

# **IMAGINE CHICAGO**

## **CITIZEN LEADERS: INSPIRING COMMUNITY INNOVATION**

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*I always wanted to do something for the seniors in this building. When I talked to them, they told me that they were afraid to go outside because they didn't know the children on the street. When I talked to the children, they said they were on the street because there weren't other activities for them. I organized the kids to come over to the senior housing complex once a week. The seniors sometimes tutor them and help them with their homework, but more often they just talk or play board games or shoot pool. Both the seniors and children have grown more comfortable with each other.*

*-- A Citizen Leader story*

Everybody has dreams of a better community. Yet, dreams often fade when kept private. When brought into public light, dreams become stronger. When translated into achievable steps for action, and held in common by a group, they can transform a community into a place of hope.

*What small change in your community would make a big difference?  
How could you work to make it happen?  
Who could work with you to bring your vision to life?*

This article will describe how IMAGINE CHICAGO applied appreciative inquiry in a community setting to increase civic engagement and help community residents articulate and organize their visions and actions into positive community change.

### **Sponsoring Organization: IMAGINE CHICAGO**

IMAGINE CHICAGO was founded by Bliss Browne in 1992 to help people imagine and create a positive future for Chicago and its children. IMAGINE CHICAGO's first project was a citywide appreciative inquiry process in which 50 youth-at-risk interviewed 150+ adult community builders in Chicago about the highlights of their lives as citizens and their hopes and plans for the city's future.

Intergenerational appreciative inquiry proved very inspiring and motivating. Adult commitments were refreshed. Hope came alive. New possibilities for engagement were imagined and shared. And the process was successful in establishing a lively sense of shared civic identity, creating effective methods for constructive intergenerational dialogue, and expanding the sense among the young people that they could make a difference. But the dialogue only took the first step – of understanding what was possible, and imagining where that could lead in the future. There was no structure within which to create that future. IMAGINE CHICAGO learned that the appreciative intergenerational interview process would be more effective if it happened within structures that could move more readily to action.

IMAGINE CHICAGO therefore created initiatives that give participants a chance to be city creators in more concrete and sustained ways. IMAGINE CHICAGO works in partnership with individuals and local organizations -- schools, museums, churches, businesses, and community

groups—to design and implement innovative civic projects that connect generations and cultures and have lasting institutional and community impact.

At the heart of each initiative are constructive questions, high expectations, and the confidence that people working together can create what they care about. IMAGINE CHICAGO encourages individuals and organizations to focus constructively on their capacities and opportunities to make a difference as they -

*understand what is  
imagine what can be, and  
create what will be.*

IMAGINE CHICAGO's work involves three core processes:

- **dialogue** -- across cultural, racial, and generational boundaries
- **curriculum development** -- frameworks and organizers to understand, imagine and create projects that build community
- **network formation** -- to link individuals and organizations committed to developing a positive future for Chicago and its children.

Each process focuses participant's efforts by asking constructive questions that draw out the best of the past and build on that foundation to design and create a more vital future. Individuals and organizations develop skills which deepen their hope, forge meaningful civic connections across generations and cultures, and move toward visible outcomes.

### **The Citizen Leaders Program**

In 1996, IMAGINE CHICAGO initiated the *Citizen Leaders* program to engage citizens of a neighborhood in imagining and planning low-cost, sustainable community innovations that improve the quality of life for local residents. Participants form a team and design and create projects with their teams—based on what they see as valuable to the community, and building on community assets they have identified.

Citizen Leaders are nominated by schools, churches, community groups, and past participants, mostly in at-risk communities in Chicago. A nominee is somebody who has shown willingness to be involved in the community, has big ideas for the community, and is looking for an outlet to get involved. Participants have included a welfare mother well-respected on her block, an active attendee of a church congregation, residents who drop by a community organization wanting to help, and a teacher wanting to become more involved in community issues. Participants are from many ethnic backgrounds and cultures and have ranged in age from 13 to 65.

The *Citizen Leaders* program starts with appreciative inquiry. Participants answer questions which help them identify the assets of their neighborhoods and their own particular talents. Citizen Leaders continue to ask these questions and involve others in the process within a longer-term structure which consists of 10 workshops over five months. During this process, Citizen Leaders and their teams receive the tools and training needed to convert the energy generated by appreciative inquiry dialogue into a sustained community project.

The process of asking positive questions and identifying and planning a community project is captured in a Community Innovation Guide created by IMAGINE CHICAGO. Participants use this guide, which builds appreciative inquiry questioning into step-by-step worksheets to organize the project planning process. The progression of topics in the Community Innovation Guide and in the *Citizen Leader* workshops is as follows:

**Month 1**

- Workshop 1            The *Citizen Leader* process  
The power of positive questions
- Workshop 2            Building a local project team  
Training on appreciative inquiry

**Month 2**

- Workshop 3            Organizing a community meeting  
Building on community assets
- Workshop 4            Deciding on a project focus  
Imagining “what might be...”

**Month 3**

- Workshop 5            Designing an action plan  
Budget preparation  
Individual proposal assistance  
(*proposal due by next meeting*)
- Workshop 6            Peer proposal feedback  
Award letters and grant distribution  
Initial project implementation

**Month 4**

- Workshop 7            Creating community learning exchanges  
Revising plans based on new understandings
- Workshop 8            Communicating and documenting progress  
Media tips; describing project vision to “outside party”

**Month 5**

- Workshop 9            Building and maintaining progress  
Structures which will sustain community development
- Workshop 10           Assessing and disseminating results  
Learning to become community mentors/teachers of community  
innovation

Appreciative inquiry questioning is built into each topic, which the Citizen Leaders learn and then apply in organizing their projects. In the *Citizen Leader* workshops, they are active learners; in their neighborhoods, as head of a project team, they are leaders.

**The Power of Positive Questions (Month 1)**

The first thing that participants learn in the workshops is how to ask positive questions to identify assets within themselves and their neighborhood. Positive questions are often new to people. In at-risk communities, people are more used to being asked about problems than assets. In *Citizen Leader* workshops, they are asked:

- What do you value about yourself?
- What is something that you have done in the community that you are especially proud of?
- What made you go the extra mile to participate in this process?
- What do you value most about your neighborhood?
- What is a positive change you have seen on your block?

Participants discuss the questions at first in pairs before sharing their thoughts with the workshop group.

Participants identify assets such as the closeness of the community, neighbors that have been there a long time and know each other, strong churches, and people already doing good work. They get a chance to talk about personal strengths, responses which vary from a concern for the community, a strong spiritual faith, or the motivation to get things done. Other members of the

group point to different strengths—that they are good listeners, they like being around children, or they are good teachers.

Sharing these responses is a high-energy moment for the group. People are able to articulate why they are involved, what the potential is for the neighborhood, and what the talents are that they can contribute. Their responses to these questions generate renewed energy and excitement in their own abilities to work in the community and on the tasks they have in mind. Participants also appreciate being in a group of like-minded, committed individuals. Knowing that others are concerned and working in their communities renews the courage of many leaders.

At this point, participants are excited about change and see it as possible. Yet, this energy alone does not bring about change. People still need a plan, other people to work with, and the skills and resources needed to make something happen. So, participants begin being trained to organize others around asking positive questions.

### **Organizing Others with Appreciative Inquiry Questions (Months 1 & 2)**

The effect of asking appreciative questions is discussed, and there is a short presentation on the key assumptions embedded in appreciative inquiry and the difference between problem solving as a methodology and the appreciative inquiry process. Participants experience being asked constructive questions in every workshop, and they get practice designing appreciative questions. Being able to tap into other people's motivations and vision through appreciative inquiry is taught as an organizing skill to get people to join a community project team, to solicit their visions for community improvement and to match people's interests and experience with the project tasks at hand.

In order to form a project team of at least six volunteers, Citizen Leaders must go to their neighborhoods and ask constructive questions of their neighbors, friends, and family. The Community Innovation Guide provides a set of appreciative questions that Citizen Leaders are to ask at least 10 other people which draw out their gifts, hopes, and commitments. Leaders are encouraged to invite interested people to a community meeting to decide on a project to improve the community.

### **Deciding on a Project Focus (Month 2)**

Citizen Leaders next decide on a project focus. While they may have specific project ideas in mind, they are asked to recruit teams of people concerned about the community and collectively discuss project possibilities. The suggested steps during this project team meeting are to brainstorm project ideas using the question, "What small change would make a big difference in your neighborhood?"

The brainstorm session generates many ideas for community improvement projects. In order to narrow the number of ideas, Citizen Leaders ask team members to nominate only those ideas which meet certain criteria for productive change. Projects have to be achievable, involve others in the community, build on community assets, have a visible result in 3 months, and have a long-term impact which is sustainable by the community. The *Citizen Leader* program will fund only projects that meet these criteria.

Leaders then choose a final idea based on what has the most energy, commitment, and leadership behind it. Suggested questions to determine this might include:

- Who can provide leadership for this idea?
- Who in this group would be willing to commit time to this project idea?

### **Designing the Action Plan, Budget, and Proposal (Month 3)**

After they decide on a project focus with their team, Citizen Leaders structure that idea to create a sustained community project. Workshops use visual charts and organizers to help Citizen Leaders plan their action steps, write a budget, write a proposal, and delegate responsibilities for the project. All workshops and project team meetings are based around positive organizing questions that can help the teams move forward:

- What are all the possible steps needed to complete the project?
- Which steps need to be done first? Who can take responsibility for them?
- How can the money available be used as an investment to achieve the desired outcomes?

Citizen Leaders then write a proposal which includes a description of their neighborhood; a description of their project; how their project is achievable, involves others, builds on community assets, has an impact in the next three months, and has a long-term impact; what the action plan is; what the budget is; and, who the team members are. Proposals that meet the *Citizen Leaders* program criteria receive a \$500 non-competitive grant, which is often leveraged with local or in-kind contributions. Teams receive help in rethinking projects that do not initially meet the criteria in this process.

### **Implementing and Sustaining the Project (Months 3 –5)**

These workshops discuss how to implement, communicate, evaluate, sustain, and document the project. Leaders have a chance to share stories, ask questions, and receive suggestions from the larger group. They report progress and challenges in implementing their projects, and draw support from each other during the workshops. The workshops continue to be focused around positive questions:

- What makes an effective presentation to a newspaper reporter?
- What specific things can you do to encourage continued community involvement?
- What positive impacts do you see happening from this project?

### **Challenges and Suggestions for Change in the Program**

While the program lays out a sequential step-by-step process for project progress in workshops and team meetings, organizing a project still proves difficult for many teams. IMAGINE CHICAGO constantly assesses Citizen Leaders' progress and helps them, as necessary, with the next step. Both assessment and help occur through individual conversations outside of workshops, and every workshop begins with a check-in on the progress of Citizen Leader teams before introducing a new topic. Challenges for participants include:

#### **1. A substantial volunteer commitment**

The program requires a substantial volunteer commitment from the Citizen Leaders. The workshops are held in the evenings after full-time jobs for many of the Citizen Leaders. Even though they are committed to developing a project to improve their communities, they cannot always make every workshop and they also have to schedule time for their project team meetings. Every effort is made to help those who have missed sessions to catch up.

#### **2. Forming a project team**

The process of forming a project team is an essential, yet difficult step. Leaders are new at trying to organize their neighbors and are usually not in the habit of asking appreciative questions. Some people on the blocks are afraid to get involved, some are not used to being involved, and some can only give a limited amount of time. It is difficult to knock on doors and reach those not already involved.

Citizen Leaders often reach out to those with a concern for the community looking for a way to get involved, especially friends and those they know personally. After two months, most Citizen Leaders have other people to work with, even if it is not yet a full team of six people. Teams

frequently include interested people on the block, family and friends of the leader, fellow church members, pastors, teachers, and other active people in the community.

### **3. Different learning styles**

The workshops have to be tailored to different learning styles. Many workshops depend upon considerable verbal, writing, and speaking skills. While some participants are comfortable with this, literacy and writing skills are issues for others.

The issue has been addressed by giving people the chance to meet in pairs before sharing an idea with the larger group and allowing participants to be creative in expressing their ideas through drawings or role-playing. Workshop presentations also give concrete examples to help with comprehension and to model written responses.

### **4. Developing achievable projects**

Another challenge has been to help Citizen Leaders develop manageable, achievable projects. Frequently, as Citizen Leaders get excited about developing a project to improve the community, they want to implement large projects such as building a new community center, or tennis courts. While these are worthy ambitions, they are beyond the scope of a *Citizen Leader* project.

Participants are encouraged to dream big, yet they need to create an achievable project that can be implemented within a relatively short time. One possibility is to do a small project which builds the foundation for a larger one. For example, participants that want to build a community center for youth may be able to organize an after-school group or a youth arts program. Those wanting to build a tennis court might organize a youth group which brings youth to other local tennis courts as part of its activities.

### **5. Problem-solving vs. appreciative inquiry**

It is a challenge to counter the problem-solving mindset of many participants. A recent Citizen Leader trying to start a youth group was told, "If you keep the group open to all children, you won't be able to supervise them. Kids will have accidents and you will be liable."

Legitimate concerns are rephrased to constructively address the issue. How will you get permission for the children to be there and how can you best supervise the kids? Citizen Leaders learn to face issues and obstacles positively and constructively.

## **Evolution of the *Citizen Leaders* Program**

Since the program's inception in 1996, IMAGINE CHICAGO has conducted four citywide classes of *Citizen Leaders* involving 37 project teams in 15 communities. Projects were designed around the particular needs of each community and have included block clubs, community gardens, after-school groups, youth groups, adopt-a-grandparent programs, arts classes, youth forums, and an open-mike youth coffeehouse.

Participation in this program has had impact on three levels: the development of the individual involved (especially leadership, communication, and planning skills), the development of the sponsoring organizations and neighborhoods (e.g. organized block clubs working with community groups), and the establishment of a network of grassroots leaders who have created effective ways to make a difference as citizens and who can share their experience with others.

The most successful *Citizen Leaders* projects have been sustained over time in cases where strong connections were established with neighborhood organizations. These organizations became a broader community of support for the Citizen Leaders and often provided facilities or other support to the *Citizen Leader* projects. For example, the community garden in Uptown has flourished because of participation of church members from the Uptown Baptist Church and teachers and students from Stewart School. The One Church One School program in Englewood reaches kids in the Nicholson elementary school and uses space in Mt. Carmel CME church. In

some cases, *Citizen Leader* projects have become important, new pieces to the outreach and mission of local organizations. For example, the popularity of an Uptown basketball league convinced the Park District to form a similar league.

Four Citizen Leaders in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago created one of the best examples of a strong connection to a neighborhood organization. The Citizen Leaders, who developed a block club, teen coffeehouse project, youth group, and intergenerational softball league, paired with the Westside Health Authority, a community organization, and started a group called, Every Block is a Village. In the past four years Every Block a Village (see [www.ebvonline.org](http://www.ebvonline.org)) organized 68 block clubs to address community-wide concerns. The group has been invited into 3 new neighborhoods to organize and even more growth is anticipated.

### **The Creation of Community Pilots**

The correlation of successful *Citizen Leader* projects with strong connections to neighborhood organizations led IMAGINE CHICAGO to another development point in the *Citizen Leaders* program. The goal is to strengthen connections between Citizen Leaders and neighborhood organizations by running the program within a given neighborhood rather than on a citywide basis. The hope is that, within community-focused classes, sustainable connections will be made more easily within the neighborhood.

The first community pilot started in June, 1998 in West Garfield Park. In this pilot, Bethel New Life and the ACT coalition share responsibility with IMAGINE CHICAGO to plan and organize *Citizen Leaders*. The second community pilot began in September, 1998 in the Englewood community with Mount Carmel CME Church as a local partner (see [www.imagineenglewoodif.org](http://www.imagineenglewoodif.org))

### **An Example of Citizen Leaders as Agents of Change in their Community**

The Englewood community pilot developed out of the work of two past Citizen Leaders, Jean Carter Hill and Helen Arnold Massey. Jean and Helen attended the *Citizen Leaders* program from May, 1997 until September, 1997 during which they organized a project called, Family Health Nights, at the Mount Carmel CME Church.

Jean and Helen are educators who met at Nicholson Specialty School in Englewood. Jean is the school/community representative whose job is to build relationships between the school and the broader community and Helen is a health educator, now on loan to the Illinois State Board of Education.

Jean and Helen see 'homeyness' and families as some of the greatest assets of the community. Many of the residents and their families have lived in the community for generations. Their school is an asset with arts and dance programs centered at the school and dedicated teachers. At their church, students learn faith and gain spiritual strength. Jean and Helen want to build on these assets in addressing the needs of the community. Englewood faces many inner-city challenges in providing productive opportunities for kids, building stronger connections among families in the area, and coordinating resources for the children's well-being.

Jean and Helen assembled a team of church members, the pastor, the local city Department of Human Services representative, teachers at Nicholson School, and many youth that attended the school to create a church/school partnership. They got support from a national organization called, One Church One School, to start this partnership with Nicholson School and Mount Carmel CME Church. The partnership provides the structure for them to develop, as their *Citizen Leaders* project, a program addressing family health.

The Family Health Nights are monthly forums where families and youth get together to discuss health topics such as dental health, cardiovascular health, nutrition, and abstinence. Every Health Night begins with a walk around surrounding blocks as a healthy, physical exercise and as a way to publicize the program to the neighbors. The program mixes group presentations with

arts activities for the kids. Different community representatives give presentations about youth opportunities, like the Whirlwind Arts program or the Girl Scouts. Each session ends with the youth and adults writing evaluations to give everybody practice with their writing skills, after which fruit and lemonade are served.

This project builds on the assets of both the church and school as strong community institutions with dedicated people. It further strengthens the closeness of the residents and the family by providing an activity in which the whole family can participate. It also provides a supervised activity for kids to attend if their parents cannot accompany them. The program also builds on Jean's strength as a school/community representative and Helen's talent as a health educator to address health issues prevalent in the African-American community.

The program started in the summer of '97 and continues to provide Family Health Nights to the Englewood community. Family Health Nights average between 20–40 participants a session, mostly youth.

Yet, Jean and Helen's vision has always been bigger. They created their project as a way to address needs in their neighborhood, but their broader vision has always been the wellness of the entire Englewood community. They developed the slogan, "Imagine Englewood if...", which they present at different community events. Recently, the community policing program held an essay contest for youth on "Imagine Englewood if...". Jean and Helen continue to challenge local residents' visions of what it might take to strengthen the Englewood community.

When the opportunity arose of having community-based sessions of *Citizen Leaders*, Jean and Helen arranged three different recruitment meetings to gather participants, and they helped write a proposal to bring the program to Englewood. The program begins in September, 1998, with Jean and Helen as the local leaders for organizing and teaching the program in partnership with Mount Carmel CME Church as the sponsor. The community pilot will involve a broad range of people from the community and get different churches and local organizations involved in projects to revitalize the entire community.

### **Summary**

Embedded in *Citizen Leaders* is generative appreciative inquiry which leads to action and sustained change. Citizen Leader projects enable people to make a difference in their communities and build their skills as community leaders. One of the key skills is asking constructive questions to mobilize others and build on their hopes and strengths.

*What would it take for every citizen to make a civic contribution worthy of their own potential?*

*Imagine the possibilities....*

IMAGINE CHICAGO is eager to identify and expand its partners in this work. For more information, please contact:

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