



The Ripple Effect

HOW CHANGE SPREADS IN COMMUNITIES



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The research for this paper was done through a collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation.



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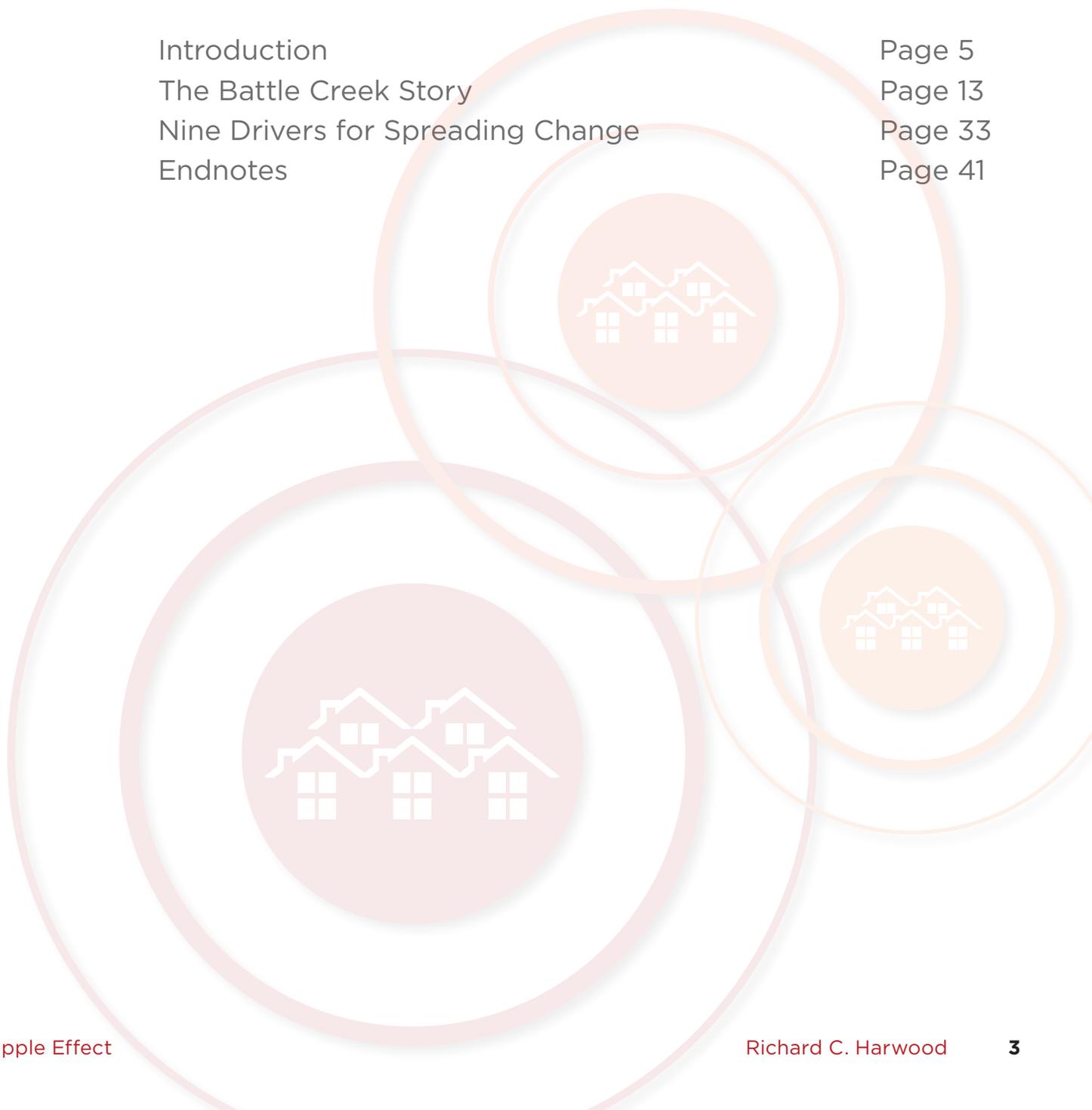
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FOREWORD

The bulk of the events in *The Ripple Effect* occurred between 2006 and 2013. Progress did not stop then. Nor has the community achieved perfection. Ask anyone in Battle Creek and they will say that there's much work still to do. But over that period, many of its leaders, organizations and citizens learned how to do their work in a different way – one that is rooted in the community's most fundamental desires and concerns – and they began to embed this new approach across Battle Creek.

Today, the community of Battle Creek marches on. Ripples of change continue to spread, enlarge and overlap. Not everyone mentioned in the report is engaged in the work in the same way as they once were, but the work moves forward nonetheless. *The Ripple Effect* is a powerful story about an exciting approach to how change occurs in communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The Ripple Effect is about how change happens in communities. It comes at a time when people throughout the country yearn to find alternatives to prolonged political gridlock, toxic public discourse and mistrust in a whole host of institutions, organizations and leaders. At a time when significant trends, which have emerged over previous decades, are reshaping society – including dramatic shifts in family structure, widening income gaps, an uneven economy that undermines the vitality of many communities and poor education systems that fail to give many youth a real shot at the American Dream.

Amid this backdrop, community-based strategies are enjoying something of a revival. Many foundation executives and national and local leaders believe progress is more likely to come at the community level than it is nationally. The very idea of collective impact and its potential for community change is gaining currency. Indeed there is a growing desire to figure out how communities can marshal their collective talents, assets and people to address tough challenges. Communities are where people live; collective action is what makes communities work.

But how does such change happen – and spread? What’s in play? And how can one be intentional in their efforts to help bring it about? This is what The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, with support from the Kettering Foundation, sought to answer. More specifically:

- How does change move from distinct “pockets” to the broader community – what does it take; who is involved?
- How does momentum for change build over time in a community?
- What does it mean – and take – for a community to learn as it goes?
- Where does the narrative of a community fit into whether the community can make progress or not?

“The Ripple Effect is based on a different way of thinking...”

Start with Embracing What We Already Know

There are certain realities about how change happens in communities that often seem ignored, despite what we already know. For instance, change in communities seldom happens in a comprehensive way all at once, though we keep trying. There is no such thing as a “big bang” notion of change – and yet we long for communities to re-invent themselves through some spontaneous combustion. Nor does change occur merely because we are able to corral a wide array of leaders who say they are willing to work together. Or because “enough” funding has been aggregated. And the use of data and evidence-based decision making – while important – is no guarantee either.

These and other approaches can be seductive – and they may work in some communities, for a period of time. But in order for communities to move forward, we need to take into account how communities naturally evolve and change.

Being In Tune with the Community

One way to think about this evolution is that communities go through stages. In previous research, The Harwood Institute found that there are five stages in all, each with its own implications – a set of do’s and don’ts – for how a community can make progress.¹ Ignoring the stage that a community is in often leads to strategies that simply do not fit that community’s context. With the best of intentions, we can be starting at the wrong place, with the wrong set of actions.

The Harwood Institute has also identified a set of underlying conditions in a community (called “public capital”) that, together, help to create an enabling environment for change.² These factors include different layers of leadership, organizations and groups that span boundaries and bring people together, conscious community conversation and networks for learning and innovation. The problem is that in most communities, the enabling environment is weak and must be strengthened in order for a community to work together and make progress.

When approaches and strategies for change don’t take into account a community’s stage and don’t pay enough attention to fostering the right enabling environment, then we are not in tune with the community. At such moments, it is often possible to hear people in a community say, “Why is the approach we’re using working in other communities but not in our own?” And, “Despite our best efforts, why is our community not moving forward faster?” Or, “Why, despite our heroic efforts, are we not making more progress?”

A Different Way to Move Forward

The Ripple Effect is based on a different way of thinking about how change comes about, takes root and spreads in a community. Some of the key ideas underpinning this approach include:

- Our efforts can help to shape a community, but we cannot impose our will on a community.
- Change in a community tends to emerge over time.

- The key is to understand where and how to get started – what’s ripe for positive movement – and then how to actively grow change.
- We must develop a community’s enabling environment for change – the conditions for innovation, emergence and spreading change.
- Intentionality in our engagement and actions is essential.
- Finally, we must work with the community, not apart from it.

What all this adds up to is the need to embrace the idea that change spreads in a community. This happens when a certain dynamic is unleashed that sets in motion a whole host of cascading effects. As initial ripples of action spread, momentum in a community starts to build, the public will for working together in new ways along with a growing sense of common purpose emerges, the community’s capacity for change expands and deepens, and a new can-do narrative takes shape. Over time what one sees is that a community is able to generate all-important staying power to stick with efforts and engage with entrenched issues; it is able to use its newly-formed capacity to address new issues that arise. The result is short-term wins, longer-term sustainability and a much stronger and more resilient community that can adapt to future challenges.

The Battle Creek Story

To illustrate the ripple effect in practical terms, we tell the story of Battle Creek, Michigan, over a period of about six years. On and off during this period of time, The Harwood Institute has

worked with a growing number of individuals and organizations there to address issues of vulnerable children and families and shift the civic culture of the community. The impact of people’s actions in Battle Creek now extends far beyond that initial focus.

But why tell the story of Battle Creek? After all, isn’t this story unique to that particular community? On some levels, the answer is yes. But the reality is that this story is emblematic of the type of change The Harwood Institute sees in its work each and every day in communities of all sizes and shapes. There are insights here for all of us who hold affection for communities, seek to strengthen them and tackle their pressing challenges.

A Matter of Collective Seeing, Learning and Innovating

The progress that is being made in Battle Creek isn’t because community leaders, organizations and citizens simply embraced a new set of techniques or processes by which to operate. That alone would not have produced the change they have generated. Nor was there a group of consultants that came to town to develop a new visioning or strategic plan. That would not have produced the sense of community ownership that is emerging there. And the community didn’t simply import a collective impact approach and implement it. Such efforts would not necessarily have led to the forging of a stronger enabling environment from which change is now spreading.

At the heart of this story is how people and groups have created a common frame of reference for how they see the community, its challenges and opportunities. It is this shared

view that is foundational for sparking various efforts, bringing disparate partners and groups together, and helping to align efforts over time.

Another key element is how people are *learning* from one another. In Battle Creek, a growing number of individuals and groups have been relentless in continually learning about what is working and not working in their efforts and how to better understand the real challenges before them. People are “showing up differently” in how they engage with one another – from the questions they are asking to the how decisions get made. The idea of “learning” – its very nature and what it takes – is of critical importance here.

And the Battle Creek story is a tale of *public innovation*. The community is literally creating its own path forward. Each step along this new path has brought with it new opportunities and unforeseen challenges. What is enabling the community to keep moving is people’s ability to discern what is happening around them, learn together and make more intentional choices and judgments about how to move forward.

This new dynamic in Battle Creek had to be set in motion. It didn’t just happen. There was no spontaneous combustion. Nor was it a matter simply of bringing together a large coalition of leaders and organizations or of piling up heaps of financial resources. No doubt, it required planning; but as you will see, planning alone would have been wholly insufficient. Too much planning and not enough doing stifles learning and innovation. In Battle Creek, various people and groups had to continually identify and leverage their community’s assets, find ways to combine and re-combine them, continually align their actions and amplify the victories.

Much work remains to be done in Battle Creek. This report highlights how individuals and organizations are being intentional in creating a ripple effect that moves the needle on specific challenges and changes how a community works together.

Organization of the Report

The remainder of this report is divided into three parts. The first tells the Battle Creek story. The second sets out the nine drivers of the ripple effect. And the third offers implications to consider in moving forward.

A Note about Source Documents

This report is based on a variety of sources and source documents, including interviews with Battle Creek community leaders, the results of community conversations with Battle Creek residents, previous research projects conducted by The Harwood Institute that examined changing conditions in Battle Creek, a third-party evaluation of the pilot project phase of the Battle Creek efforts and then various additional studies and documents which we footnote throughout this report.

NINE DRIVERS FOR SPREADING CHANGE

As you read the Battle Creek story, you will notice recurring patterns in what leaders, organizations and citizens did to bring about change, help to spread it and strengthen the community's civic culture. There are nine drivers in all:



Make the community the frame of reference to align action



Activate and spread learning and innovation by sharing knowledge of the community



Build informal networks to create connective tissue and drive the work



Start smaller and "win" to go much bigger



Focus on creating a new trajectory



Be ruthless in who you run with



Shape a new can-do narrative

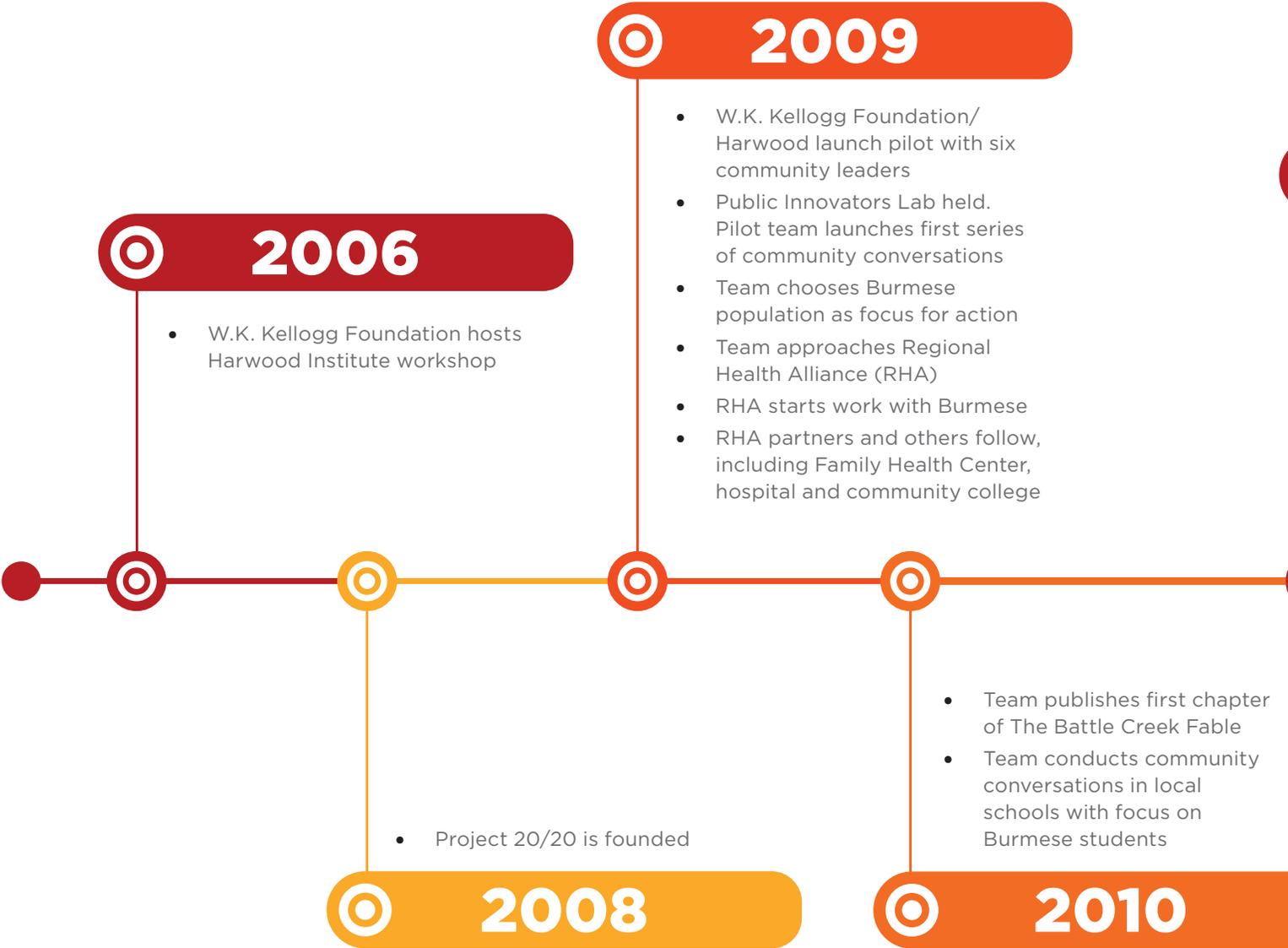


Infuse the community with a new way of working

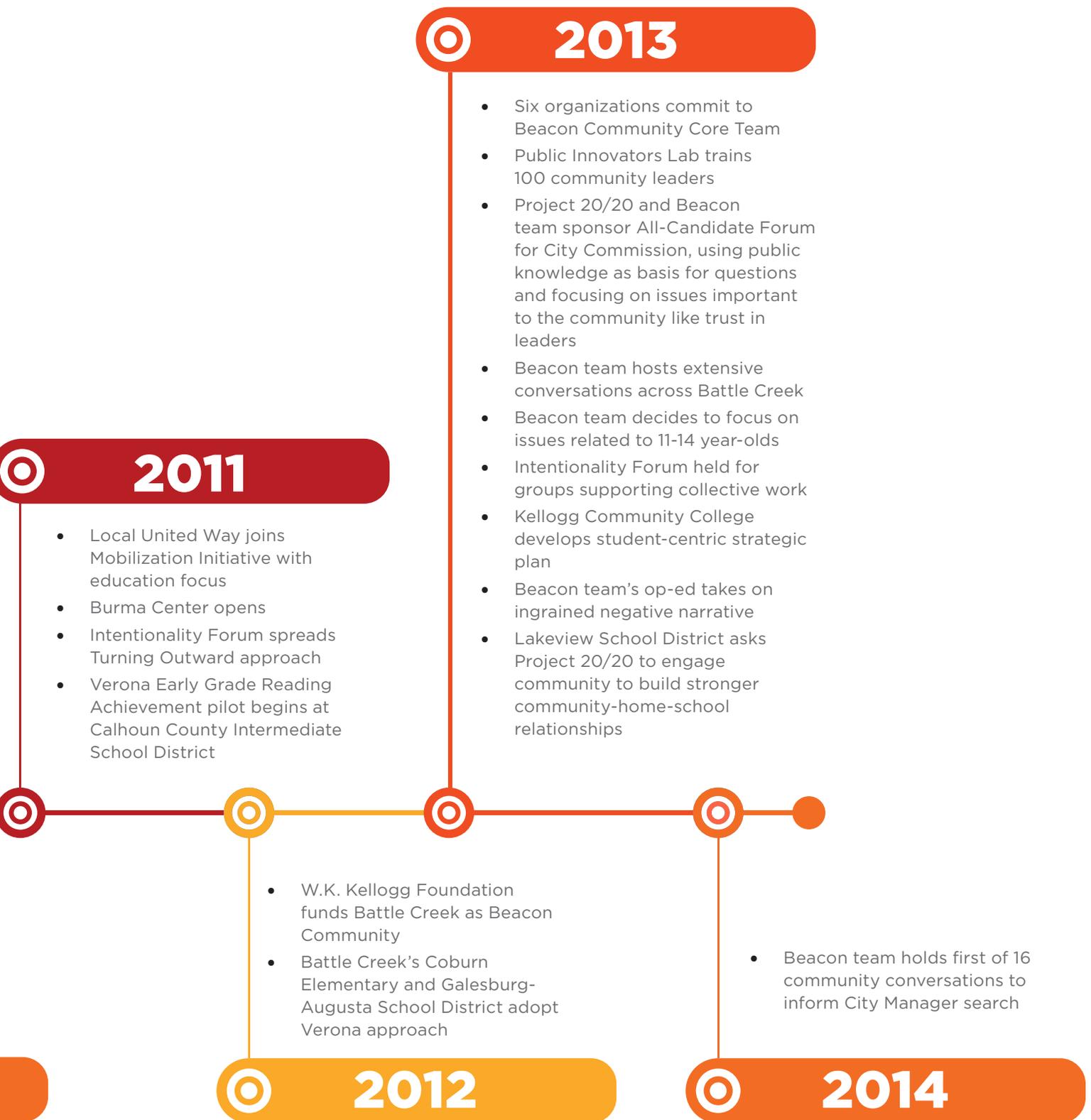


Fight to set realistic expectations

BATTLE CREEK



STORY TIMELINE





THE BATTLE CREEK STORY

One summer evening in 2006, some thirty or so community leaders and concerned citizens of Battle Creek gather at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for a Harwood Institute workshop. They talk about what it takes for communities to make progress on long-standing issues and the difficulties in overcoming turf battles in Battle Creek. As the workshop comes to a close, people want to know what will happen next. There's an urge among those attending to start a new project immediately.

Talia Chapman, a local real estate agent, stands up and declares, "We don't know enough about the community to take any action now." It is a courageous statement, especially considering that one of the largest foundations in the world has brought these individuals together. In the months ahead, based on the Harwood approach, Talia will act on her belief that people need to come together to learn about and discuss community issues when she launches Project 20/20, a community forum that sponsors such discussion.

After numerous follow-up conversations with people in Battle Creek, including Talia and others from the workshop, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation asks The Harwood Institute to begin a multi-city pilot to see if the Institute's approach can help accelerate progress on issues involving vulnerable children and families and shift the civic culture in how people and groups work together in communities. Battle Creek is named one of the sites in mid-2009.³

To get started a team of six individuals from Battle Creek forges an ad hoc steering group. Kathy Szenda Wilson is from the Battle Creek Community Foundation and Kate Kennedy Flores comes from VOCES, a Latino-focused community organization. Sheley Bess is an early childhood program coordinator from the Calhoun County Intermediate School District and leads the Great Start Collaborative; Matt Lynn and Angela Warren are from the local United Way; and Dave Nielsen is a retired educator and active citizen. Though all but one person works for an organization, they are not there to officially represent those groups. In fact, the team realizes that they can take advantage of not representing their organization. They seek to demonstrate what a diverse team of community leaders can do by strategically engaging others.

One of the initial steps of the Battle Creek pilot is to attend a Public Innovators Lab where the team members and other community leaders and organizations learn the Turning Outward orientation of the Harwood Institute and practices for bringing about change.⁴

Starting with the Community

When the Battle Creek team comes together at the initial Lab in June of 2009, there's an assumption that the team will identify a community issue, form a new non-profit organization, launch a new program or service and seek funding from Kellogg or another local funder. All this would be done "on behalf of the community." But as the team does its work, it chooses a decidedly different path. In fact over the next two years, this team never takes on any official status, opens an office, prints letterhead, or even gives itself a name. This is a significant departure from the way things usually get done in the community.

Instead the team's first step is to hold a series of community conversations to gain a deeper understanding of the community. What emerges is a clear community voice. The community is stuck, residents say. Their concerns routinely go unheard. People are frustrated with large-scale change efforts that seem to come and go. There's a lack of trust in the community. The narrative of Battle Creek also is clear: "We already tried that (fill in the blank)" and "Change isn't really possible here."

But these conversations aren't the typical community gripe sessions where people talk endlessly about the problems they face and who is to blame. (That's also been tried in the community in the past.) Instead they focus on people's shared aspirations for the community and what people hold in common. In these conversations, people say they want a community where there are more opportunities for their children (including having better access to existing services), strong community relationships, choices for people and families

to get ahead, greater economic security and pride in the community. More than anything, people want proof that change is possible – that something, *anything*, can work.

The team also finds itself engaging the Burmese community – a fast-growing immigrant population within Battle Creek that is largely invisible to the rest of community. The Burmese residents express similar aspirations to those heard in other parts of Battle Creek – including the desire for strong community relationships – but say they feel invisible and cut off from the larger community.

Health care is the top concern among the Burmese. Many individuals and families don't have a way to get to the doctor or hospital. The absence of Burmese-speaking health care practitioners leads to mothers having to speak over the phone to a translator in another community while in childbirth. In some instances children as young as eight are taken out of public school to serve as translators at hospitals during the birthing process.

Language is barrier for many Burmese children who are raised speaking their native tongue. Their limited English means they enter school already behind. Meanwhile, many Burmese parents say they don't feel welcomed at their children's local public schools and feel disconnected from their children's teachers.

What Frame to Use?

The team is faced with what to do with all the knowledge they're learning from the community. At this point, the impulse to create a new program almost instinctively rears its head again. The team also wrestles with a few

“...first step is to hold a series of community conversations to gain a deeper understanding of the community.”



strategic questions: What scope and scale should their efforts take? What set of challenges and actions can they wrap their arms around? And how can they respond to the expressions of hope mixed with fear that they have heard?

The team continues to meet. As they talk it's unclear which direction to go and on what basis to make a decision. So they turn back to what they are learning from the community conversations: they've been told repeatedly that the community is awash in programs and new initiatives and that people don't want new ones. The community wants proof that change is possible and to build from there. This leads the team to ditch the idea of launching a new program or service.

The team also re-visits the Harwood Institute's stages of community life framework. Based on what they know thus far about Battle Creek, they determine the community is somewhere in the Impasse to early Catalytic stage.⁵ They discuss that the most important step in this stage is to identify manageable pockets of change that help the community get "wins" and that lead to more trust, stronger relationships and greater confidence within the community. The key conditions the team says the community needs in order to support change include organized spaces where people can express themselves

and work together, strong diverse leadership and ongoing community discussion.

Then a major breakthrough occurs: the team discusses what is the most vital role it can play in the community. In other words, "What space should the team occupy?"⁶ This question forces the team to focus on what its contribution can be to help Battle Creek move forward. They remind themselves that they can't be all things to all people. After much discussion, they decide that they should be a convener and connector with respect to the efforts they are undertaking – to provide a space where they can share with other groups what they are learning from the community conversations and help align and focus existing efforts within the community.

But where to start? The team talks about what they are learning about the Burmese community and their health care concerns. Team members reason that demonstrating impact there – among one of the most marginalized groups in Battle Creek – would send a powerful message to the community about inclusion and the community's ability to produce action that leads to real impact. They also believe they can get their arms around this challenge and help to produce a real pocket of change.

Getting Started

The group reaches out first to the Regional Health Alliance (RHA)⁷ where a team member already has good relationships. In preparing to meet, the team makes another key decision that will shape their efforts (and those of many others in the community) for years to come. The meeting is not to be about the programs and services associated with RHA. Nor will the team use the knowledge from the community to place blame or demand RHA to take certain actions.

They start the meeting by sharing what they are learning about the community, including the Burmese. Then they begin to ask deceptively simple questions, such as: “What do you make of what we’re learning?” They follow up with additional questions, such as: “How, if at all, does this resonate?” and “What do you think the implications might be?”

The response is positive. RHA is curious and they begin to ask questions of their own. They are struck by the community’s shared aspirations and the need to build the community’s trust, relationships and confidence. Further, they say they were unaware of the Burmese community’s concerns; now, they want to think about what they could do. This is the same response the team will hear repeatedly as they talk to more and more groups in the community. By sharing what the team is learning – along with asking these deceptively simple questions – the team is building a collective way to see the community and a shared purpose for moving forward.

The conversations lead RHA to identify its first practical step: translate their informational brochures on health care and neo-natal care

into Burmese. The conversations also prompt RHA to invite one of its partners, the Family Health Center (FHC), to become involved. FHC, a provider of primary health care, then reaches out to Community Health Care Connections (CHCC) to help under-insured Burmese get healthcare coverage. Following these conversations a mobile clinic starts to provide screening and basic care visits at the apartment complex that is the home to many of the Burmese. The RHA also discovers another step it will take: connecting new parents to existing supports to help provide health care for their babies.

The quick “wins” are important. And forward progress doesn’t stop there. The local hospital has a policy that permits only two individuals at a time to visit a patient. But upon learning that in the Burmese culture people travel in groups, the hospital changes its policy and now allows more visitors at a single time. In addition, Kellogg Community College has a translation and interpretation training and certification program and also provides instruction in health care-related fields. It decides to bring these two efforts together to train health-care interpreters who speak Burmese.

This cultural sensitivity spreads to other parts of the community as well. Sheley Bess, a team member, begins to pay more attention to other non-English speaking families in Battle Creek. Following a team meeting, she says, “I came back and started making changes immediately. I made sure we had a phone line that was answered in Burmese and found people to work as interpreters for us.” The Great Start Collaborative undertakes a review of all the materials it distributes to the community and translates them not just for Burmese residents, but for all ethno-cultural groups.

The Early Childhood Connections (ECC), a part of the Great Start Collaborative, also makes a change in its hiring requirements, giving more weight to culture and language fluency. This results in the addition of family coaches that better represent the diversity of the community. For new Burmese- or Spanish-speaking parents returning home for the first time with a new infant, this means receiving counsel from a person who understands their language and culture.

Meanwhile, the Calhoun County Sheriff's Department decides to offer Burmese families training on car seats, their use and car-seat laws, with the trainings designed to be culturally sensitive. To do this, the sheriff recruits the help of an owner of a local car dealership who decides to train his employees to teach parents how to properly install and use the car seats. After hearing about this effort, the owner of a local toy store volunteers to arrange for the purchase and storage of infant car seats at discounted rates. She's a local resident who serves on an Early Childhood Connections committee.

Spreading into New Areas

As each team member continues to work their regular day jobs, they are inundated with individuals and groups expressing interest in this new approach. The newly appointed Battle Creek Public Schools superintendent, Dr. Linda Hicks, is one of these individuals. Hearing about the community conversations and the work with the Burmese community, she and the ad hoc team meet starting in July of 2010. Much in the way RHA and other health-care groups are stepping forward, Dr. Hicks believes there's a role for the public schools to play. One outcome from this meeting is that Dr. Hicks asks the team to set up community conversations with families and educators in the elementary and middle schools attended by many of the Burmese children.

Then Dr. Hicks and educators from the two schools meet directly with Burmese parents and students to better understand their culture, challenges and hopes. These efforts spark the school district to identify additional opportunities to engage with the Burmese community, including adding a representative to the student advisory board; the school district also starts to educate teachers about the Burmese culture to create a more welcoming and effective learning environment. This growing connection between the schools and Burmese community spurs a dinner held by the school district to introduce the entire Battle Creek community to Burmese food, music and language. Then a middle school teams up with the surrounding Burmese community to provide water to irrigate a new Burmese community garden.

The community garden came about when Kathy Szenda Wilson, one of the team members who works at the local community foundation, asks to present to the foundation board what she is learning from the community conversations and from the various activities now emerging. The Burmese community, in particular, has been difficult for the foundation to engage in the past. She tells her board members that there are two apartment complexes where many Burmese



live and a couple of schools that many of their children attend. She also relays that culturally, the Burmese come from a farming tradition. This information, coupled with the relationships Szenda Wilson is developing through her work on the team, leads the foundation to support the Burmese community garden, adjacent to the middle school. As Szenda Wilson explains it, the garden “ended up building a bridge to the school...We were able to provide some [informal] feedback to the school about some of the language challenges the Burmese families were experiencing.”

Today, about 125 Burmese cultivate three gardens and a new children’s garden that they started with a \$6,000 grant from the Fair Food Network, an organization that supports the development of a robust regional food infrastructure. In many communities, such networks are springing up to work side by side with citizens and various groups to fill gaps in healthy foods in the local food system. In Battle Creek, the Burmese community gardens are now part of one of these networks, the Good Food Battle Creek Coalition. Together with GFBC, the Burmese community is working to facilitate sharing and collaboration between residents and organizations across Battle Creek.

As the health care and school activity spread, another ripple takes shape involving the Downtown Transformation initiative, led by Battle Creek Unlimited, the community and economic development corporation. To unveil its new plan, Battle Creek Unlimited hosts a community meeting to ask for public reactions. Dave Nielsen, a team member, is at the meeting that night wearing his “chair of a neighborhood planning council hat” (the council is made of local residents). As Nielsen sits through the meeting, he can’t help but draw on his experiences with

the team, which now permeates all his thinking about how the community can work differently.

When the meeting ends, Nielsen immediately makes a beeline to the Battle Creek Unlimited director and invites him to his next neighborhood council meeting. At the meeting, Nielsen uses his training in community conversations to prompt a discussion that focuses on people’s shared aspirations for downtown. He wants the director to experience the difference between this conversation and the public meeting. It works. The Battle Creek Unlimited director hears ideas and considerations his original plan didn’t address. Struck by how different this experience is from his first community consultation, the director decides to shift how he is organizing the Downtown Transformation. He asks Dave to help him get in touch with the other neighborhood planning councils in town. After he meets with them, the director calls a second community-wide meeting, but this time dramatically alters the questions he asks. Now on the docket is, “What kind of a downtown do people want?” – a marked contrast from the first public meeting. From there the committee designs three different options that they then share at another large community meeting.

Meanwhile, in response to the Affordable Care Act, the community’s health care providers ask the local United Way to join them in developing navigation systems to improve people’s access to health care. To Matt Lynn, a team member who is representing United Way at the health-care meeting, it becomes clear why the ten health care organizations are stuck on why their ten different navigations systems cause problems and confusion for residents. He explains, “The big question I had is, ‘So if I’m somebody on the outside who is trying to get connected into the healthcare system and I see five or six or

seven different variations of navigation, do I give up?” He applies what he is learning from the pilot: these groups are more turned inward than outward by focusing on how to make their own individual programs successful, rather than using the community as their reference point. The United Way offers to convene residents to create a more resident-centered navigation system.

Attracting the Right Partners

Even with all the progress being made, the team quickly comes to know that not everyone wants to take the approach they have adopted. But they also have come to recognize that finding the right partners is less about recruiting new groups (and trying to get as many individuals and groups involved) than about attracting the right ones. As one pilot team reported, “It’s more about orientation, or what value system you’re using as you go about your work. It’s about being able to have a very quick conversation about, ‘This is why it’s important to make sure you’re Turning Outward and this is what it looks like.’” The team finds that groups quickly self-select in or out.

The team sorts out who to partner with in part by the questions it asks and how others engage with those questions. “It’s planting seeds about thinking differently by asking questions differently. It’s not an accusatory, ‘Why are you doing it that way?’ tone, but it’s getting them (other groups and individuals) to think a little differently about how they might approach things,” said one team member.

Whether invited to give presentations or meet informally, the team always starts conversations with other groups by talking about what they

are learning from the community and they do this in a way that invites the listener – “Come join us, don’t you want to be a part of this?” Their stories highlight how people in Battle Creek are thinking about issues as members of the community, as people who want to be part of the solution rather than people who are somehow to be “fixed.”

One team member puts it this way, “I think the story helps [professional] colleagues and those in the community connect. I think it helps to even out that client mentality with a citizen mentality. You have to tell it in a different way or else the importance gets washed out.”

The team finds that this new approach to working in the community sells itself. In talking about potential partners, a team member points out, “I think they see that we come to the table different and they’re interested in what that difference is. Why it [feels] different? Why it feels better?...I think that that’s a big piece of it. They see us coming to the table different and they’ve seen the success we’ve had. That makes a big difference.”

As new partners signal their interest and more ripples continue to spread, a Harwood Intentionality Forum is held in July 2011 for individuals and organizations to learn this new approach.⁸ Over 100 community leaders and citizens attend. Demand is so high that not everyone can be accommodated.

At the Forum, members of the pilot team share what they have been learning from the community conversations, outline many of the actions taken and underscore the different ways in which they personally have changed through this work. They say they “show up”

THE BATTLE CREEK FABLE

For many years the leaders of the Battle Creek community; civic leaders, business leaders, government leaders, corporate leaders, non-profit leaders, had been trying very hard, with the very best of intentions, to make their community better.

So one day one of the leaders said, "I know what our community needs."

Then another leader added, "I have a plan to meet that need."

Then a third leader joined in and said, "I have a program to make that plan work."

And they tried, and they tried, and they waited, and they waited. Soon after, another leader said, "I know what our community needs."

And yet another leader added, "I have a plan to meet that need."

Then one more leader joined in and said, "I know a consultant with a program to make that plan work."

And they tried, and they tried, and they waited, and they waited. All the while small voices in the community could faintly be heard, saying,

"I need help,"

"I don't know what to do,"

"I have something to say,"

"No one is listening to me."

So another leader said, "I know what our community needs."

And another added, "I have a plan to meet that need."

And a third added, "I have a program to make that plan work."

And they tried, and they tried, and they waited, and they waited, and there they stayed, sitting in that waiting place, hoping for the changes they sought, and nothing happened...nothing changed...

...Until some people in the community stood up and shouted,

"STOP!"

"ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!" (¡BASTA!)

"WE NEED SOMETHING ELSE!"

And so groups of people began listening to those small, concerned voices. They began engaging the community in conversations, asking them what they wanted their community to be. They began listening to the aspirations people had for their community, and this is what they heard...

differently now to meetings and conversations and in their overall work in the community.

our community has been...where it is and where it's heading.

The Emerging Battle Creek Narrative

It's one thing to catalogue many of them, it's another to understand and see what they all add up to. From the stages of community life framework, the teams know that the story a community tells about itself - its "narrative"- is one of the most important factors in whether a community moves forward. The community conversations revealed Battle Creek's narrative to be, "Change isn't really possible here." At issue is how does a community create more of a can-do narrative, one that is authentic and real? What to do about the community's narrative has been an issue of discussion among the team for some months now.

This discussion comes to a head in early 2010 at a retreat of the three communities taking part in the pilot (Battle Creek, Santa Fe and Detroit). Dave Nielsen recounts the team's experience in this way:

We had been meeting for a few months... We didn't really know each other all that well [and] there was a lot of team building [going on]...We had a real "come to Jesus" meeting. Our team got out our frustrations and concerns. It was a very frank discussion...done in a spirit of mutual respect. When we walked out of that meeting we were a team and ready to move forward together...We wanted to share what happened [and]... we decided that the best way to tell our story was to write a story...[of] where

From this tumult emerges *The Battle Creek Fable* (See Page 20). The next day at the retreat, Dave Nielsen writes a draft chapter that the team reviews and then performs as a one-act play before members of the other two pilot communities. The story begins much like a Dr. Seuss book, recounting from the community conversations how the people of Battle Creek feel unheard and frustrated.

Nielsen summed up the impact of deciding to write and perform the fable at the retreat: "It had a tremendous effect on us. In a fairly dramatic way it brought to light all the things that hadn't worked out in the community and really cemented our commitment to a new process that we were confident would work out."

Moving forward new chapters of *The Battle Creek Fable* are written every six to nine months. The very process of writing these installments creates a much-needed mechanism and discipline for the team to pull together what they are seeing and learning in the community and to make sense of it all.

The team also discovers that the fable is one of their most powerful tools for creating change within the larger community. The team taps into its diverse set of networks to generate and share the fable. Sometimes they share it in its entirety, other times in part. Sometimes they share it informally, other times formally. Sometimes it spreads organically from one person to another, other times through more organized efforts. In whatever form, the theatre-

like characteristics of *The Battle Creek Fable* help to create a common tale of the community, the shared work people and groups are producing together and the changes that are taking place.

By writing and releasing the story in chapters as the ripples in the community unfold, there is no “final act.” There’s no “ending” to the story. Instead, the fable serves to illuminate what is possible. And it implicates those who hear it: “You are needed to help write the rest of story of the Battle Creek community.”

Staying Aligned

Making the fable a living document that must be continually updated helps the team stay focused and grounded in their *own* shared values and aspirations. Whenever the team goes through the process of working on the fable it prompts team members to revisit where and how they got started, identify the progress they are making and stay true to their role as convener and connector.

Staying true to their purpose and aligned with the community is a major focus of the team. On the one hand this means always maintaining their clarity about a number of factors, including people’s shared aspirations and the challenges they face, the stage of community and the conditions they need to help create and the “space” they seek to occupy. They use a Harwood tool called the Taking Effective Civic Action framework (TECA). Sheley Bess and Kathy Szenda Wilson talked about it in this way:

The Taking Effective Civic Action framework was our roadmap...we used

it for everything...It kept us focused on what our role was, what we were supposed to be doing and knowing that inside and out. And you know that really helped us...and [created] some shared accountability. None of us went rogue. It was, ‘You know, let’s bring that back to the group. What should we be doing?’

Another critical element of how the team learns as it goes along is their use of Innovation Spaces. This practice helps the team develop a discipline of having conversations that are focused on what are they learning, what it all means and what the implications are – without getting mired down in tactics and minutia and getting lost in project management and planning discussions. Opening up these spaces – and creating the discipline around them – is instrumental in the team building trust and confidence and in forging a culture of learning and innovation. During these conversations the team “re-calibrates” what needs to happen given the ups and downs of the work and ever-changing community conditions. Again Bess and Szenda Wilson:

I think that the foundation of it all was the trust we have with each other and the relationships we had that enabled us to use the TECA framework as well as we did. Knowing that we made some mistakes along the way and realizing that is part of the process and taking that as a learning opportunity, [using] the Innovation Space, that was a big deal. What we found was that Innovation Space was very beneficial in all areas...”

A Whole New Wave of Ripples

As change is spreading in the community, another major area for opportunities opens up in June 2010. Matt Lynn hears about a new United Way Worldwide (UWW) initiative to provide tools and support from The Harwood Institute for local United Ways nationwide to learn how to mobilize communities on education. Lynn sees the UWW initiative as a way to put larger education concerns in Battle Creek front and center. It's also an opportunity, he says, that will "allow our United Way to really deepen its connection to Harwood and...to spread it to a lot of our partner organizations." He sees these steps as critical to continually forging a shift in the ways people and groups work in Battle Creek.

The United Way's acceptance into the mobilization initiative comes just as it is completing its new strategic framework for working on early grade-level education. As the mobilization initiative begins, Lynn and his United Way colleagues recognize that their strategies are based on good data, but that the data doesn't tell them enough about the underlying reasons why students are not prepared to go into kindergarten, *why* they are not proficient readers by third grade and *why* many ultimately drop out of school.

So Lynn spearheads a new set of community conversations, this time with a focus on education. Some of the concerns he and his colleagues hear are similar to those expressed in earlier community conversations, including those held with the Burmese community. He says, "When we talk to parents about success for children we heard them talk about that they didn't feel welcomed - they felt disconnected



from school. They felt like they didn't know how to support their kids in reading. They didn't feel like they had a relationship with the teachers... Yes, some of [the success] is because of what is happening in school, but as important is what is happening when they go home and parents knowing how they are doing and how to better support their children through their school year."

This causes the United Way to step back from its strategy to discuss what they are learning from the community conversations with officials of the Calhoun Intermediate School District. The scores being reported for third-grade students taking the Michigan Educational Assessment Program are very low and the research tells them that students who lack reading proficiency in third grade are more likely to fall behind and fail to graduate. Research also suggests that to improve this benchmark it is important to start in kindergarten. As they discuss this with the school superintendent, they talk about where to start, looking at data for the district's nine elementary schools and where this kind of intervention is most necessary. Verona school has among the lowest ratings.

With this new knowledge in hand - the combination of expert knowledge and public knowledge⁹ - Jennifer Nottingham of the United



“There are ripples within ripples growing out of the earlier efforts...”

Way launches an initiative with the Calhoun County Intermediate School District called the Verona Early Grade Reading Achievement Pilot Project. The United Way commits three years of funding to provide teachers with professional development training, mobilize volunteers to read with students, support at-home activities, protect against the loss of reading skills that tend to occur in summertime and connect the school to additional community resources.

The payoff is extraordinary. In just the first year, Verona’s kindergarten students go from 5 percent reading at proficient level or higher at the end of the 2011 school year to 71 percent at proficient level or higher at the end of the 2012 school year. A full half of these students are reading above their normal grade level. And as the students move to first grade and continue to receive support, their proficiency rises to 81 percent. Because of this early success, the Verona approach spreads to Battle Creek’s Coburn Elementary and to the neighboring Galesburg-Augusta School District.

At the start of their work with Verona, Lynn says they weren’t sure if they could rally home, school and the larger community together. But Jessica Hackworth, the Calhoun Intermediate School District staff member who runs the Verona project, reports there are about 70 volunteers

serving 175 kids, with most children at the school paired with volunteer mentors. She says the emerging academic success comes from all parts of the program – additional classroom resources, teacher training and volunteers – working together. Its success in finding and keeping volunteers is a direct result of broad-based community support – with funders, the school district and volunteers keeping things running without burdening the school.

“I feel like teachers and administrators are stretched so thin that when something else comes up like this, they just say, ‘Oh, my gosh, this is just one more thing I have to deal with,’” Hackworth said. “I think it’s definitely better-received when you have someone who will coordinate with all the volunteers and keep things running.”

In addition to helping to launch the Verona effort, Lynn is hard at work bringing his new learning, experience and tools to meetings with different community agencies the United Way funds. Using the practices he learned from the pilot, Lynn again chooses not to make a hard sell in order to recruit and align partners, but rather to open up opportunities for agencies and the United Way to learn together as they move forward. Lynn says, “Some of the tools and the elements of knowledge and learning

we were bringing back to a lot of partnering organizations so that they can learn with us; they could experience with us. That certainly gave them room to have curiosity and clarifying questions about: ‘So how does that work? So how do you do that? Where are you drawing that information from?’” This, Lynn reports, creates the conditions to “really start to pipeline based in more of an understanding.”

Efforts Deepening within Burmese Community

There are ripples within ripples growing out of the earlier efforts within the Burmese community. At the most basic level, simply acknowledging that this isolated community exists within the greater community and working with the Burmese community, is seen a giant step forward. In the words of one local Burmese mother, “They [child care workers] really learn from us, not to just fix us. That is one of the main reasons that I don’t have the desire to run away from Battle Creek anymore.”

Since the earliest efforts in the Burmese community, Martha Thawngmung, a leader within the Burmese community, has been quietly but purposefully using her increasing profile in Battle Creek to find supporters for establishing a new Burma Center. With new relationships and endorsements from other community leaders and fiscal sponsorship from the First Congregational Church, Thawngmung receives a two-year grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to launch the center – a place for reading/interpreting mail, learning English, congregating with friends, sharing a playgroup for children and getting assistance navigating in a new culture. It opens in April 2011.

Says Jennifer Thuahzathang, one of six staff people now at the new Center, “Having a dedicated space of their own has helped create a safe environment to gather and draw strength from one another as they make those initial contacts in the community...What we’re seeing is that the most important thing we can bring or offer is hope.”¹⁰

Another ripple within a ripple is the start-up of Unstoppable Noodle in May 2013, a new noodle delivery service that also provides job training for Burmese youth. The Burma Center provides the labor and training, the First United Methodist Church makes their certified kitchen available to the Center every Friday and Sprout Urban Farms and their network support promotion and access to food supplies. What’s more, produce is picked fresh for use in the kitchen from the Burmese community gardens. As reported in the local paper, “It’s an endless loop, like the infinite noodle logo that’s on every Unstoppable Noodle bag.”¹¹

Jeremy Andrews of Sprout Urban Farms first met Martha Thawngmung through early stories shared about the Burmese community in Battle Creek and encouraged her to start a restaurant featuring ethnic food. The two continued to talk. Some months later Jeremy and Martha connect again at a Harwood Public Innovators Lab where Martha mentions The Burma Center is looking for a fundraising idea. Jeremy is able to persuade Martha eventually to start the restaurant. Martha laughs and says, “We [Burmese] believe that something good and lasting should happen gradually.”

“...people don’t want to go back to the old ways of working.”

A Larger Shift in Civic Culture

There is growing momentum among various leaders and organizations in Battle Creek to continue to spread and expand the new way of working together. They want to take it “community wide.” After many conversations, community leaders reach back out to the Harwood Institute to discuss becoming one of the Institute’s new Beacon Communities.¹² The goals of a new effort are to: (1) take collective action on a specific issue; (2) develop an even larger critical mass of public innovators who can lead this action; and (3) create long-term homes for the Harwood practice in local organizations. Underlying all these goals is the desire to make a much broader, deeper and more profound shift in the community’s civic culture.

Chris Sargent, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the local United Way, talks about this new effort as making a “generational shift” in the civic culture of the community.

To steer the Beacon Initiative, a new core group forms, made up this time of the local organizations that want to serve as the long-term homes of the Harwood practice and engines for the collective action. Nine organizations come to an initial meeting to discuss the possibility of joining the new core group.

There, Talia Chapman, from Project 20/20, raises concerns about how they will select an issue to work on collectively. She and others remind the group that the community has come a long way in developing a new way of doing business and she believes strongly that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the funder of the Beacon Initiative, should not dictate the issue to the community.

She asks, “Are we willing to go to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and say, ‘The community really wants to start working collectively on a different issue?’” This will be an issue over coming months.

The City of Battle Creek is among the nine groups at this first meeting. But they’ve expressed trepidation about joining the core team. The city government is going through a particularly hard time after two police officers are charged with DUI and some people in the community believe they have been receiving special treatment. There also is concern about broader implications that might emerge from this work for how the city operates. Chris Sargent meets with Ken Tushiyama, the city manager. Sargent recalls the conversation:

I shared with him [Ken] how easy it is to get people’s true feelings, good and bad, in a way that is constructive, that holding community conversations on some of the tough issues he is facing could be done a way to break the cycle of finger-pointing that goes nowhere. I talked about some hard conversations we had with parents and educators and service providers that opened the door to the Verona School project and the great results we had there.

Sargent then makes this offer to Tushiyama: “You could do the same at the City and if it is too sensitive for you to lead the conversations, we could host them for you initially.”

In February 2013, the city government joins the core team, along with five other groups: the local United Way, Kellogg Community College, BC

Pulse (a new organization focused on building collective action in the community), Chamber of Commerce and Project 20/20.¹³

One of the core team's first steps is to hold a Harwood Public Innovators Lab the next month to introduce more individuals and groups to the Harwood practice, including multiple staff members from each of the core team organizations, individuals in the community who have already been exposed to the practice and want to learn more and those who are being introduced to it for the first time. As the attendees learn about the Harwood practice – and the need to engage the community to understand people's shared aspirations and the challenges before them – the same concerns Talia Chapman raised in that initial meeting are aired once more.

The Lab participants remind the core team that, in the past, too often things were done to people, rather than with people in Battle Creek. They say people don't want to go back to the old ways of working. The core team leaves the Lab convinced that they need to start the Beacon Initiative with a new round of community conversations to ensure that an issue that matters to the community is chosen.

Concerns about the city's leadership emerge from the community conversations. Other key issues include education, employment and safety. In almost every conversation, these are framed in terms of "youth." The team wrestles with how they will select an issue and ultimately decides on using the following criteria: (1) the issue selected must resonate in the community; (2) all six of the core group organizations will

be able to see a role for themselves in taking collective action; and (3) they can get their arms wrapped around the issue and the community can produce a "win." Based on the community conversations, the core team decides to focus on youth.

Much as in the earlier Pilot Initiative, the core team meets with groups from across the community – fifteen in all – that are working on youth-related issues. Again the goal is not to point fingers or ask these groups what they will do to "solve" the community's concerns, but to share what they are learning from the community conversations and to ask the groups what they make of it and what they think the implications might be. Once again these conversations play a central role in generating interest in the Beacon Initiative and building community ownership.

These conversations also yield insights into issues such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, bullying and kids dropping out of school. With this new "expert knowledge" in hand, the core team discusses their next step over a series of meetings. The team concludes from these discussions that they still need to know more about youth, their aspirations and concerns, before they can really narrow down the issue. So the team launches a quick round of community conversations to do a deeper dive into these issues with youth and parents. Based on these conversations, the focus becomes the "successful transition of students from middle school to high school."

But the core team is leery of simply announcing the issue. They want another check on their thinking. So they decide to test the framing

“On the table is which issue to focus on in collective action and which evaluation measures to use to demonstrate impact.”

with the seventy participants who attend another Harwood Intentionality Forum in November, where more individuals and groups in the community are able to learn and embed the Harwood practice. While some attendees wonder why any issue needs to be chosen, most say they'll keep an open mind and the core team should keep on the path they're on. The various rounds of community conversations, the series of meetings the core team has been holding to share what they are learning and the Intentionality Forum are all critical to genuine community ownership of the issue that it will work on collectively.

This juncture of work is not easy. There are some leaders in Battle Creek who continue to resist engaging with the core team and others who are taking the new approach to their work in the community. Moreover, the core team itself is working overtime to learn and nurture new norms of trust, decision-making and being outward facing among themselves. Without this, they cannot become true and effective homes of the Harwood practice and collectively help the community move forward.

One area in particular where the core team must work through delicate issues involves the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. On the table is which issue to focus on in collective action and which evaluation measures to use to demonstrate impact. For the core team, the former matter involves making sure the community gets to frame the issue; the latter is about recalibrating expectations about progress given the community's current conditions and the amount of time left in the grant. A series of conversations and meetings ensues over a handful of months between core team members and the foundation. To the foundation's credit, its staff members listen intently, ask tough

questions and ultimately work with the core team to resolve that the issue selected will come from the community and that new, recalibrated impact measures are set. These interactions are yet another signal of changing relationships in the community.

Ever Expanding Ripples

By the time Vince Pavone attends the Public Innovators Lab in March 2013, he is ready to build a new community garden on an unused portion of his car lot. Pavone is the local businessman who trained his auto dealership staff to help Burmese families learn to install child car seats. But something happens at the Lab that causes Pavone to rethink his current plans. He tells the story this way: "Just before we broke ground I paused and asked myself, 'Was this doing something good in a Turned Outward way?' And I had to answer myself, 'No. What if people actually just need transportation to an existing community garden?'"

As it turns out, transportation is an issue for people. So Pavone shifts gears. Rather than starting a new garden on his empty car lot, he decides to provide free shuttles for people to reach their existing gardens. His empty lot still sits undeveloped.

Cheryl Peters of the Generation E Institute, which provides entrepreneurship training, gets so inspired at the Lab that she applies for funding to expand her entrepreneurship programs into Battle Creek with a focus on youth at risk, thus aligning her efforts with the emerging collective action in the community. Part of the grant is to do community conversations with youth to make sure her efforts reflect the aspirations and challenges as youth define them.

“New ripples are being added to the can-do narrative daily.”



Reverend Tom Ott of First Congregational Church, United Church of Battle Creek also attends the Lab. At the time, his congregation is stuck between two battling factions. While at the Lab he experiences the shared aspirations exercise and decides to use the Harwood tool with his congregants. The latest reports are that the congregation is now working through a series of choices as to how it can move forward together.

Growing the Can-Do Narrative

While momentum is building in the community, the core team is caught by surprise by a story in the local paper, published at the end of 2013. In it, a reporter from the *Battle Creek Enquirer* questions the usefulness of the Beacon Initiative's community conversations.¹⁴ The team laments the continued currency of the ingrained negative narrative in town.

Still, they respond quickly. They acknowledge the challenges in communicating all the progress that is being made in the community and renew their commitment to nurturing a stronger can-do narrative, one that is authentic in reflecting what is actually emerging. In fact, over the previous six months, they had talked about the need to better communicate what they have been learning from engaging the

community, meeting with different groups and hearing stories about emerging actions. In the fall of 2013, a sub-group of the team produced a "Why I Like Battle Creek" video, which they used in meetings with key leaders and others in the community. But a true focus on communicating kept getting pushed aside by other pressing matters, especially because of a lack of resources available for communications.

Due in part to their experience with *The Battle Creek Fable*, the core team recognizes the power of telling the story unfolding in Battle Creek. They believe they must help paint a picture of the wholeness of the community – its past, present and desired future – so people can see the current action taking place in a larger context. They also reach the judgment that the emergent Beacon ripples are spreading so far and wide in the community that they need to incorporate communications approaches that have a much larger reach.

They employ a range of tools to do this. It starts with a recommitment to making sure they are continually inviting new individuals and groups to join with them. So they double-down on their strategy to reach beyond the usual players in town and even the newer ones that are now engaged. At various meetings, the core team members and others now involved in reshaping

how the community works become even more intentional in making room for people to tell stories about existing and new ripples. And in early February 2014, Eric Greene from KCC, with the help of Laura Otte from United Way and Amanda Lanker from Project 20/20 and with the official approval of all six team members, writes an opinion piece for the *Battle Creek Enquirer*. They directly take on the ingrained negative narrative in the community, making the case that change is possible.¹⁵

A Growing, More Diverse Base

One nice benefit of all the ripples is that there is now a much larger and more diverse pool of people involved in capturing and sharing these stories, opening up more opportunities to tap into diverse personal and professional networks, all of which creates greater potential to build momentum. This growing diversity increases the odds that people will hear a story from “someone like me.” Recall this is how the earliest ripples started when the Regional Health Alliance reached out to other colleagues, when educators reached out to other educators and when Burmese residents reached out to other Burmese residents.

New ripples are being added to the can-do narrative daily. Take Kellogg Community College, which is a strong and active core team member. The college also has struggled at times with figuring out just how to apply the Harwood approach internally. Eric Greene, one of two KCC staff members on the core team, makes the suggestion that the college try the Harwood shared aspirations tool with incoming freshman. Says Mary Green, KCC’s Director of Learning (who is being trained as a local certified Harwood coach), “This totally unlocked

things for us. There was such interest from the first year students and staff could see all kinds of ways and ideas for supporting students to prevent drop-outs...All of a sudden we could see potential in all kinds of places within the college for using these tools.” Mary says that KCC now sees that it can add great value to the college and the community by modeling this behavior. This is the breakthrough KCC was looking for. Now we know, Mary reports, that we can truly become a home for Turning Outward.

This and other activity taking place at KCC leads Dr. Dennis Bona, then president of KCC, to stand up at the Harwood Intentionality Forum in November 2013 and say, “For the first time in college history, I can truly say we put the students at the center of every decision we are making.” Now, KCC is undertaking a new strategic plan that will be student-centric.

In another part of Battle Creek, the local Calhoun County Arts Council (CCAC) is being renewed after enduring a period of financial issues, uncertain direction and being disbanded. Its members, much like Reverend Tom’s congregation, are divided on how, if at all, to shift the council’s mission and programs. Mary Juhnke, a consultant working with CCAC, learns about the Beacon Initiative in the *Battle Creek Enquirer*. She then invites Laura Otte, who works at the local United Way as the project manager for the Beacon Initiative, to lead a shared aspirations exercise in the summer of 2013. The logjam breaks and the council lands on a new mission statement: “Connecting People with Art.”

Juhnke also happened to be a consultant with Calhoun Community High School, an alternative school designed to provide a safe, healthy,



supportive learning environment for students who have not found success in traditional high schools. She brings Otte into a meeting with Tim Allard, the high school's director and they decide to conduct community conversations with students. Since the students offered up their perspectives so openly in these conversations, Otte suggests to Allard that a few students share their thoughts on camera. The video is then played for the entire high school board. Jim Baldwin, the board chair, is so impressed that the students' insights become the basis for a series of small changes at the school. At an Innovation Space in September 2013, Otte and others also share the video and what they learned from the conversations with 40-

50 community members, including members of the Sensational Seven - another group of seven organizations working collaboratively in Battle Creek.

Sharing this public knowledge results in a number of new connections, rippling out into new areas of work in the community. Students from Calhoun Community High School begin to regularly join Project 20/20 and The Coordinating Council meetings, as part of the group working on high school graduation rates. Dave Peterson, the superintendent of the nearby Lakeview Public Schools (an adjacent district to Battle Creek) and a Public Innovators Lab attendee, reaches out to Project 20/20 in November

2013 to see if it will organize community conversations across the entire district with the goal of creating stronger community-home-school relationships. Peterson takes the position that he's open to see what people want to do together. The conversations are underway.

In October 2013, Project 20/20 and the Beacon Initiative decide the time is ripe to take on another theme they had consistently heard in community conversations: leadership. They sponsor an All Candidate Forum for City Commission. The goal of the forum is twofold: (1) to use the knowledge gained from the community to shift the electoral discussion; and (2) to take on a community norm in a very clear way – directly, publicly and constructively seeking to move away from finger-pointing and blame-placing to discussion on what matters to the community. For the first time, political candidates in Battle Creek answer questions based on what the community wants, rather than focusing on specific policies. One veteran politician notes that it is the most highly attended forum he has ever seen.

The core team gets immediate positive feedback from residents. In a follow-up story, *The Battle Creek Enquirer* writes:

Battle Creek City Commission hopefuls called for improvements in trust, perception and engagement from local leaders as they made their cases to represent citizens during a forum Tuesday. “The foundation of trust is mutual respect,” said Ward 3 candidate Mark Jones. “I have to tell you, I never got that feeling from city government.”

All 18 candidates participated in the

forum, hosted by Project 20/20 in partnership with the Beacon Community Initiative. Many of the questions focused on aspirations for the city, ways to promote its assets and how to address mistrust in elected officials.... “Our job is to be experts of the people of Battle Creek,” said Commissioner Andy Helmboldt, “of knowing the people in our community so that they feel like we have their best interests at heart.”¹⁶

Kaytee Faris, who is running for the first time for an at-large seat, said trust and engagement aren't “easily earned or easily built. But, I think step one is listening, truly, honestly listening to one another.”^{17, 18}

Then, in the spring of 2014, the Battle Creek city manager leaves his post and reflecting the changing norms of the community, the city turns to the Beacon team to hold 16 community conversations to identify the type of city manager the community wants.

An Unfolding Story

At the writing of this report, the community of Battle Creek continues to push ahead in addressing people's shared aspirations and changing the civic culture of how the community works together. The collective action work focused on the middle school transition is taking shape. New ripples continue to emerge. Old ripples are getting stronger. People are seeing important signs of wins which lead them to believe they're on the right trajectory. Much work remains to be done.



NINE DRIVERS FOR SPREADING CHANGE

The Ripple Effect is about how change spreads in a community. Through The Harwood Institute's experience in Battle Creek, combined with long-standing experiences in scores of communities across the country, we have identified a set of essential drivers for learning and innovation that enable communities to create change on a specific issue and strengthen their civic culture.

This report fits into a larger context of two previous reports, in particular, by The Harwood Institute. *Community Rhythms: The Five Stages of Community Life* helps one understand the stage a community is in and the implications for moving forward. *Public Capital: The Dynamic System that Makes Public Life Work* explains the key factors necessary to an enabling environment to support change. *The Ripple Effect* is about how a series of cascading actions can be set in motion in a community over time.

There are nine essential drivers that help to create the ripple effect:



1. Make the community the frame of reference to align action

Many community initiatives start by framing their agenda primarily through the use of expert knowledge (data, evidence-based decision-making and best practices). But in Battle Creek it was *public knowledge* that made the community the common reference point and was a driving force in aligning actions.

- This deep knowledge has particular characteristics. The community conversations focused on discovering people's shared aspirations, their challenges in meeting those aspirations and the conditions needed to move the community forward. These uncovered the authentic demand for change in the community to build upon. Knowledge also was gained about Battle Creek's stage of community life and public capital, which enabled groups to align their strategies with the community's context.
- In using this knowledge, the community – and not each organization's programs or initiatives – became the reference point for focusing on common goals. No one group “owned” this knowledge. It came from the community and thus provided a common bond.
- The knowledge of the community enabled project team members, as well as organizations and individuals in the community, to stay aligned to the larger purpose of moving the *community* forward. This knowledge became the “north-star” for community action. People began to ask: “How do our actions help move the community towards its shared aspirations and create the trust, relationships and confidence necessary for the community to move forward?”
- Throughout the Battle Creek story, different groups and organizations coupled this knowledge of the community with expert knowledge. Together, the public and expert knowledge helped groups forge stronger strategies that addressed people's shared aspirations.



2. Activate and spread learning and innovation by sharing knowledge of the community

Oftentimes the approach to community efforts is to “sell” an agenda for action. But in Battle Creek, deep knowledge of the community became the calling card for the pilot team and then Beacon Initiative core team to enlist partners, catalyze change and generate authentic community ownership.

- Initially, the team members met with different organizations and individuals and focused on sharing what they were learning from the community. The meetings did not focus on a group’s programs or services. Nor did the team members use the knowledge from the community to point fingers of blame or demand a group or leader to take certain actions.
- Instead, after sharing what they were learning from the community, they asked deceptively simple questions such as: “What do you make of what we’re learning?” They would follow up with additional questions, such as: “How, if at all, does this resonate?” and “What do you think the implications might be?” This enabled the groups to focus on what was being learned and its implications and not get mired down in discussions of projects and initiatives.
- These meetings took place at each new juncture of the Battle Creek story – during the initial pilot project, when the local United Way began its education work and again at the start of the Beacon Initiative. They were used when other groups adopted community conversations to apply in their own settings, such in the Calhoun County Arts Council, school districts and religious institutions.



3. Build informal networks to create connective tissue and drive the work

Many community initiatives start by creating large formal coalitions of organizations and leaders. But in Battle Creek, the emphasis was placed on continually building an informal network that served to catalyze and spread learning and innovation, and that helped to change how the community works together. These groups always started small.

- A key step in building the informal network was when core team members met with other groups and organizations to share what they were learning from the community. These meetings were oftentimes the result of tapping into each team member's informal networks.
- The groups and organizations that were activated then engaged their own networks. This happened within the health care community when addressing concerns of the Burmese; within the Burmese community itself; among early childhood and education groups; and when the downtown transformation effort started to adopt this approach, among many others.
- There is significant overlap in the various networks activated through this work, which generates a cross-fertilization of learning and innovation. Recall how the Burmese community gardens, community center and Unstoppable Noodle all got started.
- The pilot team and the Beacon core team both operated as informal networks. In the Battle Creek efforts, neither team has taken on any official status. They remained operating as informal networks themselves.



4. Start smaller and “win” to go much bigger

The impulse in many community initiatives is to produce comprehensive change on a large scale from the get-go. But many communities, like Battle Creek, simply aren't at that stage of readiness – they don't have the political will, norms of interaction, trusted leaders and organizational capacity to undertake such change. Like most communities, Battle Creek needed to start smaller to go bigger.

- This principle was applied first to the very size of the core group teams set up to drive the pilot project and the subsequent Beacon Initiative: both were small. Emphasis was placed on developing ways for the core teams to work together and to become nimble and effective to engage others in the community in taking this new approach. A much larger group would have required focusing too much time on coordination and internal operations.
- When thinking about where to start efforts in the community, the pilot team decided first to focus on creating a pocket of change – within the Burmese community – that would provide proof to the larger community that change in fact was possible and which would then help to spark other learning and innovation.
- The approach was rooted in identifying those who were ready, able and willing to take action. Then as the learning and innovation spread in the community, more groups, organizations, leaders and citizens stepped forward. The strategic choice was to start where they could create early “wins” and not take on the most intractable or wicked problems. This enabled trust, relationships and confidence to form across the community.
- Starting smaller to go bigger is what enabled an informal network of change-agents to form in the pilot work, which then became the basis for other efforts in the community (such as the Verona Elementary School effort led by the local United Way). These networks then provided the basis – indeed, the demand within the community – for Battle Creek to become a Beacon Initiative.



5. Focus on creating a new trajectory

Community initiatives often determine their success by whether they “solved” the problem. But in most communities, the key is to create a new trajectory. People want to know, “Are we on the right track?” This leads to a focus on what actions will help to create that trajectory – a sense of momentum – rather than searching for all the steps we must take to fix everything.

- In Battle Creek, momentum came from building a sense of movement based on a variety of ever-expanding ripples. If they had focused on a comprehensive plan, they may never have even identified those ripples, as their focus would have been elsewhere.
- The community needed to see that things *could* move in a different and better direction. Recall the ingrained narrative, “Change can’t happen here.” People did not believe that comprehensive change was even possible.
- What’s required is to place an emphasis on “doing” rather than on endless talk and planning. A goal of comprehensive change can leave groups stuck in planning mode; when trying to create a new trajectory, the goal is, “Where do we get started and how do we build on that.”
- A new trajectory is created by movement over time. Those interested in creating change in communities should ruthlessly focus on whether a new trajectory is forming. This becomes the basis upon which a people in a community gain confidence and faith that change is possible.



6. Be ruthless in who you run with

Many community change efforts start with the premise that everyone needs to be at the table at the outset, which can needlessly weigh efforts down. Scarce time and resources can be soaked up by trying to convince resisters and naysayers to join the cause. Deciding on who to partner with can be hard; it means making judgments about who to run with. And that's exactly what needs to happen.

- None of the efforts in Battle Creek sought to maximize – or even grow at first – the number of people and groups around the table. In the pilot project, there were six individuals who served as the steering group; in the Beacon Initiative, it was six organizations. Each of these individuals and organizations came to the table committed to Turning Outward toward the community and adopting a different way of working with the community. This was pivotal to their effectiveness.
- When the core team members started to share what they were learning from the community, they were effectively “screening” potential partners. This was an efficient and effective way to learn who was ready to work in the community in a new way.
- The many ripples in the community emerged when different individuals and groups found other like-minded people and organizations with a deep affection for the community and a readiness to work in new ways. The premium was placed on, “Let’s get something done together.”
- In fact, none of the ripples in Battle Creek came from forced partnerships: they emerged from shared learning and innovation which created a strong basis for the collaborative work.



7. Shape a new can-do narrative

A community's narrative is the great hidden factor in whether communities move forward. The story people tell themselves and each other about the community drives their mindset, attitudes, actions and behaviors in a community. Shaping a new can-do narrative is people can see that there is a new trajectory – and thus a sense of possibility and hope.

- In Battle Creek, as in many communities nowadays, there was a significant ingrained negative narrative: “Change can’t happen here.” For the community to move forward, it needed a more “can-do” narrative that inspired people to step forward, engage and help move their community forward.
- The core team in the Pilot Initiative realized that they needed a way to help people see how the new trajectory in Battle Creek was taking form. The task was not simply to tell individual stories of change, but to tie various changes together into a coherent story for people that would create a sense of meaning and possibility. They devised *The Battle Creek Fable*.
- Every six to nine months they wrote new installments, which helped people to see where the community had come from, where things stood now and where they could go. The team used the fable in presentations, meetings, performances and elsewhere.
- Much like sharing the knowledge of the community, sharing the emerging narrative with others became a pivotal way by which people shared what was being learned in the community and it invited others to join.



8. Infuse the community with a new way of working

At the heart of efforts in Battle Creek was that an ever-expanding number of people and organizations adopted a common orientation and new set of practices that aligned them in shared purpose, action and accountability. The core teams of the pilot and Beacon Initiatives made intentional decisions to “infect” the community with this new approach (what The Harwood Institute calls being “Turned Outward”).

- The process of adopting this common orientation and set of practices began with the core teams from the pilot and Beacon Initiatives. This meant that these teams were in agreement and alignment in how they were to work together. They then became the initial spreaders in infecting others with the approach.
- Each interaction core team members had with others in the community reflected this new approach, such as the sessions when they shared what they were learning from the community and the deceptively simple questions they posed in those sessions.
- Throughout the pilot and Beacon Initiatives (as well as the education work led by the local United Way), it was critical to provide opportunities for new individuals and organizations to learn the Harwood approach. Some of these experiences took the form of Public Innovator Labs and Intentionality Forums, in which over a hundred people at a time could attend. These events (and others) were held in response to the increased and growing demand within the community to learn the approach. People were always self-selecting in.
- The frameworks, tools and questions from the Harwood Institute then spread to those groups that attended the learning experiences as well as those who sought out individuals who knew the approach and could help them apply it (e.g., the Calhoun County Arts Council, school districts and local church, among others).
- This strategy built up over time and thereby created a strong foundation for learning and innovation. It was intentionally a layered approach, not an “all-at-once” approach. It was rooted in people hearing about the approach, experiencing it and then wanting to learn more.



9. Fight to set realistic expectations

A key challenge that community efforts confront concerns “expectations” from funders, partners, political leaders and the community as a whole. Setting realistic expectations is critical to creating a new trajectory that people can believe in.

- In Battle Creek, first the pilot core team and then the Beacon Initiative team, developed expectations for change (and evaluation approaches) based on what they learned about the community: people’s shared aspirations, the stage of community life and the underlying conditions (the public capital factors). This led them to set goals that helped to create a doable new trajectory in Battle Creek.
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant supporting the Beacon Initiative work called for certain metrics to be reached. But the core team (and others in the community) came to realize that the community was not ready for such change, which caused consternation about the grant’s expectations. • UWBCKR and Harwood negotiated with foundation staff on those expectations and the evaluation design. Ultimately both were brought into alignment with the community’s context.
- The importance of setting realistic expectations was underscored time and again by individuals and groups that were learning the Harwood approach. They continually reminded the core teams and others about what they thought would be the right expectations for change. In this way, a new community norm was formed that reflected an insistence on being realistic and accountable for change.
- The wrong expectations can drive people to operate out of fear of losing a grant, trepidation that others will not join the cause and concern that the news media will not cover their efforts. Such unrealistic expectations often distort and drive the wrong choices being made (for instance, trying to create too much change too quickly and thus failing to build a durable foundation).

ENDNOTES

1. The Harwood Group, *Community Rhythms: The Five Stages of Community Life*. Flint, MI: The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (1999).
2. The Harwood Group, *Public Capital: The Dynamic System that Makes Public Life Work*. Dayton, OH: The Charles F. Kettering Foundation (1996).
3. The other two sites are Detroit, MI and Santa Fe, NM.
4. The Public Innovators Lab is a three-day immersion in The Harwood Institute's core concepts and practices.
5. The Harwood Group, *Community Rhythms: The Five Stages of Community Life*.
6. Harwood, Richard C. and Aaron B. Leavy. "What Space Do You Occupy?". Dayton, OH: The Charles F. Kettering Foundation (2013).
7. The Regional Health Alliance is an umbrella organization made up of multiple independent agencies.
8. The Intentionality Forum is a one-day introduction to The Harwood Institute approach.
9. Harwood, Richard C. "Putting Community in Collective Impact." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, April 7, 2014. http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/putting_community_in_collective_impact. "The success of any community change effort depends on genuine ownership by the larger community that starts with placing value not only on expert knowledge, but also public knowledge that comes only from authentically engaging the community."
10. Parikh, Jane C. "Burmese Americans find a home in Battle Creek." *Southwest Michigan's Second Wave*, May 24, 2012.
11. Kelley, Annie J. "Unstoppable Noodle has synergy." *Battle Creek Enquirer*, July 3, 2013.
12. A Harwood Beacon Community is a place where an emerging group of organizations and individuals are committed to working in a new way and understand what it takes to create change in the community. Work focuses on: (1) Creating a critical mass of Public Innovators and Boundary Spanning Organizations that work together to drive change in the community; (2) Building community conditions for sustaining change - a new civic culture of norms, networks and relationships; a can-do narrative that encourages action; and organized spaces for interaction; and (3) Making tangible progress on a community issue.
13. In the Beacon Initiative, each of the six groups is making an organizational commitment to help drive the initiative and to become homes for the Harwood practice. The six individuals involved in the pilot formed an ad hoc group and did not officially represent their respective organizations. The Harwood practice eventually spread to many of those organizations.
14. Lewis, Olivia. "BC Pulse ahead of the game." *Battle Creek Enquirer*, December 28, 2013.
15. Beacon Community Initiative. "Battle Creek is on the move." *Battle Creek Enquirer*, February 7, 2014.
16. Amy Helmboldt was a participant of a Public Innovators Lab.
17. Kaytee Faris was a participant of a Public Innovators Lab.
18. Bowman, Jennifer. "Commission hopefuls talk trust, engagement at candidate forum." *Battle Creek Enquirer*, October 22, 2013.

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Rich's transformational work has spread to thousands of communities nationally and worldwide - from small towns to large cities - through concrete methods he created and has honed for more than 25 years. A recent article in The Colorado Springs Business Journal called Rich "the nation's leading crusader for community action."

Rich's proven practices are based on hands-on work with individuals, organizations and communities in their quest to create change. His talks, coaching techniques and practical guides have provided the hope and inspiration for individuals and groups to improve their public and private lives. In 2013, he facilitated Newtown, Connecticut's unanimous decision on the fate of Sandy Hook Elementary, where 20 children and six adults were killed in December 2012.

Rich is currently on a nationwide campaign, Reclaiming Main Street, traveling the country to address the corrosive effect the current political environment is having on our ability to make progress in the country.

As part of his tour, Rich is training 5,000 public innovators and recruiting a 100,000-person Public Innovators Corps. He is also collecting people's aspirations for their communities in an online forum, Townhall.

A visionary with the ability to help people identify obstacles and tap their aspirations, Rich has inspired hundreds of audiences as he shares his philosophy of what it takes to be relevant and connected in today's world. Rich is also a prolific author whose books include "The Work of Hope: How Individuals and Organizations Can Authentically Do Good"; "Make Hope Real"; and "Why We're Here: The Powerful Impact of Public Broadcasters When They Turn Outward." Rich has also written numerous studies and articles that chronicle the most vital issues of our time.

He has appeared on national media including MSNBC, National Public Radio, CNN, The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, Special Report with Brit Hume, CBS Radio, The Christian Science Monitor and USA Today. Rich and his work have also been featured globally in outlets ranging from German Public Radio and China Central Television to the Voice of Russia Radio.



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