

See page 12

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August 2012

Voice of The River Valley

A Guide to People and Events that Inspire, Educate, and Enrich Life in The River Valley Area

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In This Issue

Paula Dail

Author, Spring Green

Betty Frey

Ancient Healing, Sauk City

On Our Earth

Peggy Timmerman

From the Spirit

Julie Tallard Johnson

Change and Creativity in Education

Heather Terrill Stotts

Between the Lines

Kathy Steffen

Calendar of Events: August 2012

September Issue

The Voice will be under new ownership starting with the September issue and continue far into the future! We request your understanding as we make a seamless transition.

Feature

To Be Announced

Between the Lines

Kathy Steffen

Calendar of Events: September 2012

....and much more.

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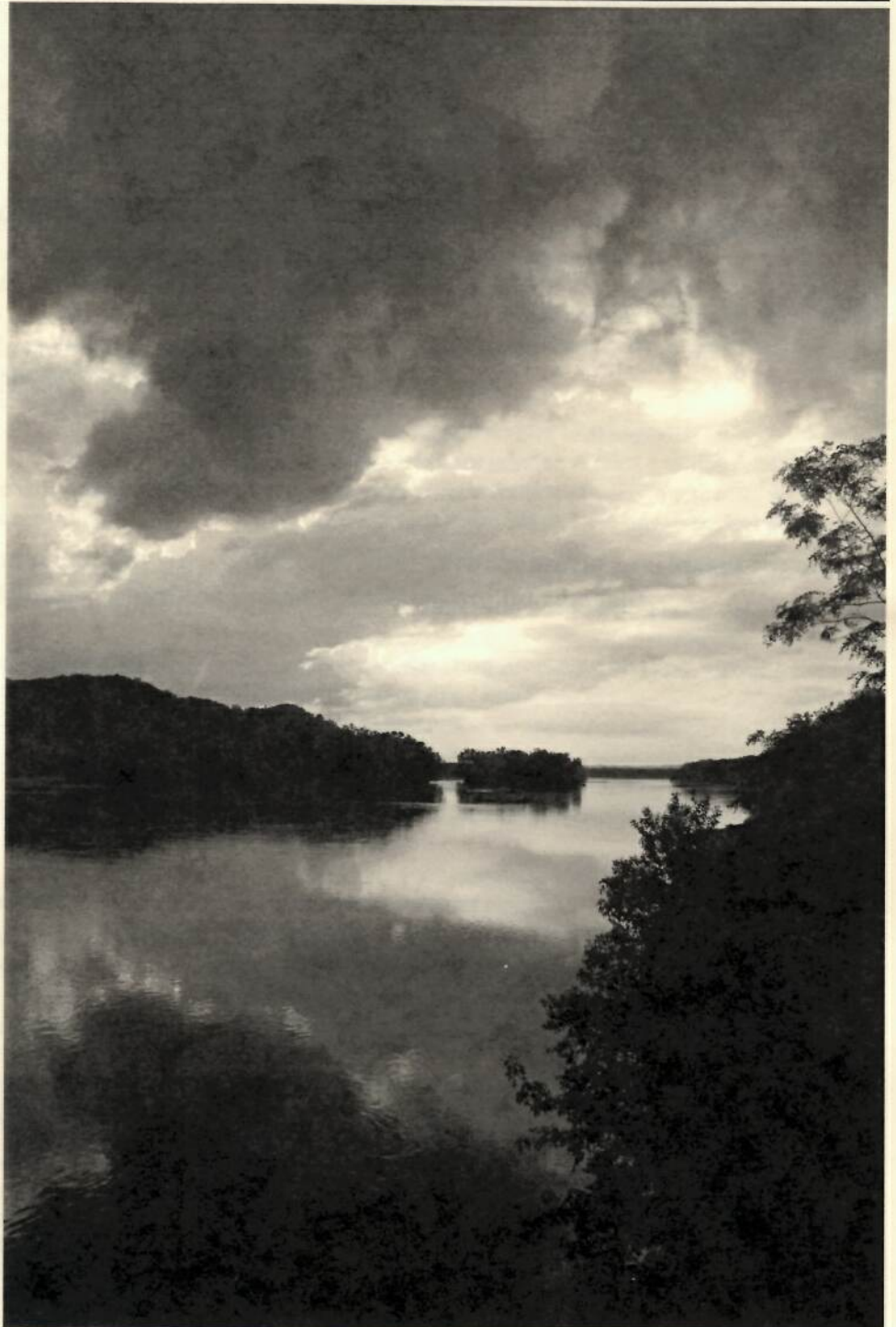
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Associations: The Vital Center of Democracy

How can local communities be revitalized in an era of shrinking budgets?

Emeritus Professor John McKnight spoke incisively on how to revitalize small towns and local communities at Unity Chapel in Spring Green on July 1, 2012. He is the co-director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University and co-author of *Building Communities from the Inside Out*.

Professor McKnight began his presentation by agreeing with the famous observation of DeTocqueville (*Democracy in America*, 1835) that the great strength of the United States lies in its tradition of voluntary associations - grassroots groups of citizens. These informal organizations, not government or corporate officials, have enriched day-to-day community life and democracy. These associations range from local churches, hobby groups, book clubs and arts coalitions to volunteer fire and EMT services, farmers markets and a thousand other topics. These associations give people space to be productive citizens, not just passive consumers and clients of professional services.

Since the 1960s participation in voluntary associations has steadily declined, especially among younger adults (*Bowling Alone* by Putnam). This is draining communities of their strength, identity and democratic participation. Older folks are comfortable gathering in a meeting format, but that often does not appeal to the younger generation. They want to help out in their communities, but many of them do not want to attend meetings. They connect via Facebook, Twitter, and other electronic means. Our challenge is to find ways to bring all generations together.

In the midst of the current budget cuts in governmental and professional programs, Professor McKnight sees a creative opportunity for all citizens to work together to retrieve the heart and soul of their communities. People hunger for face-to-face relationships and for power over their own lives. Voluntary associations can do both. According to Professor McKnight, "In sharing our gifts in associational life, we have the power to produce the future we envision. We are not consumers. We are not clients. We are citizens with the power to make powerful communities..."

McKnight warns against the seductive "institutional assumption" e.g., thinking about health only as medical care, clinics, insurance, drugs, etc., instead of focusing on the sources of health and preventive approach. From that latter perspective we generate questions about the quality of our food, consumer life-styles, safety of cars, etc. This, in turn, leads us back to community as the source of solutions. The "local food into the schools" movements that are happening in Mineral Point, Iowa-Grant and Mt. Horeb school districts are examples of this type of community driven initiatives.

Likewise McKnight challenges communities to take more responsibility for at risk youth. "In a very real sense, the kids in our juvenile corrections institutions today are our children. Until we take responsibility for the children we exile to juvenile corrections, we remain unproductive communities. A real community is one where we see that young people we have exiled have all kinds of gifts and

we organize ourselves to show our belief in that fact." The Restorative Justice Project of Southwest Wisconsin is another local example of a community-based program that is providing opportunities for at risk youth to take responsibility for their inappropriate behaviors. They meet with the victim whom they have harmed and hear how their violation affected them. Together they agree to actions that would help heal the harm that was done.

McKnight has identified 82 citizen associations in the Spring Green area and his colleague Linda Donnelley has interviewed 61 of them thus far to learn how they contribute to the well-being of the area. They hope to encourage these groups to grow and to cooperate with one another for the common good. This is a unique ongoing project that may give concrete ideas to other communities.

Despite the large amount of good work done by Professor McKnight and his colleagues at the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, several critical questions remain. First, is there a role for established institutions like hospitals, schools, and governmental agencies working with local associations? The Institute criticizes institutions for undermining local community autonomy and self identify. But can we really do without them? If not, what is the best way for associations to partner with them?

Second, does an exclusive focus on local assets and associations become parochial and even oblivious to larger national and international issues that affect people? The dangers of nuclear weapons, terrorism and war-making cannot be solved on the local level. But local citizen groups can do a lot in terms of public education on these issues and lobbying their Congressional representatives. Amnesty International is a good example of a human rights organization that has national and international offices and leadership, yet generates its letters, petitions, etc. from local communities based chapters. The Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice, the United Nations Association and the Sierra Club have a somewhat similar dualistic character. How many local associations "think globally" while "acting locally"?

by Vincent and Jane Kavaloski



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