

Citizen Leaders

Asset Building in the Community

The Citizen Leaders program was started by Imagine Chicago in 1996 to enable local citizen leaders — including young people — to create innovative community projects that make a positive difference within their neighborhood and across the city. The project was run in Chicago from 1996-2001, and subsequently in rural Ghana and north central Montana. In Chicago, some Citizen Leaders classes were held citywide; others were neighborhood-specific done in partnership with local community development organizations in Englewood, W Garfield Park, Austin and the North of Howard St. One version of the Citizen Leaders targeted parents wanting to do projects to strengthen school-community connections.

Who Participates in Citizen Leaders?

Local community residents with vision and commitment who want to organize a project team and learn from one another. They have ranged in age from 11 to 80.

How Does Citizen Leaders Work?

Leaders of project teams are identified and recruited through community based organizations and public announcements and recruitment meetings. Participants come together in a series of workshops in which they learn how to understand their community's assets, imagine ways to improve their neighborhoods, and create innovations that meet the needs of their communities as they perceive them. Using a community innovation guide developed by IMAGINE CHICAGO as an organizer, each leader learns to:

- look at their community in strength based ways
- develop their leadership
- recruit and lead a project team
- design and write a project proposal
- create the project with their team
- document, share and sustain the project

Citizen Leaders and their teams submit proposals for innovations that meet the following criteria:

- require creativity and commitment
- empower community members by giving them responsibility for the planning, implementation and evaluation of the project
- make a visible difference
- contribute to a positive community future
- can be sustained by members of the community
- can lead to more initiatives

Upon the successful completion of a proposal, the team receives a mini-grant of up to \$500 to implement their project.

Funding

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Outcomes

Individual - Effective Leadership

The program develops more effective leaders by teaching a wide variety of community capacity building skills and techniques: recruiting, asset-based thinking and planning, organizing, building shared vision, communication skills, budgeting, proposal writing, networking, and the development of structures that sustain projects over time. IMAGINE CHICAGO has trained more than 100 leaders to create innovative projects that make a difference. Each in turned has led a project team of at least 6 people and applied and shared what they have learned.

Community Impact - Community Comes Together

The skill-building has an impact not only on the individual citizen leaders but also on the teams they are organizing. The citizen leaders hold regular meetings with their team members in which the approaches they are learning are incorporated into the project design. Team members take away a sense of community vision and knowledge about how to implement that vision. More than 100 low-cost community projects have been organized since

the program's inception. Examples include neighborhood arts programs, a teenage coffee-house, youth clubs, block clubs, neighborhood cleanups, community gardens, etc.

In 1996, a group of citizens from Austin (a west-side neighborhood in Chicago) participated together in the Citizen Leaders Program. Their initial project was an intergenerational softball league, so teenagers and older residents could get to know each other without fear. That initiative inspired block clean-ups before the games and team barbecues after them. Ultimately, conversation among neighbors led to the creation of block clubs, community gardens, intergenerational sports programs, and a youth club. With support from a local community organization, these block leaders helped launch a neighborhood-wide program to bring residents together to collectively address important issues. The Every Block is a Village <www.ebvonline.org> program they started is now an organization of 57 block clubs, each with resident 'citizen leaders,' which organizes around issues like community cleanliness, economic development, and youth opportunities. A weekly sharing of stories, about what has happened, what needs to happen and how it can happen, continually strengthens the process, while the visible outcomes and growing volunteer commitment attract other neighbors who see it is possible to make a difference.

Every Block is a Village has worked hand-in-hand with the community-based Westside Health Authority, producing networks for employment opportunities, childcare, transportation, and community health and safety. Together, they have nurtured community pride, trust, and commitment. In 2002, they created the Westside Health Authority/Every Block is a Village After-school Program. The program fosters relationships between high school and elementary school students through reading, arts/crafts, outings, and movie nights. Through EBV online, neighbors can connect to each other and citizens across the world. In all of their community initiatives, Every Block is a Village exemplifies the idea that each citizen can and must contribute to their neighborhood's wellbeing. The practices and values of EBV are now being actively shared with at least three new Chicago neighborhoods who have been inspired by their

example. This project is now providing an organized electronic structure for involving and reconnecting the community.

<http://ebvonline.org>

Other Examples of Citizen Leaders Projects

The following are a small sample of projects designed and implemented by participants in the Citizen Leaders training program with outcomes and lessons learned by the participants.

Sample Projects

1. Organizing community youth in Ashburn:

The Story:

Ashburn is a community on the southwest side of Chicago. The Ashburn Direct Action Coalition (ADAC) is a model for creating positive youth activities, organized in response to several hate crime incidents in their community involving young people in the early 1990's.

ADAC addresses the problems caused by the negative publicity and develop proactive programs for the area's youth. An example of this is the 18th Ward Alderman's Summer Basketball Tournament and the open gym at Hayes Park, the site of the most serious hate crimes. There is also a chess/checkers club for young people who do not play contact sports.

The ADAC leader heard about the Citizen Leaders program sponsored by Imagine Chicago. "I felt that with the Citizen Leaders program I would be able to begin networking to make it easier for all the kids to receive all the services available to them. Imagine Chicago gave a name to the steps that I had been following and helped me to focus my goal into a realistic plan. I wanted to create what I called the Total Quality Network."

The leader gathered a team to use the Citizen Leaders program to form the Total Quality Network and turned his attention to networking for specific events and programs as a way to bring independent organizations into collaboration.

The leader created summer programs for children to play sand volleyball, basketball, jump rope and other activities. In 1997 he began a back to school rally. The rally aimed at getting kids excited for the up coming school year and helped to end summer joyfully. The rally had games, prizes food and entertainment. It has grown in size, attracting about fifty people in its first year to around 900 in 1999.

These strategies have helped build many different collaborations on the Southwest side- the Council of Southwest Side Youth Organizations, which includes the Southwest Side Youth Collaborative and ADAC -collaborations of more than 30 community partners trying to make a difference for youth.

Who got involved and how they got involved:

The leader brought together community representatives, private institution representatives, public institution representatives, business representatives, and neighborhood volunteers such as the First Bank of Chicago and YouthNet. All of these groups brought their skills, resources and services –like time, money, ideas, space, and supplies.

How this project has made a difference:

There have been two major benefits of this project: 1. Many kids have now been given the chance to do something positive; there are more opportunities for youth to participate in events they enjoy. 2. It has brought together a variety of community partners into networks and collaborations.

What we learned:

It is necessary to focus on smaller goals that can be used as a step to something larger, instead of initially pursuing a broad, vague vision and the power of networking. To quote the leader, "The status quo can be changed when people band together in a commitment to make a difference."

Key things to know if trying to create a similar project:

Going through the Citizen Leaders program was very helpful. Adding a focus and name to what the leader was doing greatly improved his ability to accomplish his goals, especially when they had been only vaguely defined visions. It was very important to go

through each step; it changed abstractions into reality.

The cost of the project:

By the end of 1999, ADAC projects cost a total of \$8,000. Most of the necessary materials were provided by different organizations working in coalition with ADAC, such as the space donated by the First Chicago Bank or the supplies donated by the Department of Public Health. The \$500 CL funding got leveraged by contributions made by organizations totaling three to five thousand dollars and private donations of \$1,000. The leader would like ADAC to grow even larger with contributions of \$12,000 to \$14,000 dollars/year.



2. Neighborhood Arts Program

The Miracle Center: Located in the Humboldt Park district

In 1998, the Miracle Center was started as an organization focused on helping children develop talents, trust, and relationships through the performing arts. It was developed out of a children's summer camp program called Kings Kamp. It sought to provide children with a place where, according to their motto, "Children's Dreams Become a Reality."

The Story:

Mary Santana grew up in Humboldt Park in a family of 10. Her family would perform plays in empty parking lots. Mary said that performing gave her an outlet for her feelings and the confidence that she would need later in life.

In 1993, a deep faith inspired Mary to begin giving back to the Humboldt community. A year later she quit her job at a publishing

company to start a children's summer program called Kings Kamp. "Every time I look at these kids, I see myself. As a survivor of the streets, I feel I have the ability to help them to do more with their lives."

Mary began Kings Kamp in 1994 by handing out fliers at Maranatha Church where she worships. The fliers advertised that the program would take the kids on many different field trips. She began by charging \$55 for a six-week program. The children went to different museums, theaters, and the lake. She was also able to get free tickets to take the children to different sporting events.

"Yet, I had a bigger vision than Kings Kamp. I wanted to create a more comprehensive program based on faith that used the performing arts as the method to teach the kids skills they need to be successful in life. In 1998, she was able to start exploring that dream with the Citizen Leaders program at Imagine Chicago. Mary used Citizen Leaders to put her dreams on paper, Mary wrote down goals and the steps to achieve those goals. Imagine Chicago helped me put my vision down on paper. And once you write something down, then you can run with it."

What resulted was the Miracle Center, an organization that runs programs aiming to teach kids the performing arts at different partner organizations, like schools and churches. The instructors teach a class based on the particular talents they have in the arts. The programs vary in size and length, some run once a week, others every day.

The first session held at San Lucas Church was a six-week program where kids learned mime, drama, ballet, and hip-hop. The children came once a week and received instructions from adults who were already in the performing arts. At the end of the program, the students put on a performance for family and community members.

During this time, Mary was discussing ways to continue the work of the Miracle Center with other possible partners and organizations. In addition, Mary sat down with all of her instructors and began to plan strategically where the Miracle Center should go and how to get there, discussing and talking

with as many different people as possible about ways to continue and expand the program. "It's key is to go and talk to anyone someone drops you. I ran into somebody that I met three or four years ago, and they told me to talk with someone who has helped us continue the work. You never know what will happen."

Mary talked to a person at the Coalition of Latin American Ministers who connected her with an opportunity to run the Miracle Center at Lafayette Elementary School. The Chicago Public School System co-sponsored the Lafayette program. The Miracle Center began toward the end of the school year as an after-school program. It extended as a summer program to the end of July 1999 and provided an opportunity for the kids to learn drama, tap dance, hip-hop, or arts and crafts. Two Miracle Center programs were scheduled to begin at the end of the summer, and others organizations were inquiring about whether the Miracle Center can be run there.

On a typical day, the Miracle Center fills the Lafayette Elementary playground with laughter and smiles. Over by the garbage dumpster some girls are doing double-Dutch jump roping while others are talking and playing hand games. Boys are calling out that they are open for a touchdown in a football game with instructors. Other boys and girls are giggling and chasing each other around the park.

Later in the day, the kids begin to work in their classes, first running around the makeshift classrooms in the school auditorium. Then one of the instructors stands in front of the room and starts to talk. He doesn't need to shout at the kids to calm down and be quiet. He simply talks about what the plans are for the day. Quickly, the 50 kids stop running, quiet each other and listen to the instructions. Afterwards, the kids break off into their respective groups.

Mary has three goals with the kids. The first is to help them develop their talents to help them to grow up into something bigger. The second is to build relationships with each child. Too often, according to Mary, these children have never had anyone they can talk to and depend upon. Finally, Mary wants to develop trust with the children. She knows that if she is transparent with

the kids, they will slowly begin to trust her. With these three goals, Mary feels that she can really give these kids the advantage they need to do great things with their life.

It is hard to work with these kids sometimes. Many of them come in cold and hardened by their experiences on the street. They do not place much trust in people. To help deal with the children's problems, the instructors go to counseling classes. Many times the children soften quickly under the guidance of the adults. "I have seen kids who are very wild when they first come in but by the second week they give their instructor a big hug and tell them they love them."

The reward for the instructors many times comes at the end of the day or performance when one of the kids or parents comes up and says a heartfelt thank you. After one performance at the Miracle Center a mother came up to Mary with tears in her eyes and a large smile and said, "Mary, I'm the twins' mom. What you've done is amazing. Both of my girls have been diagnosed with learning disabilities and it has really hurt their work at school and their confidence in themselves. But over the past six weeks, I have really seen a difference. The Miracle Center has truly performed a Miracle. When I saw my daughters on stage, I began to cry because you have allowed them to do things that they could never have done before. Thank you so much, you are an angel."

Who got involved and how they got involved:

The original instructors involved with the Miracle Center were friends of Mary Santana. They became involved because they wanted to help youth. Each had a specialty in the arts, which they taught to the children. As the program has grown larger, some of the instructors are people who have approached Mary and asked if they could instruct a class. In addition to instructors, some parent and neighborhood volunteers have helped out in running the time in between classes, and preparing materials for classes. In addition, the Miracle Center has been working with Latino Ministers Coalition. They have aided in providing materials, funding, and staff.



How this project has made a difference:

This project has helped many youth to develop further talents in the performing arts. It has also aided children's self-esteem and confidence. The children in the arts and crafts class made a poster that said, "I love the tutors." Some children, who come to the program and will not allow anyone to touch them, are eagerly giving hugs to their instructors by the end. Also, many parents have approached Mary after performances and thanked her for the things she did with their child. "One child's disabled cousin came and wanted to be in class. He needed a chairlift to participate, but was able to. Things like that mean a lot," says Mary.

What was learned:

There are many important lessons learned from working with the children. One is to appreciate life. You are only a child once. You are only an adult once. I want to see them smiling. Also, in working with youth, adults need to be transparent. It is necessary to let them know how you feel. They are very good at sensing when something is not right. They many times interpret that feeling as a threat to them, unless it is explained. Another key is to build a relationship with the children. When they know and respect the adult, they are much more likely to listen. It makes each session more productive for each party. In organizing the project, one key is to use time well. Organize everything, have a schedule, and plan the right classes at the right times. This has to be balanced.

What are the key things to tell someone trying to create a similar project:

The key to getting any program started is to make partnerships and networks. Whenever a name is shared, you should call the person to introduce yourself and talk to them. Many times that

person can be crucial to the next phase. Don't procrastinate. If you wait until the end, it will not happen.

3. Community Garden

Community Garden and Gazebo

The original project goal was to expand the garden at 4423 W. Maypole and build benches and a gazebo, involving nearby residents in the planning and building and providing space for neighborhood residents to meet once completed.

The story:

Ms. Minnie Smith and Ms. Mary Burns like flowers. In 1994 they planted flowers in front of each neighbor's house on the block. With each neighbor's approval, they installed flower boxes around the front trees of all of the houses, and planted 3-4 different kinds of flowers, both perennials and annuals. This was a start for each neighbor to take pride in cleaning and taking care of their own property. "We wanted to make the neighborhood beautiful," they said.

The neighbors welcomed the efforts and thought that the flowers made the neighborhood prettier. Many neighbors, however, said that they could not take care of the flowers. Some did not have time, some did not know how to care for flowers, and some were not physically able to do so. While some of the neighbors watered, weeded and replanted the flowers, Ms. Burns and Ms. Smith continued to care for the majority of flower boxes on the block, because their owners did not do so.

"We thought that planting these flowers would get more people to participate on the block and in the block club. Over the last five years, some people participated more a little more, but many people never started participating in the block. We were surprised that more people don't get involved. About 10-12 people come to the typical monthly block club meeting."

"In 1995 and 1996, a couple of abandoned buildings were torn down leaving two vacant lots on the block. Abandoned cars and

garbage began accumulating on these lots. That's when we started our community gardens. We got the cars taken off, and we got woodchips laid on the lots. We bought truckloads of dirt and spread them on the lot. And we joined the Green Corps program which helped us turn the lots into gardens. We now have three gardens on the block, the latest of which we started last year."

Both Ms. Smith and Ms. Burns planned for the garden to be a community meeting place. "We decided we needed a gazebo in the middle of the garden. A gazebo would turn this garden into a community meeting place. Parents could sit in it and watch their children play. We could also hold block club meetings, birthday parties, and weddings. Our garden and gazebo would be open for different people on the block in the community to use."

Their block club helped plan the layout of the gazebo. They negotiated with Home Depot for a deal on the materials, and they built the gazebo with help from mild spells during the winter. A neighbor who was good with buildings took the lead, and several people helped built the gazebo in November, 1998. An autumn storm later blew off the roof, but a few people helped rebuild the roof by the end of the month.

The opening celebration of the gazebo was held in May, 1999. "This celebration is the first time we have invited people to the gazebo. It is now open for birthday parties, meetings, and weddings!" proclaimed Ms. Smith and Ms. Burns.

Who got involved and how they got involved

Ms. Burns and Ms. Smith were the main people caring for the flowers and the gardens, with help from the block club and a few neighbors. "We can always count on the kids to help us out, especially if we have hot dogs and chips available. A couple times volunteer groups from a corporate insurance company have come to help us. Most of the work we do on our own. I knew more about gardens, so I taught Ms. Smith. She learned a lot and is real dedicated. Now, we both know quite a bit about gardens. The two of us have always been the main people involved."

How the project has made a difference

Ms. Smith: "I have always visualized having a flower garden and a

beautiful neighborhood. This is the fulfillment of a dream. I would talk about it with Ms. Burns, and we would get excited, and then we would have to go out there and work on the garden. It's been real important to have someone to talk to about this to keep us both going. She also gives good advice."

Ms. Burns: "I have always liked to garden. I retired first and was so glad when Ms. Smith retired so that she could help me with the garden. She's a good worker. These efforts help beautify the neighborhood. There is no more trash or abandoned cars. It makes the neighborhood better, safer. There are less places for people to get involved with drugs. We thought the gardens would get more people involved in the well-being of the neighborhood. A few people participate a bit more, but the flowers and the garden haven't really gotten the block involved. People always seem to have some excuse why they can't help. I've stopped asking now."

What we have learned

The key to getting kids involved is having barbeques, hot dogs, chips and block club parties. It's been very difficult to get adults more involved. Some of them are not physically able to help. I've also learned that mulch can turn into beautiful grass after a couple of years.

What we would tell someone trying to create a similar project

We didn't know how to start a garden. Green Corps helped us quite a bit. They taught us some of the basics and they gave us shrubs and even helped put them in for us. Talk to people on the blocks. They may not come out, but you have to keep talking and continuously asking. Sometimes they surprise you. It takes a lot of work, and some of your own money.

How much the project cost

To maintain a garden, you have to buy dirt, flowers, shrubs, and the fence around the lot. This takes a lot of money to start, and less to maintain every year. The fence around the lot was \$600 when we first installed it. The gazebo, picnic table, and bench cost about \$800. We had to get some of the materials twice because the storm blew the roof off the first time.

The Following Case Studies and Training Materials are Available to Download

Citizen Leaders: Inspiring Community Innovation — a case study of the Citizen Leaders program published in 1999.

Citizen Leaders: A Guide to Running the Citizen Leaders Program

Sect.1; Sect.2; Sect.3; Sect.4; Sect.5; Sect.6; Sect.7; Sect.8 — a training manual so that the Citizen Leaders program may be replicated. The manual is in eight sections