

AN INTERVIEW OF JOHN  
MCKNIGHT BY DAVID CAYLEY  
OF CBC RADIO'S IDEAS PROGRAM



# Community and its Counterfeits

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**David Cayley**

*Ideas.* On community. I'm David Cayley. Contemporary Western societies have been characterized, until recently, by a relentless growth in social services. Demands for such services now far exceed the capacities of public budgets, resulting in what is widely recognized as "the crisis of the welfare state." But the typical response has been a policy debate that focuses on setting ceilings or streamlining services. The fact that social services monopolize the definition of welfare is still not questioned.

This *Ideas* series is about someone who *has* questioned that definition of welfare, someone who claims that beyond a certain intensity the professionalization of care, counsel, and consolation turn citizens into clients, someone who insists that paid services degrade and often destroy abilities which already exist within the community.

His name is John McKnight, and he has worked with communities and neighbourhoods throughout Canada and the United States, as well as directing the program in community studies at Northwestern University in suburban Chicago. He believes that a service economy based on needs hides a very different landscape in which gifts and capacities are what count, and he believes that a good society in which everyone's gift can be given only begins to be born when this obscuring veil is lifted.

In these programs, which I have called *Community and Its Counterfeits*, John McKnight shares some of the stories of a lifetime's community organizing. He defines the distinctive non-institutional sphere, which he calls "citizen space"; he explores the disabling effects on this space of professional help; and he describes the regeneration of hospitable communities based on the giving of gifts.

**John McKnight**

Culture, at least in the more traditional sense, is a set of learnings about how we as a people can persevere or survive in this place. Modern institutions are not about that question. They are new machines redefining us not as a people in a place, but as individuals in a system.

I think one of the things that's happened in modern society is that we think more and more that institutions make people, that you will be trained, that out of the training and management of your life you will become who you are. I see very little discourse or consideration about the question: what is the gift of each person here? Is a gift something that is of your nature, rather than something that you develop out of your experience?

I often buy presents for Christmastime through catalogues, because I don't like to shop. And so I'll put these, as I buy them through the year, on a shelf. And I had a visitor who looked in the closet where I had all these things stacked up on the shelf, and the visitor said: "What's all this junk?" [laughs] I said: "That's not junk, those are gifts." And the visitor, who's a very wise person, said to me: "Oh no, that's just junk. A gift isn't a gift till it's given."

My grandmother, I think, had a lot of influence on me, because one day—she was an Irish-American—one day, probably when I was five or six years old, in her kitchen, she looked at me and said: "You know, you have a gift." And I said: "What?" I think maybe I thought she was going to give me a gift. [laughs] And she said: "Blarney." And I think she was trying to tell me about a talent I had been given.

**David Cayley**

*Community and Its Counterfeits* is in three parts. I recorded the interviews with John McKnight over a period of several days at his home in Evanston, Illinois, in June of 1993. The first program explores the meaning of community, the effect on community of social services, and the way in which John McKnight's background made him aware of this effect.

**John McKnight**

I was raised in a family of people who call themselves "Covenanters." There aren't many of them in the world—I think there are maybe three or four thousand in the United States, and in Northern Ireland and Scotland there may be five or six thousand more. They are the remnants of the formation of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, back in the 1680s, but they were the extremists: they were the people who were unwilling to compromise with the British crown. They made a covenant to resist the crown and to say the head of their church was Jesus Christ and not the king. There were a bunch of compromises made by the other resisters or dissenters, but the Covenanters didn't compromise, and so they stood in rebellion and fought the English in some hopeless skirmishes; in Scotland you can see the little monuments to the places where the English descended on them in their prayer meetings and killed them all. Finally they fled to Northern Ireland and then some of them came to the United States. Those were the people who are my ancestors on my father's side and had a great influence, I think, on me. They were a saving remnant, the people of Zion. So we were raised with the view that there were three or four thousand people in the United States who knew the truth: then there were the others.

And by the time I left my family I think I was pretty well convinced that the institutions of society were not something that were to be honoured, were to be respected, were going to guide anybody in the right direction, that it was from our community and our families and our faith that our guidance would come.

The first thing that struck me when I went to the university—I went to Northwestern University—the first day the thing that struck me was, learning from a person who I just happened to be given as a roommate, that the university had a discriminatory policy that would let in only black people who were athletes, and it had a quota on the number of Jewish people they would admit. And the motto of this university is: “Whatsoever things are true, think on these things.” So I come to this institution that has this motto on its lintel, and find that it is just systematically denying the gifts of people who are black or who are Jewish. That confirmed, right off, what I had been told was the truth. And so I think that’s probably the beginning of a story.

**David Cayley**

John McKnight’s story, as it unfolded, was about community organizing, first at Northwestern as a student and then, after three years in the Navy, with the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, the city’s first civil-rights organization. Later he would work for the American Civil Liberties Union, the Kennedy administration’s pioneering Equal Employment Opportunity Office, and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, as its mid-western director. Then, at the end of the sixties, he found himself unexpectedly transplanted to academia.

**John McKnight**

Northwestern University received a major grant from the Ford Foundation to start an urban centre, in 1969. As the centre cities were burning across the United States, the Ford Foundation gave money to universities to try to give them an incentive to apply their knowledge, expertise, to the solution of city problems. They gave money to a lot of universities, and Northwestern was one of them. An old friend of mine was the person who was to create this new centre with this Ford Foundation money. It allowed him to bring a lot of faculty members in, but he thought there should be at least one person with real-world experience, in terms of the realities of cities and their lives. He had been a professor of mine when I was an undergraduate, and I had kept in touch with him all these years, so in a very unusual move they came to me with my bachelor’s degree and said, would you come to this centre and we’ll make you a professor, a full professor. And so I was made a tenured professor at the university by a stroke of the pen . . . [laughs] and I’ve been there ever since.

But it was very clear that my purpose in being there was to be the connection between the demands and realities of the city and its life and the university and its resources. That has been a very happy fit for me because I don’t think my background would allow me to be a full-time traditional academic.

And then as time passed I began to develop a little clarity on my own part as to a particular kind of focus that I might have, other than being the connector, and that focus evolved into what we now call the program in community studies. It is an effort to understand how local communities solve problems. And I think that’s pretty much what we’ve come to be known for.

**David Cayley**

How would you define the word *community*?

**John McKnight**

You know, if you go to a sociology department and you ask that question of the faculty, you’ll never leave. But my experience is, put in academic terms, applied, so that when you ask me the question: what is the community?, I probably listen to it: where is it? And there the answer is: in your mind. And in the mind of every other person in Canada it’s a different place. To some people it’s a feeling, to some people it’s relationships, to some people it’s a place, to some people it’s an institution.

So, while that word is used a lot, it is certainly not very functional if what you’re trying to do is to think about anything that is applied and manifest. So I’ve had to come to creating a definition of community that is useful for our purposes, and that community is the space where citizens prevail.

**David Cayley**

John McKnight found what he considered to be the most pertinent description of this space in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville. De Tocqueville was a young French aristocrat who visited the United States in 1831 and 1832, journeying as far west as Green Bay, Wisconsin, and as far south as New Orleans. He noted on his travels how the young republic differed from the Old World, and then, on his return to France, set down his impressions.

**John McKnight**

That book, *Democracy in America*, is, I think, the most useful book I know to help understand who we are. And he says, if I can summarize him in a rather gross form, that he came here and he found a society whose definitions and solutions were not created by nobility, by professionals, by experts or managers, but by what he

identified as little groups of people, self-appointed, common men and women who came together and took three powers: the power to decide there was a problem, the power to decide how to solve the problem—that is the expert’s power—and then the power to solve the problem.

These little groups of people weren’t elected and they weren’t appointed and they were every place, and they were, he said, the heart of the new society—they were the American community as distinct from the European community. And he named these little groups “associations.” Association is the collective for citizens, an association of citizens. And so we think of our community as being the social space in which citizens in association do the work of problem-solving, celebration, consolation, and creation—that community, that space, in contrast to the space of the system with the box at the top and lots of little boxes at the bottom. And I think it is still the case that the hope for our time is in those associations.

**David Cayley**

Associations, in de Tocqueville’s view, expressed the spontaneous and voluntary character of the new society, the way in which Americans, without common traditions, could still make common cause. And this is what John McKnight wants to underline in de Tocqueville’s account: the idea of a social space in continuous creation by its citizens, who claim by the very fact of their citizenship, authority and responsibility in this space. And where such a space exists, McKnight says, associations will naturally tend to proliferate according to the gifts of the citizens.

**John McKnight**

The best community—it will be imperfect, it can’t be fixed beyond this—is one in which all kinds of methods create all kinds of situations in which each of us finds relationships where our gifts are recognized and magnified. In my hometown, the newspaper printed a list of associations that the editor knew about—this is a town that has 1,300 people and the list is 81, and I know there are a lot more than that.

Now, why are there so many of these little associations in such a little town? Well, I think the reason for that is that they keep proliferating until all the ways that we appreciate each other, almost the mathematical possibilities for clusters of appreciations, get uniquely magnified and celebrated in these kinds of groups, and I think that leads to rich and diverse communities that recognize the specialness of people and provide all kinds of ways for them to express their spirit and to find other people who give expression to the spirit in the same way.

**David Cayley**

John McKnight defines community as the space in which citizens associate in their own individual and collective interests. He believes this space to be mainly threatened by institutionally defined social programs with the power to establish authoritative definitions of need. Needs are, in effect, the resources of the service sector of contemporary economies—what iron ore is to the steel industry, needs are to those who propose to meet them. A hundred years ago, 90 percent of those who worked produced tangible goods and only 10 percent what economists call “services.” Today the situation is nearly reversed: a declining minority are employed in industry and agriculture, while a majority produce service of some kind. The perverse consequence, according to John McKnight, is that for this new economy to grow, problems must proliferate.

**John McKnight**

We have now, in a funny way, an architecture of industrial systems that manufactures and delivers services so that people can be paid for doing work that isn’t goods-producing. So we’re involved in, actually, a humorous but tragic kind of never-ending search for new needs in people, because systems that grow have to find new needs and impute them to people, and the problem with that is it is always at the cost of diminished citizenship. So that as these systems of service colonize your life and my life, saying that we are bundles of needs and there are institutionalized services there to meet the needs to make us whole, to make us real, what we become is less and less powerful. Our citizen capacity and our gifts get lost and forgotten, so that there is, I believe, a relentless struggle between associational ways and system ways, and what we have seen in our time is the ascendance of systems over associations.

**David Cayley**

Making the damage which follows from this ascendance visible has been one of John McKnight’s central preoccupations. In the summer of 1989, in the American journal *Social Policy*, he published an article called “Do No Harm,” in which he tried to establish the seemingly simple, but utterly disregarded, principle that social interventions have side effects. For this purpose he borrowed from medicine the idea of iatrogenesis—literally, physician-caused harm.

**John McKnight**

The idea of iatrogenesis is long-established in medicine. In fact, there’s a famous piece of lore in medicine that it was some time in around 1910 or 1911 that medical skills developed to the place where it was more likely that a doctor would help you than hurt you if you showed up at a doctor’s office. Prior to that time the odds were that you

were going to be worse off rather than better off. This is even institutionalized in the famous drug manual, the physician's desk reference every doctor has which lists all of the drugs and then shows with each all of its negative effects. There's always a cost associated with the benefit.

In fact the famous Eli Lilly, who founded a major drug company in the United States, started out creating patent medicine, and on his labels of all his medicines, back in the early days—this is the 1800s—it said: a drug with no side effects is no drug at all.

This idea, which is so deeply embedded in the premier service, medicine, is almost non-existent in all of the other helping services. You won't find the idea that a social worker's help might hurt more than help, or that a psychologist's, or that a psychiatrist's interventions have a necessary negative side effect—like Eli Lilly's drugs, like every drug we have today; there is no drug in the PDR that doesn't have negative side effects. If you go to the other helping professions and you ask now, tell me, if you intervene in the following way, what are the probable negative side effects of that, you will find a blank look. If you go to universities that prepare people for these professions, and say, what studies are there on the negative side effects of the interventions of these helping services, what do they show us are the negative effects, you will find a blank look—a non-researched area. So we began to raise the question: what are the negative effects of what you're doing?

#### David Cayley

John McKnight and his colleagues eventually concluded that there were four such effects that could be described as universal and inevitable. He recognized, of course, that there were infinitely more particular or local effects that might sometimes occur. But these four, he argued, would always occur.

#### John McKnight

The first is that into the person's being or life comes an intervention that focuses upon their deficiencies rather than their capacities, and there are all kinds of effects that flow from that that are negative. We know that if one surrounds any individual with messages and experiences that are always saying to them, what's important about you is what's wrong with you, that that will have a powerful, powerful, depressing, disillusioning and degrading effect upon that person. If we say to a kid when he gets up every morning, "You know what? You're no damn good!" what will happen to the kid?

So the first cost is the necessary degradation of the individual's self-concept by the messages of deficiency, wrongness, brokenness, and need that the helper brings.

The second negative side effect has to do with what happens to the community's economy and the individual's economy. Every time we decide on a service intervention we're making an economic decision. Every time, in fact, you decide to buy a service professional you are *de facto* deciding not to buy something else, including income for people whose primary problem is lack of income.

So the second great iatrogenetic effect is that we have decided so often for the service intervention that we have now taken the majority of all public investments in the poor and given it to non-poor people, who are called "servicers."

The third effect has to do with the fact that each time we say, in a local community—and it's especially true in a low-income community—we need more services, we need more agencies, we need more systems, we need more outreach, we are making a decision that the neighbourhood's indigenous associations, leadership, and capacities are inadequate to solve the problem, and in that trade-off we are always diminishing the community's powers by investing in the system's powers.

The fourth negative effect has to do with the fact that it is possible that a particular intervention has more benefit than cost. However, because one intervention works does not mean that six other interventions, each that independently might seem to work, will give you a seven-times-more-powerful intervention. In fact the aggregation of these interventions may negate the positive benefits.

Now, we can understand that in a metaphorical sense. I live in a neighbourhood where there are some trees. But if you said to me, or any of my neighbours, "Do you live in a forest?", we would say, "No, we don't live in a forest"; "But you have trees," "Yes, but we don't live in a forest." A forest is a place where there are enough trees that *they* redefine the environment. We all know when we walk into a forest because what is growing in a forest is different than is growing in my neighbourhood—the density of the trees creates a different ecology, there are different animals, so that the very same elm trees, if there are enough of them, will create a new world, a new environment, a new ecology.

So it is with services. You can have one service alone, but when you get enough services intervening in a person's life, you will create a forest of services. So aggregating services around people creates new environments that will

guarantee deviant behaviour by the people who receive the services, even though any one of them may look justified in and of itself.

**David Cayley**

These are the four harms which John McKnight considers to be structural, in-built effects of human-service interventions: people will become known by their deficiencies, not their gifts; money will tend to be put at the discretion of those offering service, rather than those defined as "in need"; active citizenship will retreat in the face of professional expertise; and services will aggregate to form total environments. These effects, McKnight believes, are so widely overlooked because of the compelling rationale for human services. The good human services claim to provide is care, and care is normally an expression of love. The result is that the underlying political and economic structure of services is hidden by what John McKnight once called "the mask of love," a mask which deceives the benefactors and the beneficiaries alike.

**John McKnight**

Good intention, I think, is the most dangerous explanation for an action that there is. We ought never-ever to think because somebody has good intention, says they care, is doing something for a good motive, is any indication *at all* that in fact what they do will be good for others, for themselves, or for society. Almost every crime, I think, [laughs] in society that is a societal crime was done by people who had good intentions. The great, great tragedy of the service industry is the blindness, the mask it wears, the blinding mask it wears, because of its belief in its good intentions.

**David Cayley**

One of the inevitable side effects which John McKnight assigns to social services is the replacement of community capacities. Knowledge vested in professionals disappears from communities; confidence withers in the face of professional mystique; eventually communities lose the vital functions which sustain them as communities. And this loss, John McKnight believes, extends right down to the level of the family.

**John McKnight**

Families are the primary association in a society, and just as other associations are under assault by our systems, so families are just one more manifestation, I believe, of the same thing. And you can see it, and I can see it, and all of us can see it in our own lives. If you have a family, a group of people, intimate, closely bound to each other, and you say of them: what do they do? they are of the same blood, but why do they stay together, this little

group? Well, it is a good question. Why would they stay together if their health is in a doctor, their knowledge is in a teacher, their mental stability is in a psychiatrist, their conflict-resolution is in a lawyer, their family conflict is in a social worker, their meals are in a McDonald's?

What is this thing called a family? What *does* it do? It really doesn't do anything. A family that is a collection of clients has no purpose other than procreation. Human social organizations persevere because they perform functions. There's always a motive, a reason, a cement, something that keeps those people together, and we have always said kinship keeps people together as a cement.

But I think we've radically overestimated the cement if it is nothing more than blood, because what we know is that that blood was a primary way of saying, those for whom I will take mutual responsibility and those with whom we are able to make a way and make a life. And now those people don't have these mutual functions. Nothing's left but affect, nothing's left but the hopeful power of love or romance, or care. I think relationships grow out of function, that ultimately love grows strong on the basis of people who have worked together, who have suffered together.

I think of my grandparents on my mother's side, my Irish-American grandparents. I can hardly think of anybody that I knew who I thought loved each other more. I never saw them touch each other, but I never saw them apart from each other, and I never saw them doing anything but making a life, a way, a home, an enterprise together. They had so understood each other's gifts, they had so worked them together and magnified them and grown powerful together, and each day in that way their affection grew, that when I knew them as old people, the love was impenetrable, and divorce could never have cut its way through that bond.

**David Cayley**

John McKnight explored the issue of how families and communities lose their vital functions when he gave the fourth annual E. F. Schumacher lecture in 1984. He called his lecture "John Deere and the Bereavement Counsellor," and in it he considered the suggestive analogy between the two figures of his title. John Deere was the blacksmith from Grand Detour, Illinois, who in 1837 invented a new tool, a steel plough capable for the first time of busting tough prairie sod. With this new tool the great plains were tamed for agriculture. But the settlers, as they moved westward, often left behind them deserts of depleted soil, which later arrivals had to learn to husband and regenerate.

Bereavement counselling, McKnight claimed, is a tool with comparable effects on the human ecology: it cuts into the weave of community life as surely as Deere's plough sheared the tangled grasses of the prairie, and leaves behind a social desert.

**John McKnight**

How did communities deal with tragedy before bereavement counsellors and psychological therapists descended on us when a tragedy came? They came together and sat with each other, and they cried together, they held hands, they wept on each other's shoulder, they remembered stories of other suffering and told those stories to each other, they sang songs that had been a part of the memory of their people forever about tragedy and about the meaning of life in the face of tragedy, and they said the 700 prayers that they knew that called for God to help them through this time, this people, this people together, and they lit some incense, and they sat in silence, and then they got up and they had a man with a mask of the devil, and they danced with the devil and scorned and laughed at him, and then they came together and they had a great meal, and they laughed, and they drank, and they cried. And all of that was what we did.

But now we are "enriched" because instead of that we have a person with a master's degree in bereavement counselling from the University of Minnesota who can come to our home and sit with us and put inputs into us that will help us process our grief, like a sausage-making machine processes sausage. We are impoverished by that service if it ever replaces our prayers, our songs, our tears, our hands.

**David Cayley**

But does it ever precisely replace them, or is there always a gap? I mean, a bereavement counsellor, had he or she appeared a generation earlier, would have met incredulity. You're a what?—

**John McKnight**

Yes.

**David Cayley**

—We know how to grieve. The need must first appear plausible. The bereavement counsellor will say: yes, it's very well for you, McKnight, to vaporize about community and all the wonderful things that used to happen, but in fact, lonely, isolated people need my service.

**John McKnight**

Ah. And I can assure you you're correct. I actually had the honour of meeting the first master's degree, certified

bereavement counsellor in the United States of America. This is about fourteen years ago, and I met her at the University of Minnesota. And that was exactly what I was wondering. They think they're meeting a need. Where in Canada or the United States would I find anybody who, when asked the question, do you need a bereavement counsellor?, would say, yes? They would not have heard of one, they wouldn't know what one did, and it might be hard to imagine.

So the bereavement counsellor I met had to figure out some place to begin the work of introducing this new service in a society that didn't really see a need, and exactly the people you're talking about are the people that the bereavement counsellor picked. "Oh, we understand you've got a family, it still functions, these relationships are there, *but* there are lonely widows in nursing homes who just lost their husbands and they have nobody, they need my service."

And I think the way the progression goes is: they find those people who are the most defenseless and un-understanding and underprivileged, and introduced their services there. And then they approach the institutions of society—the United Way, the government or foundations—and say: you should pay me to provide my bereavement services to this poor lonely widow. If they're successful in that, they get this institutionalized as a service.

Then they will build out from there, and they will say: we have done studies that show how kinship grieving is all right, but there are seven stages of grief, and our studies show that the grief process in the strongest of kinship groups involved in the traditions of solace only reaches the first three stages of grief, but there are four later stages of grief that our research has discovered, and we meet those four stages of grief. You may not be underprivileged and you may have a full family, and you may have a community that provides you solace and support, but our research shows that there are four additional stages of grief that will not be affected by this, and you've got that need.

There's something wrong with you, David: you have four stages of unprocessed grief, and let me tell you, we have just got the government to agree in its social insurance to fund grief counselling, so not only can the community not deal with all of your grief and we can, but you're paying for it and if you don't use it, you're just wasting your money. So call us in, David, because you need *us*. And when you call me in, when you call a bereavement counsellor in, and your Aunt Mary calls to say, "David, I'd like to come over this afternoon," because she's a part of the solace of your community, you say: "Aunt Mary,

I'd love to have you come over, but the bereavement counsellor is here. Could you come over this evening?" And Aunt Mary comes to know *the real truth*, which is, the real solace is the solace you pay for and hers is just sort of a tawdry, shabby, second-rate thing. And that's right, because she has been replaced by a bereavement counsellor. And that's the way it works.

**David Cayley**

John McKnight sees community and social service as bound in the relationship mathematicians call "inverse proportion": their sum is constant, so as one waxes, the other must wane. And he believes that where consolation or other social supports are absent, the question must always be: where is the community? Not: where is the bereavement counsellor? Justifying bereavement counselling on the basis that there is no consoling community, even though it may in some cases be true, will also ensure that no community regenerates. Consolation will warp towards a standard cultivated in graduate schools, and a professional grouping will appear with a vested interest in damping down or denying community capacities.

But though Aunt Mary and the bereavement counsellor may be alternatives, it is clear that the consolation each offers is of a very different kind. Community responses to life's vicissitudes differ from institutional responses: they cannot be managed in the same way, nor can they be certified or guaranteed. Community responses rest on character and ingrained virtue, things which can vary, waver, and fail. This may be one of the reasons, John McKnight supposes, that communities have yielded before the utopian promise of a system that cares, and cares unflinchingly to the highest professional standard; regeneration of community, therefore, depends on our abandoning the fantasy that our highest hopes can be transformed into effective techniques. John McKnight calls it "the belief that people can be fixed."

**John McKnight**

There are all kinds of people called "developmentally disabled"—some people will label these folks as "mentally retarded" people—who are in institutions and group homes, who were born with a set of gifts and capacities and a set of limits. If you go and look at what's being done with a lot of these people, you will find forty-year-old people with whom professionals are working and they're teaching them how to tie their shoes. And if you say, "How's he coming along?" "Well, he can't tie his shoes." "How long do you think people have been trying to teach him how to tie his shoes?" "Well, I've only been here four years and we, you know, we do this getting ready for community-life practice here, twice a week, so I

don't know, but probably, with the people before me, maybe twenty years."

"Oh, twenty years teaching this man how to tie his shoes. But if he ever learns how to tie his shoes, then, am I correct," I say to the professional, "then he'll be ready for community life and he can come out with us in the community?" "Yeah, that and a few other things."

Now, that man will live in the womb of professionals until he dies; he'll never be born to the community, because they are going to fix somebody who is unfixable, and in the course of that deny his gifts to community. It's a *terrible trade-off!*

But most people in the community probably believe that he needs to be fixed. Now, they believe he needs to be fixed because somebody came into the community and said they could fix him, because there was a time when nobody thought he needed to be fixed because nobody proposed to fix him.

So in that sense the possibility of saying, yes, you never will be able to tie your shoe or read, is the door to community and the recognition of the gifts. All of community life is like that.

There is nothing that is fixable in perfection. I think it comes with the human nature that we are not finally going to be fixed.



And so I think I start with that premise, that to the degree that all of the society is committed to and invested in fixing people, it creates huge and increasingly burdensome and increasingly tyrannical institutions intervening in the lives of people, when what we needed was a community that saw their gifts and said, those gifts need to be given.

We have wonderful possibilities in society if we're willing to fail to be gods, if we give up the idea that we can create institutions and systems that will fix everything, that will be the modern gods, that will make us whole, make us real, make us all those things. That's when life will come alive and communities will grow: when we see the wonderful possibilities of failing to be God.

**David Cayley**

You've been listening to Part 1 of *Community and Its Counterparts*, a three-part series on the ideas of John McKnight. John McKnight directs the program in community studies at Northwestern University's Institute for Urban Affairs. The series continues next week at this time with a program about McKnight's years as a community organizer in Chicago and his views on the regeneration of communities today.

Technical direction of tonight's program by Lorne Tulk. Production assistance: Gail Brownell and Liz Nagy. The executive producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht. I'm David Cayley.

Transcription by Hedy Muysson.

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**David Cayley**

This is *Ideas*, and I'm David Cayley with the second program in our series on community and its counterfeits.

**John McKnight**

Why do we have city neighbourhoods today where walking on the street may result in your being shot in the head—and the largest and best-trained police forces we've ever had? Why is that?

The idea we have had that there are criminal justice professionals and they can fix our society, fix our communities so they will be safe, has been the principal cause of our lack of safety. We have given away our community and its capacity and responsibility on the grounds that when something is wrong they will fix it, and the result is, we are powerless in an absolutely unsafe community and a powerful, 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 often 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 in front of 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 neighbourhoods have become dependent. Later in the hour you'll also hear from Jackie Reed, who represents a neighbourhood organization on Chicago's west side, where John McKnight has worked for many years.

*Community and Its Counterfeits* 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 begins in Chicago 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. That 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—but they weren't patients because they couldn't get in, so black people who were seeking medical care.

The other, which I think was much more formative, was that I was sent out into neighbourhoods in Chicago, which was a real experience for a kid raised in a small town in Ohio, and told to try and create neighbourhood organizations in some neighbourhoods 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. And I was often assigned to be inside the house. There were blocks that were changing racially, where I was organizing, in half a year. It would be all-white in January and it would be all-black in July. And it was in significant part the result of the flight of black folks from the south, because of the collapse of the agricultural economy and the industrial economy that was here. People were coming to Chicago every day from the south, and they had to have some place to live and the pressure was building, building and building within the black neighbourhoods; it had to give some place, and it gave at the edge.

There were speculators who were involved in what was called "blockbusting"; they just had developed their own method for "churning" the neighbourhood. They would frighten the white people to sell the houses low and then they would sell them for twice the price to the black people. It was just 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 that there was a person in Chicago who was developing a way of really creating powerful organizations, a man called Saul Alinsky. At the heart of his organizing technique was the realization that you were dealing with people whose life experience was, generally speaking, to have lost, and 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, that they had a gift.

I remember going one evening with one of Alinsky's best organizers. This was a group of people on a block, in a

lower-income neighbourhood; 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 this 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—right? They began to talk 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. And 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 they are citizens.

#### **David Cayley**

John McKnight worked for the Chicago Commission on Human Relations during the hey-day of Alinsky-style organizing. McKnight's organization, and Alinsky's, had differences, but McKnight admired Alinsky's genius in adapting the techniques of labour organizing to neighbourhood 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 neighbourhood 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 demystified and exposed.

#### **John McKnight**

There is something that is really magnificent when you see a middle-aged Italian-American lady who has always been humble putting a rat on the mayor's desk. It's a transformative experience for her and 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 wizard's palace and were inside, the little dog, Toto, pulled the curtain away behind which the wizard was

manipulating all the levers to make it look like 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 Office 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 clearly the shadows such programs cast on local communities.

#### **John McKnight**

The result of that was that into the neighbourhoods came more and more service professionals, and they came with their white coats and their clipboards and did needs surveys and brought the trappings of technical authority and special expert knowledge. A culture developed in which the multi-service centre became the place where things got done, where there were real experts, 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] Every organizer, I think, comes to see that there is this competition. 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. And the social worker is out looking for clients and making clients and needs clients, and the organizer's out looking for citizens. And 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 attention on the needs of the individual, rather than 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 in the last twenty-odd years has undergone an extreme form of the deindustrialization 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 centre of a lot of Chicago’s agricultural-industrial ascendance doesn’t exist anymore; it went bankrupt and closed down—there’s no International Harvester. 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 John McKnight cut his teeth as a young neighbourhood organizer in the fifties. Saul Alinsky and his co-workers had organized people to demand their rights as consumers. 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 neighbourhood, 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 consumption rights with the corporations or the banks because they’ve moved out, they aren’t there. Who are you going to march on? We have, on the west side of Chicago, an area of 600,000 people without one bank. No chartered bank—they’re all gone. Been gone for twenty years! 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 they? Will we look in Philadelphia? Detroit? Cleveland? Chicago? 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—haven’t got 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 neighbourhood? I don’t think there’s anybody in a neighbourhood in Chicago that thinks that 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 I think they understand he can’t, he doesn’t know!

So we’re in a world, in the neighbourhoods, in the older neighbourhoods in cities, of just wholesale institutional abandonment. So the idea that I am going to develop locally the power to confront institutions to give me a just share of their goods and services is much, 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 observed by anthropologists in the South Pacific.

**John McKnight**

In New Guinea, during the Second World War, the allied troops came and landed on the mountain tops because the Japanese had taken over the coastal towns in New Guinea. The interior had no towns—there were aboriginal people there—so the allies parachuted in guerrillas, who then learned to go down and attack from behind, in guerrilla actions, the Japanese bases. So the guerrillas landed there on the tops of the mountains and every week cargo planes would come and they would fly over the mountains and drop their cargo for the troops, to support them.

Of course the native people were amazed by this—they hadn’t seen airplanes, all of these wonderful things came out of the air—and so around the area many of these people abandoned their towns and their ways and they came and they lived on the edge of the runways and they became sort of dependencies of these landing-strip people.

And then all of a sudden the war was over and the troops left and the cargo planes stopped coming, and there they were, a people dependent upon this outside system and its stuff. And so 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 decoy ducks. And they worshipped at the shrine of these airplanes and developed a whole religion called the “Cargo Cult.” And I think after a time it didn’t work, and they decided that probably they had to go back to their little village and start

planting yams and remember once again how a community makes a life out of the resources that it has in the place where it is. And that's what we're facing in our neighbourhoods.

But in the face of the abandonment, 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 neighbourhood. 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 still to be the first Ford plant dropped into their neighbourhood in the United States.

But as people have come to realize that these ways of trying to draw that big system back, the abandoning institutions back, is not working, then they come to the third recognition and that is, whatever will happen here will happen because of us, and that means a new call to their capacity through association to understand what the assets are that they have, or what potential they have for investment, what potential they have for productivity, what creativity they can assemble, initiate, and that the heart of their possibility is there with them in that place. Now, we don't have much experience in terms of knowing how a neighbourhood that has become dependent on big institutions, as most did—become 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 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. He says that at this point experience is limited and 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 neighbourhood 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 neighbourhood organization, an Alinsky-kind of organization, set as its agenda using power methods to force that 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 neighbourhood and distributed flyers to all of his neighbours saying that he was running a racist institution, all kinds of things like that, and the hospital responded to that pressure and began to employ black people, began to appoint doctors who were serving 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 neighbourhood organization, where they were making reports on each of their task forces and how they'd done on the goals, the hospital task force that had been at the forefront of putting the pressure on this hospital to change made a report and told about how the hospital had really changed, how many people from the neighbourhood were being served, were being employed, the doctors who they were serving, everything was now in good shape. And everybody applauded and this was a very clear, manifest victory.

There was an old lady at that meeting, and I was there at the meeting—this is one of the neighbourhood 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?" And as a discussion developed people agreed that it sure wasn't clear to them that people in that neighbourhood were healthier now that they had gained control of the hospital. So they talked it over and they concluded that probably it was that it was a bad hospital—if we had a good hospital, people'd be healthy.

And that's when they turned to us. They said, it looks that we'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 order: car accidents, assaults, other accidents, chest problems, alcohol, drugs—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. So they began to see that it was community, not institution, that was going to be the source of their health.

**David Cayley**

In this light the neighbourhood 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 neighbourhood, dogs that people had acquired as protection 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 didn't do that. They had an idea about building their own community's capacity, and so what they did was, they had a "Dog Saturday" in which the neighbourhood 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, a bounty for each dog.

So lo and behold, what happened that Saturday was that a bunch of kids learned that if you could identify a dog, you could get five dollars. And so that day kids were out all over the neighbourhood 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 neighbourhood organization would go out and catch the dogs and take the dogs and they'd turn them in to the dog catcher—but they caught them. And so they created the first urban cowboys, that went and rounded up these ol' dogies, and got kids involved in building their community and becoming responsible and knowing what health was really about—not about getting your shots, but a different understanding.

**David Cayley**

Following their success with the dogs, the members of the neighbourhood 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 first 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 the communities where he has been involved, like the neighbourhoods on the west side of Chicago. He thinks that people are becoming aware in their bones that hospitals cannot simply produce health, nor schools education, nor police departments safety. Experience has taught them, he says, that communities can only regenerate from within.

**John McKnight**

The 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 colours 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 all over 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 neighbourhood 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 of the 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, who 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. So I think that, 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 the money comes and we basically buy into their recommendations so that we can somehow justify our positions in various organizations. But I think by and large we've seen so much continue to happen, so much deterioration continue to happen, despite all the big bucks out here, the continued proliferation of drugs and crime and problems. I think that 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 says that this 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 neighbourhood. 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 look at them in terms of opportunities. If people are not working on a job that is provided by a major corporation or manufacturing corporation, then it is a good time to do things in the neighbourhood. 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 out of their houses, people end up getting jobs anyway. It'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 seeds on the 5400-block of West Van Buren for all of his neighbours.

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 Goldblatts who got him a job. So a lot of what happens when people get involved with other people and as people get to know their neighbours and trust their neighbours, their neighbours help them get jobs.

When the chain stores leave our communities, it's an opportunity for the little ma-and-pa grocery 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 think we can 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 that is the legacy of the African-American experience in this country. 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 upon our neighbours. When our neighbours 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 in 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 barbeque 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 fundraise, she likes to do that for her church.

And the church has been the only 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 basically, I think, turn our neighbourhoods 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 suprisingly successful campaign to radically decentralize control of education.

**John McKnight**

An almost impromptu but tremendously powerful movement erupted in Chicago, and 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—because the state has the power over our education—and see if we can persuade the Illinois legislature to pass a law taking away from our school system and our central board of education and our superintendent about 90 percent of its powers and recreating our power as citizens over our schools and writing a law that says each school will elect its own board members and hire its own principals and its own teachers.

And in what now seems almost miraculous, 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, to hire and fire the principals, and soon, I think, to have the same power over the teachers. And out of the local citizens' choosing their representatives they now once again have recaptured within citizens' space the institution that they 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, or 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 Institute for Urban Affairs did a study of what actually happens to moneys

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 and then we took 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 is 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 with \$19,000.

However, we then did a study as to how the money was expended—that is, who got the money at the end point. And there 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 unpoor—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 a year. And what it is is a major funding system for 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 took its resources and said to individuals, we're going to give you a piece of paper and this piece of paper, 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 that person when they get the piece of paper that if you don't make good on the rest of the loan we'll pay it, us 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're going to 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 that will check to make sure that this special system for you works.

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

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 have seen my life as a continuing journey with people who act as citizens in a place and a time, and you come to recognize in some profound way that this 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; and I have seen a group of neighbourhood people come to understand that they had the tools and power to control their health and that the hospital was a great illusion as a health source.

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 neighbourhood 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.

**David Cayley**

On *Ideas* you've been listening to Part 2 of "Community and Its Counterfeits," a profile of John McKnight. John McKnight directs the program in community studies at Northwestern University's Institute for Urban Affairs. The series concludes next week at this time with a program about rebuilding hospitable communities, where people who have been excluded can be made welcome again.

Technical production of tonight's program by Lorne Tulk. Production assistance: Gail Brownell and Liz Nagy. The executive producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht. I'm David Cayley.

Transcription by Hedy Muysson.

**David Cayley**

This is *Ideas*. I'm David Cayley, with the third and concluding program in our series *Community and Its Counterfeits*. The series features John McKnight, a man who has been studying and organizing communities for most of the past forty years.

He began his career in the neighbourhoods of Chicago in the fifties, as an organizer for the first municipal civil-rights organization in the United States. In the sixties he worked for the Kennedy administration's Office of Equal Employment Opportunity and later for the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.

Today, he directs the program in community studies at Northwestern University's Institute for Urban Affairs, in suburban Chicago. He has been there since the institute opened its doors in 1969 as a response to the discontents of that era in the inner cities of the United States. And from that position he has been able to keep in touch with communities all over North America.

**John McKnight**

One of the things we've tried to do over the years, at the centre where I am, is to understand how problems get solved by trying to find places in communities where they have been solved. Now, most universities study the degree, in the neighbourhood, of unsolvedness, and therefore impute the need for an external intervention called "a human service."

They go out and they measure the emptiness, but they don't go out and measure the fullness. They don't try to find out how and when and where did what we want to have happen happen as a result of the interests, abilities, capacities, and associations in the neighbourhood.

**David Cayley**

John McKnight has centered his work on this search for the genius of local communities. In fact, he once described himself to me as "a connoisseur of social invention." He believes that the great threat to the local gifts and capacities that he wants to celebrate comes from the world of professional services. Professional expertise, in his view, dominates and displaces local competence and knowledge. Emphasis on people's needs obscures their abilities. Institutionalization undermines mutual support. In extreme cases people are reduced to nothing *but* needs and excluded from community life altogether.

This has often been the case for people with certain kinds of severe disabilities. Reintroducing such people to community life has been one of John McKnight's main preoccupations in recent years and he has convinced

citizens, like Bob Harkins in Prince George, British Columbia, to join him in this work.

**Bob Harkins**

We have to go back to this old idea of hospitality and friendship that existed between neighbours that I don't think does exist today. I think we have to get back to that.

**David Cayley**

This program is about that effort to restore hospitality. It's based on interviews I recorded with John McKnight in Chicago in June of 1993 and on later conversations with Bob Harkins and Sandra Nahornoff, two of his collaborators in Prince George.

The story begins with an observation John McKnight made about the character of what are often called "community services."

**John McKnight**

Some years ago I was contacted by some people who provide services to developmentally disabled—previously called "mentally retarded"—people, who wanted to show me what they had done in terms of creating a new kind of service, which they called a community service. So I took that opportunity to go with them in Vermont to visit a very picturesque little town.

In this town there was, on a very ordinary street, a house, a home, a residence, and they took me there because they were creating a community service in this place that they called "a community residence." And in this place there were eight adult men, mostly middle-aged, who had been in a big institution that had been closed down. They had been brought instead to this residence, where, surrounded by local human-service people, they lived out their lives in this new community residence, which was supposed to be not like the institution where they were. This is what they wanted to show me: these people living in the community. So I went there and was there enough time that I could talk to some of the men and I asked them about what they did, who they knew, and what their relationships were. I mean, a community is commonly understood to be about relationships; it's not a place. A neighbourhood is a place, but a community is about people's relationships. And it turned out, excepting for the fact that some of the men bought cigarettes at the local drugstore, and knew the druggist, that they had been there for a good many years, and they knew nobody. They lived out their lives in relationship with each other and with the people who were paid to come in and prepare their meals and stay overnight and make sure they got up in the morning and helped those who needed to be helped dress dress. Then they would take some to a sheltered workshop, where they

would work during the day, and others to a little day program, where they would sit and do macramé during the day. Then they would take them back.

And this was the human-service agency's idea of somebody being *in* the community—that is, they could imagine calling this life in a house, in a neighbourhood, surrounded by professionals, a community life. I think that's when it became clearest to me that there was a profound lack of understanding, it seemed to me, by many people in the human-service profession, who were at the progressive end of things, about where the community was.

#### David Cayley

This discovery set John McKnight off on a search for alternatives. Were there places, he wondered, where people with disabilities were part of a community? The answer turned out to be: yes, places of several kinds.

#### John McKnight

You would tend to find, first, places where the system had inadequate outreach, and so in a lot of out-of-the-way places you would find labelled folks in the community, with a place in the community, but it was because the system hadn't gotten them. So from the system's view these were places where people were falling through the cracks.

Now, another way people who were in the community got there was that their parents were determined that they would be there, and these parents had resisted the professional advice that they put their children into a system, have them institutionalized, or under professional care, or put into special this and special that.

A third way we found that people were in the community was that they fled from the system. They escaped.

And then we found a fourth kind of situation, and that was a situation where somebody in the community decided that they were going to get to know people who were in the system and to try to introduce them to people in the community and to foster relationships there.

#### David Cayley

John McKnight has made friends with people in all these categories over the years, people the system overlooked, people sustained in the community by parents, people who ran away. But he developed a particular interest in the last group, the people who built bridges from systems back into communities. Their unforced invitation to excluded people to rejoin the everyday world seemed to present a way by which communities could become whole again.

And so McKnight sought out such people around the United States and made a study of their characters and practices.

#### John McKnight

They tend to be people who focus on people's gifts, rather than upon their needs. Now, people in the human-service system, who have been labelled, have their lives focused on their deficiencies. But these are people who came and said: what are your gifts? They were never introducing an isolated person, a marginal person, a person who's a stranger to that community; they were never introducing them as "people in need"; they were never asking people to be charitable; they were never asking for help. They were always saying to the community: I have somebody who has a gift and I'm looking for a place for the gift to be given.

So the diagnostic mentality—that is, the naming of emptiness, "your deficiency is . . .," that truth about a person, that empty half, is not the focus: the full half is. And this is why professionals are so inappropriate for this work.

The second thing is that they were people who tended to be well-connected in the community. If they walked into the coffee shop, half the people there would say, "How y'a doing, Ted?" so that they were people who knew the territory, knew citizen space, knew associational space, knew community space.

Third thing is that they were people who tended to be trusted by community people, and because of that trust, their work was made much easier and much more effective. They were able to say to somebody in the community who trusted them, "I have a friend"—that's their description of somebody who've they've met in the system, who the system would call "developmentally disabled"—who they would say who knows how to sing beautifully, has the gift of singing; and they would go to somebody who's a director of a choir, and their sister was in this choir, and they would say to the director of the choir, you know, I'm Mary's sister, who sings in your choir, and I have a friend who sings beautifully, who would love to be in a choir, could I introduce you to her? And the person who directed the choir would trust that person: they knew Mary and they knew they could trust her, and they'd say, oh sure, bring her around. So they would bring this labelled person there, and a part of the ability of the community to initially accept this person as being gifted depended upon their trust of the person who brought them.

A fourth characteristic of many of these people was that they believed the community wanted to have in its midst people who are labelled. They believed, to put it another way, that their community was a hospitable place. So those were the primary common characteristics.

Now, you can imagine, this is sort of an academic, elementalistic description of folks. All of us know these folks, some of us *are* these folks, and they are people who mainly see the gifts in other people, optimistic people; they are people who like to be with people, who like to take on responsibilities, who like to be in the sharing of community and civic and associational life. Therefore, they are trusted and because they are trusted and they've been much involved and they have an optimistic view, they believe the community works.

#### David Cayley

John McKnight's researches in this area eventually led to an effort to actually instigate this kind of community building in the Logan Square neighbourhood in Chicago. Its inspiration was the work of a woman called Kathy Bartholomew Lorimer, whom John McKnight had encountered in Louisville, Kentucky.

#### John McKnight

She had begun to take some people with severe physical or mental disabilities, and just walk with them each day around a local suburban shopping centre. And as the shopkeepers got to know her and know the person she would watch these shopkeepers and began to see who seemed to have a special affinity for the person she was with who had a label, and then began to spend more time with that person in the shop of the person who seemed to be most responsive, and then began to leave the person in that shop and go on. And she left a man who couldn't speak—I think the label he had was cerebral palsy—in a little French bakery shop that had a few little tables where coffee was served, where the woman who ran it seemed to have an affinity for him. And he became sort of a regular there.

She introduced another fellow who didn't speak, but liked to play with computers, to a man who seemed to have some affinity for him, who ran a store for runners' shoes, and he began to type out the little descriptive slips that described each of these very technically complex running shoes that were put in a little holder beneath each shoe, and then all the runners came into this shop, and he would sit there and listen, loved being a part of the runners' culture and began to be taken to the marathon runs where they ran, and became a part of their life.

I had learned from her about what she was doing, and she indicated to me that she was going to come to Chicago and I thought, well, maybe we could work together and we could see in a neighbourhood whether you could find people who would say, yes, we believe those people out there with those labels, that those people have gifts, and if we could get them in the community, the community would be strengthened because of those gifts, and *they* would be greatly advantaged because they would be in the community.

#### David Cayley

The community building project in Logan Square has now been in existence for some five years. During that time people who were previously isolated have been made welcome in families and churches, groceries stores and beauty parlours, day-care centres and after-school clubs, and this mixed, inner-city neighbourhood, McKnight says, has been immeasurably strengthened and enriched.

#### John McKnight

In Logan Square, after two years, we interviewed the people from all groups and associations who had been principal in their commitments or relationships with the labelled person who had been introduced into the group, or the enterprise, or the organization. And one of the things that was the most significant, I believe, was that to the open-ended question, "How would you describe the relationship with so-and-so?" everybody began by telling about what positive benefit that relationship had given them, and nobody began by saying, this person is incontinent and I am constantly involved in the dilemma of whether or not their pants are going to be wet. They didn't start there. They told us about what that person had contributed to their life. And they also didn't say, what's been really wonderful is for me to see how much we've been able to help Mary, the labelled person. They didn't say that either.

As the principal thing, they said what she did for them. And the type of things that people said about what that person did were, most commonly they would say, she has taught me to appreciate how much I have; and then, secondly, because of her condition I have come to see what an incredible person she is in what she has overcome. Those two understandings. Oh how rich I am. You see, as an organizer, that's what I was trying to convince people of. I was out trying to say to people who felt beaten and losers: hey! no! [laughs] you've got a gift! listen, stand up! you are somebody!

And I think there's another thing, which people didn't report so vividly, but I think they all saw themselves in the person who the diagnosticians and needs needers had lied

about and said, what's important about them is this great inability, what's important about them is that gnarled body, what's important about them is their untalkingness. But you lied to me, because what's important about them is that they are the first people in years who came to me and made me see how lucky I am, and they are the first people I have seen in years who have struggled more than anybody else I know, in spite of everything that they don't have, to be what I've seen as their gift. So that's a powerful, powerful experience in the lives of people.

**David Cayley**

Shortly after the Logan Square project got underway, John McKnight received an invitation to attempt the same sort of thing in Canada. The invitation came from the director of the British Columbia Association for Community Living, which represents people with mental handicaps. He asked McKnight to go to Powell River and to the northern city of Prince George to see if he could interest citizens in those communities in helping to bring people with disabilities back into the community. McKnight agreed and presented himself in Prince George.

**John McKnight**

The local director of the Community Living Association there, in that community, a woman who had been there many years and knew a lot of people, prepared a list for me of the ten people she thought were the best-connected people in the community. Then we winnowed through those people and we finally agreed—I blindly—to start with one of them.

**David Cayley**

The person they chose was Bob Harkins, a prominent local broadcaster on both radio and television, an alderman, and an active member of a number of other important local boards and associations.

**Bob Harkins**

I was fascinated by John. I didn't know what to expect. I knew nothing of the Centre for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University, with which he was connected; but I recognized him, as I think as everyone does after they've been in his company for a very short period of time, as a very special human being.

The message that he brings to people is one that's very inspiring, I think. If you sit with John, you very quickly get on board—at least I did. But I guess I did it for selfish reasons at first, because I wanted to know more about this man and I wanted to be associated with him.

Basically what had precipitated John's visit here was a move by the provincial government to downsize some of

the institutions in the province that were dealing with adults who were labelled as "mentally handicapped." A lot of these people who were institutionalized almost at birth came back to their communities as adults. So we were taking those people, who had returned to the community to group homes and their own apartments, but in many cases were still very isolated from the mainstream of society. It was our goal to make those connections and to bring these people into society—to build friendships.

**David Cayley**

To this end Bob Harkins assembled a group of people he knew well and trusted. Many of them were also prominent and influential citizens of Prince George, a difference from Logan Square, where the work was carried out under the auspices of the local neighbourhood association.

They called themselves the Joshua Committee, after the biblical Joshua, whose trumpet blew down the walls of Jericho, and they began their work with a visit to a newly established group home.

**Bob Harkins**

It was a very awkward time for the members of the committee and also, I'm sure, for the residents. We were uncomfortable because we hadn't known these people, and some of them had very profound disabilities, in terms of communication—verbal communication I should say, because we very quickly discovered that they did have great communicating skills in terms of high spirits and smiles and laughing eyes and all of those good things, but verbally, they couldn't communicate.

And very quickly, without our recognizing it, this discomfort, I guess you'd call it, quickly broke down and we found ourselves totally involved and having fun. We had a tea party with them and just had a great afternoon. And when we came away from that a lot of the reservation that we had as individuals was removed and we knew that it would work, because if it worked for us, it would work for other people like us in the community.

**David Cayley**

The Joshua Committee evolved into what today is called Project Friendship. Through its offices and influence many people who were once isolated in institutions have become part of the everyday life of Prince George. One of them, whom Bob Harkins came to know well, was Lloyd Hansen.

**Bob Harkins**

He had been institutionalized when he was a very, very young child, and he came back here at the age of eighteen. He couldn't speak, he couldn't walk, but he had the most

expressive eyes that I've ever seen. I think anyone that visited Lloyd and looked into his eyes recognized that there was a wall there that he couldn't break through, but behind that wall was a great spirit of joy and happiness.

He loved sports, particularly hockey. So we got Lloyd going to the hockey games, and the Spruce Kings, the junior hockey club here, kind of adopted him too. He'd go into the dressing room after the games and we had hockey fans that took him to the games and he thoroughly enjoyed them.

I can recall one time I took Lloyd to a Harlem Globetrotters' basketball game; if you've ever been to the Harlem Globetrotters and all the show biz that goes with the game of basketball and the upbeat music and the whole show, Lloyd just literally laughed all the way through it. And it was these kinds of outings with Lloyd that were very, very special to Lloyd and they were very special to me. Unfortunately Lloyd passed away. Quite often people like Lloyd, who can't move around too much, are very, very fragile physically and he got pneumonia and slipped away. But he was a very, very special human being. While he was here he went to school here, and the husband of one of Lloyd's teachers wrote a poem about him, and it's something that captured the spirit of Lloyd and so many other people like Lloyd. It's entitled "Enchanted Boy" and it reads like this:

"I am enchanted, rendered small within my fragile sweet perfection. I am strong. You cannot see the private powers that I hold within my tiny curled-up hands. I am wise, with many private wisdoms that I keep within my secret skull. Private truths remain unspoken until the evil spell is broken."

I think that says a lot about Lloyd, and that's why it's important for people like him not to be isolated, because they enjoy the company and friendship and hospitality of other people. And basically, that's what John McKnight's message is and that's the one that we've tried to put in place in this community.

#### **David Cayley**

John McKnight is no longer as involved as he was in the day-to-day workings of Project Friendship. In its infancy he spent time every month in Prince George, and Powell River, where he initiated a similar effort. Today, Project Friendship is coordinated by Sandra Nahornoff.

#### **Sandra Nahornoff**

I enjoy spending time with people, and I have, I guess you would say, as John would put it, the ability to identify people's capacities and people's gifts. I guess I'm just kind

of a born matchmaker when you get right down to it, you know. There's one of those people usually in every crowd, you know. [laughs] Sometimes people will see me coming and go, oh-oh! [laughs] I ask them what interests they have, and then I try to matchmake and share those interests. It's a waste if I see someone with a lot of talent not somehow using it and putting it out there for people also to enjoy.

#### **David Cayley**

Sandra Nahornoff shares John McKnight's belief that services, however necessary, isolate people. To belong, she says, people must taste unforced, unpaid acceptance.

#### **Sandra Nahornoff**

You don't really belong in a community unless you have roots put down, and for somebody that has been institutionalized or has a great wall of service providing a lot of physical care for the person and may not have anyone but paid people to be in their lives to provide for them, they don't really belong in the community, and often they will tell me they don't feel they belong either, you know. People treat them differently or they don't welcome them, or they might want to do something and basically are told by maybe staff or family members that no, you can't do it, you wouldn't be accepted or you don't belong, or physically you're not capable.

These people are not going to belong, are not going to be integrated until they actually have set down some roots within the community, that they can feel that they could cross that bridge and actually come within the community and feel it to be their home. It's like being caught in two worlds: you're being told that you're a citizen, that now you're part of this community that you've been sent back to, and yet you're still behind walls of service and no, you don't feel that you can cross that bridge. You're taken out as an activity or a program, into the community, and taught about the community, but you don't feel accepted.

Yes, we do provide wheelchair-accessible places and things like that, but do you really want to go there by yourself? I mean, I would think we could even transfer this to people that have been in the prison system. They don't feel they maybe belong when they come back to a community. I think we could certainly move or speed up the process in which a person actually becomes integrated into a community and is actually accepted as belonging, by involving them and getting their feet down.

#### **David Cayley**

Getting people's feet down in the community is what Sandra Nahornoff does. The results are chronicled in a recent publication of Project Friendship called *The Prince*

*George Connector.* It contains story after story of loneliness and isolation overcome. And these stories continue.

### **Sandra Nahornoff**

I received a phone call recently about a young girl who had just moved into town; could I meet her—she doesn't know anyone—and get her involved, see what we could do. This young lady has an interest in Barbie dolls and will spend up to four hours a day playing with Barbies, which is considered inappropriate for someone who's nineteen-coming-on-twenty. And I looked at this, and I looked at her collection of Barbies. And everybody has frowned on this.

You don't just cut something like that off. You cannot say, I suppose, from some standpoints that this is necessarily a gift or something that she contributes, but it is certainly an interest and something she really enjoys doing. So I got back to her and I took her actually to a meeting last week, the first meeting of this year for the Prince George district Doll Club. They collect dolls.

Now, these women take this very seriously, and some twenty-five women had shown up with some of the dolls that they'd been collecting, some of them who had been on holidays this year around Europe and things, had collected dolls, some of them collect international dolls. They trade, they actually have doll shows, and swaps, and it's very extensive, their involvement. And they're fun as well.

It was interesting because she brought her Barbies to show them, and of course they were just thrilled with this. And she told them all about her love of Barbies and collecting them and stuff. So they said to her, well, you know, we have swaps and we know people that can do this, and we could take you garage-saleing on Saturdays, Sundays, and you could start, you know, really increasing the size of your collection. And her little eyes were just absolutely popping out, because she was just thrilled. Here were the first people that she'd met that hadn't told her that what she was doing was basically silly and not acceptable. And of course these are adults. [laughs] And this just is a little bit of an example: if she says that she plays with Barbies it is not considered acceptable, and yet to say that she is a doll collector, belongs to a club that makes and sells and shows and everything else their dolls is a whole different ball game, that's considered acceptable. So it's turned this around where she's met some people that accept her and her idiosyncrasy, because they have the same one—they think she's great.

I met a fellow who told me he loved electronics, and his dream was to go to electronics school. And I said, well,

why don't you? And he said to me, well, because I'm retarded. And he looked at me like, didn't I know? And I said, why should that stop you? And he kind of still looked at me like I was crazy. We contacted our local college, which has a very large electronics department—two labs and five instructors—and they said, of course he'd never pass the prerequisites; he'd never be able to attend there. And so I thought, well, this isn't quite right either. So I approached the head of the electronics department and said, I've met a man who has an incredible aptitude for electronics and I would really like to introduce him to you. So off we went. I took his father with us, because he used to own an electronics store here and he used to fix all kinds of electronic gadgets for people, and we both went down to the college and introduced Phillip to the electronics instructor, who took one look at Phillip and of course realized that there was going to be a problem, that Phillip probably would never be able to attend his school.

In the meantime the labs had been set up for testing the first-year students at the end of the year: everything in the lab had a number on it, and they had their multi-choice questions that they would walk through and actually state what each piece of equipment or component or whatever was. And it was interesting because Phillip decided, or John decided, maybe we'd take Phillip through and just see how much this man knows.

And out of those one hundred objects, there was not one that Phillip didn't know the name of and how it worked. John was so impressed. By the time we ended there and went over to the second-year lab he said, you know, I think we have a place for you. And Phillip inquired about an object over in one of the corners: he wanted to know what it was. He's quite inquisitive. And John said, I haven't got a clue what it is, it just came in. Phillip went over and scrutinized this piece of equipment, and John said, I'll go get Lance because Lance knows—he's one of the other instructors—he knows what it is. And off he went and he brought Lance back. And Phillip came up and he said, I think it's one of those cones that are off these microwave towers. And he explained what it was, which didn't mean a whole lot to me, but it certainly did to these two fellows.

And Lance said, as a matter of fact, it is: it's off Tabor Mountain here; B.C. Tel brought it in for us to repair. And of course that did it—they were totally convinced that Phillip was legitimate and really did have an aptitude for electronics. So from there they said that they had a lot of equipment that was donated to the college that they would dismantle over the summer—they used the components in their projects—and they asked Phillip if he'd like to be



part of that in return for being in on the projects that the components were being used for.

That's going back some three years ago, and Phillip still goes to the college a couple of times a week. He has his own station and he works on dismantling components and equipment, and he puts all kinds of things together, and he has a place to go. And it's funny, because over the years it wasn't so much the idea of the education, but it gave him a connection that rooted him to the community, that made him part of it. And Phillip has that now through the college, and is recognized as someone that does contribute and who does very much belong here in Prince George.

### **David Cayley**

One of the most remarkable stories in the brief annals of Project Friendship concerns a man who loves the music of Mozart, named Edward Hime. Unable to talk and confined to bed for over forty years, he was moved into a group home in Prince George in 1989. There, with help, he gradually grew strong enough to be moved into a wheelchair. The staff in the group home noticed that Edward smiled when classical music was played on the radio. So Bob and Barbara Harkins began to take him with them to the concerts of the Prince George symphony orchestra, out into a world he had never seen. Soon, as John McKnight relates, the director of the orchestra, John Unsworth, who was also a director of Project Friendship, had invited Edward to attend practices as well.

### **John McKnight**

Arrangements were made so he could come to the rehearsals, and at the rehearsals he could be up on the stage, right there beside John, with the music as it was being rehearsed and played. And then all the people in the symphony got to know him and they got to see this wonderful gift that Edward Hime had, because you could see on his face how much he loved this music. Wouldn't that be wonderful if you could play a program and see somebody listening to the program and all of a sudden their life would light up? Well, that's what they could see in Edward. And so he was such a vivid illumination before them of the value of their music. He was teaching them the value of their music! And so he became very much a part of that group.

### **David Cayley**

Edward's pleasure grew, until finally, at one concert, during a passage where the music dropped dramatically in volume and then began a slow crescendo, he loudly exclaimed, "Oh boy! Oh boy!" These were the first words anyone had ever known Edward to utter. His friends were delighted, but other patrons later complained to the orchestra about what they viewed as a disturbance. Edward's friends reluctantly stopped taking him to

concerts and attempted to teach him to restrain his pleasure by removing him from practices when his expressions of enjoyment became too exuberant. This worked to a degree, but the problem, particularly acute with the music of Mozart, persisted.

### **Sandra Nahornoff**

It started to get to a point where they thought, well, you know, we really need to also tell the community how much this means to him, instead of just cutting him off from it. So because of his love of Mozart and the fact that Mozart's two hundredth anniversary concert and celebration was coming up, they decided to actually name it the Edward Hime Concert. It was two days of sold-out concerts and at both concerts Edward was the guest and at the concerts John Unsworth, the conductor and director, spoke and told the audience Edward's story.

### **David Cayley**

Since that night, when Edward Hime and Mozart shared the bill at the Prince George symphony, there have been no further complaints.

Project Friendship, as its name suggests, has placed itself deliberately outside the sphere of service institutions. Bob Harkins, Sandra Nahornoff and their colleagues have worked with these institutions, but they have always stuck to the vision they originally shared with John McKnight: a hospitable community where relationships grow out of affinity and the ability to discern gifts. The pitfalls of basing relationships on service, Sandra Nahornoff says, became clearer to her through her friendship with someone Bob Harkins talked about earlier, the late Lloyd Hansen.

### **Sandra Nahornoff**

Lloyd loved hockey—loved hockey. He couldn't speak, he had cerebral palsy; he sat in a small chair, and he wasn't a very big fellow, but he loved hockey nonetheless, and he had a wonderful sense of humour. I connected him with a bit of a fan club that loved to go to our local hockey games. And nobody could take him on this one occasion, and I hated to see him just missing out because nobody was available that particular night, so I volunteered to take him. Well, I might be a Canadian, but I'm not crazy about hockey. [laughs] I took a book, and I read this book while he was watching hockey, and I noticed that after about the first half an hour he was sitting there and he'd quieted right down. There were no more grunts that he was making and smiles. Usually if a fight breaks out he gets right excited and stuff, but he was just all of a sudden sitting there like he was absolutely bored to tears.

And it hit me that what I was doing is exactly what a paid staff person does in essence, or is expected to do when they take a person on an outing. I had taken him, but I was not part of it. I felt . . . I felt actually quite guilty. I put the book away and decided I'd better get into the game. I moved his chair over to where a group of people who were actually quite rowdy were sitting. They were swearing and yelling and having a great time, and I moved him in there, and of course it was contagious—by the time it finished, I was getting just as rowdy as them. And Lloyd just absolutely loved it.

And then it dawned on me: belonging isn't taking someone out, it's not volunteering your time, it's sharing something of yourself. So I tell people that I'm not looking, in essence, for volunteers; but if you have a gift, an interest or something, that you wish to share, please share it with these people.

**David Cayley**

So you're saying that this is an overflowing, rather than a dutiful attention.

**Sandra Nahornoff**

That's right. You bet. It's something that has to be instilled from the heart. Friendship is really the key to the whole project, and developing friendships and relationships is what grounds us to the community and makes us be accepted and belong. I don't think there are too many barriers. We've connected people that can't speak, can't hear, and can't see, and can't walk, and have had wonderful friendships and relationships develop.

**Bob Harkins**

I think the thing that John has conveyed to us, and I think it's a very important thing to remember, that this can't be another service world that we're developing. What we're developing are friendships and hospitality, and of course you're not paid for those things. Those things come through connecting people with other people. And so we've kept our paid staff down to a minimum.

I think we're all involved in this for very personal reasons, and we're trying to do things on a one-to-one scale, and we don't go out and make a big fuss about raising money. It's one of those things we don't beat the drum about. I think it's a personal connection.

**David Cayley**

The three programs of this series about John McKnight have dwelt at length on the fundamental distinction between community and system, on which Bob Harkins and Sandra Nahornoff have based Project Friendship.

This distinction allows us to see community—McKnight also calls it “citizen space,” or “associational space”—as an autonomous realm, with its own ways, its own integrity, and its own potential for addressing the evils which beset us at the end of the twentieth century. It delimits community as what can never be bought, or sold, or subjected to professional standards; what can never be managed, monitored or fixed, without losing its nature. But drawing attention to this realm also presents a danger of which McKnight is keenly aware, a danger that this distinction will be lost and community will come to be seen not as what simply belongs to us as human beings, but as a lever of policy.

**John McKnight**

I worry over and over that even the saying of what we're saying will be heard by people who are managers and experts in systems, and that it will be quantified, systematized, administered, and that all we will have done is guided the way for them to finally colonize more of the everyday life of community folks. For instance, an example I could see is that the human-service systems will say, if we can initiate people being connected into community, then we can begin to screen the people they'll be connected with. A good service system would say, now, we don't want to connect our people to just anybody: there are rapists out there and all kinds of people who might do bad things. We have diagnostic tools, so we'll ask for citizens to volunteer to relate to the people in our domain, and then we'll test those volunteers, and those that pass the tests we'll give training, and after they're trained then we will connect them with *our* people.

That's the nightmare ahead. It's the absolute perversion that I can see happening in any day, in any place, to the kind of ventures and initiatives that I described in Logan Square and Prince George. How can you ever protect against that? I don't know, but the best that I can do is to say that what we can do is to tell you some stories. What we can't do is give you a study, because a study is a tool a system uses to understand and command. And so we've done no studies of this work, but I can tell you only the story of Edward Hime and Bob Harkins. And if you know Bob in your town and you know Edward in your town, and you're well-connected, maybe you can be a citizen too.

If I try to imagine the future, my first hope would be that however this activity can develop continuity, that the form it takes would be like Alcoholics Anonymous, or Alinsky's neighbourhood organizing movement—that is, no school has ever taken it over. It remains within the hands of the popular and is defined and carried forward in that sector, the community sector, of society. If this needs

to continue, I would hope that that's the form, and that it can escape becoming a new colonializing method for the human-service professionals, especially the progressives, who worry me the most.

The second thing I would hope for this kind of activity is that it would end. I don't see this as an eternal effort. It seems to me the question is whether we can shift our understanding at the community level, whether the culture will shift. And what I have as my vision is some activities now that will at least shift the culture's view of where a person's life ought to be lived, in the community or in a system, and that we would think about the system the way we would think about the police [laughs]—we may need a few of them, but we want as few as possible to be there, rather than, aren't we lucky, we're surrounded by these wonderful human services, and they're taking care of all those people that we can't take care of, we're not expert enough, we don't have enough time for them and after all they're a burden on us.

That's my goal. Why? I think we're back to the beginning. Everybody has a gift and a good community is a place where all those gifts are given.

**David Cayley**

On *Ideas* you've listened to the concluding program in our three-part series *Community and Its Counterfeits*. It featured John McKnight of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Also heard were Bob Harkins and Sandra Nahornoff, of Project Friendship, in Prince George, British Columbia. Technical production was by Lorne Tulk. Production assistance: Gail Brownell and Liz Nagy. The executive producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht. I'm David Cayley.

Transcription by Hedy Muysson.