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The DaVinci Center for Community Progress: Making the Community More Liveable¹

By

Helmut E. Reinhardt & Josephine A. Ruggiero

Abstract

There are many innovations, projects, and programs which can make a community more liveable. The elements that they have in common are 1) the vision of the founder (or co-founders), 2) a dedicated connection to the community and populations in which the innovation or project is located, 3) the necessary social skills and contacts of the founder(s) and other key people involved in the innovation, 4) hard work, and 5) funding sources that continue over time to keep the services (or project) going, as well as to add services as needs change. The DaVinci Center for Community Progress, in Providence, RI, is an excellent example of how to make a community more liveable for diverse populations for whom it has provided services since it opened its doors in 1972. The DaVinci Center is a multi-purpose facility based on the settlement house model in regard to many of the services it offers. It differs from the settlement house model in that the DaVinci Center staff does not live at the Center. The Center was co-founded by John DeLuca who has also served as its longtime Executive Director. The content for this article was gathered, in part, through a lengthy, structured interview both authors conducted with John at the Center, a review of written materials produced by the Center, and information provided on the Center's website.

Keywords: DaVinci Center for Community Progress, multi-purpose center, settlement house model, diverse populations.

INTRODUCTION

Social activists are familiar with the existence of settlement houses. When sociologists and other social scientists think of settlement houses in historical perspective, we think of the hordes of immigrants that entered many of the large cities of the U. S. in the 19th and early 20th centuries. We also think specifically of the city of Chicago and of *Hull House* co-founded by Jane Addams and her friend, Ellen Gates Starr, in 1889. Although Hull House was the most famous of the settlement houses in the U. S., it was *not* the first settlement house in the U. S.

In 1886, Stanton Coit founded the *Neighborhood Guild*, later renamed *University Settlement*. This first settlement house in America was located on the lower East Side in New York City. Beginning with the founding of Toynbee Hall in 1884, in South London, settlement houses operated on the philosophy that

students and people of wealth should “settle” in poverty-stricken neighborhoods both to provide services to help improve the daily quality of life, as well as to evaluate conditions and work for social reform. (<http://www.unhny.org/about/history>)

The “people of wealth” in the above statement referred to middle-class Londoners. The social reformers involved in the first settlement house focused on providing social services and education to the working-class poor in South London.

The number of settlement houses in the U. S. continued to grow. By 1887, 74 settlement houses had been established. By 1890, that number had more than quadrupled to over 400. Historical records document that “Forty percent of settlement houses were in Boston, Chicago, and New York—the leading industrial centers—but most small cities had at least one settlement.” (<http://www.unhny.org/about/history>)

¹This article is based, in part, on a personal interview both authors conducted with John De Luca on May 26, 2016.

ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/settlement.htmlv)

Until the mid-1900s, the staff of settlement houses in the U.S. lived in the same buildings in which neighborhood residents participated in programs and activities offered there. Living in close proximity to the people it served was an important aspect of the settlement house model. Living in the neighborhood allowed the staff of settlement houses to view the people who participated in its programs as “neighbors,” rather than as “clients,” thus creating a shared sense of community among staff and “neighbors”. Even today, it is common for staff who provide community-based services at multi-purpose centers to live in the community which they serve. (<http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/settlement-houses/hull-house/>)

PRINCIPAL FUNCTIONS OF SETTLEMENT HOUSES

The principal function of settlement houses in the U.S. was to aid immigrants in assimilating into their new society. Many immigrants needed to learn English and to get and keep jobs. Settlement Houses, therefore, included teaching classes in adult education and English language, providing schooling for children of immigrants, organizing job clubs, offering afterschool recreational activities, initiating public health services, and advocating for improved housing for their poor and working class “neighbors.” Hull House also provided social services which focused on reducing the effects of poverty. These services included a homeless shelter, public kitchen, a daycare center, and public baths. (<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/settlement.htmlv>).

In the early years of the 20th century, leaders of New York City settlement houses assisted in establishing a national organization of settlement houses, called the *National Federation of Settlements* (NFS). This entity was known as *United Neighborhood Centers of America* (UNCA) for 100 years. UNCA membership consisted of 150 neighborhood centers in 57 cities and 22 states. (<http://www.unhny.org/about/history>). Several years ago, UNCA merged with another national service organization, the *Alliance for Strong Families and Communities*.

John De Luca, a co-founder of the DaVinci Center served a nine year term on the Board of Directors of UNCA at UNCA’s invitation. With his professional experience, as a trained counselor, he has interacted with many individuals connected to settlement houses throughout the country. John had a unique opportunity to incorporate the vision of the settlement house into the DaVinci Center.

THE DAVINCI CENTER FOR COMMUNITY PROGRESS

The DaVinci Center is a multi-purpose center based on the settlement house and social welfare agency concept in a non-partisan environment. This center is one of 11 multi-purpose centers in Providence, RI. The DaVinci Center was started in 1972. At that time, John was a school counselor and a Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) advisor at St. Ann’s Church, the Catholic church which anchored the neighborhood. He and four other individuals who were also concerned about challenges to the social fabric of the Charles Street/Wanskuck area of Providence, formed a corporation. John stated that, according to the 1970 U. S. Census of the population, the three census tracts (27, 28, and 29) comprising the Wanskuck and Charles Street areas consisted of 18,000 people and was 74% Italian-American. He described the neighborhood as a warm and compassionate one. However, the population of the Wanskuck-Charles Street area was in great need of resources and social services. Teenager drop-out in schools had grown to an alarming rate. Businesses were going bankrupt. Eighteen of the 35 storefronts were boarded-up. Those who knew the neighborhood well saw that teens were dropping out of school. The community was becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Families were struggling. Senior citizens were lonely and financially strapped. St. Ann’s Roman Catholic Church was still the heart and soul of the community, but economic and social issues of the time were challenging the integrity of the neighborhood.

John had a vision of what the community he came from needed and he had the determination, social skills, contacts and expertise to make the DaVinci Center a long-term reality. To counter the negative images portrayed in the Godfather movies, the Center was named for Leonardo da (from) Vinci, a positive role model and well-known figure in Italian history

and culture. Leonardo's many areas of interest and achievement included inventing, painting, sculpting, architecture, mathematics, science, engineering, music, literature, writing, history, anatomy, astronomy, botany and cartography. As a role model, Leonardo was a man of many interests, talents, and accomplishments -- truly a Renaissance Man and a role model for all time.

The DaVinci Center first opened as a rent-free storefront drop-in center located at 525 Charles Street in 1972. It then expanded to a second storefront where they extended services to senior citizens and a third store-front. The current building, where the Da Vinci Center has been located since 1978, was designed by John, his staff, and Board of Directors. The building was funded by a community development federal grant and initially accredited by the United Way of Rhode Island. John became Executive Director of the DaVinci Center in 1976, and has held the title ever since. With its small full-time staff of 12 people and 30 unpaid volunteers along with occasional interns from Rhode Island College and Community College of Rhode Island, the Center continues to provide substantial services to the community which has continued to become more racially and ethnically diverse over time.

The mission statement of the DaVinci Center is to serve the surrounding community by assisting its residents with education, job training, counseling, housing issues, and senior services. The Center has also run valuable first-time home buyers' seminars and AARP Driver Safety Program courses.

The Center serves approximately 5,000 to 6,000 *different* individuals a year. John made a point of saying that many people who come to the Center have more than one need. So, if one adds up the number of times each person the Center serves receives a service, this number totals, on average, between 100,000 to 125,000 *service units* each year.

Service users range in age from young to middle-age to older residents of the community. The Center brings in people through its very effective website, referrals agencies throughout the state of Rhode Island, and announcements in local papers. Many people who come to the DaVinci Center need basic resources including food assistance, clothing, help with getting their G. E. D. so that they can access to jobs, housing assistance, and English language literacy. At one time, the Center also

provided health care assistance.

BUDGET AND FUNDING SOURCES

Since it opened its doors, the annual operating budget of the DaVinci Center has ranged from \$320,000 to \$1,000,000. Funding sources include the federal and state governments and private donations. Private donations have become especially important in recent years. Sadly, the Center is struggling financially, with local, state, and federal funding consistently late in forwarding payments due. Donations from small corporations and private individuals help the cash flow problem. However, more consistent and better income sources and grants are needed to keep the essential work of this important Center going. It seems accurate to say that the growing number of neighbors in need of various services outweighs the financial ability of the DaVinci Center to provide all the services it would like to offer.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

At the end of the interview, John was asked to complete the following statement: *The DaVinci Center makes the community a more liveable one by _____* (fill in the blank).

He promptly stated that the *DaVinci Center makes the community a more liveable one* by "being all things to all people. When they come to the door, either we give them what they need or we refer them to someone who can," He was also asked to *rate the community's perception of the DaVinci Center on a scale of from 1 (very positive) to 5 (very negative)*. John answered without hesitation: "Very positively. They love the Center. This is their home."

No one could have summed up people's view of the DaVinci Center better than its co-founder and longtime Executive Director. John should know because he has dedicated more than 40 years of his life to identifying and addressing the needs of his "neighbors" in the community he loves. He and his staff and Board have worked very hard to make the DaVinci Center an outstanding model of enhancing the liveability the Wanskuck-Charles Street community for thousands of neighbors.

The DaVinci Center is located at 470 Charles Street, Providence, RI 02904 USA. For more information about the DaVinci Center, the services it offers, or about making a donation to help to support the services those who come to the Center need, visit their website at www.davincicenter.org. Donations can be mailed to 470 Charles Street, Providence, RI 02904 in care of John DeLuca.

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About the Authors: **Helmut E. Reinhardt** first met John DeLuca when he started to teach AARP Driver Safety courses for senior citizens at the DaVinci Center in spring, 2004. Helmut continues to offer this course at the Center. **Josephine A. Ruggiero** met John several years ago when her younger daughter served as a “Bingo” volunteer at the Center. Josephine has been a social activist “at heart” from childhood and an advocate for positive change for underserved populations at the micro and macro levels of society for decades.