- The Habit of Public Deliberation ........................................ page 2
- The Grassroots Connection: A Key Ingredient in Building a Democratic Public ........................................ page 5
- Partnering with Large National Organizations: A Win-Win Proposition ........................................ page 9
- Local Issue Framing and Deliberation: Making a Difference in Community Life ........................................ page 13
- News Organizations as Partners in Deliberation: Tapping Democratic Potential ........................................ page 16
- A Question for the Public to Decide: What to Do about Money and Politics ........................................ page 20
- They Give, But They Also Take: Voters Muddle States' Finances ........................................ page 24
- Books Worth Reading ........................................ page 26
Local Issue Framing and Deliberation: Making a Difference in Community Life

By Grace Severyn

When people from a community come together to deliberate about and work on a problem they care about — a problem that affects them, their neighbors, or a family across town — good things can happen.

Over the past few years, teams of people from several communities have been working to bring the process of deliberation to their communities. Through the foundation’s Community Politics Workshop series, these teams have learned about deliberative public politics. They have framed their own local issues and moderated deliberative forums. Most teams have viewed their work as far more than issue framing and holding forums; they see it as a way to create a new, effective, deliberative culture. Despite obstacles, the community teams have made progress toward the goal of embedding the practices of issue framing and deliberation in their community life.

The experiences of the community team from Helena, Arkansas, which is participating in the current series of Community Politics Workshops, illustrates how deliberation can begin to take root in a community and how it can make a difference. Helena is a small, rural, poor, predominantly African American Mississippi-River town. While Helena boasts of an annual blues festival, historic homes and churches, and good fishing and recreational opportunities, the community also suffers from racial tensions, a teen pregnancy rate that is among the highest in the nation, and public schools in “academic distress.”

Several years ago, two local women, Mary Olson and Naomi Cottons, saw the potential for deliberation in their beloved, but troubled, hometown. Mary and Naomi noticed that talk about local issues tended to be divisive and argumentative. They heard people say that they were “talked out” and wanted action. These two friends, one black and one white, were so united in their conviction that deliberation could lead to positive changes that they created a new organization, Walnut Street Works. One of the goals of the organization is to empower citizens to make decisions for themselves and the community using the process of “democratic deliberation.”

As Walnut Street Works was getting started, Naomi drew together a team of six to participate in the Community Politics Workshops. This new Community Politics team began by sponsoring six discussions on violence by young people. The forums were based on an NIF issue book, but because Helena is predominantly an “oral culture,” moderators did not use the issue book. Forums were held at a school, juvenile detention facility, senior center, housing authority, barbershop, and city hall. Olile White, a team member, observed that the forums gave people a sense that they have some control over their lives and the issues that affect them.

Because of the notoriously high teen-pregnancy rates in the county, the Community Politics team members chose teen pregnancy as their first issue to frame. They produced a one-page...
"We know no one solution is enough, so we hope people will end up working on the issue in a lot of different ways."

Clockwise from top right: Naomi Cottons of Helena, Arkansas; teen moderator Nduliamaka Oyetunbi; the Community Politics teen leadership team; an MLK Day march; a talent show held in conjunction with the Teen Summit on teen pregnancy.

framing entitled “Teenage Pregnancy: What Can We Do?” Using this framework, the team organized five forums in the spring of 2001, at various community sites. Most participants in these small forums were African American, and quite a few were teens. After this set of forums, Naomi wrote:

“The greatest public action was that people who participated in the forums actually left feeling like they could do something, they could make a difference in this issue. This process is very empowering for a people who have been oppressed and live in a land where hopelessness abounds. This empowerment is exciting… It is a wonderful beginning for action.”

Responding to interest expressed by teens in learning to moderate forums, the
team held a training session for 15 teens. These teens have formed a leadership team. “We hope we will be able to actually make a difference in our community,” said C. Ryan Ford, a member of the leadership team. “We know no one solution is enough, so we hope people will end up working on the issue in a lot of different ways.” Working in teams, the teens moderated nine forums for teens under the supervision of the Community Politics team and seven more without supervision. After moderating a few forums, one of the teen leaders, Ndidi Amaka Oyetunbi, concluded that “this process is a good way to get youth to become more responsible by allowing them to decide how they can be more responsible.”

At the close of each of the forums, participants are asked to think about what action could be taken as a community, as a group, or as an individual. To encourage action, the moderators make a sign-up sheet available. The Community Politics team is learning that people want to do something, but that they often “need a little support and nurturing.” As Naomi explains, this follow-up could be as simple as contacting the people involved to see if they have been able to come together.

With this gentle nurturing by the Community Politics team, both adults and teens are beginning to act. One parent is developing a second youth leadership team. The teens in this group have moderated forums on teen pregnancy in a neighboring county and plan to use the deliberative process to work on drug and alcohol abuse. Another parent who is a nurse and medical technologist wants to join with Walnut Street Works to offer training for hospital laboratory careers to teen mothers. A group has also formed of parents interested in moderating forums.

Another outcome of the teen-moderated forums was a teen summit. In November, the teen leadership team, assisted by the Community Politics team and some parents, held a Teen Summit. More than 300 teens participated in the day’s activities, beginning with a forum on teen pregnancy moderated by teens. At the close of the forum, many teens committed to changing their personal behavior or to learning how to moderate forums.

The deliberative process has also been a bridge between people and officeholders. Debates within and among the major political bodies — the West Helena City Council, the Helena City Council, and the County Quorum Court — often are contentious. Because of the safe and neutral environment of the forum, members of these three political bodies felt comfortable enough to attend a forum together on teenage pregnancy, an accomplishment in itself. A day after the forum, several officeholders who did not attend the forum apologized and expressed their desire to be included in future forums. The mayor has indicated he would like to use the deliberative process in decision making.

Finally, the process plays a role in improving race relations in the area. All current members of the Community Politics team are African Americans. A majority of participants in the forum for officeholders were white. As Naomi says, the team “moves as an African American team in a community where African American teams are often discounted.” The fact that an African American team is introducing the process of deliberation to the community as a whole could ultimately become a unifying element.

Through the forums in Helena, people from all walks of life are talking to one another. Teens and adults have begun to take action. The Community Politics team hopes that issue framing, deliberation, and public action become habits in the community. Then, as Naomi envisioned, the deliberative process can be the hub of a wheel of much-needed change.

For more information about Community Politics, contact Jim Wilder, director of external affairs for the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at wilder@kettering.org or 202/393-4478. Grace Severn, an associate of the foundation, can be reached at severn@kettering.org.

A Local Issue Framing: Teenage Pregnancy

The Community Politics team in Helena, Arkansas, chose teen pregnancy as its first issue to frame. The result was a one-page framing entitled “Teenage Pregnancy: What Can We Do?” It encompassed three choices:

- Educate. The community as a whole should become more educated about the perils of pregnancy and the impacts it has in our community, both potential and factual, in order to reduce teenage pregnancy.
- End Poverty. We must create job opportunities, raise income levels, improve educational opportunities, housing, physical health opportunities, social venues, and the general wellness of the community in order to reduce teenage pregnancy.
- Everyone needs to set good examples. Adults and youth should begin to set better examples for each other in order to reduce teenage pregnancy in our community.
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