

# Taking Care of Our Own

## A Denver Neighborhood Leads the Way in Alternative Youth Justice and Shows a Way that Communities Can Help Build a Model for System Reform



Myra, 18, and her cousin Anna, 9, listen to Myra's mom talk about how Myra has changed since hooking up with the Denver Community Court.

Starting in the fall of 2003, a community court in a *Making Connections* Denver neighborhood became a focal point for the transformation of this community and the strengthening of many families who live there.

It also became a case study in how community residents can work closely with system people to build a model for how a system—in this case the juvenile court system—could do its work more effectively.

“The court provided a way for a community to lead an initiative in a very hands-on, tangible way,” explains Susan Motika, *Making Connections* Denver’s

site coordinator who helped create the court when she was working in the Denver District Attorney’s office.

But after a great start, the court has been struggling. A city-wide funding crisis—and the continuing resistance to change by some people in the court system—put the community court in jeopardy.

All and all, it is an often encouraging, sometimes discouraging, always very interesting and instructive story. Actually it’s two stories.

***This story shows how a community court can become a focal point for change, using the ‘stick’ of a violation to engage kids and their families as well as attract other service providers.***

The first story is about the creation of the community court and its exciting initial year and a half. This story shows what can come out of a partnership between system people and community people.

This story also shows:

- How a system can allow significant changes in the way it does at least some of its work.
- How much community residents can do if they are engaged in an effort to help troubled kids and their families.
- How something like a community court can become a focal point for change, using the “stick” of a violation to engage kids and their families and using the physical presence of

the court to attract other service providers that want to reach these families.

This first story—told by Denver Making Connections’ former diarist Tory Read—begins on page 4. The lessons that this story generated about the role of community in system reform are explained in the article that begins on page 23.

The second story is less upbeat, though just as instructive. It is the story of the withdrawal of much of the court system’s support for the community court and the services it was providing.

When a city-wide budget crisis hit in 2005, the court became an easy mark for cuts. For several months it was unclear if the court would survive at all. Ultimately the judges voted unanimously to find the resources to keep the court going through 2006, hearing cases two days a week. However, there were significant cuts in the budget for the staff who were providing the critical wrap-around support for the kids who came before the court.

There is no way to sugarcoat it: the court’s struggle to survive has been extremely discouraging to the people who fought hard to create the court and helped it achieve a lot in a very short period of time. “It’s just so frustrating,” says Loree Greco, who was hired by the court system to help organize the community court. “We were so close.”

But while those who are the closest to the court are understandably upset over its struggles to survive, those struggles don’t

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***The core lesson seems to be that achieving short-term system change is not the same as achieving long-term system reform. The challenge of maintaining a change can be as great as achieving that change in the first place.***

change the fact that it created a rich model for how a community's residents can play a large role in confronting an issue that many communities rank as a top priority: crime and the struggles of young people.

And the story isn't over. Motika believes that the unanimous vote by the judges to find a way to keep the court going is a key step, showing that the juvenile justice system as a whole is beginning to see the community court as an important part of the system.

**T**he struggles over the court's future also don't change the fact that much has been learned, not just about how to create a change within a system, but also what you need to do to maintain that change.

Indeed, one core lesson seems to be that achieving short-term system change is not the same as achieving long-term system reform. Put another way, the challenge of maintaining a fundamental change in the way a system functions can be as great as achieving that change in the first place.

Most of the lessons these people have learned relate to why it's so hard to maintain a change:

- It's extremely hard for any system to let go of its control and, when it does, it will both take time and take many detours.
- It's hard to communicate the benefits of the change to more than a handful of individuals within a system. It's easy to rely too much on these individuals, people who can and often do change jobs.



Court planner Loree Greco says, "We realized we were missing points of intervention and opportunities for prevention."

- It can be harder to engage a community's residents in maintaining a change than in winning the change in the first place.
- When you're deeply engaged in building something new, it is hard to pay attention to things that will be critical down the road, like hard data on impact.
- When you have to rely on outside grants to build critical parts of a new initiative, it's hard to make sure that every part is included. A huge hole in the community court was money to pay for a Spanish-speaking staff person.

***“Myra has changed. She listens now. She helps me in the house more. We are closer, and we don’t fight much any more. The court helped me by helping Myra straighten up.”***

—Myra’s mother

## **Taking Care of Our Own: The Creation of Denver’s Community Court**

Denver Community Court has changed Myra’s teenage life. The court has also had a profound impact on Brandon, Kevin, Bernadette, Demarco and Anna. The list goes on.

Myra landed in Denver Community Court, located in the inner city Cole neighborhood, in October 2003 when she got in a fight at the local high school. She had already twice faced the judge at the municipal juvenile court downtown, known locally as 191J, for trespassing and for shoplifting.

“Myra has changed,” said her mother Martha. “She listens now. She helps me in the house more. We are closer, and we don’t fight much any more. The court helped me by helping Myra straighten up.”

“Before, I was never in school,” said Myra. “I ditched all the time, fought all of the time, ran from the cops, shoplifted stuff. I didn’t care about anything. I used to dress like a gangster, and the way that I used to talk to my parents—I used to just cuss them out.”

*Story and photos (through page 22)  
by Tory Read*

So why the transformation? “The court in Cole is small,” Myra said. “Other times I went to court, I got a sentence and then I did it. I got a fine and then I paid it. At the community court, they give you chances to do more things. They let you explain what you did and the way it happened.”

Myra received her sentence on Halloween. It included probation, time on the community court’s work crew, completion of a computer literacy and personal development program, and weekly meetings with a “wrap-around” team composed of family members, a counselor and community court staff from the neighborhood. Myra also switched to a high school in southwest Denver, to be farther away from the temptations of her old friends, and her ditching quotient went way down.

Myra still meets every other week with her wrap-around team, whose members coach her on school choices, job options and future plans. She’ll tell you herself that she’s not out of the woods yet, but she’s trying hard, and she wants to go to college.

The story that begins on this page about the early days of the community court was originally written and published in 2004. The article that begins on page 23 about the lessons learned from the court was written in 2005 and is based on interviews done in 2004 and 2005. The article on “the context” (page 35) was written in 2005. This publication was published in May 2006.

**“The idea of kids going back to the community and repairing the harm they’ve done to individuals and the community makes sense. In my experience, kids listen more to the people they’ve hurt.”**

—Judge Johnny Barajas

## **An Experiment in Restorative Justice**

The courtroom was almost full at 8:25 a.m. on a July Friday morning. Community court volunteer Sandy Douglas, a long-time resident of the Cole neighborhood in Northeast Denver, was already in motion at the front of the room, explaining what kids and parents and other guardians were about to experience. The magistrate came in and provided more detail about the community court process. For the uninitiated, it was a lot to take in. A Spanish-language interpreter was doing simultaneous translation on headsets.

Julie Anderson was one of four magistrates who, along with Denver’s downtown municipal juvenile court judge, rotated to the court on Fridays to hear youth offender cases in 80205.

Denver Community Court serves kids who get tickets for municipal offenses and who either live in or commit the offense in the 80205 zip code area, which is comprised of seven Denver neighborhoods, including Cole. Cole is one of four Denver neighborhoods that are part of *Making Connections Denver*, a long-term effort to transform struggling communities.

Community court is held once a week on Fridays. Trained community members and social work professionals do a comprehensive review of young people who have committed violations and their families to assess their needs and make recommendations to the court. All families are eligible for this assessment. The approach is one of restorative justice, where the emphasis is on repairing the harm done whenever possible.



***“California is putting in a new jail every two or three months. There are some communities in the United States that now spend 80% of their budgets on corrections.”***

—Matt McConville

The courts have reason to experiment with alternative models. According to a recent study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the number of state and federal prison inmates jumped from 488,000 in 1985 to 1.3 million in 2002. At the same time, the number of inmates in local and county jails tripled to 691,000.

One reason for this dramatic increase is longer prison sentences. Many people who have served long sentences struggle to lead fully functional, successful lives when they are eventually released. Many of these long-term prisoners got their start as kids committing minor offenses.

Proponents of restorative justice want the system to respond more effectively to young people who commit relatively minor crimes. The idea is that these young people

have a responsibility to repair the harm caused to the victim, in the community where the offence occurred. Community members are directly involved in dealing with the offender.

Over the past 20 years, restorative justice principles and practice have become increasingly influential across the United States as an alternative to standard criminal justice methods. “California is putting in a new jail every two or three months,” notes Court Administrator Matt McConville. “There are some communities in the United States that now spend 80% of their budgets on corrections.”

“We’re trying to build a 1,500-bed pre-trial facility and a 32-courtroom justice center. It’s going to cost about \$260–300 million. And here we have this community court that doesn’t cost a whole lot.”



Crew UNIQUE leader Debra Johnson, assistant Crew leader Amalio Payan and Youth Development leader Sandy Douglas coordinate Saturday community service for youth assigned to their programs

***“I often see kids who started off in our downtown juvenile court with simple offenses, and they’ve worked their way into aggravated robbery and eventually murder. And many of them show no remorse.”***

—Judge Raymond Satter

“The idea of kids going back to the community and repairing the harm they’ve done to individuals and the community makes sense,” said Denver County Court Judge Johnny Barajas, assigned to preside over 191J downtown. “In my experience, kids listen more to the people they’ve hurt. And it’s better for a child to be interacting with community members rather than just hearing me preach.”

The kinds of trouble that bring kids into the community court include disturbing the peace, fighting, riding the light rail without paying, staying out after curfew, driving without a license, shoplifting, possessing marijuana or paraphernalia, trespassing, slashing tires and interfering with an arrest.

“I had a kid who wanted to know why he couldn’t just pay his fine and get it over with,” said community person and court staffer Debra Johnson. “I said, that’s the whole idea. You’re not just going to pay the buck and then go out there and keep on doing what you’ve been doing. If you offend in this neighborhood, you are going to pay back in the neighborhood.”

“What we really want to accomplish is to break a continuing escalating cycle of kids committing crimes and thinking it is really cool,” said Denver County Court former presiding judge Raymond Satter, who supported the development of the community court in Cole.

“I often see kids who started off in our downtown juvenile court with simple offenses,

and they’ve worked their way into aggravated robbery and eventually murder. And many of them show no remorse. The hands-on approach of the community court redirects them.”

“Our ultimate goal is to connect young people to their own community, not connect them to us,” said Sandy Douglas, a Cole resident who helped found the community court. “For example, a young man was in court recently, and he needed a summer job and youth activities. He had absolutely no clue how to connect to a job. Our priority is to connect him, then follow up and make sure he is OK. We help him out with this, in addition to restorative justice. Like him, families need a little help along the way. We provide that, too.”

The court also acts as a resource center for the community, providing referrals for food and clothing as well as information on jobs, health care and housing. “We’ve watched the Cole court expand to become a resource center in addition to being a justice center,” said Judge Satter.

The court heard 423 cases in its first 10 months, representing more than 900 violations of municipal ordinances. Recidivism and failures to appear (FTAs) are less than 10 percent, whereas the FTA rate at the downtown municipal juvenile court is 18 percent.

“At first, I thought that families would tell us to get lost,” said community court planner Loree Greco. “But there are real needs out there, and it’s a community person asking the questions, so they talk.”

**“Our ultimate goal is to connect young people to their own community, not connect them to us.”**

—Sandy Douglas

## **Cole Neighborhood: A Difficult History**

“Lots of organizations have come through here and made promises they didn’t follow through on,” said Steve Reemts, site manager for two Catholic Charities housing programs in the Cole neighborhood.

“Foundations and others spent lots of money here, but people in the neighborhood still don’t know where all that money went. They were fed up, and they felt played.

“Local organizations were also at each other’s throats because of competition over resources.”

Steve Reemts and community court volunteer Al Rue conduct an R & R (Risk and Resiliency) assessment with a youth offender and his guardian at Denver’s community court.



Reemts has been involved in the court since day one. He first hooked up with *Making Connections* when the Annie E. Casey Foundation came into the neighborhood and started organizing residents in 1999. They had several meetings to identify issues for the community, and numbers one and two were safety and education.

Compared to previous foundations, which had infused money into the community via large grants to nonprofit organizations, “*Making Connections* took a different approach,” said Reemts. “They wanted to hear from residents first. They didn’t go to the nonprofits first. And they wanted residents to do the work, not organizations.”

In relation to safety, several residents helped start the Cole Crime and Safety Board, which was begun by the Cole Neigh-

***“I see that everything I do has consequences. I’ve learned to listen more. I’ve learned to care more. And I know that I’m going to have to work for whatever I get.”***

—Brandon

## Brandon’s Story

*Brandon, a newly-minted 18-year-old, was born and raised in the Cole neighborhood, where he’s lived with his grandmotherly guardian Frankie since he was four. As we drove through the neighborhood delivering flyers for the DA’s office, kids of all colors called out to him, and he called back in English and Spanish, as though he was the bilingual mayor of a small town.*

*Brandon came to Denver Community Court in Cole on November 17, 2003, with four tickets. Before that, he had served five days on the downtown municipal court work crew for a prior offence.*

*Brandon has almost completed his sentence from the community court, serving eight Saturdays on Crew UNIQUE, a resident-led community service crew attached to the community court. In early August 2004, Brandon went to California for the first time, for a three-day youth conference (hosted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation) where he met teenagers from all over the U.S.*

*“I knew the court was different when I walked in and saw two African-American women from the neighborhood. That was a shock off the top. One of them, Sandy Douglas, explained the court to me, and I felt better right away. It’s no joke, I can almost say I walked out with a smile.*

*“In Crew UNIQUE, I’ve gotten to know all of the other kids. I got to get out in the neighborhood and interact with people. And there were no uniforms, that was cool. We deliver flyers, clean up around the neighborhood and do door-knocking and talking to people.*

*“Before, I wasn’t cautious. Then when I turned 18, I realized that most of my homeboys were either dead or headed to jail. One just died last week. For me to not follow in their footsteps, I’ve got to make different choices. They think there is*



Brandon

*no way to make money besides selling dope, but I know there’s jobs out there.*

*“I never learned the essence of hard work, but I’m learning it now. I’m working for a construction crew, and the immigrants work really hard. I learned about working hard from them.*

*“I see that everything I do has consequences. I’ve learned to listen more. I’ve learned to care more. And I know that I’m going to have to work for whatever I get.*

*“My main dream is to truly become “somebody.” Right now, I’m working on community activities, and maybe that is the way I’m supposed to go. If I can rise to be someone like Deb or Sandy, that’s my dream. If college knocks, I’ll take it. If not, I’m going to follow this community work.*

*“Graduating from high school is my top goal right now. I’m starting as a senior at Manual High School this year. I’ll be the first person in my immediate family to finish, and I know I’ll look good in my graduation gown.”*

**“Making Connections took a different approach. They wanted to hear from residents first. They didn’t go to the nonprofits first. And they wanted residents to do the work, not organizations.”**

—Steve Reemts



Brandon, 18, delivers resource packages to neighborhood residents as part of his community service sentence with Crew UNIQUE, created and led by resident Debra Johnson.

neighborhood Organizing Alliance, which is in turn a part of *Making Connections* Denver.

The Crime and Safety Board’s work was supported by the Community Justice Unit of the District Attorney’s office.

In early 2002, the Crime and Safety Board turned itself into the Cole Community Justice Council, with continued support from the DA’s office, which was interested in supporting a community court agenda.

## A First Attempt

The justice system in Denver has been considering the notion of community court for at least five years. Community courts are a

neighborhood-based attempt to solve neighborhood problems by bringing courts and communities together and encouraging meaningful resident participation in the judicial process.

The first community court in the country opened in 1993 in midtown Manhattan. Since then, at least 20 community courts based on a variety of models have opened around the United States, according to the Center for Court Innovation web site.

In 2000, Denver County Court opened a community court in the Cole neighborhood, but “it functioned more as a satellite court for downtown than it did as a court for the neighborhood,” said former presiding County Court Judge Satter. “They took dockets that could have been handled downtown and

***“People didn’t trust the system, but they cared a lot about their kids, so it made sense to start with youth.”***

—Loree Greco

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moved them out there, including small claims cases, name changes and traffic matters.”

Not all the cases it heard even involved the community. “We took cases from all over the city out there,” said Denver County Court Administrator McConville. “It was all top down.”

Meanwhile, a community court task force composed of staff from the DA’s office, the City Attorney’s office, the county court system and others had been meeting and talking about community courts for more than two years. This effort was spurred by the Denver DA’s office and the Denver City Attorney’s office, led by assistant city attorney Laurie Kaczanowska. Susan Motika was the head of the DA’s Community Justice Unit.

“The task force was largely systems led, with some community representation, but we had various parts of the system on different pages,” said Motika.

In 2002, Motika and others wrote a job description for a community court planner. In September 2002, the county court hired a social worker and community organizer (with prior court and juvenile justice experience) to do outreach in Cole and surrounding neighborhoods. She was to recruit neighborhood residents to participate in a conversation about community court and restorative justice.

“My job was to talk to neighborhood leaders and shop owners and to define a viable catchment area for the court,” said court plan-

ner Loree Greco. “People didn’t trust the system, but they cared a lot about their kids, so it made sense to start with youth.” Greco and Steve Reemts brought many community voices to the table.

### Timing is Everything

Greco spent her first three months on the job talking to people and attending community meetings, including those of the Cole Community Justice Council. That group played an active role in defining the target area for the court. “At first, we thought it would just serve Cole, but then Loree pulled tickets and we realized we needed to expand to the whole zip code area to make it worth the investment,” said Reemts.

Then, Greco put together an open invitation Working Council to oversee the court’s development. This group included some people and organizations from the earlier task force, as well as interested residents and organizations in the zip code. They asked: Why do kids get in trouble? How has the system not been helping? What are current recidivism rates? What is the typical sentencing? What services do kids and families need?

One key thing this working group lacked, Motika says now, were Spanish speakers. Cole and surrounding neighborhoods have become increasingly Hispanic during the past generation.

***“For me to be part of planning, for me to be at the table and have a turn to speak and to voice an opinion—I’ve always felt like I knew what we needed here in the community.”***

—Debra Johnson



Community member and court staffer Debra Johnson.

Residents had a voice from the outset. “For me to be part of planning, for me to be at the table and have a turn to speak and to voice an opinion—I’ve always felt like I knew what we needed here in the community,” said Debra Johnson.

“When we started having meetings with systems people and community people, it wasn’t easy,” said Reemts. “From the beginning, we all agreed that we wanted the new court to be community-based, to serve youth and to build on a restorative justice philosophy. The challenge was in figuring out what that meant and how to do it.”

Given the community’s history, “it was difficult for community people to establish rela-

tionships with professionals from the court system,” added Reemts, who does not live in the neighborhood. “It wasn’t easy for neighborhood folks to step up and tell people with formal authority what they wanted. People on both sides got angry. We fought. Sometimes, people walked out of the meetings.”

Major points of contention included how much authority residents would have and what role they would play in daily court operations. “I saw that our jobs as representatives of the system would be changing,” said Motika. “The community was no longer in a simple consultation role. Our role became to figure out how to support community people in creating this court.”

***“We realized we were missing points of intervention and opportunities for prevention. In order to reduce risks and repair harm and also rebuild community, we realized it’s going to take family-strengthening activities.”***

—Loree Greco

## Out on a Limb

Steve Reemts laughs until his face turns red when asked if he was ever scared. “The stakes were high for everyone. It was high pressure. We were totally scared, because there wasn’t a blueprint for what we were trying to do. When things got tough, though, we just kept reminding ourselves that this is for the kids, and we got through it.”

In the first nine months of 2003, the Working Council hammered out a “to do” list for court planning and case processing. Their process included a neighborhood meeting in February 2003 to get broad community input.

Early on, team members realized they would need various kinds of “wrap-around”

care for kids and families interacting with the court system. “We realized we were missing points of intervention and opportunities for prevention,” said Greco. “In order to reduce risks and repair harm and also rebuild community, we realized it’s going to take family-strengthening activities.”

“The first thing we asked was, who is already in the neighborhood and what are they doing,” added Greco. “There was a lot going on—it was just a matter of connecting the dots.”

The community court forged partnerships with local organizations, including Family Directions, a group that provides family therapy and referrals to other relevant services. “We made a lot of in-kind arrangements and haven’t formalized much of this on paper, because we need to stay flexible until we have a

Cole court co-founder and volunteer Steve Reemts and Denver County Court former presiding judge Raymond Satter.



***“The first thing we asked was, who is already in the neighborhood and what are they doing. There was a lot going on—it was just a matter of connecting the dots.”***

—Loree Greco



Court administrator Matt McConville and community member, court staffer and Youth Development leader Sandy Douglas.

clearer picture of what works the best for our kids,” said Greco.

## **Residents Move to the Center**

Residents wanted control, and they got it. Compared with other community courts around the country, the community court in Cole has an unprecedented degree of resident leadership and resident saturation.

“Deb and Sandy are just electric,” said Judge Satter. “We have had a high rate of appearance at the court, because they go to work calling these kids and their parents saying, ‘You’ve got court tomorrow, you better show up.’”

Court Administrator McConville says that the former president of the National Association of Court Management was very impressed by Denver’s community court. “He said, ‘I’ve seen a number of community courts in my travels, and the judges usually have been the champions of their court. I have been impressed. This however is altogether different because this is not your court, Matt. This is the community’s court.’”

“It’s a blessing to be able to do something that I want to do, and what I want to do is work with youth, with young people that made a mistake,” said Debra Johnson. “I did it. I messed up. I stole a pair of slacks for my mother on Mother’s Day. Only the pants didn’t fit, and she found out I stole them, and she made me take them back to the store. She made me do that, and I had to face the band.”

***“It’s a blessing to be able to do something that I want to do, and what I want to do is work with youth, with young people that made a mistake. I did it. I messed up. I had to face the band.”***

—Debra Johnson

At the outset, residents had a lot of learning to do with regards to arraignment, due process and sentencing. Wading through a sea of jargon and acronyms, they had to learn the ins and outs of the juvenile justice system as they did their work.

As the team developed a working case flow, two elements emerged that make Denver Community Court’s pre-sentencing process different than the one offered in the downtown municipal juvenile court. First, Greco suggested that they include a Risk and Resiliency Assessment (R and R) for each child and family, using a tool developed by the Mayor’s Office of Drug Force Strategy.

Then, about a month before the court opened in September, 2003, Sandy Douglas and other residents voiced concern that residents were not represented adequately in the case flow. She suggested adding a community advocacy meeting (CAM) as a new first step in the process. She wanted to get young offenders and their parents to face community people right away. She also wanted to connect families and kids to services and support.

On a typical day about a year after the court began, residents Amalio Payan, Sandy Douglas, Debra Johnson and

Dr. Beverly LaMumba leads a Youth Development session on college application essays and resume writing.



***When youth are serving their sentences, community members stay in touch with them and make sure they are staying on task.***

Al and Claudette Rue were greeting families at the door. Douglas gave a personal introduction to the court and its procedures as the day got rolling. These residents were present in the courtroom throughout the session, and they took turns running the community advocacy meetings. They were also present during sentencing and they didn't hesitate to consult with the magistrate to help tailor the outcome to better meet the young offender's needs.

Later, when youth are serving their sentences, community members stay in touch with them and make sure they are staying on

task. "Residents also mentor kids beyond the courtroom process," said Greco. Two of the sentencing options are actually designed and run by residents Douglas, Johnson and Payan.

In addition, community members actively participate in debriefing sessions with the magistrate and other court personnel after each court session, to discuss the day's work and to identify and start to solve emerging issues.

The court planner—Loree Greco—played a central role in the first 18 months of community court planning and implementation. She began to step back as the court entered its second year. "In the beginning, the court

Myra and her family talk about school and job plans during a wrap-around meeting with Family Directions, a local sentencing partner with the court.



***“In the beginning, the court planner was the glue that held it together.”***

—Matt McConville



An interpreter translates former magistrate Julie Anderson’s words for a Spanish-speaking mom.

planner was the glue that held it together,” said County Court Administrator McConville.

Systems professionals also have played vital roles in the Cole Court, including four rotating magistrates, the presiding judge at 191J downtown, the city attorney, staff from Safe City Juvenile Diversion Program, security personnel and a court clerk. Benita Muniz of the DA’s Community Justice Unit was also available to support the court with translation and technical assistance on restorative justice.

## **Sentencing Relies on Local Resources**

When the court opened, court planners saw two gaps in existing sentencing options and residents stepped into the breach to design two of the court’s most popular programs.

Debra Johnson created Crew UNIQUE (Under New Inspiration Qualified yoUth Emerge), a community service program in which youth do service projects identified by the community to repair the harm done. More than 100 young people have served on the crew, which has a 95% completion rate.

**Built into every court day is a lunch-time debriefing session for the magistrate, participating systems professionals, sentencing program partners, resident court staff and community court volunteers.**

Johnson got the idea for a community-focused work crew at a conference she attended in Keystone, Colorado. “I heard a probation officer speak about an offenders’ group he was running,” she said. “I took some notes and listened to his recipe, and then I created my own.” Johnson got a grant from Chinook Fund’s Social Justice Institute Small Grants Program (another *Making Connections* Denver-supported initiative) to support the crew.

In addition, Cole resident Sandy Douglas created Youth Development, a computer-based literacy program that provides computer tutoring and personal development classes on weekends and Monday afternoons. Youth Development also introduces kids to mentors from the neighborhood and from the University of Denver, and it connects kids to jobs and higher education.

One thing is for sure. No child is as simple as the offense on the ticket. A quiet girl wearing pink double-dice earrings and a fake fur collar came to court with multiple, back-to-back shoplifting tickets. Her Community Advocacy Meeting and her Risk and Resiliency assessment revealed trouble at home—a sick grandparent, a mother in prison and a 7-month-old baby brother to care for. Nevertheless, she had managed to graduate early from high school, and she wanted to go to college.

Her sentence included Douglas’ Youth Development program, a promise to follow through on enrolling in community college this semester (Douglas is going the extra mile and walking her through this process), and voluntary grief counseling for the girl and her entire family.



Substance abuse counselor Dr. Okonji (far left), African drumming therapist Neil Stone, community volunteer Claudette Rue, D.A. community prosecution director Diego Hunt, Cole Court case manager Cari Stegall, Crew UNIQUE leader Debra Johnson, Magistrate Julie Anderson, community court planner Loree Greco, D.A. community justice coordinator David Mrakitsch, city attorney Laurie Kaczanowska, community court volunteer Al Rue, and three community interns participate in a routine debrief after a day in court.

***When the court opened, court planners saw two gaps in existing sentencing options, and residents stepped into the breach to design two of the court's most popular programs.***

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Students leave Cole Middle School at the end of the day. The school pays a trained community member to work as a victim/offender mediation specialist.

## **Learning on the Fly**

Built into every court day is a lunch-time debriefing session for the magistrate, participating systems professionals, sentencing program partners, resident court staff and community court volunteers. Neighborhood residents are as outspoken as the magistrate.

The debrief covers a lot of territory and enables the court to make quick course corrections. A single debriefing session covered eight topics, from the small details to the big picture.

• Court folks are discussing new ways to  
• handle situations where parents of kids who  
• commit property crimes get stuck paying res-  
• titution to the victim because the kid doesn't  
• have a job. Currently, the victim has to wait  
• for payments to roll in incrementally over a  
• period of months. Victims are dissatisfied,  
• and parents are stressed out about their  
• checks being spent before they get them. Sys-  
• tems professionals and community members  
• are discussing solutions together.

• New ideas come up in every debriefing  
• session, and the court has been open to im-  
• proving its performance. The personal intro-  
• duction to the community court that a trained

*“I got sent to Crew UNIQUE. At the beginning, I hated waking up early on Saturdays. But now I like the connections with the other kids, and with Debra. I feel like I’m part of a group, and I’m not left behind.”*

—Anna

## Community Court Sentencing Options During 2003–04

- **Safe City Diversion Program:** classes, counseling and community service designed to address root causes of behavior problems and divert kids out of the system.
- **Family Directions:** wrap-around support and counseling for kids and families; community members participate in creating individual plans of care.
- **Community Accountability Board (CAB):** a group conferencing process bringing together victims, offenders and community members to give kids a broader sense of the harm they’ve caused.
- **Crew UNIQUE:** a local community service program.
- **Youth Development:** a literacy and personal development program.
- **Whittier Drumming Project:** youth and family therapy combined with African drumming.
- **Community Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation and Education Center (CADREC):** substance abuse and anger management therapy for individuals and families.

neighborhood resident gives each court day came out of a suggestion from a community member during the debrief. So did the idea of letting community volunteers know how many kids are appearing from their neighborhood on a particular day in court.

## Impact

Eleven months since the court opened its doors and 19 months after residents and systems professionals came together to start the conversation about the community court, there’s less tension between neighborhood people and justice professionals.

In particular, relationships between magistrates and community members have changed markedly over time. Community people were initially wary of judges and magistrates. Now, residents are comfortable approaching the bench during court, and they participate with equal voices in the weekly court debrief session.

Systems professionals are invigorated after years of service to the courts. “We opened up for business and one year later we’ve got young people coming in and meeting community people, we’ve got them talking to each other in community accountability meetings and R and Rs, we’ve got child care, we’ve got Crew UNIQUE,” said McConville. “That’s cool stuff for me, and I’ve been a court administrator for 16 years.”

Families have also benefited from one of the court’s unique features. “The CAMs (community advocacy meetings) are helpful to people, I see that,” said part-time court staffer and Cole resident Amalio Payan, 20. “I’ve done a lot of them, because many parents speak Spanish. We’ve helped a lot of people out. It’s cool because CAMs were a community idea.”

**“We’ve got young people coming in and meeting community people, we’ve got them talking to each other in community accountability meetings and R and Rs, we’ve got child care, we’ve got Crew UNIQUE. That’s cool stuff for me, and I’ve been a court administrator for 16 years.”**

—Matt McConville

## Funding: Successes and Challenges

Since it began in late 2003, support for the community court has come from small foundation grants, grants from the justice system itself and staff support from partners such as the District Attorney and City Attorney. In 2004 the city kicked in \$50,000, one sixth of the court’s \$300,000 annual budget.

But in 2005, the city was confronted with a budget crisis. Every city department was asked to cut its budget by 6 percent. In response, the court system reduced its support for the community court in 2005, ending its contracts with several community court staff people, including Greco. Support for the court waned when Judge Satter’s term as presiding judge ended.

A series of small foundation grants (including one from *Making Connections*) helped the court survive through 2005, though staff members often had to work without pay. The court was in jeopardy of being shut down in 2006.

However, early in 2006, the judges voted unanimously to find ways to transfer resources to the community court in order to keep it operating through the end of the year, with court being held twice a week.

Meanwhile, back in the neighborhood, Myra keeps coming to Crew UNIQUE on Saturday mornings, even though she has completed her sentence. She likes to meet new people there, and she

## In Their Own Words

“I got in trouble in middle school and got expelled. Luckily, the principal and a counselor helped me finish the year at another school, so I’m starting high school this fall.



Anna

“I got sent to Crew UNIQUE.

At the beginning, I hated waking up early on Saturdays. But now I like the connections with the other kids, and with Debra. I feel like I’m part of a group, and I’m not left behind. I’m still going to Crew even though my sentence is done.

“I also like starting to know the community, and I like working outside. I know I can talk to Debra and ask for help if I need it, and she will help me.

—Anna, 14

“I got a ticket for fighting at school. In my R and R, Sandy asked what would be good for me, and I said I needed something to do with my time.

“Sandy got me working with the Healthy Children’s Partnership to learn about lead poisoning. I went to community meetings for the first time. It was really interesting to hear about how much is going on in the neighborhood.

“I’ve learned public speaking. I don’t like speaking out, at least in the past. I can talk in front of people at the community meetings now, and I talk louder than I used to.

“I’m really into computers, and I am definitely going to college.

—Bernadette, 15

***“I’d love to see a day where every zip code has a community court.  
The issue is resources.”***

—Judge Johnny Barajas

likes being with Deb Johnson because she is fun and she listens.

“Myra’s old friends are in trouble, getting pregnant, doing drugs,” said Myra’s mother Martha. “Myra isn’t going that way. I’m very proud.”

“I’m proud of myself,” said Myra.

“I’ve been around a long time,” said Sandy Douglas, “and never have we been this close to actually making a difference.”

“We went to this community and asked them what they wanted to get done, and they told us,” said Court Administrator McConville. “That’s a paradigm shift.”

Cole community member Debra Johnson goes up to receive a grant from the Chinook Fund’s Social Justice Institute in support of Crew UNIQUE.



## LESSONS

### How Denver's court system came to support a community court

When Denver began to explore the development of a community court more than five years ago, it approached the task “in the typical way that planners start,” remembered Susan Motika.

“The typical way that this is done is for people from universities to come in as consultants, do objective research about crime and safety, rigorously examine dockets and intake, develop architectural plans and come up with a plan for how a community court would work.

“Five years ago, that was the relationship. It was experts providing leadership with consultation from the community...at best.”

One problem was that the experts couldn't agree, Motika re-

counts. “People had a certain vision for the court. They wanted to elevate their approach or their institution over the others. It became very conflict-ridden. It was one step forward, two steps back.”

The result was a community court in name only. Sandy Douglas says that residents seldom went into the building in Cole that was labeled “community court.”

Amalio Payan and Sandy Douglas discuss Crew UNIQUE work assignments with a young person who has been through the community court.



***“The systems side said that it’s time for a change. They said that to us. It was like fireworks in the sky for us to hear them admit that.”***

—Debra Johnson

### **Lessons about developing a community court**

- Seek in-depth community buy-in before you open a court in a neighborhood.
- Start by asking the community what it wants to get done. Follow the community’s lead.
- Start with a core group of people in the community and within the system who are totally committed and who will see it through no matter what.
- Residents have to learn a lot about the juvenile justice system in order to fully participate. It takes time and effort to learn and grasp complicated systems.
- A regular debrief after each court session with the magistrate, court staff and community members helps the court learn from its experience and make quick course corrections.
- Figure out the pay process and payroll paperwork flow before you start – people who couldn’t afford it worked for months without pay.
- In a predominantly Latino neighborhood, make sure you have adequate resources for a Spanish-speaking community advocate.
- Stay flexible. Don’t lock yourself into agreements with collaborators until you are sure their services are a good fit for your community, your kids and your situation.
- System and community should avoid dissing one another—it reinforces barriers.
- Systems professionals who engage in this kind of work must be flexible.
- You need a full-time planner and a community organizer for at least the first three years.
- The community court’s planner had a social work background and systems knowledge, a very effective skill set.

—Tory Read

“It was just a building there. There was no community court there. It had been like all the other programs and nonprofits that were there in Cole in the name of the community but not serving Cole residents.”

But somehow, in a relatively short period of time, all this changed. The court in the Cole neighborhood became a model for how to build a community court. As Court Administrator Matt McConville puts it: “The structure has changed. The structure is now we’re listening to Sandy Douglas and Debra Johnson and Steve Reemts and on and on. This court is community-led. That’s our difference.”

**T**he question is, how did Denver’s court system change its thinking about what a community court could and should be? How did it come to start working so closely with the Cole community? What can other system reform efforts learn from this experience in Denver?

The people involved in this effort – both court staff and residents – believe that their experiences suggest several possible lessons. But they are also quick to say that this is an ongoing story. The court is threatened by budget cuts that affect programs throughout Denver and Colorado as a whole. Many people within the court system remain uneasy with this very different approach to juvenile justice. Without doubt there will be more lessons learned.

But no matter what happens over time, the fact that Denver’s court system agreed to create a court that uses a very different,

***“The judges who hear cases at the community court like it because they have a big book now that is full of community-based resources that they can call on when needed.”***

—Loree Greco

restorative justice model – and that has such far-reaching involvement by community residents – is a powerful example of nascent system reform.

- **People within the system need to acknowledge its shortcomings.**

What really got the Denver Community Court in Cole started on a path of real reform was that one person with power – Presiding Judge Raymond Satter – was frustrated with seeing the same kids in his court and was willing to try a different approach. He decided to hire a social worker with community experience – Loree Greco – to help design and organize a new approach.

“We acknowledged that we were not doing a real good job,” says Greco. “We were seeing a lot of the kids over and over again. We knew there were multiple risk factors, but we didn’t have any resources to offer them. We were sending them back to the community and missing the point of intervention.”

Cole resident and court staff person Debra Johnson was amazed by what she heard from people like Greco. “The systems side said that it’s time for a change. They said that to us. Matt said that the system is no longer working and that we need to try to do something different. It was like fireworks in the sky for us to hear them admit that.”

Another key in Denver is that there were other people within the larger justice system, such as Susan Motika and David Mrakitsch in the DA’s Community Justice office, who for years had been advocating a new approach to

dealing with young people who were in the justice system. They exposed a lot of people within the system to new ideas about how to achieve justice and reduce crime.

It was when these system people began to meet with community people that the community court took off.

- **System people need to clearly understand the value of involving community in their work.**

Most people who work for systems such as the courts don’t have much experience working with residents of struggling communities. Because of this they often don’t understand the complex web of factors that have influenced the person they see in court, nor do they appreciate the understanding that community people can bring to the table or how community resources can help.

One result is that they don’t see the impact – or lack of impact – that their particular system is having on people and neighborhoods. Getting at least a few people within a system to see this was critical in the case of the community court.

“We understand that in order to reduce risks and repair harm and rebuild communities, we have to strengthen families,” Greco says. “We put a lot of effort into this. We understand that the earlier you intervene with a child, the greater the chance that this child’s resiliency will get to the point where they will never be in the justice system. Judge Satter downtown won’t be seeing them on a homicide charge.”

***“It’s so much better than a systems job. It’s so much more fun.  
You do extra. You think more deeply, more creatively.”***

—Susan Motika

Greco also understands that just intervening early is not enough: you also have to intervene comprehensively. “It’s that every day contact with community that makes a difference” is how she puts it.

The problem – which people like Greco and Judge Satter and Court Administrator Matt McConville seem to understand – is that the court system by itself simply does not have the resources to intervene comprehensively. Thus they were open to something like the Denver Community Court, with its restorative justice model and its heavy involvement by community.

The judges who hear cases at the community court like it “because they have a big book now that is full of community-based resources that they can call on when needed,” explains Greco.

But not only do they have access to community resources, they also have access to the community’s expertise, something that McConville has learned to value. He recounts a story about Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, to explain why he believes that community people have so much to offer.

“Sam Walton said that, if you want to know how to sell sweaters, you don’t need a committee. You don’t need a marketing director. Go to a woman who sells sweaters every day and ask her how to do it and she’ll tell you. We go to this community and ask them what they want done and they tell you. That is a paradigm shift.”

“What we have here is so different than what I’m used to doing,” explains court administrator McConville. “I’ve worked for people who wear black dresses all the time. They’re used to issuing orders and people saying, ‘Yes.’ That’s not the case here. Now we have judges listening to a community.”

• **Nurture and educate advocates within the system.**

Court Administrator McConville has played a key role as a bridge between the community court in Cole and the court system in downtown Denver. The fact that he became a convert to the community court approach has been invaluable.

“I’ve been a court administrator for 16 years. The thing that sticks out is not how many cases we’ve closed over the years. What sticks out is the fact that we have the first child care center in a court in this region. We’ve got a community court that people are saying is real different.”

He would love to see the community court in Cole replicated in other communities in Denver. “The model is a powerful one.” But he understands that a big part of the model is listening to what a particular community wants and needs. “It’s definitely not going to look the same. The neighborhood is going to have different concerns. It’s not, ‘We have the flavor of the month for you.’ The community needs to tell us what the flavor is.”

McConville has become a strong advocate within the court system. “You can hear Matt’s passion,” Greco points out. “He can talk at

***“A lot of individuals in these systems got into this work originally because they really did want to make a difference. The key is connecting with the people who still want to do this.”***

—Garland Yates



length about the importance of community, of relationships, of the need to focus on the whole family.”

No doubt work life was easier for McConville before he got so deeply involved in the community court. But the trade-off is that his work has become much more interesting and rewarding. “Is it gratifying?” he asks. “You bet it is.”

“It’s so much better than a systems job,” adds Motika. “It’s so much more fun. You do extra. You think more deeply, more creatively.”

Or, as Greco puts it, “It’s not just coming to work and going to a cubicle and pushing papers.”

Indeed, Making Connections Denver Site Team Leader Garland Yates thinks this

personal element is what can pull a few key system people into a reform effort. “A lot of individuals in these systems got into this work originally because they really did want to make a difference,” he explains. “The key is connecting with the people who still want to do this.”

Also important is educating people, Greco believes. She was trained in both restorative justice and community building, training that “gave us the knowledge base and practical skill set you need to go into a community.”

Greco adds that good training is important not just for someone in her role as the community liaison, but for many people who are part of the existing system. “The normal citizen who’s working in this system is not going to necessarily know what restorative justice is or how to approach community. It

***“Loree has been our advocate. She’s gone to bat for us to present these ideas and convince them that it’s okay to go out on a limb and try it.”***

—Steve Reemts

was really important for us as systems people to have that knowledge base and to have those skills and to actually use those skills in a community.”

- **A system that wants to connect with a community needs to hire a good organizer.**

Court administrator McConville says that the advice they got from the Center for Court Innovation in New York City was to hire someone who could build relationships with community and be the “glue” that holds all these relationships together. That person was Greco.

Many people – both residents and court administrators – testify about the critical role

she played in the process. “It’s so important that Loree didn’t go into her office and call the national experts and come up with a plan for the court,” says Motika.

“She came at this with tremendous respect and faith in the community to lead this initiative, and then she put more than a full-time effort into this.

“I think this is a valuable lesson: you need an advocate who is going to dedicate their time. You don’t just talk about this over lunch. You have to go out and make it happen.”

Greco says that she began by telling residents that the community court simply “wouldn’t be anything without community driving this effort.” She added: “I want you to



Long-time Cole resident Sandy Douglas (left) says, “We’re talking the courts here. This is the place that eats up our children.”

***“To sit at a table where somebody is really listening, somebody who can do something, to have a voice, that’s different.”***

—Debra Johnson

own this court.” She then asked them what they thought would make this court work in their community.

“The real key was how the court was introduced in the neighborhood,” Greco believes. “It was real important that they own it right away and see it as a resource.”

Reemts thinks Greco herself was just as key. “There is just no way we could have progressed to where we are today without someone like Loree.” He says that she has acted as a bridge between the court system and the community.

“It hasn’t been easy to try and get the systems and the community to come together. Loree has been our advocate. She’s gone to bat for us to present these ideas and convince them that it’s okay to go out on a limb and try it.”

While Greco’s role was pivotal, Motika now believes that the early organizing effort would have been greatly strengthened if there had been enough money to also hire a bilingual advocate.

**• The first step is to overcome the inevitable distrust.**

At first, community people were wary, Greco recounts. She says she purposefully spent her initial weeks building relationships and getting residents to trust her.

“It wasn’t easy. There has been lots of money poured into this community. There were a lot of hurt feelings, a lot of angry people. I was coming into this community as a

white woman, a social worker to boot. And I was with the courts, which makes me even more dangerous. People are looking at me saying, ‘Okay, is she going to take the kids away? What’s her mission?’”

Douglas says that this is exactly what many residents think. “We’re talking the courts here. This is the place that eats up our children. The children go in; they get eaten up. We don’t know where they go from there.”

Reemts also talks about the “trust factor.” “Here was another person coming into the community saying we want to work with you. Well, we’ve been down this road before and we don’t want to go down that same road again and put residents through that same experience.”

“However, the lack of a bilingual advocate made it very hard to build trust with the Latino community,” Motika adds.

**• Listen, don’t preach.**

The first step was simply to listen, Greco says. And that is exactly what she did, according to Reemts. “She was open. She listened.”

This made a huge difference for Johnson. “To sit at a table where somebody is really listening, somebody who can do something, to have a voice, that’s different.”

Importantly, it wasn’t just Greco, with her social worker background, who was listening. Court Administrator McConville and others were also in these meetings.

***“It’s all been word of mouth. Us saying, ‘Come on just one more time. I promise you this will be different. Take a chance on yourself and your future.’”***

—Debra Johnson

McConville says he will never forget the meeting at which another resident reached across the table and touched his arm and said, “Never in my life did I think that I’d see someone like you at this reach.’ It was one of our first community court council meetings and what she saw was a white guy in a starched shirt and jacket.”

The DA office’s Motika was also there, listening, Johnson says. “Susan came along and asked, ‘What do you want? What do you need? You know what you need. We’ll back you up. We’ve got a way to make it happen.’

Motika thinks this suggests a lesson for systems that want to build a relationship with communities. “You need to figure out what role you can play. Is it writing, technical assistance, some other form of support? This turns on its head the usual approach, with the system analyzing the problem and coming to the community saying, ‘Here’s what we plan to do.’”

“For me to be a part of that, to be at the table and have a turn to speak and voice an opinion, that’s different,” Johnson adds. “I’ve always felt like I knew what we needed here.”

- **Be open to getting involved on a personal level.**

Greco not only listened to what residents had to say, she also asked them how she could help. “To the extent that we can meet peoples’ immediate needs, right there we are building relationships. We help get people stabilized enough so they feel like they can volunteer and do something special.”



Debra Johnson.

**“So many times Loree has said to me, ‘You are community. They have to hear it from you.’”**

- **Ask residents to play key roles.**

Listening to what community residents have to say is one step. Another is actively involving them in implementing the reforms. In essence these residents become advocates within their communities, just as people like Matt McConville become advocates within their systems.

Long-time Cole residents like Johnson and Douglas became the face and voice of the court in the community. Johnson says she tells people that this isn’t just another program, “it is systems change. It is change for the community. This is something that you can have a part in, that you can have a say in for a change.

***“The timing was right. We had this location. We had this person [Loree Greco]. But we also had a community that was organizing itself. And boom, one year later, we opened for business.”***

—Matt McConville

“It’s all been word of mouth. Us saying, ‘Come on just one more time. I promise you this will be different. Take a chance on yourself and your future.’”

Reemts believes that the court’s willingness to work with residents has been critical. “When we tried to find the resources we needed, we tried not to go outside the community. We tried to identify resources already in the community, like a Sandy, like a Debra.

“That’s important because it empowers the community. They see that they don’t have to rely on other people all the time. That they can actually address some of these needs themselves.”

Residents also reassure the community, Greco adds. “People know Sandy. They know Sandy from way back and that helps in a huge way.”

- **Engage with communities that are already organizing themselves.**

As Laurie Greco would be quick to say, one person, no matter how good, is not enough to make the kind of far-reaching, systemic changes represented by the Denver Community Court in Cole. One crucial factor was that the Cole community was already in the process of organizing itself around issues it had identified, one being crime.

“The timing was right,” acknowledges McConville. “We had this location. We had this person [Greco]. But we also had a community that was organizing itself. And boom, one year later, we opened for business.”

Everybody involved in the process was a little amazed by how quickly the court came together once community people got deeply involved in the process. Motika points out that the court system had spent almost five years trying to start a community court before community people got involved.

A key reason for this is that a community that is organized and has some clarity about what it wants to accomplish can provide the push that a system needs to overcome its inevitable inertia.

Greco remembers the initial meeting between court people and community. “Community was in place. They owned it. They were great. They had provided us with a road map and showed us where we needed to go. Our job was to ask how we could help them. Then everybody at the table began to say that we can do this, we can do that. We were able to start moving.”

The community was in place because it had just gone through a long process of pulling itself together and getting clear about the issues that residents cared the most about, according to Denver Making Connections Site Team Leader Garland Yates (see page 35).

“By having the community articulate what it wanted and then having the court system see the community start to carry out its plans, it made it much easier for them to start talking and working together.”

Another important factor was that these residents had also learned a lot about how to be strategic in working with an institution like

***“It was important that the community came to the table and said, ‘We’re in this too.’ I think it made a difference for the system people to hear community say we’re in this too. It wasn’t all about blame and defensiveness.”***

—Loree Greco

the courts. “When the Cole residents entered this dialogue with the courts and the DA’s office, they knew to find out what their interests were and to look for the overlap,” Yates adds.

This went a long way toward allowing the court system to engage in this dialogue with residents, Greco says. “You guys weren’t angry and pointing fingers.”

Residents also didn’t just complain about the failures of the court system. “It was important that the community came to the table and said, ‘We’re in this too,’ Greco says. “I think it made a difference for the system people to hear community say we’re in this too. It wasn’t all about blame and defensiveness.”

One reason for this, Yates believes, is that Cole community members had already worked through some of the tensions among themselves that he thinks exist in every community (see “The Context” on page 35). As Reemts responded to Greco’s comment about not being so angry, “Oh, we went through that period among ourselves. We had to go through that process too.”

• **Involve other institutional partners.**

The relative smoothness with which the community court developed in Cole belies the fact that this court represents a huge change for a tradition-bound system like most court systems. As McConville puts it, “Boy is it tempting to say, ‘Oh, no. We don’t bend the rules because we are a court.’ This is a stretch for a court to let go of that.”

**Partners 2003–04**

- City of Denver
- Denver District Attorney’s Office
- Denver County Court
- Denver City Attorney
- Making Connections Denver
- Piton Foundation
- Family to Family
- Denver Foundation
- Denver Department of Human Services
- University of Denver School of Social Work
- University of Denver School of Education
- Cole Neighborhood Organizing Alliance
- Cole Community Justice Council
- Mayor’s Office of Workforce Development
- Denver Department of Safety
- Denver District 2 and 6 Police
- Denver Health and Hospitals
- Chinook Fund
- Family Directions
- Whittier Drumming Project
- CADREC
- Conflict Center
- Catholic Charities
- Colorado Family Services
- Victim Offender Reconciliation Project
- Safe City Diversion Program
- North City Park Civic Association
- Denver Public Library
- Denver Public Schools
  - Bread for the Journey
  - Arts Street

***“I think that we saw that we all had the same goal. We wanted to create a court that was truly a community court, with community involved in the process.”***

—Steve Reemts



Steve Reemts was part of a delegation from Cole that told *Making Connections*' partners about the changes happening in this neighborhood and how they could help.

One key reason it did let go and try this new approach, Greco believes, is that it happened in a neighborhood targeted by *Making Connections Denver* and it happened with the long-term support of a large national foundation like the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“For the system, having Casey there, having a resident like Sandy there, having Steve there – gave us a feeling that they’re up and running and providing us a structure to lean upon,” Greco says. “It felt strong enough for the system to be able to let go and trust that this was worth trying. Casey being there, with its philosophy about strengthening families, helped legitimize the efforts of the court to try this new approach.

“We were able to say that there is a field of knowledge out there that supports what we’re doing. Casey is there. They are a potential resource. Community is in place.

“Without all this strong leadership being there, I don’t think we would have been anywhere.”

- **Engage community not just during the planning process but all through the implementation process.**

Many programs try to gather “community input” as they are planning a program but not as they implement it. In contrast, the community court created a Working Council that meets once a month.

***“We realized that we are all working towards the same thing. People began to talk as people and figure out what resources they could bring to solve the problems.”***

—Loree Greco

“It’s important that people really see this as a community-sponsored meeting,” Greco says. “Stakeholders are in the room and community residents present their concerns and interests and say what they’d like to see happen at the neighborhood level.” Greco reports that the Working Council had more than 25 people coming to a typical meeting.

“The community was real strong,” says Reemts. “We stayed. I have seen initiatives start and go so long and people get tired and begin to drop off, but community stayed with this because the issue is just real for us. The whole issue of safety in the neighborhood has been a problem forever.

“And at each meeting we saw that we were getting closer.”

“I’m amazed at how many residents stayed with it,” adds Douglas. “It was so time intensive. But they just kept going.”

Part of the reason why, Yates thinks, is that being part of implementing a program like the court is a very different role for residents.

“From the point of view of the system,” Yates explains, “the resident role is to be advisors. From the point of view of many community organizations, the role of residents is to be critics and advocates.

“Being engaged in the implementation and day-to-day work of the court, with several residents being in staff positions, is a very different role. I think it’s a role that can keep residents engaged over time.”

• **Build a sense of collaboration.**

One reason residents have stayed with the process of implementing the court is that they have felt part of the process.

“It hasn’t always been easy,” Greco reflects, “but I think overall it’s felt that way to me. There is a real spirit of collaboration here that is driving this. There are always a few stakeholders who don’t agree so it doesn’t make sense to move forward with them on an idea. But we can usually get everybody on the same page, change our plans a bit so they feel like they own it.”

What brought diverse people together, Greco adds, was recognizing their common interests. “We realized that we are all working towards the same thing. The question became, how do we get there? People began to talk as people and figure out what resources they could bring to solve the problems.”

Reemts agrees. “I think that we saw that we all had the same goal. We wanted to create a court that was truly a community court, with community involved in the process.”

“The initial struggle,” Greco says, “was about power. How do we get everybody sitting in a circle and at the same level? How are we all going to work together? We’re still struggling a little bit with that, but we’re definitely moving forward. We are really in a good spot to do some good work.”

—Tim Saasta

## THE CONTEXT:

### The need to take the time to let the histories and tensions surface and be resolved

*“This community court is a direct outgrowth of our theory. We believed that we could change systems by connecting these systems with organized communities.”*

—Garland Yates



It was one of those community meetings that make you think twice about the potential of community-driven change. It seemed like half the meeting was devoted to a struggle over the agenda for the *next* meeting. Even the man who preaches the importance of community – *Making Connections Denver* Site Team Leader Garland Yates – had a moment of uncertainty after this particular gathering.

The meeting involved representatives from a range of groups working in the Cole neighborhood, one of four neighborhoods targeted by *Making Connections – Denver*. Called the Cole Neighborhood Organizing Alliance, this group was trying to come up with ways to work together on the goals that residents had

To build relationships with the police, Cole residents have developed a computer lab that involves officers as tutors.

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Garland Yates says that his task was “to find ways to help people set aside their differences.”

laid out at a large neighborhood “summit” that had taken place in the summer of 2000. Similar “alliances” had begun in the other three MCD neighborhoods.

As this meeting demonstrated, it wasn’t going to be easy. Like many struggling inner city neighborhoods, Cole had a long history, both of home-grown organizations trying to do something about particular problems in Cole as well as outside initiatives that had brought resources to try to turn around this neighborhood.

Also, like many struggling neighborhoods, Cole had a long history of tension among all these groups and initiatives, each of which brought its own philosophy about what would work. Indeed, one fairly recent, multi-million

dollar, city-led initiative had engendered the kind of deep skepticism that can doom any new effort to make a difference in a community like this one.

Site Team Leader Yates believes that, as hard as it can be, a long-term initiative like *Making Connections* needs to start by acknowledging these histories and tensions and finding ways to overcome them.

“A meeting like that one in Cole is an example of how divisive the culture of community development really is,” Yates says now. “In that room you had many voices, many silos. You had all kinds of history. So much of our task when we come into communities like Cole is to find ways that can help people set

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aside their differences and begin to work together.”

This process takes time, Yates believes, time that an outside foundation representative doesn't always have. “My biggest challenge was to strike a balance between the process that was needed to overcome these things and the deadlines and tasks mandated by the foundation.”

Yates was thinking about this challenge as he left that Cole Alliance meeting. “At that point I was wondering whether I should stay with this process, to let it play itself out, or give up on it. When I thought about it I realized that, if I gave up on it, the responsibility to make this *Making Connections* agenda happen would be on me alone.”

Not relishing that responsibility, Yates kept working at getting these “voices” in Cole to get through their differences and find things they could do together.

Over time that is exactly what has happened. The getting-through-their-differences part “wasn't always comfortable” says Steve Reemts, director of a senior housing facility in Cole and a long-time community activist. But he agrees that, “We had to go through that process.”

“We had some horrible meetings at times among ourselves,” Reemts adds. “We were not trusting each other.”

“We had some sick relationships in Cole,” is how long-time Cole resident and activist Sandy Douglas puts it.

But now, says Reemts, “We are there for each other.”

“When we come together now we love to be together,” adds Douglas. “We love to see each other. Without the Alliance we'd still be scattered.” The key, she thinks, is the relationships that have been built among the Cole residents who have stayed involved in the Alliance.

The fact that a range of community people had already worked through many of their differences and had been able to forge a common agenda around crime made a huge difference when Cole residents began to talk with the juvenile court system and the DA's office about creating a community court.

It helped give Cole a united voice and a clear agenda, something that the DA's and the court system's staff recognized. “It felt so strong, so resident-led,” remembers Loree Greco, who was hired by the county court to help develop a community court in Cole. “The system was like, ‘Wow, we really are here to serve community and the way this is structured, we better just sit back and listen.’”

But the impact of the Alliance has gone beyond the community court. Another group of residents and parents helped organize a regional effort to improve the local public schools, an effort that has since grown into a city-wide effort called the Transforming Schools Initiative. There has also been a clean-up campaign, an effort to improve po-

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lice-community relations that has included a tutoring program involving officers, and a push to get the Environmental Protection Agency to deal with lead-contaminated soil in the neighborhood.

Taken together, this has made a difference. “I definitely sense and see change in Cole,” says long-time resident Patty Lawless.

“You can actually see it and feel it in the neighborhood,” adds Sharon Bridgeforth, another long-time resident. “It’s just different.”

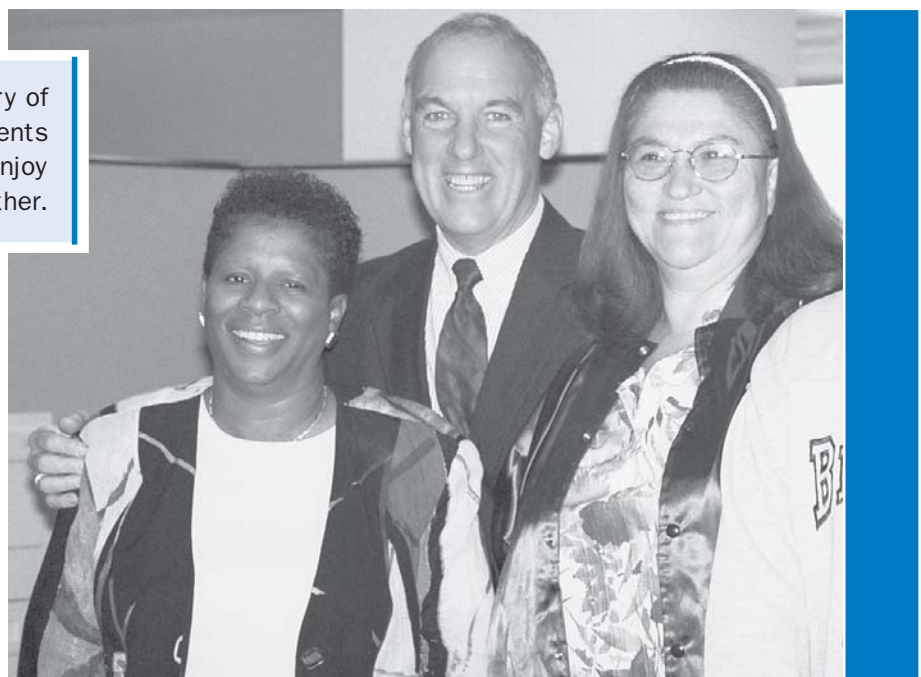
She sees it when she does her daily walks through the neighborhood. “This neighborhood used to be a temporary stop for people, but now people are beginning to stay. I don’t see new ‘for-rent’ signs every time I go for a walk.”

Whether these perceived changes will ultimately add up to measurable changes remains to be seen. But without question strong momentum for change now exists in Cole. And much of that momentum comes from the Cole Alliance.

“The Alliance has been so necessary,” says Douglas, who helped coordinate the work of the Alliance. “It provided the structure we needed. It provided the leadership.”

She says that being part of the Alliance gave her “the credentials” to go to every group in Cole and push them — and help them — to engage more residents. Douglas adds that the Alliance also “provided a place for residents who were not connected to any of the organizing efforts to meet.”

After a long history of tension, Cole residents and activists now enjoy working together.



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—Patty Lawless

The result? “There are now residents involved in doing all this stuff who were never involved before,” reports Lawless. “They are involved in the community court, the 77<sup>th</sup> Street clean-up. There is a level of residents owning a piece of transforming our community that wasn’t happening five years ago.”

Casey Foundation’s Yates thinks that taking the time to get people more comfortable with each other has allowed this momentum to develop in Cole.

“We told them that we wanted this work to grow in Cole, we thought that this neighborhood could benefit from this, but only if they all decide to work together.” To help them do this, Yates supported their meetings and paid for a facilitator to help them get through all the tensions.

“One of the biggest mistakes outsiders like us make is that we don’t take the time to let these histories surface. We don’t help create a process for these people to acknowledge their histories so they don’t remain obstacles.”

Reemts agrees. “When you come into a community you need to find the people who are really committed to community and have the passion for change and you need to understand what their hidden agendas are.

“We’re just so thankful that Casey hung in with us. During those difficult times we were afraid that Casey would say this isn’t working. Casey was always receptive to where we were, whether it was good or bad. Casey would acknowledge it and say, ‘That’s okay. You still need to keep the focus and go on. It was im-

portant for us to know that Casey was in it for the long haul.”

Yates was willing to wait while Cole residents struggled through their histories because he knows that Cole is not the only community with a long and often bitter history. He says that, in his long experience in many types of communities across the county, “Every community has histories and tensions just like those in Cole. It is pervasive. It is omnipresent. But it lurks in ambiguity. We don’t want to talk about it. Thus people stay in their organizational boxes. It’s the biggest challenge we face as we pursue these notions of comprehensive community change.

“What we have to understand is that what we are proposing – while it sounds perfectly logical – is antithetical to the existing way of doing things.”

Cole’s Douglas agrees: “Getting these groups to change their philosophy to residents first is so hard.”

Not every Cole group was willing to change its ways of doing things and they left the Alliance. “People fell off to the sides, the people who probably should have fallen to the sides,” says Reemts.

The fact that people and groups withdrew from the Alliance does not bother Yates too much. “Not every community group has the capacity or willingness to get into a very structured piece like this,” Yates believes. “They feel disempowered. They are leery of getting into alliances with powerful players.” Some-

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## Preparing the Ground

One thing that nearly everyone involved in Denver Community Court comments on is how quickly the court came about after court system staff began to meet with community people.

Why did it happen so quickly? One reason is that community people came to those initial meetings with a clear sense of what they wanted and a strong base within their community, according to *Denver Making Connections* Site Team Leader Garland Yates.

“It was a community that had already hashed out what it wanted to achieve and had collected enough data and other information to be strategic about what’s possible,” Yates explains. This did not happen overnight.

It began with a summit in 2000 that brought together more than 240 people, most of them Cole residents. That summit identified six overriding issues, two of which were central to the community court: safety and youth.

Two things came out of this summit. One was an alliance intended to be a place where a variety of neighborhood residents and groups could start meeting and working together. The second was a series of committees that began to meet to focus on the issues identified at the summit.

One committee focused on crime and safety. It was hosted by Steve Reemts’ organization, St. Martin’s Plaza, a housing program for seniors.

This committee worked with the Making Connections Community Learning Network to do a crime survey in Cole, with residents themselves conducting the survey. That survey showed that crime was an even larger issue than the high crime statistics would indicate since a large percentage of crime was never reported.

The data that came out of this survey helped Cole residents better understand crime-related issues in their community. This in turn helped these residents articulate their needs and ideas when they started meeting people from the justice system to design the new community court.

At the same time, the committee was developing relationships with law enforcement. They began meeting with the police regularly to start a dialogue about police-community issues. They also engaged cops as tutors in an after-school computer program they were sponsoring, another way to establish connections.

Still another element was a leadership training program put together by long-time Cole community leader Sandy Douglas. This training “laid the groundwork for some of the things we see happening today,” according to Reemts.

During one of the crime and safety committee’s monthly meetings, Susan Motika was invited to discuss the DA’s restorative justice philosophy and how that might be applied to Cole’s crime issues.

At about the same time, Loree Greco was hired by the court system to see if the existing court in Cole should be closed or if something more could develop there.

“We started talking with her, partnering with her, and then the whole idea of maybe trying to do a community court involving youth came up around the restorative justice philosophy,” explains Reemts.

Less than a year later, with residents heavily involved in designing the new community court, that court began hearing cases.

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—Steve Reemts

times these groups do the most to resist change, Yates thinks, so having them leave the table is not necessarily a setback. Indeed, some of the people at that contentious early Cole Alliance meeting did ultimately choose to pull out of the Alliance.

Many of the groups that ultimately pull out got involved in the first place because of the prospect of getting Casey Foundation money, Yates thinks. Reemts agrees. “When Casey started talking about dollars, eyes would light up. Then all of a sudden, all these other agendas started coming in.”

**N**ot only did Casey and Yates give the Cole Alliance time to work through its members’ histories, they also gave Cole a task that helped push them to work together. In essence that task was to put together a resident-driven plan for transforming their neighborhood.

“From the beginning Casey told us, ‘We don’t want to hear from the nonprofits, we don’t want to hear from the organizations, we want to hear from the residents,’” remembers

Reemts. “They kept driving that point home and you don’t know how hard it was to even begin to grasp that concept.”

“I think we understood it,” continues Reemts. “But there was so much baggage from the previous endeavors. People were saying, ‘Why should we even try? Why should we even get involved? We’ve seen people coming through our neighborhood, making promises and nothing ever comes of it. It’s the same old dance.’”

The key difference, Reemts believes, has been the focus on residents themselves. “Be-



A Cole resident talks in Spanish to a meeting of *Making Connections* partners.

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Now there is. That’s pretty remarkable.”**

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fore they were trying to get the nonprofit to make the change whereas now we are trying to get residents to make the changes. It’s not up to the nonprofits.”

“We flipped the switch,” Yates explains. “Rather than tell them what we would fund, we asked them to tell us what we *should* fund.” Each neighborhood had to work out a plan for working together and addressing the concerns that families expressed during neighborhood summits. These summits brought out hundreds of families very early in *Making Connections Denver’s* existence.

“We asked for an agenda articulated by families. Not a compilation of organizational agendas or an organizational consensus. We wanted a commitment to work together towards the results articulated by these families, with residents in leadership roles.”

**W**ith this resident-driven agenda in motion, Yates reflects on that early meeting when even he began to question if this strategy of allowing people to work out their differences would work in Cole.

“There will be a moment when you have to make a choice about your course of action. That is where it becomes important for you to have enough grounding in what you are trying to do to be confident enough to make this judgment and go forward.

“There will be lots of moments like the one that happened that night in Cole. If you don’t have a lot of knowledge about community

processes, the fear of failing can cause you to give up prematurely and go back to an approach that you are more comfortable with.

“These moments of doubt are going to come no matter how good you are. What helped me is having worked in this field a lot. I wasn’t taken completely off guard by these struggles. Through RCI [Casey’s earlier Rebuilding Communities Initiative], I developed a more functional understanding of them.”

What is the function of these often very personal struggles? Yates believes it is to “create a process for these people to acknowledge their histories so they don’t remain obstacles.”

In Cole, what has emerged is a new set of relationships among residents and community groups and a much greater willingness to work together. Patty Lawless tells the story of residents coming together to successfully advocate about an Environmental Protection Agency issue that affected Cole. “Five years ago, there wouldn’t have been any place to go with that issue,” Lawless says. “There was no forum for community issues. Now there is. That’s pretty remarkable.”

These new relationships within Cole – plus the new relationships between Cole and the criminal justice system – are indicators of sustainability, Yates believes. “People are not doing their business in the same old way. They are trying very different, bold approaches to long-standing problems. Breaking through the tensions, building these new relationships, working together on new strategies – all this helps create a momentum for change that we think can be sustained over time.”

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Over time, Cole residents have become much more comfortable working together.

**A**bout a year after the contentious meeting of the Cole Alliance that included a lengthy struggle over the agenda for the next meeting, the Alliance helped put together a meeting that brought together perhaps 100 residents from Cole and two other Making Connections neighborhoods

to talk about what they were doing in their communities.

After this meeting ended, two participants in the earlier Alliance meeting, two people who hadn’t exactly seen eye-to-eye, were talking about how far the process had come. Had Yates overheard their conversation, he would have felt that his mantra — you have to trust the process — had been affirmed.

“Even if Casey pulls out,” said one, “we need to continue these meetings.”

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Tory Read (pages 1–27, 36, 44)*

*and*

*Mary Ann Dolcemascolo  
(pages 3, 28, 30, 33, 35, 38, 41, 43)*

—Tim Saata

**“What we have here is so different than what I’m used to doing, I’ve worked for people who wear black dresses all the time. They’re used to issuing orders and people saying, ‘Yes.’ That’s not the case here. Now we have judges listening to a community.”**

—Matt McConville

## The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of publications about the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *Making Connections* Initiative put together by The Diarist Project. The project is a new approach the foundation is using to learn from its efforts to strengthen families and transform struggling neighborhoods.

Diarists work to capture strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. In *Making Connections*, the diarist works closely with the staff people who lead the work in each city, the Site Team Leader and Local Site Coordinator.

The main article was written by **Tory Read**, *Denver Making Connections*’ former diarist ([www.ToryRead.com](http://www.ToryRead.com)). The articles on the community context and the lessons learned were written by Tim Saasta, the coordinator of The Diarist Project.

**Making Connections** is a Casey Foundation initiative to support work that demonstrates the simple premise that kids thrive when their families are strong and their communities supportive. What began in 1999 as a demonstration project in selected neighborhoods in 22 cities is now an intricate network of people and groups committed to making strong families and neighborhoods their highest priorities.



Court administrator  
Matt McConville

**The Annie E. Casey Foundation** works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families.

For more information about **The Diarist Project** or to receive copies of its publications, contact:  
The Diarist Project,  
c/o Charitable Choices,  
4 Park Avenue, Suite 200,  
Gaithersburg, MD 20877  
(240-683-7100;  
[Tim@CharityChoices.com](mailto:Tim@CharityChoices.com)).

**Making Connections - Denver** is an initiative to improve life for families living in four lower-income Denver neighborhoods—Baker, La Alma/Lincoln Park, Sun Valley and Cole. Its philosophy is that children succeed when their families are strong and families get stronger when they live in supportive neighborhoods. For more information, contact Gloria Marrujo, 303-454-5369. [www.makingconnectionsdenver.org](http://www.makingconnectionsdenver.org)