

## IMAGINE CHICAGO

A Chicago Case Study in Intergenerational Appreciative Inquiry (1995)

by Bliss W. Browne

*Imagination is more important than knowledge.*  
-Albert Einstein

Cities echo creation. They are a living symbol of our ability to imagine and to create, to turn our visions into tangible products. They are an inventory of the possible, an incarnation of human capacity and diversity. Cities concentrate forces of light and darkness, and hold the world in miniature.

Reflecting on one's relationship to the city raises questions of meaning and mystery at the heart of human life and community. What does it mean to share a place with people from all parts of the world? As citizens of a common city, for what and whom are we responsible? What powers govern our common life? How has our own experience shaped what we see as possible and worthwhile? What is our own vision as creators in the city in which we live?

Aristotle said, "*A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey it.*" What might happen if all of Chicago's citizens were encouraged to give public expression to their imagination about a healthy future for the city as a whole, and were invited to claim their own role in bringing that vision to life? Is it not likely that giving public voice and support to deeply held civic visions will help create Chicago as a more vibrant home for the world's people?

### MISSION

**IMAGINE CHICAGO is a non-profit organization, created in 1992, and dedicated to cultivating hope and civic commitment. It enlists young people, and others who want to make a difference, to bring to light the experience, hopes, and aspirations of Chicago's citizens and to act on that imagination in ways that benefit individuals, communities, and the city as a whole. This work is done in partnership with local organizations-- schools, churches, community groups, cultural institutions-- and serves as the catalyst to encourage people to think about themselves as creators of the city's future, and to form communities in which that future can be created and the ownership of that future shared.**

IMAGINE CHICAGO is designed as a partnership between community builders, educators, and the city's young people. Visions, values and accountability are shared; collaborative, creative leadership is encouraged. There is little likely to be more motivating to the city's youth than their confidence in a viable future, based on their own direct experience of having a role to play in shaping the city's future as a positive one for themselves and others.

### Project History and Background

IMAGINE CHICAGO arose out of Bliss Browne's interest in what would be necessary to create a vision and action plan for the city's future that was owned by the people of Chicago. Working as a Division Head at First Chicago in corporate banking and as an

Episcopal priest, with well-established civic interests in community development, Browne began to question how to stimulate civic imagination on behalf of Chicago's future. She convened a group of 65 experienced community builders actively engaged in civic, corporate, religious, and neighborhood activities in Chicago for a 2-day conference, which took place in October of 1991. Together, they explored "Faithful Economic Imagination", or how individuals might collectively steward the city's resources to sustain life for everyone. The highlight of the conference turned out to be an exercise in which people were challenged to imagine visions of Chicago's future considered to be ultimately worthy of human commitment, and to identify what would be necessary for those dreams to become reality.

On the strength of the energy and conviction which emerged from this conference for many of its participants, Browne resigned from a sixteen year corporate career to work full-time on discovering what might be an effective process for "faithful economic imagination" to become a way of life in Chicago. Browne dedicated nine months to learning Chicago history, listening to people's concerns and hopes about what might constitute an effective visioning and economic development process in Chicago. Browne visited other cities with emerging citywide initiatives (such as Atlanta and Pittsburgh), and worked with the Council of Religious Leaders on articulating their vision for Chicago's future. During that time, an informal network of Chicago leaders began to gather around the questions at the heart of Browne's inquiry. In September 1992, twenty of them -- educators, corporate and media executives, philanthropists, community organizers, youth developers, economists, religious leaders, social service providers -- were convened as a design team for the project, which Browne had already initially conceptualized as "Imagine Chicago". The MacArthur Foundation supported Browne to pursue the work of designing the project's first phase, testing the project's viability, and getting the project organized and institutionalized.

From September 1992 to May 1993, the design team created a process of civic inquiry as the starting point for engaging the city of Chicago in a broad-based conversation about its future. Two ideas emerged from the design phase which shaped the ultimate process design: first, that the pilot should attempt to discover what gives life to the city, and second, that it should provide significant leadership opportunities for youth, who most clearly represent the city's future.

It was hoped from the outset that positive intergenerational civic conversation could provide a bridge between the experience and wisdom of seasoned community builders, and the energy and commitment of youth searching for purpose, yielding deeper insights into the collective future of the community.

Two types of pilots were designed and implemented in 1993-1994: a citywide "appreciative inquiry" process to gather Chicago stories and commitments, and a series of community-based and led processes. In each case, the intent was to give young adults and community builders in Chicago opportunities to share their hopes and commitments in a setting of mutual respect. The process was designed to use intergenerational teams, led by a young person in the company of an adult mentor, to interview business, civic, and cultural leaders, about the future of their communities and of Chicago, using a process of appreciative inquiry. The youth would then distill the content for public view in ways that would help inspire public action, and reinforce commitment. The premise was that young people could be effective agents of hope and inspiration, if they were released from the negative stereotypes in which they held themselves and were held by others.

Each pilot had the following phases:

Phase	Activities	Participant Skills
Phase I	-foundation for the project -developing interview questions -recruiting and training youth and adult volunteers	-planning/organizing -presentation skills -identifying key community resources -interviewing -designing appreciative questions
Phase II	-interviews scheduled and accomplished -follow-up process (thank you notes, etc.)	-presentation skills -analyzing data -interpersonal skills -communications skills
Phase III	-interviews concluded -compilation of data begun	-synthesizing data -organizing data -planning events
Phase IV	-completion/celebration with interviewees, students and adult volunteers	-planning, organizing events -presentation skills
Phase V	-evaluation and feedback	-designing evaluation -sharing learning -accountability to constituencies

### **Citywide Pilot Implementation and Feedback**

The citywide interview process involved approximately 50 young people who interviewed about 140 Chicago citizens who were recognized by members of IMAGINE CHICAGO's design team as "Chicago glue". These included artists, media executives, civic and grassroots leaders, politicians, business and professional leaders, and other young people. The interviewees represented over half of Chicago's neighborhoods. Young people were principally recruited from the Chicago Area Project, the Chicago Cluster Initiative, Public Allies, candidates known to the Urban Teacher Corps, and various local schools. Some young people became involved through the involvement of their friends.

The interviews were conducted between the summer of 1993 and the spring of 1994. A letter of introduction was sent from IMAGINE CHICAGO explaining the process, and requesting an appointment for a young person. Appointments were set up, and travel arranged, through IMAGINE CHICAGO.

Interviewers were given modest coaching in interviewing skills, and equipped with a set of questions designed by the IMAGINE CHICAGO design team. They were encouraged to ask other questions that arose for them in the conduct of the interview, and to engage the interviewee in as personal and positive a conversation as possible. They were also required, as part of the interview process, to send a follow up thank you letter to the person interviewed summarizing the conversation, what they learned, and their appreciation for the work the interviewee was doing in the life of the city.

In the citywide pilot, it became clear that appreciative conversations help broaden the participants' view of what is possible, both within themselves and within the city. Looking into the face of a young person, adult leaders found themselves thinking hard about the future and what they could do to ensure that it would be a bright one for the coming generation. Young people learned the power of their own commitment and how to make a difference.

Once the first round of interviews had been completed, a group of ten young adults spent several weeks summarizing the data for public view. This summary was shared in three public events: the anniversary dinner of the Center for Neighborhood Technology on December 2, 1993; the Christian Laity of Chicago annual forum in February, 1994; and a citywide IMAGINATION CELEBRATION at Preston Bradley Hall on May 7, 1994, to which all interviewers and their interviewees were invited. Ninety people were in attendance at that event.

*A data summary of the citywide interviews is available.*

### **IMAGINE CHICAGO CITYWIDE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (1993-1994)**

1. How long have you lived in Chicago? In this community.
  - a. What first brought your family here?
  - b. What's it like for you to live in this community?
2. When you think about the whole city of Chicago, are there particular places or people or images that represent the city to you?
3. Thinking back over your Chicago memories, what have been real high points for you as a citizen of this city?
4. Why did these experiences mean so much to you?
5. How would you describe the quality of life in Chicago today?
6. What changes in the city would you most like to see?
  - a. What do you imagine your own role might be in helping to make this happen?
  - b. Who could work with you?
7. Close your eyes and imagine Chicago as you most want it to be a generation from now. What is it like? What do you see and hear? What are you proudest of having accomplished?
8. As you think back over this conversation, what images stand out for you as capturing your hopes for this city's future?
9. What do you think would be an effective process for getting people across the city talking and working together on behalf of Chicago's future? Whom would you want to draw into a Chicago conversation?

## **Community Pilots**

In addition to the citywide pilot which was run by IMAGINE CHICAGO, there were three principal community pilots, in Little Village/Lawndale, Grand Boulevard, and Englewood. In the community pilots, IMAGINE CHICAGO worked as a collaborator with local organizations. In the case of the first two, the local collaborator was the Chicago Cluster Initiative. In the case of the Englewood pilot, the local partner was the African American Leadership Partnership, and its member Englewood churches. IMAGINE CHICAGO was invited in to help develop the capacity and interest of young people in gathering hope and civic commitment in ways that might inspire collaborative action. Intergenerational appreciative inquiry was the tool used to engage the community's values and vision. The intent was both to gather important information and perspective and to build critical relationships that might change what was possible.

The first pilot, done in Lawndale/Little Village in October 1993, with almost no notice or training, involved 20 younger children, in the company of Urban Peace Corps volunteers, in interviews of local community builders. Different ethnic communities were linked in constructive ways. African- American youth learned to respect Latino leaders from a neighboring community, which they had held in suspicion. Latino youth learned that African-American neighbors cared about their community. One of the leaders who was interviewed framed the thank you letter she received from her young interviewer (which summarized her expressed hopes and commitments) and put it on the wall of her office. IMAGINE CHICAGO learned to design materials for training, debriefing, and follow-up that could be built upon in other settings. The young mentors involved in Lawndale were sufficiently engaged by the process to volunteer to conduct the training and implementation of a similar process in Grand Boulevard. They did this without IMAGINE CHICAGO's on-site help, except for training support from other young people who had been involved with the IMAGINE CHICAGO citywide process.

In the Grand Boulevard pilot, held in January 1994, a dozen or more elementary children from Robert Taylor Homes were involved in community interview training and visioning exercises. Unfortunately, the disbanding of the staff of the Chicago Cluster Initiative (who were the local implementers of the process) short-circuited the community interview implementation. But the young people who had been trained were sufficiently confident in what they had learned that they were able to serve as facilitators of a suburban Christian Laity of Chicago conference in February entitled "IMAGINE CHICAGO!" with youth from the Chicago Area Project. The event changed the image that many of the adult attendees carried of "inner-city kids from tough neighborhoods" and what they were capable of accomplishing.

IMAGINE CHICAGO was also invited to work with the African American Leadership Partnership, a coalition of 62 black churches on the South and West sides. AALP, and its executive director Leon Finney, were captivated by the possibility of using IMAGINE CHICAGO to link young people and appreciative inquiry into community assessment and outreach that might be done by local churches. IMAGINE CHICAGO's training of the community organizing staff of The Woodlawn Organization resulted in their reconfiguring their community outreach programs to include teenagers as organizing partners, and rethinking their organizing strategy to focus on constructive issues.

IMAGINE CHICAGO worked with AALP in Englewood from June to August of 1994. IMAGINE CHICAGO was brought in to teach 90 teenagers and their supervisors, all employees of the Mayor's Employment and Training program, a way of thinking about community capacity building, with young adults as vital leadership resources.

For two months of the summer program, IMAGINE CHICAGO worked closely with one of the five church groups, approximately twenty youth from Christian Covenant Outreach Church (CCOC) to develop and create a community organizing process to get a

YouthNet for Englewood. To bring local youth organizations and local community leaders together, the Christian Covenant youth organized a presentation for community leaders, so that the youth could share their own vision and action plan for the community and also solicit the support to make the YouthNet a reality. These dedicated youth also developed an appreciative inquiry protocol around the YouthNet. Before and after holding the community organizing meeting, the youth from Christian Covenant conducted appreciative interviews across their community to gain further support and involvement from residents.

The possibility of applying for and securing a YouthNet center gave focus and energy to the community outreach work the young adults wanted to do. This was the first IMAGINE CHICAGO pilot that had in place a tangible community organizing goal. Under the leadership of Pastor Troy Garner and his wife, Debra, from CCOC, the youth recruited a variety of community organizations and individuals to join together to form a youth collaborative. The YouthNet vision brought together scores of community organizations, both public and private under a new youth collaborative, which is itself the designated youth component of the enterprise community application from the city of Chicago. Below are quotes describing the impact of IMAGINE CHICAGO on them personally as well as the broader community.

"IMAGINE CHICAGO has stirred up our neighborhood. It has gotten community people, activists, youth centers, police, churches, all stirred up about something positive that can become a reality. People who have never been together have come together to do something positive...to bridge a gap between young people and adults. It has sparked energy in Englewood. If IMAGINE CHICAGO hadn't told us about YouthNet, we wouldn't have known...and I wouldn't have gotten such boldness to work on it. It has sparked hope...We have worked together; we have collaborated, young and old. It took all of us to put the program and proposal together. It took all of us. Now everyone is looking forward to getting a YouthNet. We know it's going to happen, because we've become one family, everyone encouraging one another. Now it's going to become a reality. If IMAGINE CHICAGO hadn't come, I don't know if we would have tried. Thanks be to God...This has formed respect for our young people, that they can get an idea and bring it to life."

--Debra Garner, Christian Covenant Outreach Church

"Just when I needed it most, IMAGINE CHICAGO provided a very positive outlook on how to view things in a positive way instead of negative. Through appreciative inquiry, it enabled me to mobilize more effectively and to be able to get the most out of talking and working with people."

--Yvonne Orr, The Woodlawn Organization

"Watching the impact that IMAGINE CHICAGO has had on Christian Covenant Outreach Church and the Englewood community is very powerful and telling about the strength of the appreciative inquiry process."

-Rev. Leon Finney, The Woodlawn Organization

"IMAGINE CHICAGO taught me the power of networking. With the skill of networking, there has been a great change in Englewood. It has formed collaboration that would not have been. For example, there are now greater connections between different pastors and churches, and even the Chicago Park System."

-Pastor Troy Garner, CCOC

## **SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES TO DATE**

In its 1993-1994 intergenerational city interviews, IMAGINE CHICAGO played a generative role in the lives of many Chicago citizens from different ages, cultures, creeds, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In late 1994, a formal evaluation gathered feedback on the effects of IMAGINE CHICAGO's appreciative inquiry process on those involved. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in November, 1994, with participants from the citywide interview process as well as from the least extensive community-based pilot. IMAGINE CHICAGO's Board of Directors also did its own evaluation. The Board noted two distinct levels of impact: visible outcomes and products (concrete), and "subterranean" outcomes (less measurable but perhaps more significant). In both tangible and subtle ways, IMAGINE CHICAGO has inspired hope and a sense of commitment and dedication to a greater Chicago community.

**Three outcomes of the interview process are worthy of particular note as being of potential importance in reconstituting a shared sense of civic community:**

### **1 Shared identity:**

The conversations facilitated by IMAGINE CHICAGO brought people together across boundaries of age, race, experience, and geography to reflect together on their relationship to the city as a whole. The connections that were made through IMAGINE CHICAGO were extremely positive because the meetings were grounded in mutual respect and appreciation, and solicited positive visions and stories which people were eager to share. Participants found their Chicago citizenship provided common ground.

These appreciative intergenerational conversations prompted a mindset shift among many participants. Participants, who may have expected to feel separated from their conversation partners by age, culture, or background, instead experienced powerful and positive relationship connections. This, in turn, shifted their sense of possibility about their own and their community's future. They began to understand the commonalities between their visions for the city's future, and be encouraged by their respective commitments. Experiencing an "undivided" Chicago conversation" seems to have nurtured hope in the possibility of sharing ownership of the city's future. The process itself modeled the hope held by many participants, and expressed by one, of "a new Chicago in which all people can (and would) participate." As another commented, "it was helpful to pull together all of our visions and create understanding for those who had not shared your experiences."

### **2 Intergenerational Partnership and Accountability:**

It was important that the interviews were conducted by intergenerational teams led by young people. The conversation opened lines of communication. Both the young people and the adults involved commented that they gained an appreciative understanding of the other generation. As Addie Wyatt said, "Yes, I gained hope too. The thing we lived for...hopefully will be shared by the young person and enhanced through them". A young person commented "It has made me think about the youth and how much people care about us". The adults talked about their understanding that youth are vital partners in creating a vision of the city's future, and that youth need to be viewed as community organizing partners. In the citywide interview process, a frequent interview response to the question "What image captures your hopes for the city's future?" was for the adult interviewee to point to the young person and say "You!"

### **3 Creating new possibilities and methods of civic conversation:**

In addition to gaining a shared hope and identity across a well-documented intergenerational divide, many participants benefited from learning the power of appreciative inquiry. Shifting civic conversation away from problem solving to collective visioning about a shared future created energy and opened new possibilities. Learning to ask and answer positive questions, and to engage in active listening, was a subtle and welcome shift for many participants. A significant by-product of the process was an obvious collective ease and goodwill among all those who had participated, which was evidenced in the May 7, 1994 gathering of all those who had participated in the citywide interview process. Constructive civic conversation, in a diverse group, seems to create momentum and interest in making commitments to bring the visions to life. A number of people who were involved in the interview process are now using the process of appreciative inquiry within their own organizations. Organizations continue to come to IMAGINE CHICAGO to be trained in the process.

It was suggested that these changes were caused by the contagious mindset of positive question/positive image/positive action that IMAGINE CHICAGO is spreading. This belief brought to the surface deeply held hopes and values, and created connections among people who could band together to bring the hopes to fruition. In some cases, that led to very practical projects in which the hope became focused, as in the formation of an Englewood Youth Collaborative, and its application to be a YouthNet center. In other cases, it led to less immediate results but demonstrably improved communication skills and community interest among those involved.

#### **Other outcomes to date include:**

##### **Youth participation results:**

- Ownership of greater community
- Empowerment to change conditions in the city, create young vision for Chicago
- Intimate connections in a broader community
- Successful team work demonstrated through planning and organizing
- More ease in traditional social situations
- Greater self-esteem and self-confidence
- Self-expression and creativity demonstrated in public speaking opportunities
- Appreciative understanding of older generations

##### **Adult participation results:**

- Opportunity to express hopes and dreams for the City
- Potential to influence a newly inclusive community
- Renewed commitment to making a difference
- A (re)awakened sense of accountability to one's own possibilities
- Appreciative understanding of the younger generation
- More confidence regarding young people as positive civic resources

##### **Community results:**

- Higher visibility for civic issues / civic conversation
- Development of young civic leadership
- Adoption of appreciative inquiry / appreciative listening as powerful methodologies for organizational development by many organizations
- Intergenerational new collaborations
- Shared ownership of Chicago's future
- Identification and connection of people willing to invest in that future

- Reservoir of goodwill and energy that can be tapped in the future

### **REFLECTIONS: WHERE IT ALL LED**

The power of the above process has been summarized. Its limitations also became clear over time. Because IMAGINE CHICAGO was a new and small civic organization when it sponsored the citywide interview pilot, it proved difficult to move the process from inquiry to action. There was simply no "holding structure" or institution to do that. During 1995, IMAGINE CHICAGO continued to work in partnership with local organizations to design and test ways to engage Chicago youth in civic projects that challenge their imaginations, enrich their communities, and build their confidence in a viable future. But IMAGINE CHICAGO learned that the appreciative intergenerational interview process would be more effective if it happened within structures that could move more readily to action.

IMAGINE CHICAGO therefore created a number of initiatives targeted at community-based and educational institutions that move through all stages of the appreciative inquiry process and accomplish practical outcomes consistent with the institutions' missions.

IMAGINE CHICAGO encourages individuals and institutions to focus constructively on their capacities and opportunities to make a difference as they,

*understand* what is;

*imagine* what could be, and

*create* what will be.

Working in collaborations and consultative partnerships with schools, museums, community and governmental organizations and communities of faith, IMAGINE CHICAGO creates opportunities for dialogue about the city's future that invite creative reflection and stimulate collaborative action. These partnerships take different forms -- public school curriculum development, public forums, grassroots leadership development, and coordination of intergenerational collaborations. All reflect three core processes:

- **DIALOGUE** across generational, geographic, racial, economic and cultural boundaries.
- **FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT**, structured presentations and blueprints for understanding, imagining and creating Chicago; and
- **NETWORK FORMATION**, to link individuals and organizations to organize creative projects that meet the needs of their communities, as they perceive them.

IMAGINE CHICAGO is eager to identify and expand its partners in this work. For more information, please contact: [bliss@imaginechicago.org](mailto:bliss@imaginechicago.org)