

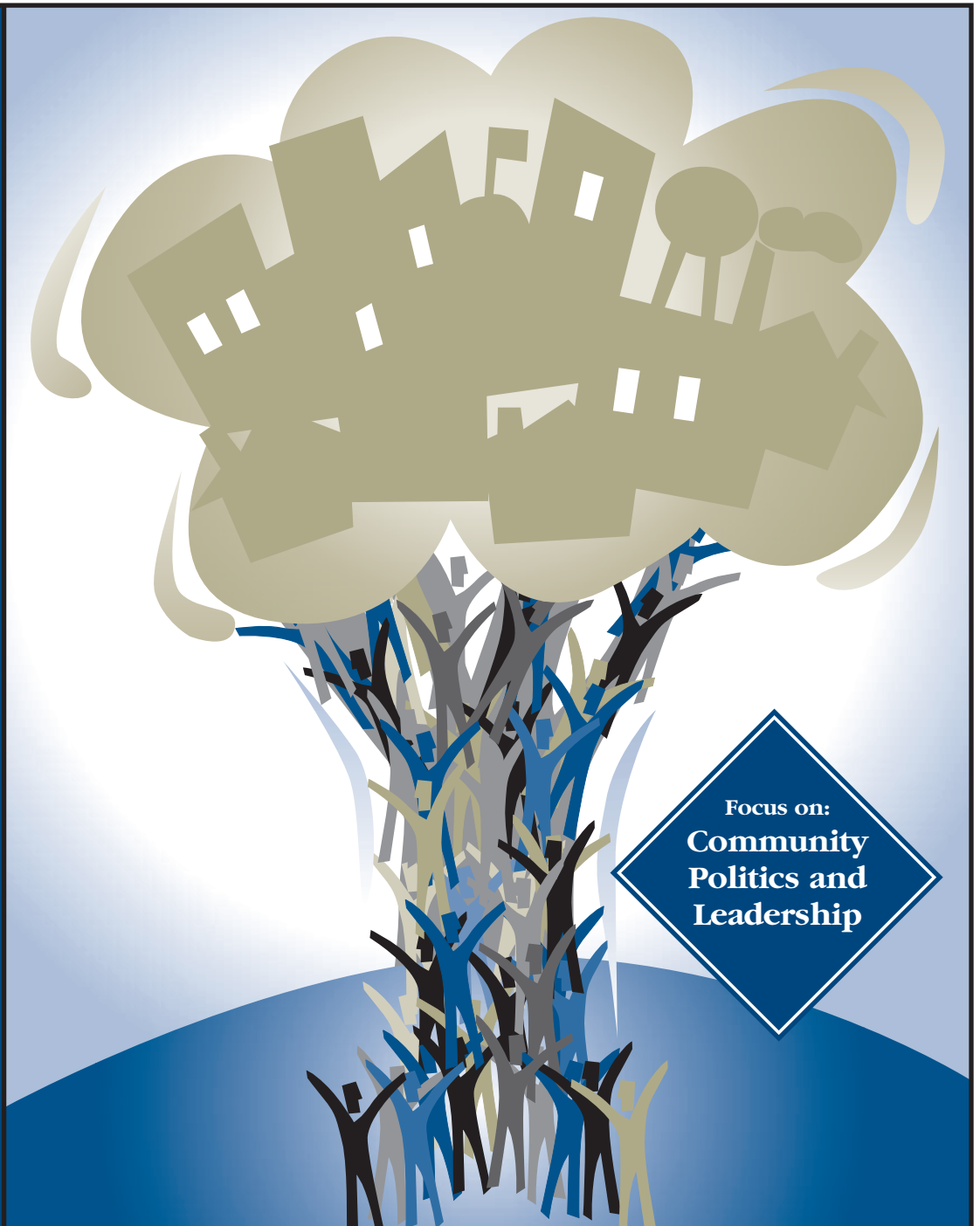
CONNECTIONS

VOLUME XIII

ISSUE 2

March 2003

- **The Little Republics of American Democracy**
.....page 2
- **A Question Revisited: What's in a Name?**
.....page 7
- **Reflections on the Practice of Community Politics**
.....page 9
- **Inactive Communities: Lessons from Rebuilding**
.....page 13
- **Shared Learning with Uniontown: Lessons in Community Development**
.....page 16
- **From Dialogue to Action in Tajikistan**
.....page 19
- **Catalysts for Change: Toward Leaderful Communities**
.....page 23
- **Make the Leap**
.....page 26
- **Books Worth Reading**
.....page 29



A Question Revisited: What's in a Name?

By Betty Knighton

More than two decades ago, in sophomore English classes at Dunbar High School, my high school students and I had vivid conversations about the difference a name can make. Each of these discussions followed a class reading of Act II, Scene II of *Romeo and Juliet*. “What’s in a name?” Juliet asks in that scene, arguing that it is the Montague *name* and not Romeo’s *nature* that her parents reject.

While my 15-year-old students strongly related to many themes in the play, this one struck a particularly powerful chord. “Absolutely,” they responded to Juliet’s complaint. “She’s exactly right. Why should a name matter?”

Twenty-five years later, I find that I am still engaged in vivid conversations about the act of naming. Some of these conversations still involve high school students; most involve adults living and working together in West Virginia communities. Yet the focus remains on the difference a name can make.

These more recent conversations have focused less on the limitations of an insufficient name than on the potential of a sufficient one. They have illuminated another, more positive aspect of naming: the powerful dynamic that occurs when a name does resonate, does capture real qualities, does reflect an intended meaning. These conversations have focused on the power of naming — not in relationship to individual people, but in relationship to public issues. They have focused on the public process of describing a problem in the way people want to talk about it, in a way that shows how it affects their daily lives.

Our work here in West Virginia, and similar work in many other locations, is helping us recognize the connection between public involvement in defining a community problem and public engagement in talking and working together to address it. We are finding that when the concerns of a broad and diverse group of citizens drive the way an issue is framed

for public dialogue, the issue connects to the community in ways that are both personal and public.

Recently, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life worked with a team of 14 colleagues from around the country to create a framework for discussing health care — one we hoped would resonate with Americans from all walks of life. An important part of this work has involved researching public policy initiatives and tapping into the expertise of health care professionals. But the framework has been built on the health care concerns of more than a thousand citizens who talked to us, who were willing to contribute their private experiences to a public examination of health care in this country.

All of the health care team members are involved in building networks for public deliberation in their own communities, and all involved their communities in creating this national framework on health care. Although the goal of the team has been to create a discussion guide that would be useful throughout the nation, the work of naming the issue began in local communities in ways that were intensely personal and inherently individual.

Each team member sought out community members from all walks of life. Each asked questions that would allow citizens’ concerns and insights to surface:





West Virginia residents participate in a televised public forum using the health care issue book.



Our work ... is helping us recognize the connection between public involvement in defining a community problem and public engagement in talking and working together to address it.

“What really matters to you about your own health care? What concerns you most about your own care or the care of others you know? What aspects of health care need to be discussed by the public and not only by health care professionals?”

We asked the employed and the unemployed, those with no health insurance and those with the best coverage money could buy. We asked health care providers, officeholders, and insurance executives.

But whether we spoke to an uninsured worker at a fast-food restaurant or the CEO of a major insurance company, to a Medicare recipient or to a member of a state legislature, we began in the same way: “What really matters to you about health care? What concerns you about your own care or the care of others you know?”

We heard a state legislator express his fear that his family’s coverage would be capped because of the high cost of a loved one’s illness. “My wife has diabetes, and she’s had many other complications,” he told us. “I’m afraid our benefits will run out.”

We heard an unemployed father of four describe his experience with the requirements of a public health program he knew was designed to help children like his: “I applied for CHIP (Children’s Health Insurance Program), but they told me I make \$63 a month too much.” He would gladly return the \$63 if he could, he told us. We heard a highly skilled nurse express her frustration with navigating the health care system when her father-in-law was ill. “When he was in the hospital, he had six different doctors and was on eight different medications. No one was looking at the big picture.”

These individual experiences with naming a public issue allowed people to tap into their personal concerns and not only their professional positions. For many of them, participating in naming a public issue provided an opportunity to consider their public identity — for some of them, an initial opportunity.

As we asked questions about their own health care — and as they understood that their individual concerns would help design a framework that would benefit the community — they expressed strong interest in participating in these future public dialogues.

Our work with health care is continuing. Citizens around the country are participating in deliberative dialogue about the issue. Here in West Virginia, we are pleased to be seeing some familiar faces in community forums. We are engaging in public work with many of the same citizens whose individual insights helped inform it.

As always, we are reflecting on the work we have done and how we have done it. We still recognize the importance of questioning “What’s in a name?” But for us, the more compelling question has become, “How did that name come to be?”

Betty Knighton is director of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life. She can be reached at knightonb@aol.com or (800) 296-5038.

Kettering Foundation
200 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459-2799

Nonprofit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Dayton, OH
Permit No. 638

The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is an operating foundation — not a grant-giving foundation — rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.” The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now — the study of what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required for strengthening public life. Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment.

How to Order Kettering Foundation Publications

To request a *KF Publications Catalog*, call 1-800-600-4060, send a FAX to 1-937-435-7367, or write:

Kettering Foundation
Order Department
P. O. Box 41626
Dayton, OH 45441

Name _____

Title _____

Organization _____

Street _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Phone (_____) _____

For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

Unless expressly stated to the contrary, the articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.

Those who contributed to producing this issue include:

Editor...

Amy Harper

Editorial board...

Maxine S. Thomas

Carolyn Farrow-Garland

Graphic Design

& Desktop Publishing...

Long’s Graphic Design

Art Director, Production...

George Cavanaugh

Copy Editor...

Betty Frecker

Assistant to the Publisher...

Valerie Breidenbach

Publisher...

Robert E. Daley

*Kettering
Foundation*

© Copyright 2003 by the Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300
444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478
6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016