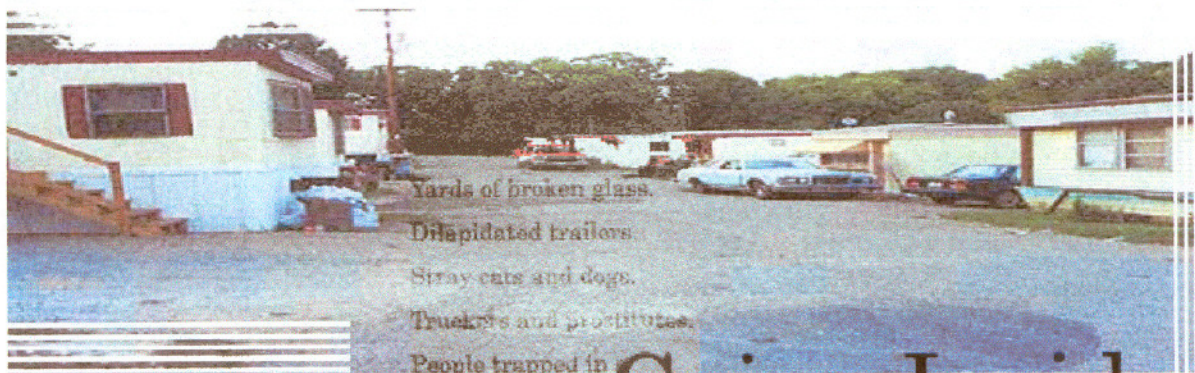


horizon: people and possibilities

print  email   

Yards of broken glass.
 Dilapidated trailers.
 Stray cats and dogs.
 Truckers and prostitutes.
 People trapped in

moving past the stereotypes to build bridges in tennessee's trailer parks.

Going Inside

by monica a. coleman

Underserved, poor Whites. Yards of broken glass. Dilapidated trailers. Stray cats and dogs. Truckers and prostitutes. People trapped in a dead-end existence.

I had come to my new job with the same images of trailer parks that rule the popular imagination. My love for community work, a natural affinity for the nonprofit world, and a need for cash had led me to the Neighborhoods Resource Center in Nashville. My task as a new hire for a very small organization? *Work with neighborhoods to help form and develop organizations where residents work to meet the goals that they define for their communities. Oh, and you are assigned to the trailer-park project.*

It would have been easier to teach 15 6-year-olds to build a fire. I mean, that's what had set me on this path, in the first place. As a teenager, I had not been allowed to work for pay (by fiat of my father, who had *had* to work as a boy to help support seven younger siblings). So I had spent my summers volunteering for the Girl Scouts, bonding with a different troop every two weeks. For that place and space in time, I was able to be to those girls what my own camp counselors had been to me.

seriously seeking fulfillment

Since high school, I'd worked for various grassroots agencies. All my real-life experience fell into the "overworked-and-underpaid" category, but I remained committed to nonprofit work for one overarching reason: At the end of every day, I knew I touched the life of somebody. That's what I told the people who hired me, and that's what I had come to believe. And, I preferred to come to work in jeans.

De Tocqueville Was No Joke

This is pretty straightforward. Community organizing means creating ways for ordinary people, like you and me, to participate in the social, political, environmental, and economic decisions that affect our lives. Don't roll your eyes; this involvement is vital to the durability of our communities. More than ever, citizens today feel powerless against – not to

But looking at this new task brought a million questions to mind.

How exactly do I "organize" residents?

What makes you think people even want to organize?

So, what, I just walk around in trailer parks?

Is that safe?

Will they listen to me?

surprising terrain

Not knowing where to start, I began with my feet. I walked around the parks the center had identified. In one, I saw exactly what I had expected: a couple of acres of the worst land in the county, only blocks from the Interstate. Bleak, arid terrain, dotted with six or seven units with broken windows, crumbling foundations and peeling paint. Mangy yellow dogs sauntered down the street, and children played among used drug paraphernalia in the sewer drains.

In another part of town, however, I walked through a neighborhood that could have housed the Cleavers. Delicately manicured lawns and spring azaleas greeted me at each door of this 300-unit trailer park. Small slides and jungle gyms filled the backyards of brightly painted homes. It seemed like the ideal place to live and raise a family.

There went my one-dimensional stereotype of trailer parks. But I still didn't know how to organize residents. I didn't even know any residents. So I started meeting with area guidance counselors and principals. I met with pastors of neighborhood churches and members of the Nashville/Davidson County Council. I met with anyone who would meet with me. I explained my task and asked the same question: "Do you know any park residents who seem interested in making a change in their neighborhoods?"

Some people asked, "What trailer parks?" Most replied: "I really don't know them at all." It was slow and frustrating work but for every six unhelpful people, there was one who said, "Yes, I know someone. Let me find a name and number for you."

cozy encounter

mention suspicious of – the political and private forces making the decisions that affect our families and communities. Do you feel like you're being heard on the health care you receive, the planning of your neighborhoods, or the schools that educate your children? No? Hey, this is a democracy – is this the way you think America should be?

Alexis de Tocqueville was a Frenchman who moved to the United States in 1831, at the age of 25. The book he soon wrote, *Democracy in America*, is still quoted by everyone from President Clinton to Supreme Court justices. Tocqueville said something more than 150 years ago that's worth thinking about today: "Acting alone, most citizens are helpless. Acting together, they wield power."

But to wield that power, professional organizers need our help. They need our energy, our talents, and our passions. And in return, they *will* help those motivated enough to help themselves. Not even God is expected to do more.

With our help, organizations and committees can be formed that focus on specific goals and have the strategies to achieve them. We can create community organizations that influence political and economic decision-making. But none of us can do it alone. It can only be done if we work together.

So what are you doing this afternoon?

Approaching one unit, I saw an old-model Oldsmobile and a lonely cat on the porch. The unit had been built in the '70s. A large branch protruded through a hole in the roof, the remnants of a recent storm. But going inside was like walking through the pages of *Better Homes and Gardens*. An Oriental rug and antiques decorated the living room. The owner ushered me into a country kitchen with yellow, blue and white lace everywhere. She puttered around, insisting I have a diet soda and some peach turnovers she had made especially for my visit. I instantly relaxed as she showed me her collection of old clocks, and pictures of her children, grandchildren, and best friends.

She told me that she had talked with two of her neighbors since I had called her, and they were excited that someone cared about what was going on inside of trailer parks. She and her friends were frustrated by the lack of community centers, social service-agencies, daytime activities, grocery stores, and laundromats in the area. Located just a block off the highway, it wasn't really accessible to anything if you didn't drive. I later learned that this was a common problem for trailer park residents because parks have a special zoning code that falls somewhere between commercial and residential. It's not unusual for 500 residents to live in the middle of an area that has no room for or awareness of the need for residential activities.

"Can you do something about this?" she asked me. I gave the patterned response my boss had taught me: *"I can help you do something about this."*

seeing what rises

I called her friends, and the people they knew who cared about making some changes. I met with them. I listened hard to hear the common strands. I called more residents, and met with them too. Over and over, I did this in four parks. Identifying community leaders is like stirring a pot of stew, looking for the potatoes to rise to the top.

When the first couple of residents get together, it's a gripe session. Finding the individuals who seem the most interested in change also means finding the most dissatisfied residents. What I learned is that most people don't talk to their neighbors – so they don't even know they share some of the same concerns! When three or four residents realize that they are not alone in their feelings about a particular issue, they form more than organizations, they form friendships. In the moment that I first saw that happen, I knew why I'd taken this job.

After getting excited about a particular issue, the newly formed neighborhood group holds a meeting. As the organizer, I help with legwork – more complicated than it may appear. An individual trailer can comfortably hold eight people for a small meeting, but more than 10 would be unreasonable. I approach churches, elementary schools and YMCAs seeking meeting space. I help design flyers and translate them into Spanish for the park's growing Latino population. I walk with residents, stuffing flyers into the handles of screen doors. I buy the cookies and punch for the meetings, and bring the markers and flip charts to write down important notes. I talk with the new leaders and make copies of the agenda. I'm the person behind the scenes hoping everything comes together.

beware of the fine print

One park organized around legal questions. The residents were initially afraid to get involved because they feared eviction. They first met blocks away from the park with attorneys from the Legal Aid Society, who had come to answer their questions about their legal rights. It seems that housing laws do not adequately cover residents of mobile-home parks. In some ways they are tenants like any apartment or duplex dweller, because they rent the land on which their trailers sit. On the other hand, they own their individual homes. Legally, that makes them "tweeners," in between the categories defined by law. Although moving a mobile home requires a couple of thousand dollars, planning, and foresight, residents are subjected to the same 30-day eviction practices as apartment dwellers. Many leases are vague, month-to-month contracts with a lot of room for interpretation.

The residents were on a mission to learn their legal rights and ways to negotiate with management for community needs not covered by the law. As a result of this meeting, they began working with a member of the council (who lives three blocks from the trailer park) to introduce legislation that would help protect against consumer fraud and abuse in "submetering" of water services. It's a serious issue for trailer park residents and others living in apartments and other multi-dwelling complexes, where landowners, not the water company, read the meters and can take advantage of residents.

Sometimes success is elusive. Residents of another park – where most parents are in the working class, with inflexible hours, and aren't home after school – were concerned about the lack of youth activities. In the absence of a playground

or accessible community center, some youths had been drawn to a nearby busy intersection, and into destructive behavior – smoking, throwing rocks (from the park's unpaved roads) and gang activity. So a core group of residents planned a neighborhood fair with free food, face painting, games, health information and reps from local social-service agencies. For two months, three residents worked hard to plan the fair – only to see it get rained out twice because there was no suitable indoor site. When the fair finally did take place, it was a gray day, and only a handful of adults and children showed up to eat hotdogs and get stars painted on their cheeks.

The resident providing most of the leadership almost gave up. "Why should I care if none of the other neighbors care?" he asked. "Why am I doing all the hard work here? Where is everyone else?" I gave him "the pep talk" – trying to encourage leaders to keep the faith. I met with more residents looking for more potatoes in the stew, but ultimately, he was right. Often, you can only count on the work of a dedicated few.

a different kind of payoff

The personal interactions are what keep me in the job. Renee, a woman in her early 40s, lives in one of the parks where I have worked. She and her husband run a small home business. Her daughter and grandson also live with her. A couple of years ago, this park was infested by criminal activity. Renee once counted 19 bullet holes in her home from the gang wars. She tells stories of holding a gunshot victim in her arms in front of her home while waiting for the ambulance to arrive. Outraged by the situation, Renee had started a neighborhood watch program, working with the city-county council, police, management and other residents to drive crime out of the area.

When she and I met, a year and a half later, she was proud to say that the park was a safe place to walk and play. While organizing with the new leaders of the park, I continued to call Renee, invite her to activities, and seek her opinion on relevant matters. One day she asked why I continued to call her when I know how busy she is with her business and grandson. I feared that I was pestering her and replied that I thought the work she did two years previously was important. Clearly, she knew the neighborhood and her opinion mattered. At that moment, I was prepared to sheepishly hang up the phone and leave Renee alone for a while.

However, Renee paused and said, "Most of my life, I've been a real screw-up and it feels good to know that someone out there is paying attention to the things that we are doing in the neighborhood, and there is someone out there who cares about my opinion."

It is hard to work in a neighborhood that I don't live in. It doesn't affect me if the trailer park gets a new playground or a nearby grocery store. My daily life is not changed if the laws never improve. I *do* care that each community has the opportunity to organize around an issue that matters to its residents. I *do* care that most people have negative stereotypes of trailer parks, as I did, that simply aren't true. I *do* care that residents in parks feel as if there are people out there who care about them. And I have learned that the only way to know a trailer park or any other neighborhood, is not by seeing it on TV or walking around it, but by going inside.