

**HOPE VI Community & Supportive Services
Sustainability Conference
Seattle
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In one of his most important speeches on city building, James Rouse, the renowned urban planner and co-founder of Enterprise asked:

“Will we provide new communities sensitively designed to meet the real needs of people... communities in which people feel important and uplifted?”

When Jim set out to build what became the new 14,000-acre city of Columbia, Md., he had two overriding goals.

One was the preservation of natural areas.

The second was the growth of people.

It was clear to Jim that the first goal would entail conserving, preserving and enhancing as much of the land as possible.

But the second pursuit – the growth of people – proved more challenging.

A wise and deeply compassionate man, Jim believed that a community “should be designed to promote health, security, dignity, independence, opportunity, choice, growth, mobility, comfort, stimulation and pleasure.”

Yet the path to such a simple concept proved elusive.

What kind of community or neighborhood makes an individual feel secure, comfortable and important?

How much do people value community participation?

What kind of relationships and social networks should exist within the community?

Jim raised these questions to his diverse team of planners and architects, bankers and sociologists.

Columbia would be the ultimate experiment of a planned community – one that is socially, racially and economically diverse -- where a janitor could live next door to a CEO.

I rented a place in Columbia when I accepted the job of CEO of Enterprise Community Partners.

I like the sense of community, the modest and well-designed homes; the well-placed parks and walking trails; public gathering places and in-door shopping malls.

But contrary to Jim's original vision and despite Columbia's huge success, the quality of life in Columbia and superior public school system (Howard County ranks among the top school districts in the nation) have steadily pushed housing prices up.

No janitor can afford to live there today.

More than 40 years later, we continue to confront similar questions in our efforts to develop and sustain healthy, mixed-income communities. And as service coordinators, your experience offers invaluable guideposts for all of us.

With HOPE IV transforming crime-ridden and dilapidated public housing developments into mixed-income communities, we've broken down traditional walls and economic barriers that have historically marginalized and isolated low-income people.

But now we must work to build sustainable human and social networks that enable individuals, families and whole communities to reach their greatest potential.

There couldn't be a more urgent time for a discussion about the value of social networks in our culture.

Last month, the Pew Center for Charitable Trusts announced a study showing that one in 100 people in the United States is incarcerated.

And neuroscientists now report scientific evidence that growing up in poor, isolated communities actually poisons children's brains.

So I commend HUD and its Community Supportive Services division for hosting this critical forum. And I want to thank Ron Ashford for inviting me to join you this morning.

My personal journey – from a foreign student to a community organizer to my role at the Seattle Housing Authority and the one I now hold at Enterprise – is a testament to the power of social networks.

Of course, individual achievement is also critical. It's what our parents wanted for us and it's what we all wish for our children.

But it's social networks – and the capacity to continually develop those networks through the various routes and trajectories of our lives – that truly sustain and enrich us.

My personal conviction in the power of community building and social networks took root in 1969, when I left my home and family in Hong Kong at the age of 18 to study at the University of Wisconsin, at Madison. I was deemed the brainy one among my five siblings. And I was also a dutiful daughter. So I heeded my father's urging to study computer science. Math came easily to me, so computers seemed as good and as practical a path as any. But midway through my freshman year, logic and reason gave way to unrest and uncertainty as the student movement took shape and gained momentum.

In April 1970, the campus celebrated the very first Earth Day. For the first time, I grasped the notion that I was a global citizen. It was a pivotal discovery for a young woman searching for a sense of place and belonging. And I began to question whether I was cut out for a life in the computer lab when my heart and my spirit yearned to be in the streets with the people, working for change.

Earth Day was a milestone on my coming-of-age journey.

Another watershed occurred two years later, when a napalm attack in Vietnam produced a horrifying image of a 9-year-old girl, crying and running naked through the streets of her village. Many of you are no doubt familiar with it.

I still remember walking through the student lounge and seeing that photo on the cover of *Time* magazine. It made me so angry – and so certain that this was no time for me to be communicating with machines.

My parents were not pleased with my decision to switch my major to sociology. But they supported me and understood my difficulty reconciling what I was feeling as a foreign student in a country that was waging war against a familiar part of my world.

The struggle to help end the war consumed me. And I knew that I wanted to be part of the struggle for change.

When I shared that dream with one of my professors, he advised me to leave the utopian campus town of Madison to take on some of the inequalities and hardships in Chicago's low-income communities.

As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, my advisor was a former organizer under whose guidance we studied the works of Malcolm X and Saul Alinsky. But studying social change proved far less instructive than volunteering in the communities of Chicago.

On weekends, I taught English to Chinese immigrants working in factories. And to parents less interested in grammar and vocabulary than in learning how to ask their boss for a day off to go to the doctor, or to meet with their child's teacher. Some of the immigrants I met were young like me. Others were older. All of them took me in, knowing that my home and my own family were thousands of miles away.

The bond was so deep that even before graduating, I decided that I would not return to home to Hong Kong. Instead, I would stay in the United States, where I had found a community – a social network – to call home.

Teaching English and helping the immigrants find their voice opened my eyes. I realized that there were people who woke up

each day and lived their lives without any glimmer of hope, or choice, or opportunity. And while I didn't share their life circumstances, our fates intertwined. And their struggle became my struggle.

After graduate school, I worked as a health educator on Chicago's Southside. But I continued volunteering and organizing in Chinatown. Working through the local school, I brought together Chinese, Latino and African-American parents whose children – bright, capable children – were disproportionately placed in special-education classes in the absence of some very basic preparation and tutoring.

These mothers didn't complain about their jobs or the hardship in their lives. But mess with their children, and they fought back. Hard. And in their struggle, this diverse group of women became their own best allies. For the first time, I saw the power of these working women – as protectors of their families; as advocates for, and guardians of, their communities.

And I saw the value of their unique social network.

My path turned eastward in 1979. After marrying a fellow organizer, we moved to New York City, where he had family. My husband's grandmother had worked in Chinatown all her life as a seamstress. She lived in a rundown tenement, in a tiny apartment with a bathtub in the living room.

We joined a group of volunteers called Asian Americans for Equality, or AAFE, as it's commonly known. We worked on housing and other civil rights issues in New York's Chinatown and Lower East Side. It was a rich, energizing time.

We organized legal clinics and rent strikes, holding slumlords accountable for repairs. Yet every winter, three or four major electrical fires forced residents to flee these old and neglected

tenement buildings. Sometimes, in the dead of a winter night, residents would be stranded on the streets, shivering in the bitter cold, with barefoot children grabbed from their beds. AAFE would be on site, working with the Red Cross, and the police and fire departments, to translate and help stabilize families and move them into emergency housing.

Eventually, we realized that we needed to do more. We needed to build homes, and from these homes, hope and community.

In 1984, I became AAFE's founding director, and, partnering with Enterprise, we gained the skills and resources necessary to start developing housing.

To date, AAFE has leveraged the financing to build or renovate more than 500 affordable apartments in Chinatown, on the Lower East Side and throughout New York City. Its community lending and counseling programs provide important resources for first-time homebuyers and small businesses. After 9/11, AAFE organized a Rebuild Chinatown campaign to bring focus to the harsh impact of the tragedy on the economic and emotional psyche of the surrounding immigrant neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan.

Across the United States, stories abound of committed people saving battered neighborhoods. Transforming broken schools. And giving hardworking people a chance to build a better future.

As service coordinators working in HOPE VI communities, you hear stories of refugees and immigrants, of struggling young mothers and of grandmothers raising their grand kids.

Life and hardships can be overwhelming, but these residents are survivors. If you are poor, you have to be tough, resourceful, and resilient. You create your own systems and support networks.

HOPE VI gave each of these residents a new community, and a better chance to make it in life. As service coordinators, you are integral to these efforts, helping make connections and build social bridges that can pave a path out of poverty and isolation.

But it will take more than providing intake, counseling and making service referrals.

It will take strengthening family supports, rebuilding neighborhood fabric and creating community networks.

It is this social and human connection that will eventually sustain the gains of HOPE VI.

In my brief experience here in Seattle, at Holly Park, Rainier Vista and at High Point, the Seattle Housing Authority started a tradition of “community builders.”

In addition to connecting residents with service providers and neighborhood support systems, the SHA community builders hold forums and discussions to address the community’s shared concerns, promoted block parties and cookouts – encouraging positive, organic channels for conversations that lead to shared concerns and mutually acceptable solutions.

No one knows better than you that change occurs gradually and is not without its rough spots.

But stigmas and stereotypes begin to crumble when we allow the human element to unfold and be our guide.

The mixed-income community model shows people how to feel safe and validated in each other’s presence.

The community building effort provides an opportunity for people to come together and form their own support systems.

Imagine how powerful it can be for a child to have a network of friends who not only play together but also strive to attend college together.

How assuring it will be for a working mother to have friends and neighbors who can watch over her children while she attends a two-hour computer class at the neighborhood library.

Or someone who will refer her teenage son to a summer internship at a downtown law firm.

One positive step leads to the next. We can learn so much about human and social networks in a healthy community.

I want to conclude with a hopeful notion drawn from Enterprise's work in the Gulf Coast region, where I arrived on the ground one month after the hurricanes struck. I will never forget the scenes of devastation and nothingness that stretched for miles and miles during many trips from New Orleans to Biloxi, Mississippi, on Highway 90.

Yet in the middle of this barren landscape, I noticed a group of native live oak trees.

And I recalled what a colleague once told me about the region's live oaks – native trees that can live for 800 years and more.

Many of these sturdy, canopy-like trees had withstood the hurricanes. You see, these live oak trees live in colonies, or

communities, with wide canopies and even wider and deeper root systems.

And because the trees' roots are intertwined, the ones whose trunks have toppled will be held and supported by the roots of the neighboring oaks in their community. They will be sustained until they have a chance to grow new shoots – and in time, regain their strength and majestic splendor.

These live oaks are symbols of hope – rooted in strength and supported by community.

Just like the HOPE VI communities that each of you is working so hard to rebuild and sustain.
