



CITYLAB TOOLKIT: Introduction to Urban Social Enterprise

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Business Integration Project

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"Wars against nations are fought to change maps; wars against poverty are fought to map change." -- Muhammad Ali

In my last visit to Jonestown, the word that kept coming to mind while walking the streets was "emptiness." The streets were quiet, neighbors were not convening at doorsteps, buildings were boarded up, and very few stores, coffee shops, or restaurants were around to encourage citizens to gather and socialize. Despite Jonestown's rich history and heritage, I felt none of that culture or community pride in the streets. In fact, I felt no sense of community at all. Jonestown is missing that "something" that fosters human connections. That "something" that promotes communication and interaction among citizens, businesses, places of worship, and NGOs. I believe finding that "something" will create a sense of neighborliness within the community and will unlock Jonestown's true potential.

I believe when children and families flourish in a neighborhood, they can serve as catalysts to revive a community and nurture such human connections. Walking the streets of Jonestown led me to this question, where are these families and what constructive opportunities are available for children and teens?

To truly understand the challenges of Jonestown, it's imperative to step back and see how it is nestled in the city of Baltimore that ranks poorly in economic well-being, which is a leading indicator to poverty. The Kid's Count Data Center (a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation) reports the following on family-specific metrics in Baltimore:

Year	Metric	Percentage	US National Average	Rank (of total cities measured)
2012	Children Whose Parents Lack Secure Employment	50%	31%	46 of 51
2012	Children Living In Low-Income Households Where No Adults Work	15%	6%	45 of 51
2012	Teens Ages 16 To 19 Not Attending	12%	8%	40 of 50

	School And Not Working			
2012	Persons age 18 to 24 not attending school, not working, and no degree beyond high school	21%	16%	41 of 50
2012	Students Receiving Free And Reduced School Meals	86%	N/A	N/A

And in many categories, statistics around poverty and poverty-related conditions are worse in Jonestown in comparison to Baltimore City. In 2011, the Baltimore City Health Department reported the following alarming statistics about Jonestown.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Metric</u>	<u>Jonestown</u>	<u>Compared to Baltimore City</u>
2005-2009	Percent Unemployed	14.7%	11.1%
2005-2009	Percent of Families in Poverty	26.6%	15.2%
2010	Percent of Single-Parent Households	47.3%%	26.0%
2005-2009	Percent of residents 25 years and older with a high school degree or less	63.7%	52.6%
2005-2009	Percent of residents 25 years and older with a bachelors degree or more	17.5%	25.0%
2008-2009	Percent of High School Students Missing 20+ Days	50.9%	39.2%
2005-2009	Teen Birth Rate	92.0%	65.4%

What is most unfortunate about poverty is that it is regularly passed from generation to generation. Adults living in poverty often become parents of children living in poverty, which makes it difficult for youth to break the cycle. And with the first years of life setting the foundation for a child's physical and mental well being, most children living in poverty start with a disadvantage that take years to overcome if ever at all. These disadvantages are exacerbated by challenges that youth from more privileged circumstances rarely face, like having a parent who is addicted to drugs or incarcerated. Children living in poverty not only have more exposure to environmental toxins from poor housing conditions, but are also exposed to more violence and physical threats to health

and safety. All of this contributes to chronic psychological stress and anxiety. As children grow in to their teenage years, that can manifest itself in different ways - from poor performance in school, to depression, or even violence.

So are the youth of Jonestown doomed? Is it impossible to break this cycle of violence?

State and federal government have tried to thwart such problems in similar cities through entitlement programs and throwing free laptops at low-income schools. NGO's have tried to provide mentorship and life coaching to "at-risk youth", yet systemic youth poverty is still on the rise. In Jonestown itself, the federal program, HOPE VI, was designed to replace extremely distressed public housing sites with housing designed for residents with a mix of incomes with the goal of reducing the segregation of low-income populations and providing community services to promote self-sufficiency. But has HOPE VI achieved its goal? Has it fostered a sense of community amongst mixed-income residents? Has it provided the community services to promote self-sufficiency, for families to thrive, and to alleviate youth poverty? Or has it fallen short?

In my experience working with a group of youth from underserved communities who were frequently bullied due to their ethnicity and religiously-mandated uniform, I found that facilitating workshops for them on anti-bullying made them more "aware" and "educated" on bullying and how to tackle it, but turning them in to facilitators of anti-bullying workshops themselves caused a transformation...it empowered them. In that same light, my approach to addressing youth poverty in Jonestown is to "empower through service" – to design and implement service projects for youth living in poverty. This would involve building a network of local charities in and around Jonestown that need young volunteers and pairing them with youth groups that are formally organized or informally organized (from schools to church youth groups) in Jonestown who are ready to serve. Programs won't be solely based around an event, but instead it will be a 2-3 month process of identifying a social problem in the community, coordinating with local charities to find ways to address them, designing a plan to implement the solution, and program execution.

One might ask, why would the needy be interested in helping the needy? And

how does that help toward alleviating youth poverty?

I admit that it is a risk. I am making an assumption that there are children that would be interested in helping others despite their own difficult circumstances. And if I meet challenges, I may need to start with youth groups that are slightly more organized or work with organizations like churches or synagogues where service is already part of the mission. I feel strongly about this approach, because if successful, it provides a series of results and skills that youth living in poverty rarely experience:

- An appreciation for what you already have
- The innate feeling of happiness and positivity from helping another human being
- The identification, planning, and pursuit a goal
- Problem solving; the juggling of priorities and multi-tasking
- Delayed gratification; working toward a goal that takes time to realize

All of these are critical life skills that make individuals better students, better workers, and better citizens. I am convinced through exposing youth in poverty to such a radically different paradigm to problem solving, it will give them perspective to challenge the cycle of poverty and an opportunity to realize their full potential.

The beauty of this model is the starting costs are low. By leveraging charities and youth groups that are already in place, it is primarily legwork that is needed to put it all together. And rather than build an actual institution, my recommendation would be to create 2-3 catalyst projects to generate interest in the concept, see if the idea floats, and takeaway some key leanings to turn it into more of a long-term program. Two potential catalyst projects, could be:

(1) Build a playground with Kaboom (www.kaboom.org). Kaboom pairs up corporate sponsors with communities in need to build a playground based on the community's design. Kaboom works with low-income communities to plan and design playgrounds, assist fundraising efforts, and coordinates/manages the actual playground build event that is completely built by the community.

(2) Meal packaging event with Kid's Against Hunger (www.kidsagainsthunger.org). Kid's Against Hunger is a food security organization that works with communities to coordinate 3-4 hour "packaging events" where volunteers fill and pack thousands of nutritious dry meals that are then sent to local food shelters or internationally through Kid's Against Hunger's international shipping partners. Roughly \$2,500 would need to be raised to package 10,000 meals. The youth will be responsible for finding sponsors, raising the funds, securing a location, and recruiting volunteers for the event.

If these events are successful, this concept can be turned in to an NGO where full-time employees create a more formal network of charities and youth groups. And with appropriate funding, more projects can be accomplished without having to fundraise each time. Funding would be through a combination of federal and state grants, foundations, and private donations. Another alternative for funding would be to build a "for-profit" social enterprise that coordinates customized service projects in more affluent communities for a fee, where profits fund the NGO that works with youth in poverty.

I believe youth poverty alleviation through service is critical in fostering human connections and will help create a sense of community in Jonestown. In the short-term, establishing service projects throughout Jonestown and nearby neighborhoods encourage collaboration among nonprofits and engage the greater community through direct service and volunteerism. And the process of designing, planning, and pursuing a goal creates bonds and builds essential problem-solving skills to create productive citizens. And in the long-term, if we find that Jonestown becomes a hotbed of youth-driven service activity, the reputation of the neighborhood can change. Rather than being the questionable neighborhood by Little Italy, Jonestown's identity can be defined through service. A community known for its social resilience and for a tradition of serving the neighborhoods of Baltimore.

REFERENCES

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