

Moving Communities Forward Is The Goal For Facilitator

By Nancy K. Crevier

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It takes stamina, experience, and a belief in one's self and others to turn chaos into transformation.

Standing in front of The Sandy Hook School Building Task Force the evening of April 5, Richard Harwood looked into the eyes of the task force members, most of whom he was meeting for the first time. The founder of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, in Bethesda, Md., tried to assess where those members, the additional members of the technical team, and members of the public in attendance were in the difficult process of determining the future of the Sandy Hook Elementary School.

A rather slight man, with a gentle voice, he introduced himself and then began the work of alternately posing questions, focusing the group, and stepping in and out of the conversations when needed. It was a task he would continue for four more meetings. His job was to juggle the many guidelines, emotions, and needs, and balance a time line without rushing the group to a decision.

"It was a risky proposition. I was not sure if the community was ready. I was not sure people would engage productively. There was potential for grandstanding and posturing. That first night," Mr Harwood said, "I was not sure what would happen."

Hired by the town to facilitate the four or five meetings that it was anticipated would be needed to complete the task, Mr Harwood knew that he needed to gain people's confidence, and that he needed to set ground rules to make sure the conversations at the meetings worked toward the common good for the community. It is a process he has refined in the nearly 30 years he has devoted to moving communities forward through difficult times, be it natural or manmade disasters, financial catastrophes, or in the case of Newtown, a mass murder. It is never a task that he enters into lightly, and as he does so, the themes of hope, moving forward, faith, and resiliency remain foremost in his mind.

"I have a great faith in people's abilities to come together, that under the right conditions, people can identify and work together to solve difficult problems. There is a deep yearning that we all want to be a part of something bigger than ourselves," he said, and his role is to gently nudge people in that direction.

Newtown First Selectman Pat Llodra knew before the end of December 2012 that there would be the need to create a process to deal with future decisions. She came up with the idea of having 28 elected town officials coming together as decisionmakers "but not representing their specific offices," she said. "I knew that in order for me to participate, it would be inappropriate to also facilitate. Also," added Mrs Llodra, "we needed someone with a lot of experience, and an ability in dealing with a lot of 'Type A' personalities — we all have very driven personalities — who could help our agenda move forward.

"I had asked Bob Geckle [former member of the Fairfield Hills Authority] to do a scan for facilitators who have done work around complex situations," said Mrs Llodra. "He has a lot of corporate contacts, and came up with a short list, and reviewed it. He was consistently hearing positive things about Rich and his work with communities," she said,

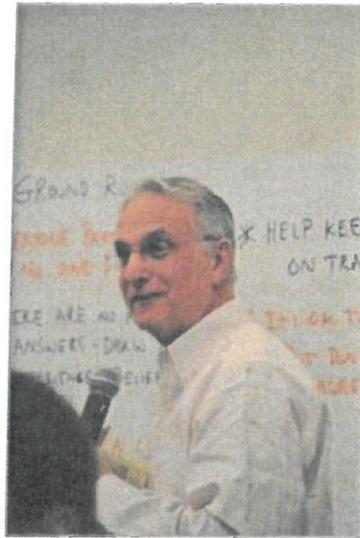


Photo: Nancy Crevier

Richard Harwood of The Harwood Institute led the 28-member Sandy Hook School Task Force through the steps leading to a unanimous recommendation.



and arranged an interview with Mr Harwood.

"[Richard Harwood] seemed the most amenable, flexible, and most experienced," she said.

It's Okay To Have Hope

Every morning, as he shaves, Richard Harwood asks himself one question: Is my work worthy of Ray Rivers? It is a question to which he can almost always answer, "Yes," these days.

It was not so, when as a young man he worked in the political campaign arena, and for nonprofit organizations. "I found that they all said the right thing, but the actions didn't fit. They were actually undermining what it takes to create communities that work together," he said.

Ray Rivers was his basketball and baseball coach, and one of the first adults to show unconditional faith in him, and the man who taught him it was okay to have hope, said Mr Harwood. As a child growing up in upstate New York, he was sickly for a great part of his childhood. He grew up feeling invisible as adults talked over and around him. It was Ray Rivers, he said, who was among the individuals who lifted him up.

Using that vision of hope given to him by his coach, and building on his faith that taught him there is a need to be responsible to each other, in 1988 he formed the Harwood Institute (then called the Harwood Group, and operating out of the bedroom of his Washington, D.C., apartment), an organization that has grown into a successful nonprofit, and according to its website, works to help people "develop into Public Innovators, build Boundary Spanning Organizations, grow common spaces for innovation and learning, and cultivate the conditions, norms, and productive narratives that help their communities move forward."

The goal has always been of assisting communities to build a civic foundation that enables all to work together, and even reinventing his own organization along the way to best support that goal. "It's always about reengaging communities: what are people's aspirations for moving forward, what can we work on together? It has always been clear to me that the only way to make it through this world is by helping each other," Mr Harwood said.

He knew that the challenge in Newtown, fraught with high emotions and with diverse needs that had to be addressed, would be different from the many other cases he had handled. "It differed, in that one hopes it is not a situation that repeats itself, and in the level of trauma that occurred to a community," he said. "Newtown was a unique situation of a small community in which so many people were touched by what happened," said Mr Harwood. Still, in any kind of trauma, at some point a community needs to deal with it publicly "and pivot to what does it mean to move forward, together?"

Experience has shown him for that to happen, certain things need to occur. First, a methodical process that is clear for moving forward has to be put in place. Second, that process must be transparent to all involved. "And you need a time for open conversation," Mr Harwood said, "to sort through the emotions and fears." Time for people to circle back to what they've been talking about is also vital to success. Those principles were what he strived to keep the Sandy Hook School Building Task Force focused upon as they worked to come to a consensus on the fate of the school site.

Resolved To Recover

"On the surface, the process in Newtown was about a school building. But it was really about a community deciding if it could move forward, and it was about people," said Mr Harwood.

That he was dealing with a town resolved to recover was apparent at his first visit in March. "I walked into town hall and saw two signs, 'We Are Sandy Hook, We Choose Love,' and 'Our Collective Strength and Resiliency Will Serve As An Example To The World.' It made quite an impact. To exercise both love and resolve is not always so easy," he said.

Being the facilitator in tough situations means preparation on his part, Mr Harwood said. "I have to be very clear on how I'm going to lead people, and I have to anticipate where things could go wrong and how that will be addressed," he said. Recognizing signals from a group is the result of his many years of experience. "When leading groups, there is no script. I have to have the confidence that I can handle difficult situations," he said. When there is great disagreement, that could mean leaving a strand of conversation and returning to it later to find out under what conditions might the opposition make another choice; or breaking up into smaller groups; or returning other options to the table.

It was at the fourth meeting, on May 10, which the task force had hoped would culminate in a recommendation, that he suggested it would not be a bad idea to return other options to the table. "Some felt this was a big step backward," he said. But deep emotions had come to the surface prior to and during that lengthy meeting, and it was clear to him that, emotionally, no one was ready to make a decision. Not all of the members were ready to discard two of the site options that had previously been set aside.

"This was the only way forward. In every situation with high emotional content, there has to be a conversation like that, that takes place. The closer you get to a decision, it is no longer an idea. It can get harder, not easier," Mr Harwood has learned.

He had been part of the closed meeting earlier that evening, in which task force members met with a group of Sandy Hook School teachers. It was an incredibly moving experience to be included in that meeting, readdressing needs and desires of those who had been so intimately impacted by the events of 12/14, said Mr Harwood. "Communications need to be repeated over and over. People are ready to engage at different times," he acknowledged.

Concern For The Common Good

As the task force went through the process, Mr Harwood was impressed by how this group operated. "There was a deep concern for common good, and a deep level of compassion. They stayed with the process, despite any differences," he said. He was also struck by the task force's sense of financial stewardship.

"This was a ready-made situation that could have broken apart; but they did stick together," he said. It was midway through the fifth and final meeting that he sensed there would be a unanimous consensus. He saw the emphasis on moving forward "as best we can" as a positive sign. "We knew that a perfect solution would be impossible, because you can't undo what happened. It was clear the group wanted to stick together," Mr Harwood said.

It is this human capacity to find ways to heal, together, amid sometimes horrific conditions, that makes his work satisfying, Mr Harwood said. "It's about people realizing that they can do more than they thought they could do," he said.

The experience of Newtown was not like other situations he has gone into, he said. "Parts were very difficult. I was overwhelmed by the trauma people had experienced. During the public comment sections [of each meeting of the task force], it brought tears to my eyes when someone would sit at that little table — and say 'Thank you, for what you are doing,' even though they disagreed."

The recommendation by the Sandy Hook School Building Task Force to the Board of Education, to rebuild a new Sandy Hook Elementary School on its original site, was

unanimous, May 17. There was great satisfaction in seeing the community decide to come together, rather than break apart, he said

"After the meeting, many people told me, 'This is the first big public step of our healing.' This was one of those places where a decision had to be made. The challenge was, could the community make that decision?" he said.

The Harwood Institute prides itself on teaching others how to work through difficult choices in a manner that can be accepted by the majority. Newtown was an example of how a community can move toward healing, he said, as it reasserts itself as a community, not defined by one moment.

Mrs Llodra sees a time when Mr Harwood's skills could once again be put to work in Newtown.

"I have had a dream for a while," Mrs Llodra said, "that I call Community Visioning. It would be a way to come together to say what our core values are, and how do we leverage those strengths." She envisions engaging many people in larger conversations.

"Fast forward ten years in Newtown. What do we hope we would see? We've faced a lot of difficulties in the past couple of years, beyond the events of 12/14. Are we using what we've learned from those difficulties? What are we becoming?" she asked.

Returning to a city that he has assisted for a "tune up" is not unusual, Mr Harwood said, and he remains in touch with town officials, should that need arise.

Newtown, Mr Harwood said, has confirmed for him that humanity possesses an enormous capacity to heal. "There are certain experiences in one's life that become markers," he said, "and Newtown is one of them."