

REFLECTIONS

on Making Connections

A Reflection on Why Social Networks Are Critical to Sustainable Change

To some people, strengthening social networks in struggling communities is a nice thing to do, helping reduce the isolation of many families. But while these people think it's good to encourage residents to interact more, they just don't think it is nearly as important as work that leads more directly to concrete results: better jobs, more assets, kids who do better in school.

Audrey Jordan disagrees. Jordan, a senior associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, thinks that strong social networks are “fundamental to the transformation of struggling communities.” Given her strong belief in their power, Jordan has been asked to develop the Casey Foundation's work around social networks.

The connections among people that social networks can stimulate can be helpful not only for individuals who are trying to change their lives, but also for entire communities that are trying to change their futures, believes Audrey Jordan, pictured here with Making Connections colleagues Grace Giermek (left) and Jim Alexander.

Jordan is quick to say that social networks are certainly not some “magic bullet” that will solve the “myriad challenges of tough neighborhoods.” She thinks that those living in these neighborhoods need access to effectively delivered services, decent jobs and much more. The underlying barriers that keep these neighborhoods isolated and poorly served — such as institutional racism — also must be addressed.

“We know you need fundamental changes in policies and practices. You need people and agencies and others who impact these communities to be truly accountable to achieving



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results. Social networks certainly can't be a substitute for all of this.”

But at the same time, Jordan continues, social networks are essential as a way to achieve these kinds of fundamental changes. “They help transform how people understand the challenges. They help them become much clearer about what practices and policies *they* need to change. And they help transform residents of these neighborhoods.”

How can social networks do all this? Jordan's answer lies partly in her definition of a “robust” social network. Such a network involves not just interaction among a group of residents, but a set of *reciprocal* relationships among a range of people, including residents, community leaders, service providers, funders and others. By “reciprocal,” Jordan means that each person in a network both receives and gives in exchanges. This reflects a core belief that every individual has needs and assets.

“This reciprocal relationship is quite different than the usual relationship between residents of tough neighborhoods and the staff of service organizations, which involves a professional providing a service to a client,” Jordan says.

What makes social networks potentially transformative, Jordan believes, is that a truly reciprocal network “changes business as usual.” An example of business as usual, Jordan says, is when a funder or an agency sets up a program designed to meet a particular need. The goal is to achieve a specific result, such as a certain number of jobs for community residents.

“But that's where we have always gone,” Jordan says. “This is the singular focus of most community-building efforts. And we continue to get the same kind of results, which involve very specific, small-scale changes, such as 35 more jobs.

“They also produce results for only certain people: those who already are capable of walking through the door, people who have few if any barriers. And the results last only as long as the particular investment lasts.

“A social network approach to results focuses on changing business as usual. It assumes that the process we use to get to results matters as much as achieving results. It assumes that how residents view themselves and their ability to take advantage of an opportunity matters. And it assumes that how providers view residents and their abilities matters.”

Reciprocal social networks affect participants in three distinct ways, Jordan believes:

- **First, residents see themselves differently.**

By participating in a group, by having a range of people listen to what they have to say, residents begin to experience themselves differently, as people who can give as well as receive. “Residents see themselves as people who have choices and hope and who can go for a future that is not limited by the challenging conditions they often face,” Jordan says. Many residents involved in *Making Connections* have testified to the dramatic changes they've experienced in themselves, often saying that they've gone from not saying a word at their first meet-

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ing to becoming “a leader of meetings, a leader in their families, a leader in their communities, a leader in their own eyes.”

- **Second, when networks involve a range of people including residents and providers, the providers begin to see residents differently.**

“People in these organizations see that residents, with some support, have the capacity to take advantage of opportunities,” Jordan explains. “They see that residents can and want to take the personal responsibility needed for change to happen in their lives. They see strengths, not just problems. They see people who may have challenges, but these challenges don’t define who they are. They are not just an ‘ex-offender’ or ‘depressed mom,’ but a person with a range of assets that can be built upon.” Jordan says that this can be a real paradigm shift for people who have spent their professional lives focusing on people’s problems and needs.

- **Finally, as these providers begin to see residents differently, residents see themselves differently in the providers’ eyes.** “They see in these providers a reflection of their strengths,” is how Jordan puts it. “Anyone is going to respond better to someone who believes in them as opposed to someone who sees them as a problem.” At the same time, “residents begin to see

providers not as distant bureaucrats but as individuals who are interested in connecting with and truly helping them to help themselves.”

All of this changes business as usual, Jordan believes. “You humanize the exchange. Providers begin to see their role as facilitating folks to take advantage of opportunities. Their job isn’t just going down a checklist or sticking to a rigid protocol.

“Residents start to believe that they can take advantage of opportunities and that their lives can change. People see a different set of possibilities. The social network approach flips people’s perspective so they begin to see not just problems but solutions and opportunities.”



Audrey Jordan says a social network approach “flips people’s perspectives.”

“Social networks tend to be invisible and taken for granted. We wanted to find ways to describe and define them and communicate why they can be such a valuable resource.”

Developing a Social Networks Approach in *Making Connections*

When it began in 1999, *Making Connections*, the Casey Foundation’s decade-long initiative to strengthen families in struggling neighborhoods, recognized the need for more and deeper social networks within these struggling neighborhoods that it wanted to transform.

Research during the 1990s, most visibly Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone” book, documented a decrease in social networks throughout America. This phenomenon seemed particularly acute in many struggling inner-city neighborhoods, where crime had forced many people to stay inside their own homes, especially in the evenings.

Indeed, the initiative’s name itself — *Making Connections* — implies an interest in social networks as ways to stimulate these connections.

But what do we really know about social networks within the *Making Connections* target neighborhoods? What is the nature of existing networks? What works to stimulate new networks? What roles if any can networks play in the transformation of these neighborhoods over time? What roles can networks play in helping the *Making Connections*’ sites achieve results, such as more and better jobs for residents?

To answer questions like these, the Casey Foundation asked Senior Associate Audrey Jordan to pull together a group of people and begin to lay out a long-term strategy around social networks. The Social Network Team includes Bahia Akerele, Mary Achatz, Nilofer Ahson, Terri Bailey and Bill Traynor.

This effort began in 2004. It involved visits with organizations that have emphasized social networks as a strategy for transforming struggling communities, organizations such as Lawrence CommunityWorks in Lawrence, Ma., LUPE in McAllen, Tx., and Beyond Welfare in Ames, Iowa. “We recognized early on that we needed to get out and learn from people in the field, practitioners and families,” Jordan explains.

The group then spent time pulling together what they learned and began to develop their ideas about what a social network approach entails and how it could make a difference in *Making Connections* sites. A report to be published in the summer of 2006—*The Ties That Bind* by Terry Bailey—will summarize some of this early learning.

They also reflected on what this group could do to make a difference for those using this social networks approach, Jordan explains. “Early on it became clear that the Foundation could help people see social networks and the impact they have, to see that they can be a vehicle to changed outcomes.

“Social networks tend to be invisible and taken for granted. We wanted to find ways to describe them and communicate why they can be such a valuable resource, in and of themselves, but also as a way to build social capital. This then leads to accumulation of other kinds of capital, such as economic capital.”

To do this the group is trying “to lift up promising models and approaches.” They also are putting together tools that practitioners and residents can use to develop various types of networks, as well as measure their impact and demonstrate their value. “It is very important that we demonstrate how social networks help you get the other results that we are interested in, such as more jobs, more assets and more children healthy and prepared to succeed in school.”

Showing how social networks can help people achieve a variety of outcomes is critical, Jordan believes. “Strengthening social networks is not a thing, or a program, or an institute. It’s an approach. It’s an approach that needs to be part of everything we do. It needs to be part of our FES [Family Economic Success] work. It needs to be part of our getting children prepared for school work. Programmatic efforts can be enhanced using a social network-strengthening approach.”

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The challenge is that it takes time to build a social networks approach, and many people “don’t get the importance of what the groups that are successfully using a social networks approach are doing.” It is not easy to examine or measure.

“We are about producing results here at the Casey Foundation. We are learning that it is not just about the end game of achieving results, however. There is a pathway to achieving results – the how you get to results – and this matters at least as much. Yes, it takes more time. Things that take a little more time, like social network development, are a challenge in this environment.

“We are making the case that emphasizing a social network approach can really broaden and deepen the results that occur in the sites, and that results can last longer and for more people. It can allow our work to reach the people we aspire to reach, which are the most vulnerable families, families who are seldom if ever reached by more traditional initiatives.

“But this isn’t going to happen in six months. And it isn’t going to happen if we don’t invest resources and if we don’t stay flexible so that we can support and engage the people in the field who know the most about this approach.”

Perhaps Jordan’s greatest challenge is communicating how and why using a social networks approach can be so successful. “People have to see it. I will never forget some of the people in these sites we visited who kept telling me how much this has changed their lives. When you experience these people, you sense how powerful this is, how much difference it can make in people’s lives.”

Seeing solutions and believing in opportunities is critical to achieving transformative change, Jordan believes. “You have to believe that change is possible and have a vision for change. And you have to see a role for yourself in making change happen.

“Of course not everyone doing this work really believes that change is possible. They’ve gotten jaded over time. And it is easy to understand how this happens. But I’ve seen enough change happen — for many, many residents in *Making Connections* neighborhoods and in other places, for myself, for many other providers — that I *know* change can happen.”

Being part of a robust social network can help people to see change happen in individuals within the network, an experience that can help them again believe in the possibility of change, Jordan believes. And she adds that it can stimulate change within these people. “Change starts with me being willing to change. Am I willing to see people differently? To see opportunities differently? To be a part of change greater than myself?”

What makes people more open to change is the relationships they develop within a network, Jordan believes. “The more trusting and deep a relationship, the more you get to honest and authentic exchange.” She thinks this experience can cause people to change long-held perceptions and assumptions.

Just as important, social networks can change status differentials among those who are part of the network. The key here, Jordan explains, is the reciprocal exchange that hap-

“People are drawn to this way of thinking about community change work. They begin to see that this kind of social network is fundamental to the realization of transformation.”

Audrey Jordan believes that a social network approach “can change business as usual.”

pens in a healthy social network. “In any interaction between people, the focus is on the needs and assets on both sides of the equation. Both people in a network get something and give something. In intentional social network-building, you look for ways that everyone can both give and get.”

Jordan explains that every person or entity engaged in a “genuinely robust” network brings both assets and challenges. “Organizations have assets and challenges just as residents do. They have self-interests, just as residents do. Everyone involved — providers, funders, system people, politicians, business folks — is there because they have needs,” Jordan says. They may need good employees, or need their programs to be more successful, or need a better connection with a community.

Recognizing this reality lessens status differentials, Jordan believes. “In a positive social network experience, everyone has value and everyone is valued. Everyone has something to give even when they are in a position of need. Residents are no longer seen as completely dependent clients who could never lead a change process — in themselves or in their communities.”

Similarly, she adds, providers “are no longer seen as the repositories of all that is right and good. Instead providers can learn and receive from residents.”

The robust networks become “quite engaging for both residents and other stakeholders,” Jor-



dan adds. “People are drawn to this way of thinking about community change work. They begin to see that this kind of social network is fundamental to the realization of transformation.”

Once again, Jordan quickly states that building robust social networks by itself is not enough. “You still need fundamental changes in policies and practices.” But building strong social networks is a crucial step toward getting these fundamental changes.

Once you change the process you use to achieve results, “the results themselves change,” Jordan believes. “The results grow in all kinds of ways.”

For one thing, results become much more comprehensive. Rather than seeing the result as a job for a resident, people start focusing on “what will really make a difference for that resident, a person with whom they have a relationship. They think about what will help keep that person in this job. They think about how that person can eventually earn enough to support a family.

“People start to look across program lines. They realize that they can’t put someone’s challenges and strengths into a particular box – ‘education’ or ‘health’ or ‘juvenile justice.’”

“People can see that it is not enough for someone with a family to get a job with no benefits. Now that they are connected to people, they can see this. They can see their day-to-day needs. They see their humanity. Their possibilities. They start thinking with them about what this opportunity really needs to be.”

They figure out ways, for example, to connect an employer with a provider of “soft-skills” training. Or they figure out ways to make sure people have transportation to a job or have the child care they need to work.

“People start to look across program lines. They realize that they can’t put someone’s challenges and strengths into a particular box – ‘education’ or ‘health’ or ‘juvenile justice.’ This is an important way to link opportunities across programmatic boundaries and achieve scope.”

This awareness of the need to be more comprehensive comes not just from the process of getting to know people, it also comes from having those people at the table, Jordan believes.

“People bring who they are and what they need. They force the conversation if they are at the table. They insist that agencies become more comprehensive. They won’t let you try to fit everything into one little box. This is in part the ‘authentic demand’ that Ralph talks about.” [Ralph Smith is Senior Vice President of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.]

“This is a way that individuals as well as groups develop a voice.”

Again, the key is the relationships that develop, Jordan thinks. The proposition that “agencies

should better coordinate their services” becomes more than an idea. “The reason that services must be coordinated becomes real to people.”

Another way you get scope, Jordan adds, is that people begin to work with a greater range of residents. “You don’t just deal with the cream, with people who walk in the door ready to go. You begin to deal with people with needs who might not readily come in for help or who don’t even know that help is available. Or you start working with people who have multiple issues.”

This happens because “the residents who have positive experiences go back and talk to people in the communities. At times they might not even talk to people, but others see that their lives have been changed by something outside of their current reality. These residents then can serve as ambassadors to other residents.”

Some of these residents may have larger challenges: they speak limited English, they may have criminal records or be involved in the child welfare system, or they may be immigrants. “This social network experience pushes people to think about what it will take to impact the lives of people who may have more extensive needs,” Jordan adds.

For individuals who are trying to change their lives, being part of a social network can be extremely valuable in another way, Jordan believes. It can help people confront challenges within their own lives that create barriers to transformation.

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—Bill Traynor

Developing “Habits of Attachment” in Lawrence, Ma.

One reason creating strong social networks is critical is that they can break through our “habits of detachment,” in the words of Bill Traynor, executive director of Lawrence CommunityWorks. Breaking these habits has become a central strategy of this organization, one of several across the country that Audrey Jordan says are showing how these ideas about social networks can be implemented on the ground.

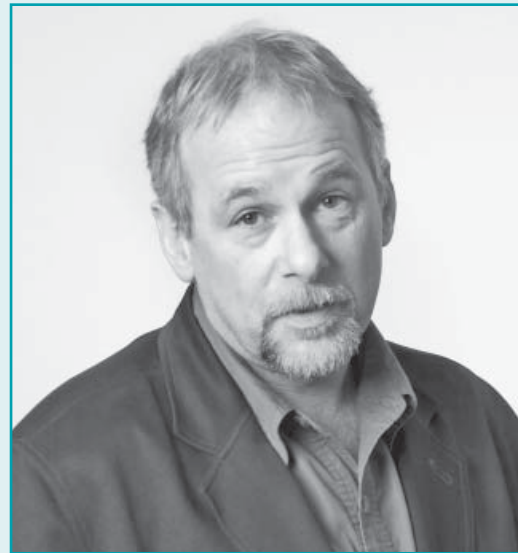
“What Bill Traynor is saying is that society is organized in such a way that that there are barriers placed between people so we can get business done,” Jordan explains. “People believe that we need protocols and rules so we have boundaries that help us get our work done.

“But we’ve developed boundaries to a fault. We’ve internalized these boundaries. We don’t even see people sometimes. We see an entity or problem that comes in the door that we have to process.

“The way to counter this is to create opportunities for people to connect and relate to one another.” She explains that Lawrence CommunityWorks “has things for everyone in a family to do. They have opportunities to celebrate. Opportunities for people to tell their stories to one another, often across generations. They are all opportunities to strengthen families.

“But often we don’t take the time. We get right to the tasks at hand. We go right to the result we want to see. We don’t think about building in time for people to just tell their stories to one another and understand more about the people they are working with. We think we’re safer or more effective if we don’t know all these things about each other. But there are high costs to not having these connections.”

One cost, according to Traynor, is “chronic disengagement.” People simply don’t participate in their community’s civic life. In Lawrence, Traynor explains, “It was too hard, too scary, too bor-



Bill Traynor

ing and too unnatural for people to find ways to get to know and learn to trust their neighbors, or to take part in public life.”

In an article in Shelterforce Online, Traynor writes that this “is a fundamental condition that consistently undercuts even the most successful community development efforts.” He believes that this condition must be attacked, something that few community organizations have done. “If we do not build resident power and engagement and repopulate the barren public landscape in our cities, then we are ignoring one of the key challenges in the field today and undermining all our other efforts.”

Traynor says that attacking these “habits of disengagement” has become the core strategy of Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW), which is based in a small city north of Boston that has struggled since most of its textile mills shut down decades ago.

“Lawrence is one of those places where disengagement has left a vacuum of energy, vision and leadership in public life. The result is a city that has

“Applying network thinking to our work has helped us challenge some of the common obstacles to genuine engagement and shape a strong demand environment for change.”

—Bill Traynor

stagnated physically and economically for years, unable to adapt to a changing economy and population and resistant to individual efforts to improve it.”

To deal with this reality in Lawrence, LCW has been using a “network organizing” strategy that starts by connecting people to each other. The strategy evolved out of “established practices of community organizing” combined with an understanding of network theory. “Applying network thinking to our work has helped us challenge some of the common obstacles to genuine engagement and shape a strong demand environment for change.”

Traynor says this idea of residents demanding change is critical. He believes that most community improvement initiatives focus on the “supply side,” by which he means community-based organizations, intermediaries and service providers. These initiatives try to build the capacity of these organizations to better engage community.

In contrast, a network organizing strategy “invests in the community’s capacity to produce demand by providing abundant opportunities for people to come together, articulate and act on those things that are important to them.”

The key to break through residents’ uneasiness with getting involved is “to offer multiple opportunities and many levels of involvement.” People can be involved once-a-week or once-a-year. They can opt out and be welcomed back. “We strive to create an environment that recognizes the demands of people’s lives.”

It is also an environment that “recognizes that a primary strength comes from the human need for fun, affection, connection and recognition.”

One way Lawrence residents can get involved is through CommunityWorks’ **Family Asset Building Department**. It offers practical adult programs (English as a Second Language, computer training) to

give residents needed skills. It then combines these programs with regular networking nights which allow people to interact socially.

Another way for people to connect is through **NeighborCircles**, which pull together residents for a series of dinner discussions focused on helping people get to know each other. These dinners are hosted by LCW-training resident facilitators.

LCW’s board members, residents, allies and staff are encouraged to act as “weavers,” the people who actively connect individuals to each other and to the network. Altogether more than 1300 people are members of LCW’s network.

Traynor says that this network has proven to be “an enormously powerful force that can be organized for actions and leadership roles needed to reinvent our city.” LCW can point to a series of accomplishments that have resulted from this force, including \$16 million in new investment for neighborhood development, 40 new affordable housing units, the first major zoning change in Lawrence in more than 50 years, and an LCW-led city budget reform effort supported by the Mayor and the City Council.

Traynor cautions that, “We are just at the beginning of our efforts to shape and refine our network organizing approach. The early results are encouraging, but we face myriad challenges as we move forward. We have to challenge each other constantly to trust the process.”

He adds that “the most important challenge is personal, as the network-organizing ideal requires all of us to break down our individual habits of detachment and find a comfort level in an environment where the successes, the failures and the power are shared.”

Bill Traynor’s article, co-written by Jessica Andors, can be found at: <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/140/LCW.html>. Traynor also serves as a consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“The fact that there are other women in the network who have been in the same place can make a huge difference. They can reinforce the positive shift. They can help people see their strengths. They understand their fears.”

“I could see this most powerfully in Beyond Welfare, a program in Ames, Iowa.” Beyond Welfare is a support network for people who have significant challenges, such as drug abuse or a criminal record. The support comes from others who “have been there themselves and have found a way to turn their lives around.

“They told us that the first thing that had to happen was for the person to see the part that she was playing. They put it like this: ‘I need to understand what I have allowed myself to become in response to what I’ve experienced.’”

The key is that people see that they have the power within themselves to change how they act and how they see themselves, Jordan explains. “A shift needs to happen. The person has to reject defining herself as problem-laden. She has to see that she has strengths. It is a shift from seeing herself as a victim now and forever to recognizing that she can make different choices for her life.”

A social network like Beyond Welfare can play a critical role in facilitating these kinds of shifts, Jordan explains. “The fact that there are other women in the network who have been in the same place can make a huge difference. They can reinforce the positive shift. They can help people see their strengths. They understand the fears. They understand that it’s a hard process and that most people slip, but they keep saying, ‘We’re still here for you.’”

Indeed, at times the women in these networks can be more supportive than a person’s own family. “These women told us that, as heart-breaking as it is, sometimes they had to face the fact that the support they needed wasn’t going

to come from mom or husband. Sometimes these are the very ones who keep pulling you back. You have to find a positive support network that isn’t limiting your possibilities.”

The women involved in Beyond Welfare say they also understand the “tricks” that some people play. “These women told us stories about how you learn to play the system and play on people’s sympathies and guilt. When they see someone else doing the same thing, they can call her on it, often in ways that a professional helper cannot.”

The result of all this, Jordan continues, is often a person “changing her self-image of being a victim and being dependent to an image of someone who can make a difference to what happens in her life.

“No one can do this for another person. That person must see that there are some changes that only they alone can make. No one can do it for you.

“It’s tough. But because these women trust other women who know their circumstances, because they see how these women are now living very different lives, they begin to believe that they too can change their lives.”

This process is not dissimilar from what most of us have experienced, Jordan believes. “You can just think about your own life. Change is hard. We all have our insecurities and blind spots. The times in my life when I changed were when I first changed my perspective about what I could do and what opportunities I had, the choices I had to make for myself.

“If people can come and get their needs met, they are likely to build trust and get engaged. If you build trust then they might be willing to take some risks They are more willing to learn from each other.”

Two Key Elements of Social Networks

Most people get involved in a social network for relatively straight-forward reasons: to get information, support, resources, jobs. In other words, people get something tangible.

“These elements of social networks lend themselves to the kind of results orientation we have with *Making Connections*,” says Audrey Jordan. She began to refer to these networks as “instrumental.”

But robust social networks also can provide a less tangible benefit. This benefit involves internal transformations in participants and in their relationships with each other, transformations that can lead to more powerful, tangible, results. “You begin to get a different sense of what the future can be. You begin to see yourself and what you can do differently.”

She says this transformation happens not just in residents but in people representing organizations. “They begin to see residents as assets. This in turn transforms their thinking about how to do what they do differently from ‘business as usual.’”

At first Jordan says that her group that is studying social networks tried to classify networks as

“instrumental” or “transformative.” But that seemed “a little artificial, like we were putting people in boxes, or being overly conceptual.”

Jordan says that her group learned that a robust network performs both functions: helping people meet specific needs as well as helping them transform their thinking and perhaps ultimately their lives.

“If people can come and get their needs met, they are likely to build trust and get engaged. And if you build trust and folks get engaged, then they might be willing to take some risks. They are more willing to learn from each other. And that can cause people to transform their thinking, and then their relationships.”

In places where social networks have thrived, Jordan adds, “people reach another level of transformation. They realize that it’s not about what I can get for myself or my family, but also what I can do for and with other families who are experiencing the same things. People start caring more about their neighborhoods and communities.”

“It’s simple in a way. If there is an actual opportunity available at that moment when I see the possibility of change, then I can act. I can change. Especially if I have the support of people around me.”

But while a powerful change can happen in a moment of awareness, it can take time for a person’s life to change.

“This is an aspect of sustainability,” Jordan thinks. “Even with all the positive support and opportunities, most people will continue to have

issues. Their lives are fragile.” The very fact that they have limited incomes and connections to networks adds to the fragility of their lives.

“Things can happen that can really set them back. That’s when they need a network of people who can catch them and support them through a setback so they don’t lose all the progress they have made.

“When you couple this personal transformation with real-time opportunities to act differently, a person’s life can really change.”

“Social networks help transform how people understand the challenges. They help them become much clearer about what policies they need to change. And they help transform residents.”

—Audrey Jordan

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.

This reflection was written by Tim Saasta, the coordinator of The Diarist Project. It is based on interviews conducted by Grace Giermek and Tim Saasta. It was published in June 2006.

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.

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.



Audrey Jordan

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).

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DiaristProject.org

All the diarist publications are available at no cost at www.DiaristProject.org/pubs. Information about the diarist work and additional reflections about Making Connections are also available on this website.