

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

### *Point of Proof:*

# SARASOTA COMMUNITY STUDIO

SARASOTA, FLORIDA

### WHAT MAKES THIS PROJECT A “POINT OF PROOF”?

Between 2009 and 2014, hundreds of young children in the Central-Cocoanut neighborhood of Sarasota led place-based community change efforts to catalyze the transformation of this predominantly Black neighborhood and surrounding community. The results were powerful: increased awareness and involvement of residents of all ages, and increased awareness and responsiveness of agencies and systems, to benefit all children and the neighborhood as a whole. Children invented playful, neighborly approaches to asset-mapping, networking, data-gathering, storytelling, advocacy, stewardship, and conflict resolution to powerfully change the narrative about the community within and beyond the neighborhood. They demonstrated to themselves and others that they are undeniably talented, diligent, and capable of improving the community together.

### WHAT IS THIS PROJECT’S ELEVATOR SPEECH?

Built upon five years of efforts by neighborhood children, Sarasota Community Studio was established as a creative space in the Central-Cocoanut neighborhood of Sarasota, Florida for neighbors to come together to invent powerful approaches to community change. As a local hub established by residents, the goal was to become a 47-block area, where the entire neighborhood, including children, are thriving.

Sarasota Community Studio was founded upon the recognition that a community is not built, it emerges. It emerges as people and great ideas coalesce around the positive, when neighbors are making decisions and taking action as primary community change agents. As a neighborhood transforms, it becomes possible for change to scale out and positively affect the broader community.

Sarasota Community Studio was also founded upon the recognition that children are particularly talented as neighbors. They are naturally inclined to be curious, playful, social, and joyful. They are storytellers and boundary-crossers. These are

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not only the qualities that make great neighbors, but also the very qualities of social innovators. As children intentionally take on their identity as neighbors to make the neighborhood even better than it already is, they become increasingly recognizable as valued “neighborkids.”

There are four key domains to the work of Sarasota Community Studio, with children leading efforts in each domain:

- 1. Community Building**—Activities that strengthen connections among residents and generate a sense of welcome and neighborhood spirit while sharing information, making decisions, and taking action together for the sake of the neighborhood and broader community.
- 2. Community Data**—Activities that gather and generate regularly updated neighborhood-scale information about how children and the neighborhood are faring; this data informs decisions and actions to bring about collective well-being.
- 3. Talent Development**—Activities that help children recognize, develop and contribute their talents as neighbors using a positive, relationship-based, neighbor-oriented approach that is an alternative to typical social service models, which tend to orient around children’s needs and problems.



**4. Communications**—Approaches for sharing information through stories, pictures, and maps that help to change how people talk about the neighborhood and make decisions.

Sarasota Community Studio was founded upon the belief that together in these ways, neighbors can help their communities thrive by following the lead of “neighborkids.” In doing so, children thrive too.

#### **WHO PARTICIPATES IN THIS PROJECT?**

Central-Cocoanut is a 47-block neighborhood in Sarasota, Florida. Of the 2,100 people who live in the neighborhood, more than 500 of the residents are children; 300 are up to the age of ten and 175 are up to the age of five. Racially, more than 50 percent of residents identify as Black/African American, while 40-45 percent identify as white. Ethnically, more than 10 percent identify as Hispanic/Latino. More than 70 percent of the neighborhood’s children identify as Black/African American.

In Central-Cocoanut, both children and adults express a love of the neighborhood and a desire to stay. Oftentimes, however, families move out due to housing conditions. Reasons cited by neighbors include the disrepair of buildings, exorbitant utility bills, disrespectful treatment by landlords, and the rising cost of rent. A housing survey conducted by neighbors in 2013 revealed that about half of all households rented rather than owned their homes and more than forty houses were abandoned.

The median family income in Central-Cocoanut is \$26,000, which is half the rate for all families living in Sarasota. Twenty percent of all households have a family income below \$15,000, which is twice the rate for all households in the city of Sarasota.

As such, many people in Central-Cocoanut know how to navigate hardships and harness existent resources to thrive.

#### **HOW DOES THIS PROJECT DEFINE SUCCESS?**

In order to gauge whether and how efforts to bring about the intended changes are working, a strategy was outlined to continually assess both the efforts and the actual change in the community. An application of the Results-Based Accountability framework was

drafted to identify outcomes relating to “how much” and “how well” the efforts develop, as well as “who is better off and how,” in terms of:

- Number, diversity (age, race, ethnicity), geographic distribution, and interconnectedness of residents involved in the efforts.
- Number, frequency, quality, and interconnectedness of the efforts.
- Increase in neighborhood identity, as reported by people directly participating in efforts, as well as periodic and systematic surveys of residents from the neighborhood documenting their sense of community, neighborhood attachment, knowledge about the neighborhood, sense of hope, and sense of agency.
- Increases in child well-being, measured in terms of happiness/emotional grounding, learning, loving relationships, and community contribution.
- Changes in neighborhood well-being, measured in terms of improved quality and availability of affordable housing, decreased abandoned and boarded-up buildings, increased employment and family income, improved social justice, decreased crime and arrest rates, and an increased sense of community.

To begin, changes that may signal “tiny initiating events” of transformation are documented through pictures and stories. As related community datasets become available, it will be possible to systematically measure and track changes in well-being over time.

### HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN THIS PROJECT IS SUCCESSFUL?

Sarasota Community Studio is currently participating in a cross-site case study with eight other place-based community change initiatives in cities across the United States. This case study effort is coordinated by the Population Change Learning Community associated with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Center for Healthier Children, Families, and Communities and is funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. It is intended to assist the local community in reflecting upon its development and progress, in order to spot and harness success as it emerges.

Indicators of success to be tracked over time include: 1) number and diversity of residents (particularly children) and local organizations/agencies involved in the overall efforts; 2) number and range of neighbor-led efforts to promote child/family well-being; and 3) improved infrastructure for the efforts, including increased availability to neighborhood-specific datasets. In the future, it is expected that a range of indicators of child/family well-being will be available through the neighborhood, the school district, and various city or county agencies both at the individual and neighborhood scale, in order to identify and track changes in these indicators.

### WHAT MAKES IT SUCCESSFUL?

The efforts of Sarasota Community Studio have been oriented around the wisdom and talents of “neighborkids,” meaning children who own their identity as neighbors with intentionality. In Central-Cocoanut, hundreds of children made positive contributions to the neighborhood over a span of five years before the Studio was established, not through schools or formal services or programs, but voluntarily as neighbors. Most of the children who contributed were up to the age of ten. They now have a “demonstrated track record” of caring and contributing to the neighborhood and community. The Studio was established as a response to these contributions, building upon the neighborhood spirit that the children created.

Because neighbors initiated and led these efforts as “first investors,” this is community change-making that is “inside out *from* the inside out.” It begins with neighbors who already love the neighborhood and recognize and appreciate the talents of children and others who live there. Many community initiatives start with the belief that certain neighborhoods are weak or damaged and need to be fixed and that the primary sources of improvement exist outside the neighborhood. When ideas and efforts instead are recognized as first emerging among residents, the locus of power and decision making shifts from outside experts to residents, and truly democratic decision-making becomes possible.

### WHAT CHALLENGES HAS IT FACED?

The greatest challenge faced by Sarasota Community Studio has been the relative unfamiliarity people have with place-based approaches to comprehensive community change. There are also biases about children; it is often assumed that because they are young, they can be the beneficiaries of efforts, but not the legitimate leaders or primary agents of change. Neighbors are often assumed to be less knowledgeable, less skilled, and less sophisticated than professionals associated with formal institutions. These assumptions are held by funders, policymakers and leaders of some of the institutions that most directly influence the well-being of children and families. These assumptions and biases will likely continue to pose challenges to child- and resident-led change initiatives in the future unless they are acknowledged and examined. In Sarasota, they have made it difficult to secure the funding and related resources. Although the efforts are now dormant due to a lack of funding, the traditions and practices initiated by “neighborkids” continue to influence the broader community’s orientation to children and neighbors as change makers, and similar efforts are now growing in nearby St. Petersburg, Florida.



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Even still, the efforts of Central-Cocoaanut "neighborkids" and Sarasota Community Studio experienced unprecedented success. Not only did the network of connections within the neighborhood become strengthened, but policies changed as well. Children led efforts to redesign and transform a neighborhood park. They revived the annual celebration of local civil rights history, prompting the county historical society to formally acknowledge this history as well. The local elementary school re-examined library policies that were promoting income-based disparities. The school district and Sheriff's Department reorganized their data so that neighborhood-specific patterns of student success and arrests were finally shared publicly. These successes were made possible through the steadfast actions of Central-Cocoaanut neighbors coming together around the children.

#### **HOW IS THIS PROJECT SUSTAINABLE?**

While the efforts of Central-Cocoaanut "neighborkids" and the Sarasota Community Studio have been widely embraced by neighbors, with vocal support from the city mayor, local newspaper editorial staff, and leaders in

various sectors, the efforts are not currently funded sufficiently to realize its full potential. Children and fellow residents of Central-Cocoanut continue to carry out the efforts with volunteer support. The founding co-executive director of Sarasota Community Studio is now working with neighbors in the nearby city of St. Petersburg, Florida to develop a parallel effort that is now receiving financial support. Children in the two neighborhoods are now connected, with some preliminary collaborations forming. As such, sustainability for this approach is emerging.

### HOW IS THIS PROJECT REPLICABLE?

These efforts are now serving as the model for similar efforts in the Lake Maggiore Shores neighborhood of St. Petersburg, Florida, with an emphasis on the well-being of babies and very young children. Lake Maggiore Shores is also a predominantly Black neighborhood, where more than 90 percent of residents identify as Black/African American. The learnings and insights from Central-Cocoanut are being applied in order to generate a similar resident-oriented approach that follows the lead of “neighborkids.” Children have formed a “Neighborbaby Fan Club” to welcome and champion babies who are born into or move into the neighborhood.

These efforts are a living example of a key point recently made by Principal Associate and CEO of Community Science, Dr. David Chavis on the Community Science blog:

*For true collaboration, there must be recognition of equal power among all those at the table, preferably from the very start. Many community organizations have not attained that level of power (or stature) within their community when [a] coalition is formed. Basic power inequities are never resolved until residents are seen as bringing equal or greater value to the table than the larger institutions. Funders and technical assistance providers need to be prepared to assist in this challenging process.*

### WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

When community development starts from within, the community’s progress is infused with the wisdom of the neighborhood and “neighborkids.” When Black residents take the lead in uplifting their community, they counter negative narratives and draw on the strengths and beauty of Black culture. In Sarasota, we are thoughtfully (and playfully) engaging the neighborhood in community transformation with Black children leading the way.



