

Community Building Around Environmental Justice

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Summary

For my leadership project I listened carefully to community members and leaders in order to design an outreach campaign that elevates and amplifies marginalized voices in the Central Brooklyn community. The campaign will highlight organizations and organizers in the community so that people can connect with others already doing the work, seek out aid, and find solidarity. This project began as an effort to foster pro-environmental behavior but rapidly evolved into one centered on community building and outreach, environmental justice, and resource security.

Introduction

Brooklyn is a borough of blocks. Dozens of languages, cuisines, and cultures inhabit the landscape of cracked concrete and verdant parks, tree wells and vacant lots. Life hums in all its forms. But this intricate balance is not always just; goods, services, and decision-making authority are rarely distributed equitably within and between these borough-defined systems. Whether through oversight or intention, these disparities result from a failure to listen to the various voices of our community.

There is ample evidence linking greenspace access and the quality of community health and wellness (Sandifer, Sutton-Grier, & Ward, 2015). However, many of the communities affected most by a lack of access are not afforded the luxury of seeking access or addressing the underlying issues - these efforts take time and money. When urban green space *is* prioritized and built, it is often done so by actors from outside the community and without listening to community priorities or addressing community needs. This approach can result in increased housing costs, displacement of historical residents, and gentrification (Wolcha, Byrn, & Newell, 2014).

Unequitable lack of access to the ecosystem services of urban green spaces is just one example of environmental injustice. One possible model for achieving greater environmental justice is ensuring that affected communities have the agency, the tools, and the self-efficacy to govern themselves (Langemeyer & Connolly, 2020). This model has the potential to build communities that are more resilient, able to maintain themselves in the face of injustice and a

rapidly changing world (Meerow, Newell, & Stults, 2016).

One way to allow for community self-determination and environmental justice is to center the voices of the community and prioritize support for community organizations already doing the groundwork (Langemeyer & Connolly, 2020, Meerow, Newell, & Stults, 2016). In order to amplify Central Brooklyn community voices, I had conversations with a cross-section of community members and developed an outreach plan using principles of conservation psychology. The goal of this leadership project is to listen and provide a space for the community to share their stories. These stories will be the foundation of the outreach plan. Hopefully, these actions will contribute to fostering community self-determination and environmental justice.

Project Details

Initially, I set out to conduct a qualitative review of the Central Brooklyn community in order to identify barriers to pro-environmental behavior as a part of a greater Community-Based Social Marketing approach (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011). I interviewed six people over the course of the project. I selected three random interviewees from the neighborhoods of Crown Heights, Bed Stuy, and Brownsville. The other three interviewees were heavily involved in community affairs and were selected based on their organizational affiliation. I spoke to an MTA bus driver in Crown Heights, a bodega cashier in Brownsville, and an artist in Bed Stuy. I spoke to a community board member, a community organizer, and a member of a mutual aid group. I spoke with these individuals based on their availability and in places that were safe and comfortable to them.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each interviewee and recorded the audio on my phone. I asked them all the same series of 10 questions in addition to some questions specific to their role in the community (Appendix A). After these conversations, my personal outlook and the direction of my project changed fundamentally. I went into these interviews expecting to uncover a number of barriers to pro-environmental behaviors that I might be able to address. Instead, I discovered a barrier that was central to all the behaviors I planned to address - historic environmental injustice.

With this adjusted lens, I will conduct a qualitative analysis of the interviews in order to

identify the most urgent needs in the Central Brooklyn community. Then I will collect resources from community-level organizations and actors aimed at addressing those specific needs. I will design and distribute a flier that shares this information in easy-to-understand buckets (food, health, legal aid, etc.). Each section will include the scope of the organization and contact information. I will also use the audio from my interviews to start a podcast called 'Aid & Amplify' with the goal of elevating community voices. I will include a call-to-action on the flier to listen to the podcast, share within the community, and submit their own stories. By soliciting new stories, I can continue the podcast indefinitely and update the outreach fliers on a needs basis. I will provide an option to email, submit a voice memo, or use a QR code. I will also include tear-off tabs at the bottom with the same information. This approach is based on the effectiveness of flyering in the community based on my interviews.

Reflection & Conclusion

Based on my conversations within the community, historic environmental injustice prevents the marginalized Central Brooklyn community from prioritizing pro-environmental behaviors. Rather, many in the community are justifiably focused on their own issues of food security, housing security, and health. Individuals in the community don't know where to turn to seek help for these urgent issues, not to mention the few environmental issues that warrant their already thinly-spread efforts.

There are more dire problems facing the Central Brooklyn community than the lacking pro-environmental behaviors that I expected to find. The urgent issues facing the Central Brooklyn community - waste management, food security, housing security, energy sovereignty, pollution, and health and wellness to name a few - are issues of environmental justice. I was only able to learn these lessons by listening to the community on a very intimate level. This revelation has reshaped my leadership philosophy to emphasize listening. How can one hope to help their community without first listening and trying to understand the perspectives of the community itself? To lead is to listen. I hope to continue to heed these lessons and embody my leadership philosophy through the outreach plan and beyond.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

- Tell me your story. How long have you lived here?
- Describe the neighborhood for me.
- Describe the Central Brooklyn community for me.
- What makes the Central Brooklyn community resilient? *Urban resilience refers to the ability of an urban system-and all its constituent socio-ecological and socio-technical networks across temporal and spatial scales-to maintain or rapidly return to desired functions in the face of a disturbance, to adapt to change, and to quickly transform systems that limit current or future adaptive capacity.*
- What challenges does the Central Brooklyn community face?
- What is the most difficult or urgent challenge facing the Central Brooklyn community?
- Does the Central Brooklyn community face any environmental or environmental justice challenges? Would you identify any of the challenges you already listed as issues of the environment or environmental justice?
- What (if any) resources are there to help with these issues?
- What resources are still needed?
- What can listeners do to help their neighbors?