

An Interview with John McKnight

The Man Who Is Making an Old Idea New Again.

John McKnight is the Director of Community Studies at Northwestern University on the outskirts of Chicago. He is the author of *The Careless Society* and coauthor of *Building Community from the Inside Out*.

As one who has reignited citizen action in cities across the country, how would you define this movement?

This is an effort to remind people of what we all know— every community is built by mobilizing the capacities, skills and gifts of people and mobilizing them in groups of all kinds. This is the basic tool for all community building.

How have we gotten away from citizens organizing to solve problems together and if so, why?

Since WW II our institutions have focused on the need of people to be fixed or filled. . . So much has gone to agencies to fix and fill rather than to mobilize people for problem solving and productivity that we have had much less progress in developing neighborhoods than we could have had.

Our major institutions have focused on the emptiness of our neighborhoods and not on their assets.

Universities quantify the emptiness (how many below code houses, how many pregnant teens), many of our *foundations* have funded those who purport to fix or to fill needs (using the need surveys to justify giving), the same is true with the *United Ways* across the country, though Atlanta has taken the United Way further than any other in the country. *Government* at all levels has followed in the footsteps of the foundations and United Ways, and finally the *downtown media* which has portrayed (urban) neighborhoods as glasses that are half empty (by focusing on the deficits.)

People who come together to pool their capacities are the real community builders, and yet the resources flow to those who deal with the brokenness and the emptiness, and usually these groups are not from the neighborhood, are not run by the neighborhood and are not staffed by the neighborhood.

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center of community power is in the hands of citizens and their associations.

Detractors charge that this approach plays into the hands of those who say, "Yeah, let people take responsibility for themselves rather than depend on our tax dollars."

We need our institutions to treat people at the bottom of the ladder or on the margins of society like those of us in the middle and upper income levels. It is not the American tradition to leave people alone to sink or swim.

We have built [our country] based on citizen cooperation aided by the government and other institutions. I work in a university that receives money in study grants, work programs, student loans as well as industrial research grants. The difference is that the external support focuses on our capabilities. But in low income neighborhoods the support is based on their incapacities. It is absurd to suggest that we are saying let them just take care of themselves. If you go to any meeting of faculty or corporate officers, sitting in the room will be men and women with serious deficiencies - financial problems, marital problems - but their institution focuses on and supports their capacities.

Let's just do unto other what we have done for ourselves.

You have written before about the role of the faith community in this asset building movement.

The role of the faith community is central in mobilizing local citizens for community building. To ignore it is to greatly weaken our capacity to regenerate society because we will not be using the single most creative and resourceful group available to us.

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