redefining community

not just a place, but a
community of
people who share
values and beliefs.

people who live here, work here, and
belong to this community. it's more
than just a place to live; it's a place
where people come together to
support each other, to celebrate
each other's differences, and to
work towards a common goal.

community ties are
important for
many reasons. they
help to create a sense
of belonging, they
provide a network of
support, and they can
help to strengthen local
economies by promoting
collaboration and shared
values.

in order to strengthen
community ties, it's
important to foster
connections and
encourage
interaction among
people. this can be
achieved through various
community events and
initiatives, such as
cultural festivals,
volunteer opportunities,
and neighborhood
meetings.

by working together,
communities can
overcome challenges
and achieve goals that
individually may seem
unattainable. and by
celebrating our
differences, we can
create a more
inclusive and
dynamic society.

John L. McInerney
Most citizens lead lives in which they can only imagine, never see or talk to, labeled people.

organizations that solve problems.

De Toqueville observed three features in how these groups operated. First, they were groups of citizens who decided they had the power to decide what was a problem. Second, they decided they had the power to decide how to solve the problem. Third, they decided that they would themselves become the key actors in implementing the solution. From de Toqueville’s perspective, these citizen associations were a uniquely powerful instrument being erected in America, the foundation stones of American communities.

De Toqueville’s understanding of community is helpful in thinking about the incorporation of labeled people into community life because it focuses on the collective relationships that we understand as an association.

It should seem obvious that communities are collective associations. They are more than and different from a series of friendships. One can have a friendship with a labeled person in an institution, for example, but that does not mean the person has been incorporated into the community. A community is more than just a place. It comprises various groups of people who work together on a face-to-face basis in public life, not just in private.

The kinds of associations that express and create community take several forms. Many of them are relatively formal, with names and officers elected by the members. They may be the American Legion, the church bowling league, or the local peace fellowship.

A second kind of association is not so formal. It usually has no officers or public name. Nonetheless, it represents a gathering of citizens who solve problems, act together, and enjoy their social contact. These associations could be a bowling club, a coffee shop, or a gathering of neighbors who live on the block. The fact that they do not have a formal name and structure should not obscure the fact that they are often the sites of critical dialogue, opinion formation, and decision-making that influences the values and problem-solving capacities of citizens. Indeed, many Americans are primarily influenced in their decision-making and value formation by these informal groups.

A third form of association is less obvious because one could describe the place where it occurs as an enterprise or business. However, much associational activity takes place in restaurants, beauty parlors, barber shops, bars, hardware stores, and other places of business. People gather there for conversation as well as their economic activities. In the 18th century, some of the most basic discussions about the formation of the government of the United States and its Constitution occurred in taverns and similar settings. The backdrop for some of the most fundamental associational life today.

These three types of association represent the community from which most labeled people are excluded, and into which they need to be incorporated if they are to become active citizens at the association level of a democratic society.

Including the Excluded

Once we have understood the nature of the community of associations, we can begin to look at ways to incorporate excluded people into this community life.

Some people who have been excluded forge a path back into community on their own. This is usually a heroic struggle that requires great commitment and persistence. And while we know that such efforts are important, it is equally clear that life in the community is the dream of many of those labeled people whose lives are surrounded by nothing but services.

A second point of entry into community life is created by family and friends who almost always have a vision for the labeled individual that reaches beyond access to community services. They see that the good life is not just a fully serviced life, but one filled with the care, power, and continuity that comes from being part of a community.

A third point of entry into community is the one I would like to focus on in this article. It is a process involving individuals who assume a special responsibility for guiding excluded people out of service and into the ranks of the community. In varying degrees, this phenomenon occurs in many places.

At Northwestern’s Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, for the past eight years, we have been engaged in a continuing study of the initiatives of these individuals who serve as what we call “community guides.” The guides are unique, unshackled in their efforts, and informed by their own individual creativity and insight. While it is difficult to generalize about these people, it is possible to describe some patterns of their work.

Building Community Relationships

Effective guides do not just introduce one person to another. They bring a person into the web of associational life that can act as a powerful force in that person’s life. And they bring the individual into life as a system by incorporating them into relationships where their capacities can be expressed where they are not simply absorbed by these definitions.

Most guides are people with a special eye for the gift, the potential, the interest, the skill, the trauma, the capacity of others who are said to be “in special need” to open up to the strengths they introduce people into community life.

Several guides we interviewed had previously worked in service settings, and told us they had not realized that their basic understanding of the people they called clients was focused upon “fixing” them. They report that their most basic change in attitude, allowing them to be a guide, was to stop “fixing people.”

A second attribute of most, but not all, effective guides is that they are well-connected in the interrelationships of community life. They have invested much of their energy and...
Effective guidelines ensure that the community is informed and engaged in the decision-making process. They help to ensure that the community is aware of the benefits and impacts of the proposed project, and that their concerns are addressed. This process is essential for building trust and ensuring that the project is supported by the community. The guidelines should be developed in consultation with the community, and should be transparent and accessible to all stakeholders. This will help to ensure that the project is successful and that it meets the needs of the community.
We need to distinguish between services that lead people out of community and into dependency and those activities that support people in community life.

dence and could be designed to support community life such as income supplements, independent living aids, and specialized medical services. There has been very little systematic study in this area. A preliminary hypothesis is that services that are heavily focused on deficiency tend to be pathways out of community and into the exclusion of serviced life. We need a rigorous examination of public investments so that we can distinguish between services that lead people out of community and into dependency and those activities that support people in community life.4

Finally, we are reminded that the policy statement indicates that it is our goal to "facilitate interdependence in community life." It is critical here that we emphasize the word "interdependence." The goal is not to create independence—except from social-service systems. Rather, we are recognizing that every life in community is, by definition, one that is interdependent—filled with trusting relationships and empowered by the collective wisdom of citizens in discourse.

Community is about the common life that is lived in such a way that the unique creativity of each is a contribution to the other. The crisis we have created in the lives of excluded people is that they are disassociated from their fellow citizens.

We cannot undo that terrible exclusion by a thoughtless attempt to create illusory independence. Nor can we undo it by creating a friendship with a person who lives in exclusion.

Our goal should be clear. We are seeking nothing less than a life surrounded by the richness and diversity of community. A collective life. A common life. An everyday life. A powerful life that gains its joy from the creativity and connectedness that comes when we join in association to create an inclusive world.5

Notes

1. The Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research has developed a guide to finding and mapping local associations in your own area, called Getting Connected. It is available from the Publications Department, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, 2308 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60201-3100.

2. For a vivid description of one person who escaped the world of service, see the article by Philip Wuth, president of Ontario People First, in the Association for the Severely Handicapped (TASH) Newsletter 15, 5 May 1980, 1-3.

3. Two reports of the work of community guides, The City of Hospitality and Community Building in Logan Square, are available from the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research.

4. To an effort to assist policymakers in large public and private agencies to examine their resource allocation from this perspective, we have developed a guide to creating an environmental budget, which distinguishes between dollars spent on disability-oriented services, and dollars spent on the maintenance and creation of community opportunities. "An Accounting System Designed to Monitor the Environments We Invest in for Labeled People" is available from the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research.

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