiences offer deep insights for those seeking to mobilize the extraordinary human and financial resources of the modern university to provide excellent education and support resident-led community transformation efforts at the very same time. Unlike many histories of community-university development partnerships, this book does not gloss over the difficulties that community members, students, faculty, and staff experienced as they tried to span significant racial and class differences that too often have prevented cooperative problem solving in the trenches of American cities (Katznelson 1981).

In Part IV we follow with a conclusion, an afterword, and an interlude noting where our contributors are now. The conclusion summarizes and draws lessons from the project participants' stories. The afterword addresses several outstanding concerns readers might still have: What has happened in New Orleans's Ninth Ward since the time of the project, and what difference did the project make? What educational impact did all of this work have? Even with

these questions addressed, the book has been difficult to bring to a close for obvious reasons: the political life of New Orleans proceeds, and postdisaster plans, like any plans, do not implement themselves. So the editors and contributors to this book will be as eager to read the next chapters in the Ninth Ward's history as any of our readers will be.

But before we begin, we introduce the cast of characters who've written this book and who played central roles in the work that we describe.

NOTES

1. Throughout we use "partnership" colloquially; these were not legal partnerships but practical, committed collaborations.

2. Rumbach was one of several graduate students, like David Lessinger, Kerry McLaughlin, Lesli Hoey, and Shigeru Tanaka, who were responsible for helping coordinate data collection, interviews, proposal writing, computer analyses and more. See Chapter 12.