

Listen Before You Leap

How Harlem Children's Zone built trust in a community before it built a school.

By Woody McCutchen

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Geoffrey Canada is one of the most highly acclaimed nonprofit leaders in the nation. Fortune Magazine once ranked him 12th among the world's fifty greatest leaders of any kind. Harlem Children's Zone, the organization he co-founded and led for 24 years, has been hailed in the Harvard Policy Review as "arguably the most important social policy experiment in America." The cradle-through-college programs it provides 25,000 youth and adults in 97 blocks of central Harlem have inspired federal legislation and \$350 million in appropriations to create "Promise Neighborhoods" throughout the country.

St. Nicholas Houses is one of the larger and more troubled public housing projects in New York City. In half of the nearly 1,500 families who live there, no family member holds a job. Most of the children attend public schools where statewide testing found that only 21.5 percent of students were at or above grade level in English language arts and only 16.6 at or above grade level in math. Meanwhile, 39 percent of third through eighth graders at Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy charter school scored at or above grade level in ELA, and 55.7 percent at or above grade level in math during the same period of time. So when Geoffrey Canada offered to build a new charter school building in St. Nicholas Houses, you'd think that residents would have welcomed him with open arms.

Guess again! At the first tenant association meeting to discuss the proposal in early 2010, Canada ran into a wall of opposition. And among the more vocal opponents was a former member of an HCZ Community Advisory Board. "We fought hard against it being built," says Leona Draper, a two-time St. Nick's tenant association president.

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The opposition Canada encountered and how Harlem Children's Zone eventually overcame it are an object lesson in the importance of understanding and engaging, as too many social services funders and providers fail to do, the communities they are trying to help, and of respecting what social science calls "agency": the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own choices. The story is also a good example of how and why Harlem Children's Zone has been so successful in lifting the life prospects of Harlem residents.

This story is particularly timely because over the past five years so-called community-based collective impact initiatives have proliferated in more than 200 cities and neighborhoods across America, many with a declared goal of replicating HCZ's success. The funders and organizers of these projects are very attentive to ensuring that solid evidenced-based interventions, sophisticated data systems, shared outcome measures, and strong nonprofits are at the core of such efforts. However, many of them pay less attention to engaging the agency of the communities they are targeting. According to Canada, these efforts have little to no chance of successfully transforming communities if engaging their residents is not central to their strategies.



Canada knew St. Nick's would be a tough nut to crack. Although its 14 buildings are squarely within the Zone, a number of St. Nick's youth participated in HCZ programs, and some residents even served on HCZ's Community Advisory Board, he and his staff viewed the New York City Housing Authority project as a "closed" community. One day, visiting a youth center that NYCHA ran there, Canada was shocked to hear 10-year-olds using, right in front of NYCHA staff, language that would "make your skin tingle."

When he learned that NYCHA planned to close the center due to budget cutbacks, HCZ offered to manage the facility and provide free services for kids. After more than six months of bureaucratic wrangling, a new NYCHA Chairman, John Rhea, accepted the offer and upped the ante by asking HCZ to consider opening a school inside St. Nicholas. While Canada considered the proposition, Rhea sold his boss, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, on the idea. When the Mayor jumped the gun and announced in his annual "State of the City" address that a school would rise in the St. Nicholas Houses, Canada called Rhea and said, "I guess we're building a school."

However, Canada added, "I will not do this project unless the tenants support it." One of the first meetings he scheduled to vet the idea was with Willie Mae Lewis, then president of the St. Nick's tenant association.



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Willie Mae Lewis, now 75, grew up in North Carolina, attended North Carolina College (now North Carolina Central University) on a scholarship, and eventually graduated from the College of New Rochelle. She has lived in St. Nicholas Houses for nearly fifty years and raised two daughters, both college graduates, there. According to Canada, at their first encounter she said, “You’re the answer to a dream I’ve always had.” Lewis supported bringing a charter school (and not just any charter school but an HCZ Promise Academy) into the development. They may be poor, she said, but the kids there deserve a high-quality education as much as kids from any other community. “All they need to do is get dressed, come downstairs and walk to school.”

Still, Lewis warned, “Everybody is not going to like it.” Soon to retire from her position as a New York City Public Schools attendance coordinator, she knew whereof she spoke. Charter schools are a highly inflammatory issue in many public school districts. There was also the broader issue of building a charter school on public land. If NYCHA could sell open space to a charter school, what next? A fast food outlet, a liquor store, a big box retailer?

Deeper than this was the distrust many communities of color feel after decades of exploitation. Canada knew this from personal experience. “There were lots of challenges that happened over the decades in Harlem,” he says, “and this is a very typical issue.” When HCZ began to help the city redevelop houses and tenements it owned in Harlem, he recalls, “they’d move all the tenants out of the house, fix it up, and 20 percent of the tenants would make it back. When you asked what happened to the other 80 percent who had lived here and were promised these wonderful apartments, they would say, ‘We don’t know.’ So you can imagine what that looked like to the community. This was urban removal: a scheme to get rid of folks, fix the place up, and then other people would come in. I won’t say that the city was intentionally doing it, but the end result is everybody loses their place and the promises are not kept. I think that’s the legacy that’s happened in Harlem: the placement of transfer depots, urban waste facilities. It’s been a dumping ground. People make these

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promises, and then in the end the promises are not kept. So I think the community had a long history of distrusting big projects that would supposedly aid them, and in the end they weren't around to benefit from it.”

Determined to do better by the people it served, HCZ worked out a deal with the city to transfer residents of a building under renovation to another building on the very same block. “And we improved retention into the high 80s of folks actually moving back into their own apartment.”

In her opposition to the charter school proposal, St. Nicholas resident Leona Draper expressed the distrust many of her neighbors felt. Draper, now 72, retired in 2009 after working for more than 42 years for the U.S. Postal Service. She was born in one of the brownstones that was razed to make way for St. Nicholas Houses and grew up in the development. “I was raised there, I raised my children there.” When she learned about the school, she says, “it was already in the works.” Despite her respect for Canada and years on an HCZ Community Advisory Board, she was incensed. “I

truly admire Geoffrey Canada for all he's done, but when this was thrown into our laps, I was upset. I spoke to numerous residents, and they as well were very upset because we weren't pre-warned this was happening. And at the time we didn't get a chance to express our views on it.”

Leona Draper and Willie Mae Lewis, two equally civic-minded retired public employees, past and current tenant association presidents only three years apart in age, were on opposite sides of an issue that deeply divided the development.

Draper and other opponents rallied St. Nick's residents, hired a lawyer and went to court to stop the project. Meanwhile, with Lewis's staunch support, Canada and HCZ did everything they could to mollify them. “There were a lot of

concerns for reasons I believe are easy to understand,” Canada acknowledges. “One area I really did think was legitimate that people raised was the issue of public space. We didn't tear down any buildings, but we built in a large open area that was public space for St. Nick's, and people rightfully said you're depriving us of our public space. There's an argument to be made that that public space was owned by gangs and other folks, but I'm not going to pretend that folks did not use that public space. And what I said was I honestly believed in the trade-off — we're going to build you a state-of-the-art facility which is not just going to be for kids but for the community — and we think it's more than an equal pay-off for the loss of public space. Some folks heard that and said we'll see. We were going to build a \$100 million building in the middle of the housing projects for the kids in the projects — who would believe such a thing?”



“I have discovered through trial and error,” Canada continues, “that you draw something up on the blackboard and you think everybody’s going to love it. And then, when you try to execute it you find, no, people didn’t actually want that. Partnering with the community is very difficult for lots of very sophisticated organizations.... You get this huge disconnect with the community because there’s not a sense of partnering.



“At the time HCZ started, there was a lot of focus on communities and what communities need and how they knew best and we have to rely on the community. I never bought into the fact that the communities know more about ending poverty or about education or housing than all of the intellectual capital at colleges, universities and foundations. That didn’t make any sense to me. What did make sense was, communities can interpret the best practice in ways that make it more likely that you will be successful if they are engaged and informed. So very quickly

we decided, whatever we did, we were first going to have a discussion with the community about whether or not they agreed this was a priority.”

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When, for example, HCZ sought to recruit families for Baby College, a new program in parenting skills, someone suggested offering free lottery tickets. “I thought that was brilliant,” Canada recalls. “I thought people will show up just to see whether or not they’ve won, and then we could get them engaged. But at the point we were all celebrating ourselves, one of the ministers said to us, ‘I can’t do that. Nope. It may be a good idea, but I can’t go back to my congregation and say we’re supporting gambling for poor people.’ I said okay, [and] the community realized we weren’t kidding.”

“The naysayers at St. Nick’s,” Canada says, “were cynical, but one of the things that came up was dust and asthma.” HCZ distributed free air conditioners so families with asthma problems didn’t have to open their windows during construction. Vermin? “We got in touch with NYCHA and got our own extermination team in.

“These issues are things that we learned about, and if we had not done that well, we wouldn’t have ended up with the kind of relationship with Willie Mae Lewis that allowed us to build that building. The trust factor is huge, and I don’t know any other organization that really has partnered in a way with the community that says, ‘We’re going to learn about this together.’”

Leona Draper often walked past the construction site with a grandson who would say, “That’s gonna be my school.”



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“Not if I can help it,” she would reply, but opponents of the project eventually ran out of money and energy as HCZ won over more residents by listening to and mitigating their misgivings.

At the ribbon cutting, Draper apologized to Canada and John Rhea for her opposition to the project. Both her grandsons now attend the St. Nick’s Promise Academy, and she proudly displays the older one’s Presidential Academic Achievement Certificate and his trophy for being captain of the basketball team. She marvels at how accessible and responsive the principal was when her grandson experienced some bullying, and delights in sitting in the stands at his games and hearing the refrain, “Shorty can play!”

Draper often appears at HCZ events in support of the school alongside Willie Mae Lewis, who now sits on the NYCHA and Promise Academy boards. Overcoming her neighbors’ resistance to the charter school was the most stressful time of Lewis’s life. She says she was investigated on her job with New York City Public Schools, had to change churches, and suffered a stroke. But Lewis insists she would do it all over again to give the children in St. Nicholas access to the quality education every kid deserves.

HCZ opened the Promise Academy I school building and Westside Community Center in the St. Nicholas Houses in June 2013. In the 2015-2016 school year, the school served 1,187 students in grades K-12, 96 of whom live in the development. Nearly 60 additional St. Nick’s children who were selected in the lottery when they were three years old will soon enter the school. HCZ has committed to recruiting 100 St. Nick’s youth annually for summer jobs, and the West Side Community Center operates year-round, offering free evening and weekend programming for youth and adults.

Canada is more convinced than ever that the funders and providers of social services have to temper their top-down thinking and partner with communities instead of imposing programs on them. “The current structures that most sophisticated organizations have, where they have collected all of the intellectual capital within themselves and use that to create plans for a community which they think the community is going to embrace,” he says, are “a failed strategy. My answer is, No!”