

The Art of Knowing Your Place White Service Learning Leaders and Urban Community Organizations

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Meaningful change through service learning can only occur if service learning leaders build "embedded" relationships with community organizations. The paradox is that the more engaged the relationship, the more intense the issues of race, class and power. Institutional racism tempts white activists to assume they know what is best for a community. If they give in to this temptation they risk co-opting the community's agenda and diminishing the possibility for legitimate empowerment. Well-meaning service learning professionals must learn to navigate these risks by becoming allies rather than leaders in community organizations.

It's a sweltering late June afternoon in Los Angeles, and I'm working on a funding proposal that's designed to get some Westside Foundation to give us 1,000 children's books for our library.

As the sun sets, blinding rays pour through the green mesh gardening tarp we use as window screens. I lower my own shades and stumble through some prose explaining that our current bookshelves are re-used apparel racks from the old sweatshop that used to occupy the building. Not very moving. Certainly not moving enough to get the funders to look beyond the fact that we can't afford an audited financial report. Sweat drips down my forehead and into my eyes.

I try to visualize Carlos and Micaela with new Dr. Seuss and Simon Silva books instead of the ones with the pages tagged up and ripped out. I visualize Miguel working late into the night on his essay at a cubby desk in the library with its own reading lamp. I close my eyes and more images of the kids come to me, but they're floating too fast to grasp more than one word here, another there.

Poetry and grant writing workshops are out of focus and blend into one.
I'm spinning....

"Pinche Cabron!"

Hector's explosion knocks me out of my grant writer's hell. Startled, I jump in my green plastic chair.

"Calmate, Zimmer. You drink too much coffee, man." He laughs. "Mother.... You made me get shot again....." He adjusts his headphones and returns to the simulated battle on his screen.

"What did I tell you about America's Army at the Center?"

Hector doesn't hear me. I look around. Long shadows and the haze of the dying sun cover the plastic tables, and I have to squint to see the industrial door that leads out to Newell Street. Sounds of the kids playing kickball in the street drift through the lighted opening and dance with the shadows.

I have no idea how America's Army got onto the computers. We have a standing policy against any violent computer games, my compromise from no computer games at all. But somehow Hector, Miguel and a few other students who have been with us since the day we opened seven years ago stand above the policy.

It's just Hector and me left in the Center. It was too hot this afternoon to spend more than about 40 minutes on homework, and the kids from the after school program have been gone for over an hour. Uli and Jen also left, saying it was too hot to work on their Cal State math problems in the library. Al and Gloria, my partners at the Center, left at 5:00 to be with Tyler, their newborn son. Even Hector's compadres are gone on a training ride with our cycling team as they prepare for the state championships in August. Hector has stayed behind because he's been lackadaisical with his training schedule.

Hector slams his fist into the computer table and throws down his headphones. Must have been an IED thrown somewhere around Mozul.

It's time to call it a night. The grant is going nowhere.

My problem is that neither is Hector. At first I try to be friendly.

"Time to wrap it up, Hector. My cats are starving and I can't work in this heat."

“Give it a minute, Zimmer; I just gotta get to this next town.”

So “cool guy” isn’t going to work. Keeping my own cool isn’t going so great either. If it weren’t for the Center, Al always tells me, Hector, Miguel, Chris, Luis.... they’d all be on the streets. That reminder works most of the time, but now I want him on the streets—or at least on Newell Street—so I can go home. I reach back in my memory to my counselor’s training manual: calm, directed, and assertive discipline.

I shut my computer down and methodically stand up, walk over to Hector, pull a chair up close to him, and pull out one earphone. Distant explosions reverberate in my hand. “Now here is what’s going to happen,” I say in my best authoritative whisper. “You are going to shut down the computer and we’re going to go home. This isn’t personal, but I am in charge. This is what I need you to do and I need you to do it now.”

“You’re not the boss of me, Zimmer!” Hector says, snatching his earphone back. “You can’t kick me out; this is the community center. *Community* center.”

“Hector!!! Shut down that damn computer now!” It still surprises me after all these years when my father’s voice leaps from my mouth.

My shouting actually gets Hector to stop and glare at me. We hold the stare for maybe ten seconds, but it feels like ten minutes in the brutal heat. And then, just like that, he clicks on the little red X, and it is done.

Hector leans back in his chair and lets out a sigh of a man a lot older than his thirteen years. He looks over at me as he gathers his things.

“You know what your problem is, Zimmer? You stress it too much, man. That’s why you went bald all over.” He flicks the top of my head with his index finger as he walks by. I’m left rubbing the skin of my crown and thinking about what he has said about the community center.

Hector, in all the glory of his eighth grade insolence, had issued a challenge, not only to the legitimacy of my authority, but to the legitimacy of my very presence. I know that Hector’s Mom and sister, as well as Al and Gloria, all would have wanted me to kick Hector out, and probably a lot sooner, too. But each of them have lived in the community for years and years. How does someone with only a “guest pass” into a neighborhood become a leader, a decision-maker, or an authority figure in a

community where he or she was only supposed to be a visitor? How do questions of race, class and culture intersect this landscape? How do these questions particularly affect service learning leaders, who by nature of our current social condition often seek guest passes and who, by nature of the work, often create engagements far beyond those of an innocuous guest?

The Road to Newell Street

Albert Vargas founded Elysian Valley United in 1994 in response to the LAPD's request for a neighborhood watch group. As a former Sheriff's Deputy and a lifelong neighborhood resident, Al knew that stopping the wave of violence in the community would take a lot more than convincing residents to snitch on their neighbors' sons.

Al argued that the community needed to create not a neighborhood watch, but an organization that could both advocate for and provide needed services, particularly for the community's youth. Later that year, he recruited Gloria Moya, a kindergarten teacher, to teach GED classes at the old recreation hall. Having moved into the neighborhood from Jalisco, Mexico when she was nine, Gloria learned English at Allesandro, the neighborhood elementary school where she now taught, went on to be an honor's student at nearby Marshall High School, and then became one of the most

respected educators in the neighborhood. She became one of EVU's strongest members.

I came on board with EVU early in 1995. It began as a Marshall connection. I was working as an ESL teacher at Marshall, where I had started running service learning programs, first in my classes, and then for the school. Partially because I was young, partially

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because of my experience with Habitat for Humanity in college, and mostly because the school realized I'd yet to establish much of my own life in Los Angeles, Marshall had tapped me to develop its public service program. We hooked up with the Coalition of Essential Schools, and some forward thinking faculty interested in civic engagement suggested that the way to bridge the gap between the mostly affluent community that surrounds the school and the mostly poor students who attend the school was to break down the walls around the school. In 1995, Marshall High

School became one of California's first urban public high schools to institute a public service graduation requirement. With over 4,500 students on three tracks, between 600 and 800 students would seek to complete their public service requirement at any given time throughout the year. I needed placement spaces and I need them fast.

I put out a cold call inviting local community organizations to come to a meeting, one of five meetings I was convening with hospitals, schools, libraries and recreation centers to build support for our burgeoning program. The goal was to get the agencies to buy into the value of student community engagement as part of the Marshall experience. I prepared elaborate arguments about shifting the concept of the server and the served by having students from traditionally "served" communities engage in their community as service leaders. This was an important link in the efforts to shift the power dynamics in urban Los Angeles, while simultaneously suggesting to students that their home community was potentially a place to invest in, rather than a place "to get out of" as fast as they could.

In attendance at that first meeting were half a dozen women from the various improvement and homeowner groups in the surrounding community—and Al Vargas. The women listened patiently to my presentation about race, class, community, and public service. Then they wanted to talk about what was really important: graffiti abatement. The contract was clear. They would "mobilize" their volunteers and "help" our kids if the school made a commitment to eradicating graffiti in the neighborhoods around Marshall. After all, it was our kids who commit the crimes in the first place. Al Vargas didn't say much about graffiti, but he did come up to me after the last "neighbor" had left.

"Look, if you want to set up a real youth service learning program, Elysian Valley United would love to be a partner. Why don't you come down and I'll show you around."

"I'd love it, man. Forgive me, though. Where is Elysian Valley?"

"I didn't realize you were new here. Elysian Valley is right off of Riverside Drive, below Dodger Stadium, next to the L.A. River."

"Oh, you mean Frog Town?" The neighborhood was renowned around Marshall as gang territory.

Al gave me a tense smile and a deep sigh. “No, Frog Town is the gang. The neighborhood is Elysian Valley. But everybody forgets that. The community is called Elysian Valley.”

Clearly, I made the exact mistake I wasn’t supposed to make. I couldn’t have been more the outsider. As he would again countless time over the next decade of our friendship, Al forgave me and invited me to join him and Gloria the next weekend along the river.

That Saturday morning was the first step in a change in how I viewed service, education and my own life. It wasn’t so much what I saw (graffiti-marred streets, dumping, human and medical waste strewn along the Los Angeles River bed) or didn’t see (not a single retail store, clinic or service provider in the community). It was Al and Gloria.

Their passion for improving the community had nothing to do with protecting property value and everything to do with social justice. It had everything to do with personal and community history, or personal history as community history. The story of Elysian Valley is Al’s story of a young kid with a passion for reading who couldn’t get to a library for fear of the three rival gangs operating between his house and the closest LAPL branch. It is Gloria’s story of a scared immigrant family fighting for their daughter’s education against a school counselor who wouldn’t let her take advanced placement classes because English wasn’t her first language. It is the story of a community of isolated kids and struggling families pitted against a city that doesn’t even know where they live, a city that has forgotten even their names.

It was easy to know, even that first day, how this story would turn out. Al and Gloria would make lasting and profound changes in their community. The questions of how and when and in what context remained, but there was never an “if”. My role, however, in this narrative, was then—and even more than a decade later remains—much less clear.

We would work together for five years before the day when Al and I accidentally happened upon the sweatshop that would become the community center. Over those five years, Elysian Valley United had sponsored community clean-ups, health vans, and employment workshops, and we each had a sense of our collective assets and liabilities. Al is ten years my senior and our friendship is also a partnership, with clear rules. Our strengths, our weaknesses, and most of all our stamina would all be tested in our struggle to build and operate Elysian Valley’s first community center. What I

didn't realize then was that the experience would also force me to re-examine my own perspectives on race, culture, privilege and service.

The Power Dynamic and the Dynamics of Power

I am the only person deeply involved with EVU who wasn't raised in the community. I am the only White person. I am the only Jew. I am the only person whose parents graduated from high school in the United States. My official position at the Center is Family Services Director. I run the after school program, the intervention programs, and oversee all volunteers. The irony is never lost: I direct family services but am the only one who doesn't have a family in the community. Yet I am embraced by many in the community as a brother, cousin, neighbor and friend.

My leadership role at EVU has been problematic since the day we began. Anytime a White person assumes a position of authority in a community space that is used primarily by communities of color, problems of legitimacy, intention and practice emerge. Systemic White supremacy projects a lot of inappropriate and pretentious power onto White men; insert the persona of the teacher and this false authority becomes even more complete, especially in a Latino Immigrant community where educators are revered and rarely questioned.

This dynamic is further complicated by the intersection of my roles at Marshall and at the Center. Service learning practitioners who focus on long-term projects often find they develop both an institutional (school or university) role and a role within the partnering agency. These roles can blur daily. My students at Marshall select EVU as their placement site for either Marshall's public service requirement, the teaching academy's service learning requirement, and/or community service requirements for court. Wearing my Marshall hat, I am their supervisor. The culture of classroom power, discussed by Lisa Delpir in *Other People's Children*, then transfers into the community.

The complication embedded in my role at Marshall is reinforced by my role within Elysian Valley United. We are an entirely volunteer organization, and I am responsible for all of the "labor." The students who run Kids United turn to me for guidance and direction. The students from my classes ask questions about applications of pedagogical theory we studied that day in class. Other students seek me for approval for signatures. Parents view me as the "gate keeper" for the continuation program and the reference point for other needed family services.

The paradox for even the most altruistic White service-learning leaders is that engagement will always be problematic. If you are going to work—or serve—in a community where you teach and where the issues are most urgent, and if you are determined to be a change agent, you will be in uncomfortable situations everyday. The racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic power dynamic at each level of engagement must constantly be in the foreground of your reflection. But reflection, as important as it is, won't solve the problem. Because the problem can't be solved.

There has been a lot written about what differentiates service learning from community service. The power of reflection, student direction, and curricular integration establish service learning as both legitimate pedagogy and effective instructional strategy. But for me, what differentiates service learning from community service is relationships. For the White outsider, relationships create an opportunity for the service-served relationship to become unglued. But for these relationships to be real, trust is essential. This means that service learning leaders must have a presence in the community over several years and must be engaged with community-based agencies throughout that time. Hence the dynamic question of how to be appropriately engaged without inappropriately leading.

The Work We “Award”

In the case of service learning, the “work” itself delivers us to these questions of conscience and community. The better the work, the more important the questions. The more invested in a community you become, the more accolades you receive. In fact, I have an entire wall of plaques and certificates that pay tribute to my “good work” in Elysian Valley, but I can't remember the last time the Mesa family received an award for keeping their kids in school every single day even though both parents hold two jobs and the family lives right next door to the most prolific drug dealers in the neighborhood.

The disproportionate recognition of White leaders' “contributions” to “impacted” communities reinforces the dominant paradigm of the server and the served. It betrays empowerment and deflects questions about the legitimacy of the leader's presence in the first place. Yet the awards keep coming in and I certainly don't turn them down.

This is in part because the dividends of the “work” are real for the community. Students have received tutoring and counseling in their own community for the first

time. Over 200 students who had dropped out of high school have received their diplomas through our continuation school. Families have been able to visit a library in their community for the first time in over fifty years. Perhaps most important, there is finally a center where families know they can come in, and no matter what the problem, somehow, someday, we find an answer. Together, we are making a difference.

Still, questions of race and power continue to haunt me. How do I reconcile the problematic strands of my power in the community with objective benefits EVU has achieved? Do the assets I bring outweigh the damage I perpetuate by maintaining the subject-object relationship inherent in the very act of serving?

The Question of the Ally

Back in the early 1990's, when I was organizing with the United States Students Association, we went through a series of painful sessions around the role of White students in the struggle for the rights of students of color. A number of White students, myself included, had risen to positions of power in an organization committed to student rights and anti-racism from the curriculum to the classroom to the streets. There was a conscious effort to ensure that White students did not co-opt issues

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that needed to be addressed for students of color by students of color. Progressive White students who accepted and supported this self-determination nonetheless sought to define a role through which we could support the cause without appropriating the agenda.

Out of these stressful all-night dialogues, an organizational definition of the White ally emerged: a student who shared and supported the goals of students of color, goals determined and prioritized exclusively by the students of color themselves. Our challenge as White allies would be to take on strong advocacy roles without leading and without receding into passivity. It would be "neck out" organizing that involved risk-taking and collective action. Most of all, we would have to continuously and conscientiously reflect in order to sustain both the intensity of our activism and our loyalty to the supportive ally paradigm.

I find myself returning and re-returning to the idea of “ally” as I attempt to reconcile the conflicting realities of my role in Elysian Valley United. Can I be an ally intra-organizationally and inter-communally? Can an ally sometimes be the one who provides services when true collaboration and empowerment remain years away? Can an ally alternate between roles as the needs demand without making organizational or communal decisions directly or by proxy?

The evolution of service-learning as pedagogy and practice makes discussion about the White ally’s role in community organizations essential. Paul Kivel urges White professionals committed to collaboration to understand the pervasiveness of racism throughout society and the importance of recognizing who holds attention and power within and outside organizations. Ann Green has similarly called on service learning

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teachers to highlight racism through their own stories, their students’ stories, and the related subject-object understanding of the “client.”

More journalistic accounts also provide models for allies to consider. In the last decade, Jonathan Kozol and Celeste Fremon have featured the stories of two religious leaders, Reverend

Martha Overall in the South Bronx and Father Greg Boyle in East Los Angeles, who embedded themselves within communities of color and became passionate advocates, indispensable resources, and sparkplugs for meaningful change. The effectiveness of their respective ministries built lasting trust within the community and forced other clergy to reflect on the church’s role in poor communities. They achieved not only cultural competency and street credibility but also the balance between service and advocacy that is often so elusive in even the best organizations. For allies like Overall and Boyle, however, the church provides legitimate context for their presence if not their actions. They are religious leaders, and their service missions differ from those of service learning leaders based in schools or universities (Kozol; Fremon).

White service-learning leaders who recognize the necessity of building strong, lasting relationships within the institutions, organizations and communities where they work face the challenge of engaging without co-opting. They must build trust and credibility without letting their personal struggles interfere with the more important

struggle of the community. In order to contribute meaningfully, they must assume leadership roles, but can they or should they ever be leaders?

Malcolm X's response to the question of White allies working in communities of color is unequivocal:

I have these very deep feelings that White people who want to join black organizations are really just taking the escapist way to salve their consciences. By visibly hovering near us they are "proving" they are "with us."I mean nothing against any sincere Whites when I say that as members of black organizations, generally Whites' very presence renders the black organization automatically less effective....every time that Whites join a black organization, pretty soon the blacks will be leaning on the Whites to support it, and before you know it a black may be up there with a title, but the Whites because of their money are the real controllers.

I reread Malcolm X's autobiography in the months before we opened the center and these words resonated with me. I wondered if it was appropriate for me to play any role at all, and tried my best to stay in the background. But by then we were a team, the three teachers, los maestros. And we had fallen into roles: Al was in charge of everything, but especially the renovation of the building; Gloria was in charge of developing the school and our programming; and I was in charge of raising funds and building support within and outside of the community. And our first and most lasting linkage is between Marshall High School and the community. Even as we renovated the building, I was bringing in and supervising service-learning students. I wondered if my very presence was making EVU less effective, but the calls came and I answered them. I thought answering a call was listening. I learned otherwise the first day we opened the Center.

The White Man at the Door

On opening day, I drove over to the Center from Marshall not knowing what to expect, wondering how many in the community would embrace the Center. As I drove down Newell Street I saw that the line to get into the Center stretched around the corner.

It's a sight I'll never forget. All of those kids, backpacks weighing them down, waiting for someone to help them with their homework, waiting for the first time just to have a place to do their homework. Interspersed with the elementary school children were high school students waiting in line to volunteer. Although I had been talking about and promoting the Center in my class at Marshall for weeks, I thought three or four

students at most would show up. There were twelve. In all, over eighty students would sign in on that first day.

But later that evening I was forced to remember that my excitement was different from everyone else's. Word had gotten out that we were going to run a continuation school program, and as the winter dusk set, groups of teenagers began to congregate near the door to the Center. Most of them were from the Frog Town Gang. There had never been a program in the neighborhood for drop outs, and it seemed like every kid who had dropped out or been kicked out of Marshall for the last five years came to the Center that night. For me, as an intervention counselor, it wasn't a window of opportunity, it was an entire landscape. I wanted to talk to every single one of them and hook them into the program.

The problem was the students were congregating around the door at the time that parents were picking up their children from the after school program. Some parents knew the high school kids as neighbors and the sons and daughters of their friends. Others saw baggy pants and shaved heads, and they were scared. I was oblivious to this. I was in the office having teens fill out registration forms and oblivious to the parents' concerns. Al was not at all oblivious.

He yanked me out of the office and brought Gloria and me to the back of the library.

"This is exactly what we didn't want to happen! Who are those kids out front? Parents are scared s---less. This is totally f---ed up!"

"But these are the kids we need to target for the continuation school. Look at these applications!" I waved my small stack of victory.

"Parents are scared! We promised them a safe place. Look at that doorway!"

"But, dude, we said the doors would be open to everyone! These are the kids who need us the most, I don't want to turn them away...."

"What's more important than a kid trying to do his homework? This is the Elysian Valley United Community Services Center, not the Frog Town Recreation Center! This is Elysian Valley United, I'm the Executive Director, and, so help me, if you don't get out of that office and clear all these kids out of here, the least of our worries will be turning them away!"

I walked to the front with my tail between my legs. Harsh words for a volunteer gig. I sent the kids home with applications in hand. For better or for worse, we saw most of them again. The need for continuation was far greater than the blow to the ego of getting kicked out on the first day.

As a reader, you might be empathetic to my position or even question Al's judgment here. You might identify a question of organizational process or note concerns about leadership style. You might, that is, if you didn't grow up in the neighborhood and if a place to do your homework has always been assured. Had I been listening, I would have understood the need to create safety. Had I remembered the trappings of privilege, in fact, there wouldn't have been an issue in the first place. I sensed the excitement, and ran with it as if it were mine. Race, power and privilege couldn't have played a bigger role.

Al was right, strategically and organizationally. Most of all, he was right communally. I wasn't wrong in wanting to make gang-involved teens feel welcome at the Center. I was wrong in the assumption that I was in a position of power to extend that welcome. If a White person is to take on a supporting role in an organization, the commitment to stay as much as humanly possible in a supportive rather than leading role is the most important commitment that he can make. If he really believes that folks from the neighborhood can and should lead their own organizations, then he can never be that leader. Not behind the scenes. Not in a boardroom. Not in families' living rooms. Not at a meeting. Nowhere.

The Family

I have thought several times since then that I knew what was best for the community. Each time it was ugly for me and for the organization. The lesson that I have finally learned is that I will never, ever know what is best for a community I didn't grow up in. No matter how much I care, I am not from the neighborhood. White service learning leaders who partner with community organizations need to constantly examine and re-examine their relationships within that organization. Community-based organizations are a lot like family businesses. You have to carefully moderate your role in the family system because even if you sleep on the sofa every night, you'll never really be "part" of the family.

White people often feel entitled to full and automatic acceptance, however, and when it is not forthcoming they behave strangely. There tend to be extended discussions about process and everyone's role in the organization. I have a file of embarrassing

emails to attest to this phenomenon. Most were sent after Al cut me off or simply ignored my project proposals or input. I was as butt-hurt as the second grader picked last for the kickball team.

Understanding that trappings of race and privilege contributed to these feelings helped me deal with them for what they were instead of questioning my worth to the organization. I began working to earn my place at the table instead of assuming it would automatically appear. Listening and checking myself before I acted or spoke on behalf of EVU or the neighborhood usually stopped me from making false assumptions. When I did speak, I knew I had the full backing of the organization and the families it serves. I learned that having an engaged family “system” of allies within and outside the community is part of what sustains the family itself. To the extent that I have played that sustaining role, I am grateful.

There is one more thing about the family. And I’d be less than honest if I didn’t acknowledge its role in keeping me in check. Elysian Valley United is not a democracy. Al is the Executive Director and expects deference and respect. While I operate with a strong degree of autonomy and often represent the organization to the world outside Elysian Valley, all organizational decisions are ultimately made by Al. No matter how many progressive models exist for community organizing, the most successful organizations are the ones that are centrally managed by a Board of Directors and are run by a decision-maker who is both from the community and accountable to the community. Elysian Valley United makes programming decisions based on expressed community need, but Al doesn’t ask anyone for permission when we create a program. As we organized EVU for sustainability, Al’s strength in the leadership structure prevented certain mistakes I might have otherwise made.

Building Community Currency

As I struggled to check myself and establish a legitimate role as a White ally within EVU, I needed to listen in a different way to the multiplicity of voices in the community. I had to establish legitimacy of service provision and advocacy both intra- and inter-communally. Because time was pressing and every issue a crisis, I had to simultaneously solidify my community competence and establish my street credibility.

Cultural competency, a term first commonly used in by Felipe Castro and others in the health care professions in the 1980s, refers to the cultural awareness a “provider” has in a community. The tenets of cultural competency include understanding

individuals within the context of their culture and utilizing culture-based insights to ensure the organizing is culturally relevant and effective. To effectively participate in service provision in the community I had to be completely culturally proficient. Understanding that my effectiveness as ally depended on my real and perceived cultural competence, I immersed myself in neighborhood culture and history. This immersion process began during Elysian Valley United's formative years before the Center opened, but the real work began once we were operating every day.

Even though many neighbors and parents knew me through Elysian Valley United activities, it took time for them to open up and trust that I would listen once they spoke. There is so much in stories from the elders about what the neighborhood was like in the 1950s and 1960s. The construction of the Golden State Freeway had destroyed the entire commercial corridor and had effectively walled the neighborhood off from the rest of the city. To make room for the freeway, the city tore down the library. And despite the promises from the city, it was never rebuilt. Now I understand why a whole group of Elysian Valley residents still refuse to attend a meeting with a city representative.

The shared history between Elysian Valley and the families from San Martin in Jalisco was another essential primer. I had worked with families for years without knowing they were cousins. I hadn't understood that one fight between girls at Marshall went back to a family feud three generations before. No wonder I'd missed it when one mom came into the

center and asked me to move her son to another table even though our best tutor was working with him. Then there was the history of the Frog Town Gang. Understanding how and when "The Neighborhood" changed from an expression of pride, politics and solidarity to criminal pursuits helped me to understand families' mistrust of the police.

Through all of these learning processes, I made plenty of mistakes and asked plenty of questions, but the "family" was always there for me. Al and Gloria explained a lot of what I didn't understand. They assured me that I hadn't set off another feud by having the wrong two kids share a book. They ran interference for me when I accidentally offended some veteranos by yelling at one student about how gangster life was immoral in front of his dad, never knowing the elder was one of the neighborhood's shot callers.

In community organizations, White people often feel entitled to full and automatic acceptance. When it does happen, they behave strangely. There tend to be extended discussions about process and everyone's role in the organization. I have a file of embarrassing emails to attest to this phenomenon.

Trust in the Center and on the Street

Cultural fluency is essential for any service learning leader hoping to build lasting, effective relationships with organizations and communities. But that fluency only has currency if it is combined with the trust that enables action. For the most part, the progress we have made as an organization and that I have made as an ally is a testimony to the sacred and expanding trust placed in us by families in the community. As an outsider, I had to keep in mind that the trust parents might give to me was never going to be the same as the trust they would have in Al or Gloria. As long as I remembered my role, however, the trust bestowed would be invaluable in moving forward with our goals. That has made the power of “being there” even more important.

Inter-communally, I have found that the most important contribution I can make as an ally is to be at the Center every day, year in and year out. When we opened in 2000, we made a simple commitment to the parents of children who were in kindergarten that year. We said that we would be at the Center with them until the kids graduated from high school. This year, those kindergarten students will enter middle school. And the Center is still open every school day, all year round. In the first year, the three of us were there every single day for nine months in a row. Through this consistency, and some events none of us could have predicted, slowly, gradually I have built trust in the community.

The students, their parents, their siblings, and a lot of their cousins have gotten so used to seeing me that they think it's strange when a kid in the community doesn't know me. “Don't you know him? That's Zimmer.he's my library school teacher.” (We have always thought it a great victory that students and families use their own words for the Community Services Center.some call it the library, some call it the Center, some call it the little school.) Over time, parents have slowly come to ask me questions, especially when a sibling enters Marshall or has problems. Each time a parent feels that concerns are heard and addressed, that parent will want to come back, and may even tell their neighbors and co-madres about the Center and what we offer.

One particular event, in December of 2001, was a defining moment in my efforts to build trust. The community center had been open for almost two years. Gloria was running the continuation school, and Al had taken a job with demanding hours as a political director for United Teachers Los Angeles. One morning there was a suspicious young man trying to get into the Center. Gloria called the police, and since Al was at the union, she called me. Twenty minutes after I arrived and more than

thirty-three minutes after Gloria had first called 911, automatic gunfire rang out and hit the Center, with Gloria, me and twenty high school students inside. Three shots hit the young man who it turns out was from a rival neighborhood. Thankfully, he survived. The remaining eleven shots were absorbed by the steel walls of the Center.

The way I dealt with the aftermath of the shooting proved to be the first test of my integrity and loyalty as a neighborhood ally. With Al urgently needed at the union and Gloria anxious to restore regularity for the students, Al asked me to take point in dealing with the shooting.

There was a dance I had to dance. Parents needed to know their kids were safe at the Center. Board of Education administrators needed to know we could control the environment for the school. Community members needed to know how we were going to deal with the specifics of the case. Yet there was a sensitive divide. On one side, there was a “law and order” element to the community that had to be appeased. On the other side, the victim in the shooting was a gang member from a rival neighborhood and we (particularly I) were still building our relationship with the Frog Town elders. An overzealous pursuit of two young kids from the neighborhood and an appearance of collusion with Northeast police division would cast us as a more formalized antagonist to a gang we opposed but needed to work with. We had to simultaneously show that we were taking concrete action to protect the students at the Center while avoiding a showdown with the Frog Town gang.

The steps I learned to dance around this issue helped me to earn credibility as an ally throughout the community. By advocating with the community on the issue of the LAPD’s unconscionable 48-minute response time (one line repeated over and over was, “If you couldn’t respond to a school, imagine what its like when we call from our homes”), I was able to consolidate the two poles on neighborhood safety issues while at the same time restoring community faith in our efforts to secure the Center for all of the community. My stock as an ally rose as I was able to get elected officials to respond to residents’ outrage. In this instance, the situation needed someone both within and outside the community to move people toward a unified position. The utility of my role as an ally in this case proved potent.

The lesson of this potency is that if the ally can effectively embrace his or her outsider/insider status instead of fight it, critical utility—distinct from the appropriation of leadership—will be among the ally’s most important assets. We never got the public

apology from LAPD we demanded, but response time throughout the community has greatly improved.

Lessons and a List

I've been working with Elysian Valley United for over a decade now. Sometimes my utility feels real and other times I feel like I am still struggling to keep myself in check. Intra-organizationally, my role as an ally has also evolved. It is an interesting blend of foreground and background, or maybe a better analogy is a tricky gear shift. I had to learn when to push gently on the clutch, when to shift, when to brake, when to not do anything at all. And also when to do all four at the same time. It was important to give honest feedback when asked, but to always be ready to support any and all EVU projects whether or not I had a role in their development. As an ally, I learned to always trust Al, Gloria and other community members. And just as importantly, I learned not to trust my gut. Not surprisingly, the later proved much more difficult than the former. Every single time my gut told me Al or Gloria was wrong about an issue in EVU or the community, it has turned out they were right.

When I decided to commit to an ally role in EVU, for the most part I abdicated my natural gravitation towards traditional leadership roles. While I lead every day through my work at the Center, within the organization I am a loyal deputy. I may on occasion question Al privately, but never, ever publicly. I defer to Gloria on all questions of family and community. In meetings I am sure to speak only after they have both had the opportunity to address a particular issue. I represent the organization and the CSC when I am asked or directed to. I run all programming and organizing ideas through Al and Gloria before even piloting them.

Every organization and every community is different. The most important thing a White activist can do is spend time learning about the community where he or she wants to engage as an ally. Nonetheless, there are a few basic ideas, outlined below, that are starting points if one is serious about becoming an ally in a community that will never be one's own.

Rules for White Allies working in Communities and Community Organizations

1. Defer to community members for all decision-making, goal and agenda setting, organizational planning, and day-to-day operations.

2. Advocate passionately, but act under the direction of leaders from the community based on decisions made by the community.
3. Establish legitimacy, authenticity, and trust based on actions, not proclamations.
4. Intra-organizationally and inter-communally, engage in slow building; resist the temptation to “save” families, “transform” realities, and “shift” paradigms.
5. Reflect consistently about the racial and cultural dimensions of actions, interactions, decisions, and engagements that define your organizational and communal role.
6. Stay. Cultural fluency and community credibility come slowly and with time. Longevity and utility are partners in the struggle.

But making lists about something and doing it are two very different things. There will always be blazing hot afternoons. There will always be Hector.

Later that same week, while I was still working on the grant application, Hector's aunt came into to talk with me about his seclusion and obsession with video games. She talked, I listened. Gloria came in and we sat together and talked. Later, I took a walk with Al. Together we came up with the beginnings of a plan: re-engage Hector in the cycling team; have Hector work with Gloria one-on-one for at least half an hour during Kids United; limit gaming to less than half an hour; share the responsibility for getting him off the machine.

The plan has started to work. Hector approached me the other day for help with a math problem and didn't laugh at me when I knew less than he did. But there will be many more afternoons with many other Hectors.

In truth, I fight with Hector so that one day Hector will be the one fighting with all the other Hectors. So that he will overcome the barriers in front of him, get his education and return to the neighborhood to serve as Al and Gloria have served. For the final tenet of the White ally is to work towards the day when our presence in the community is made obsolete by the presence of new leaders developed through organizations like Elysian Valley United and this grant I might not ever finish.

Until then, my presence will still be a problem. But I've learned there are many kinds of problems. And there is learning in the search, even if the search provides few

answers. And somehow, someday, when we make it to Hector's graduation there will learning from that journey too.

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