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“This is What Community Should Look Like”: an Ethnographic Study of a Local Nonprofit Organization

(Originally submitted for ANTH 470: Anthropological Analysis and Interpretation)

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Abstract

This ethnographic study is based off of six weeks of participant observation and ethnographic research with Neighbors to Friends, a local grassroots organization in Central Minnesota that facilitates a free laundry program and runs a mobile shower vehicle that provides showers to those experiencing homelessness. By fully participating in the day-to-day operations of Neighbors to Friends, the purpose of this project is to gain a holistic understanding of how this unique nonprofit organization creates a sense of community for those experiencing homelessness and poverty. Nancy Dyson, the director of Neighbors to Friends, has a leadership style that allows for volunteers, community partners, and the people they serve to take ownership in the program and creates a sense of community where all are welcome. In a capitalistic society, people are often seen as commodities and value is often placed on a person based on what they can contribute to society financially. Neighbors to Friends rejects this ideal and finds value in people just because they are human. By comparing my observations to scholarly research about community and grassroots leadership styles, I argue that Neighbors to Friends not only meets the physical needs of marginalized individuals experiencing homelessness and poverty, but fosters an environment where community is created and the need to belong is met as well.

Introduction

Neighbors to Friends is a not-for-profit organization established by Nancy Dyson and Jason Jaques, along with the other volunteers they work with. Before the organization had a name, it started off as a small laundry program at Kip’s Laundry in St. Cloud, Minnesota. Nancy had spent some time at Lake George, bringing coffee and breakfast food to some homeless men that had been living around the lake. As time passed, she began to form a friendship with them and developed trust. She found out that these men had a great need for their clothes to be washed and Nancy wanted to do something about it. Five years ago, Nancy and the men from Lake George worked together to start a program called Laundry Love. They collected quarters and laundry soap and anyone in need was welcome to come and do their laundry for free on the first, third, and fifth Tuesday of every month. Laundry Love is a nationwide program that



offers laundry services and supplies to those in need. Nancy does not take credit for starting Laundry Love in St. Cloud, but says the men from Lake George helped too. Over the years, the program has grown quite large and there is now a second location in a neighboring city where families can go to get their laundry done. Over the years, Nancy has developed relationships with the homeless community in St. Cloud and has become aware of what their needs are and the lack of community resources that are able to meet those basic needs.

A few years ago, Nancy and Jason were walking in a parking lot outside of a store and ran into one of their friends. She was a middle aged woman experiencing homelessness and when Nancy leaned in to give her a hug (as she does with nearly everyone she talks to), the woman pulled away and tearfully said she hasn't showered in days. She asked Nancy and Jason if they knew of any place where she could take a shower, and Nancy and Jason said no. In St. Cloud, the homeless population has grown increasingly over the years but shelters have not grown to accommodate. Shelters are almost always full and there is no place that is easily accessible for people experiencing homelessness to shower. Nancy and Jason knew they had to do something about it and began looking at small busses to transform into a mobile shower vehicle. As they were about to purchase a 15-passenger bus, they looked at each other and wondered if this was too crazy of an idea. They had no idea what they were getting themselves into, but had faith in their idea and felt compelled to do something about this growing issue in their community. Jason and their friend Brian watched countless YouTube videos and became amateur carpenters and plumbers and transformed the gutted bus into a fully functioning mobile shower vehicle which they call "Shower the People," named after the James Taylor song of the same name. Nancy, Jason, and Brian started bringing the truck out in the summer of 2019 and now take it out to a local rest stop and the public library parking lot multiple days in a week.

Neighbors to Friends is in the process of becoming a 501(c)(3) and has three branches to the organization. Laundry Love, Shower the People, and a project addressing housing for the homeless that is currently in the works make up the larger non-profit of Neighbors to Friends.

Experiment and Methods

During my field research between 6/25/2019 and 8/6/2019, my primary method of research was participant observation. Participant observation is the foundation of ethnographic research and involves the researcher actively participating in the day-to-day lives of a people group. Essentially, it is learning by doing. This method gives the researcher a tacit and more holistic understanding of a cultural group. This method allowed me to learn about how Neighbors to Friends operates by participating in what Nancy and Jason were doing. The boundaries and limits to participant observation depend on the circumstances, however I was heavily involved with the operations at Neighbors to Friends. I went to numerous Laundry Love events, went out with the Shower the People truck, worked with Nancy during her office hours, and attended various meetings with Nancy to obtain a holistic view of how Neighbors to Friends is run. During these various activities, I took extensive field notes to make sense of all that was happening. Using participant observation allowed me to have a first-hand view of what went on and also allowed me to physically feel what it was like to be involved with Neighbors to Friends. These viewpoints could not be obtained had I not used participant observation as my primary research method.

I will be using the terms "homeless person/people" and "people experiencing homelessness" interchangeably. Throughout my fieldwork, I have heard both terms being used. Nancy Dyson uses the phrase "people experiencing homelessness" because she believes that "homelessness is something you are

living and experiencing, it isn't who you are." She also stated that she doesn't think there is one right way to say it. Because of this, I will use both.

In this ethnographic essay, I argue that Neighbors to Friends is an organization that was created to meet the basic physical needs of marginalized individuals experiencing homelessness and poverty, but serves a larger purpose of creating community between the individuals it serves, their volunteers, and community partners. Through analyzing the definition of "sense of community" (McMillan 1986), the use of food in creating community, and grassroots leadership styles, I argue that Neighbors to Friends brings people together to create a "beloved community," a term made popular by Martin Luther King Jr.

Results

"Sense of community"

David McMillan defines the "sense of community" as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (1978:9). McMillan's definition has four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership is when one feels like they belong to the group and have a shared connections with other members. Membership also means that boundaries are set about who is and is not included in a group. Influence is the sense that one can make a difference to the group and that the group matters to its members. Integration and fulfillment of needs is the feeling that a members' needs will be met through resources available to those that are members of the group. Finally, shared emotional connection is the idea that members have and will share a history, similar experiences, and time together (McMillan 1986:9). Neighbors to Friends is composed of all four of these elements which can create a strong "sense of community" for those involved.

Nancy, Jason and the other volunteers at Neighbors to Friends are adamant in the fact that anyone and everyone is welcome to participate in the programs that they offer. There are no income requirements or proof necessary to be able to use the laundry services or mobile shower. People can simply show up to the locations and utilize the services. Membership in any group means that there are boundaries, meaning that there are people who belong to the group and people who do not. These boundaries can vary greatly depending on the type of group. These boundaries that are set "provide members with the emotional safety necessary for needs and feelings to be exposed and for intimacy to develop" (McMillan 1986:9). Even though Neighbors to Friends is extremely inclusive and will always welcome anyone who desires to be a part of the community, there are a few requirements that are put in place in order to allow everyone to feel comfortable in the group. They have guidelines as to what kind of behavior is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Many that attend Neighbors to Friends events are often going through difficult circumstances and tensions can run high. Nancy created guidelines that state that anyone is free to express their frustrations in however way they need to, as long as they are not harming others verbally or physically.

According to McMillan, groups often use deviants to establish boundaries (1986:9). For example, at Laundry Love, one young man had escalating aggressive behavior and was swearing and yelling at Nancy. She asked him many times to end that behavior or he would be asked to leave or the police would be called. Because he did not stop the aggressive behavior, she unfortunately had to call the police and he was banned from the laundromat. Nancy said he would be welcomed back to Laundry Love if he would behave appropriately. Nancy said that she doesn't care how people express their anger or frustrations as long as they are not hurting others. Because this man's behavior was violent towards others, he was asked to leave the group. The basic rule that Neighbors to Friends has of not hurting others allows for members



to feel safe to expose their emotions and needs and develop intimacy with one another. Members of the Neighbors to Friends community have a shared connection through events they attend together, such as Laundry Love and Shower the People. Over time these shared connections create intimacy and foster a “sense of community”.

Influence, the second element of the “sense of community”, is the sense that one can make a difference to the group. The group at large also has influence on members of the group. These two ideas working together make influence a bidirectional concept. “In one direction, there is the notion that for a member to be attracted to a group, he or she must have some influence over what the group does. On the other hand, cohesiveness is contingent on a group’s ability to influence its members” (McMillan 1986:11). This idea does not mean a loss of personal choice because many people would try to escape the conformity of a tight-knit community in order to express their own ideas and values. This shows the need to develop communities that appreciate everyone’s differences so that an individual believes they can exert some sort of control over the community (McMillan 1986:11).

Nancy and her team fully embrace each individual’s uniqueness and encourages anyone involved in Neighbors to Friends to use their gifts and talents to have ownership and a sense control over their community. Anybody is welcomed and encouraged to volunteer in whatever capacity they feel comfortable with. Nancy has the belief that everyone has a unique gift or talent and if someone has an idea of how they can use those skills to contribute to the community at Neighbors to Friends, they are strongly encouraged to do so. For example, a woman approached Nancy with an idea of how she wants to contribute to Laundry Love. She wishes to create a children’s program and provide activities to keep kids occupied while the adults they are with do laundry. She was excited about this and felt that is how she could best use her skills to contribute to the Neighbors to Friends community. Nancy and Jason do not try to control each individual’s ideas, but allow them to fully take control and utilize their skills in a way that only that individual could do.

Nancy also allows for individual agency within Neighbors to Friends by not forcing her religious beliefs on anyone. Nancy belongs to a local religious community and those religious principles guide her beliefs, but she does not hint towards any sort of religious affiliation within Neighbors to Friends. During my fieldwork, I heard many people ask if Neighbors to Friends is a religious group, and I believe this is because many charity organizations will help people in need only if they listen or be involved in their religious practices. Because Nancy does not advertise her religious beliefs or only provide services if an individual participates in those beliefs, people are able to hold on to their individual freedom while still getting their basic needs met.

The third element of the definition of the “sense of community” is integration and fulfillment of needs or in other words, reinforcement. McMillan states that “it is obvious for any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group associate must be rewarding for its members” (1986:12). This theory of the “sense of community” can be applied to all different types of community, but Neighbors to Friends has shown to be rewarding to all different types of people. People experiencing poverty or homelessness get a need met through a hot meal, a shower, or free laundry services and for many this is very rewarding. Along with that, being able to spend time with others and make intimate connections is also rewarding. Many people that came to the Shower the People truck often never took a shower, but spent time with the group socializing and sharing a meal with others. Even though they weren’t utilizing the shower, it was rewarding to them to have time to socialize with others.

McMillan goes on to state that groups work to find a way to fit people together so that people meet the needs of others while also meeting their own needs. This is evident in Neighbors to Friends about just how often Nancy and Jason talk about boundaries. Nancy always says, “if you can’t do it with joy,

don't do it at all." For example, some volunteers asked what to do at Laundry Love if someone arrives after the cut off time. Nancy explained that if they feel comfortable and are willing to stay a little bit longer and still have joy, then they can feel free to let someone start washing their clothes late. If they don't feel comfortable and would be disgruntled about staying later, then tell the person they cannot start washing. Nancy encourages everyone to have this mindset because she believes that they are present to serve others, but also to have personal boundaries as well. She wants the volunteers to feel good about the work they do and not feel like it is a burden. Another way Nancy and Jason develop boundaries is by calling all volunteers at the beginning of the year to ask if they want to continue volunteering. They do this so people are able to say no if they want to back out and not continue volunteering with Neighbors to Friends because sometimes it can be difficult for people to quit and to set boundaries themselves. Nancy and Jason make sure to set boundaries to make sure the community at Neighbors to Friends is rewarding for everyone.

The fourth and final element of the definition of the "sense of community" is a shared emotional connection which is based, in part, on a shared history. It is not necessary for members of a group to have participated in the history of the group, but must identify with it in order to share it. McMillan states that "the interactions of members in shared events and the specific attributes of the events may facilitate or inhibit the strength of the community" (1986:13). For example, "the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close...and the more positive the experience and the relationships, the greater the bond" (McMillan 1986:13). Food definitely helps facilitate positive experiences and interactions between group members. In a way, serving food at Neighbors to Friends allows people to set aside their status and make positive connections and have meaningful conversations.

A shared emotional connection also involves what McMillan calls a "spiritual bond" (1986:14). This is present in varying degrees in all communities but is difficult to describe. I believe this is what Nancy and Dr. King call the "beloved community," a place where great love for one another is fostered. I also believe this is the kind of bond Nancy is talking about when she says it is difficult to describe to news outlets what goes on at Laundry Love because all the media wants is numbers and statistics. She cannot put into words what it means to have meaningful connections with one another at Neighbors to Friends. I believe this spiritual bond is what an individual that attended Shower the People was referring to when they said, "this is what community should look like." I don't believe they were talking about sitting outside a renovated bus in the summer heat, but were talking about the welcoming and loving environment that is created at Neighbors to Friends. All four elements that McMillan describes (membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection) work together to create a community at Neighbors to Friends that is based on love, tolerance, and acceptance.

Food at Neighbors to Friends

Every week at Laundry Love, a homecooked meal was always provided for everyone attending. Various groups would volunteer to provide the meal, including church volunteers from St. John's Episcopal Church (the church Nancy attends), volunteers from other churches in the area, and employees at the local credit union. Volunteers and people using the Laundry Love services would also bring food to contribute. Salvation Army would donate meat to be used at Laundry Love since many of the people staying at the shelter would also come to Laundry Love to get their laundry done. One of the long tables at the laundromat would be cleared off and transformed into a buffet. There would be hot dishes, soups, chips, juices, milk, pie and other desserts. Crock pots would be plugged into power strips and flimsy metal trays would be filled with ice to keep beverages cool. Nancy always had a board listing the names of everyone who brought food to acknowledge and thank them for their contribution. Everyone who came to the laundromat would be invited to eat and people who brought food seemed to take pride in the things



that they made. The laundromat at the St. Cloud location was small and every washer and dryer would be used, and having an elaborate buffet seemed to add to the chaos, but I observed people connecting over the food that was provided and it allowed for people to stay awhile and enjoy the meal and each other's company.

Throughout my fieldwork with Neighbors to Friends, I observed that food was an integral element of both Shower the People and Laundry Love. At every single event I attended with Nancy, there was always some sort of food that was provided. Whether it be a box of a dozen doughnuts from Walmart at Shower the People or an elaborate homecooked meal provided by local church ladies including a main dish, sides, and desserts served at Laundry Love, food was consistently provided to those attending. In many different cultures, food is used as a tool to bring people together. Church potlucks, inviting your new neighbor over for dinner, or having party food at a Superbowl party are just a few of the countless ways people use food as a means to support a gathering of people. This is the same way food is used at both Shower the People and Laundry Love.

Having a sit-down meal with others has been shown to have a positive impact on psychological well-being and emotional stability, along with many other physical and emotional benefits (Purnell and Jenkins 2013). Food has had a long connection with human intimacy. The word "companion" is derived from a Latin word that means "with" and "bread." Originally, a companion is someone that one broke bread with (Purnell and Jenkins 2013). In 2013, David Purnell and J. Jacob Jenkins conducted a study on the phenomenon of "Family Dinner Nights," a weekly dinner put on by the Seminole Heights neighborhood. For the past twelve years, neighbors and members of the surrounding community have come together to share a potluck style meal, talk about significant events in their lives, and enjoy each other's company. Purnell and Jenkins argue that the weekly gathering to eat together transforms an "otherwise disconnected group of residents into a strong network of friends and an even stronger community" (2013:74). This transformation is done through open invitation to the meals and shared storytelling during them. Neighbors to Friends does just that. Sharing a meal together is a means for them to turn disconnected neighbors into friends.

Whenever I went out to the Shower the People truck, Nancy made sure to always provide some sort of food. Sometimes it would be as simple as a few boxes of \$5 pizzas and pop, and sometimes it would be something more like fried chicken, potatoes, and corn dogs. Anyone was invited to eat the food and there was no limit on how much you could take. If you were hungry, Nancy wanted to make sure you would be full. Leftover food would be given to whoever needed it. One afternoon at the rest stop with the shower truck, Nancy brought pizzas and pop for people to eat. Myself, Nancy, Jason, Brian and some of the people that were living in their cars at the rest stop were sitting outside of the shower truck chatting and eating. A rest stop employee in his all green uniform and cap walked over to say hello and ask how things were going. Nancy invited him to sit and eat with us since there was plenty of pizza to share. He agreed and sat with us for quite some time and told us about his job at the rest stop. Having food out at the truck allowed for a means to get to know this man and spend time with him, which I believe is the goal of having food at all of these events. People are more likely to stay awhile and get to know each other if they have a reason to do so, and here sharing a meal is that reason. Similar to the attendees at the "Family Dinner Nights," people from all different backgrounds were welcome to eat the meal at both Shower the People and Laundry Love. I observed volunteers, people experiencing homelessness, rest stop employees, and even people stopping by to check out what the shower truck was all about stop and share the meal with others.

Purnell and Jenkins also argue that sharing a meal builds community through shared storytelling. At "Family Dinner Nights," Purnell and Jenkins state that "in contrast to "report-talk" which is indicative

of formal conversation, the sharing of food was shown to create a casual atmosphere in which participants were less interested in impressing one another and more interested in knowing one another" (2013:79). Conversation arose spontaneously and there was never a pre-determined agenda. In a sense, food appeared to level the playing field by allowing conversation to flow naturally without status and power looming overhead. Purnell and Jenkins state that these conversations emerge from the "immediacy of presence" and builds community by "deconstructing personal boundary structures." At both Laundry Love and Shower the People, I heard conversations about people's days, the ups and downs in their lives, and stories that made everyone laugh. For example, during one evening at Shower the People, a man that regularly used the mobile shower shared a meal of sandwiches and pop with everyone and told us all stories of pranks he would pull on his teachers and principals in high school. He was making big gestures and acting out the pranks he pulled, making everyone laugh. Many people that are not experiencing homelessness often view themselves as being drastically different than those that are experiencing homelessness. Sharing stories during a meal with those that we believe are very different makes those differences fade away and it is easy to see just how much you have in common, which is the goal of Neighbors to Friends. Nancy explained numerous times that the shower truck is not about "efficiency," but it is all about creating a special community and loving people.

One element of community is a shared emotional connection between group members that is based, in part, on a shared history. This does not mean that community members need to be a part of the history of the group to share in it, but they must identify with it (McMillan 1986, 13). This can come from interactions between members that strengthen the community, like sharing a meal together. In David McMillan's analysis of the "sense of community", he states that "the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close...and the more positive the experience and the relationships, the greater the bond" (1986, 13). Based off of Purnell and Jenkins' study on weekly neighborhood meals and my observations about sharing food and conversation at Laundry Love and Shower the People, I believe that food helps facilitate positive interactions and experiences between individuals and that fosters a "sense of community".

Grassroots leadership styles

Since I spent a large majority of my fieldwork doing participant observation with Nancy Dyson, one of the founders of Neighbors to Friends, I will be highlighting her leadership styles and how they compare to other grassroots leadership styles. Nancy makes it very clear that the work she does isn't about her and that Neighbors to Friends could not be possible without the contributions of everyone involved. While this is true, Nancy does possess characteristics and leadership styles that set the stage for how Neighbors to Friends operates. Through analyzing my field notes and contextualizing them within larger studies of leadership styles, I argue that Nancy has numerous qualities that classify her as a successful grassroots leader.

Before analyzing leadership traits or grassroots organizations, it is important to define what a grassroots innovation is. According to Mari Martiskainen, grassroots innovations are "networks of activists and organisations [sic] generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved" (2016:78). By definition, Neighbors to Friends would be considered a grassroots innovation because they have developed solutions (like Laundry Love and the mobile shower truck) that respond to the local issue of homelessness and poverty. A grassroots innovation is different than other types of organizations because its goal is to create social good rather than monetary profit. This goal can allow for unique innovations and ideas that would not have been developed in an organization driven by profit (Martiskainen 2016:78).

The complexity theory is one way to analyze adaptive systems and “how system-level order spontaneously arises from the action and repeated interaction of lower level system components without intervention by a central controller” (Onyx 2011:494). It was originally used to analyze the effects of relationships within non-human systems but can be used to analyze human systems as well. There are a few dynamics within the complexity theory that may explain the process of the self-organizing emergence of networks, like Neighbors to Friends. First, a social network emerges out of a state of disequilibrium or a tension between disequilibrium and equilibrium in a wider context (Onyx 2011:494). For example, there was tension between the disequilibrium of a lack of places to shower for people experiencing homelessness in the St. Cloud area and the equilibrium of everyone else in the community having access to showers. The second dynamic in the complexity theory is that the state of disequilibrium draws agents (individuals, organizations or both) together to explore options for action (Onyx 2011:495). Nancy and Jason came together to explore solutions to the problem of the lack of showers when they met a woman experiencing homelessness in a parking lot that hadn’t showered in days. Nancy and Jason sought to respond to the disequilibrium that was occurring in their community. The third dynamic of the complexity theory states that positive feedback loops are necessary and that actions that are both big and small produce an effect. The effects can be positive or negative (Onyx 2011:495). For example, the shower truck that Nancy and Jason created received media attention which garnered them more support from the community. The final dynamic to the complexity theory states that these forms of actions are full of uncertainty and although disequilibrium occurs, there are forces working against it and towards equilibrium (Onyx 2011:495). It is important to note that “leadership should not be viewed as individuals operating in isolation as they influence their followers, or in terms of individual traits. Leadership is seen as an emergent phenomenon that arises from interactions and events” (Onyx 2011:496). Nancy and Jason do not operate in isolation and they have become leaders through reacting to the disequilibrium of poverty and homelessness that exists in their community.

In Onyx and Leonard’s case study of traits in leaders of community development in small communities around the world, they discovered that community leaders have a broad vision for what is possible in the future and a clear path of how to get there (2011:504). Although Nancy did not have a clear idea of how to develop Laundry Love over the years and did not try to plan for every single problem they could run into, she did see a problem in her community and knew the kind of steps she wanted to take to address this problem. Nancy entered into this endeavor knowing full well that she did not have all of the answers but was willing to adjust her plan as necessary. She knew that it would be possible to have a community that would strive to meet everyone’s basic needs and took action to work towards that goal.

In Mari Martiskainen’s case studies of community leadership in the development of community energy projects, she found that leaders voiced their expectations. This helps provide direction to work towards the group’s goals along with attracting potential support and resources from external partners (2016:83). Regardless of the motive, the case studies showed that there is always someone, either an individual or a group, who sees an opportunity or a need and decides to act on it. Nancy and the group of homeless men at Lake George saw an opportunity to meet a need (assistance with laundry) and decided to act on it. They did not wait around or ask someone else to do it. In Martiskainen’s case studies, the community leaders were clear from the beginning that they wanted to create projects that would benefit their local community. They had the confidence needed to voice those expectations and had trust in their group’s ability to deliver their idea.

In Onyx’s and Leonard’s case studies of community development leaders, they found that the identified leader or leadership group was strongly embedded in both the formal and informal networks of the community. They were not in a position of formal authority, but they took an active initiating role in



establishing the project. The leaders had integrity, cared about the public interest, and were trusted by the community (2011:503). Nancy has belonged to the St. Cloud area for decades and has gained trust from the community. Martiskainen's case studies also showed that community leaders were people that were well known in their community and active in them (2016:84). Being visible and active in the community helps leaders voice their ideas to a wider audience. Being engaged in the community helps build connections and access to other community organizations and funding sources. Nancy has been an active member of her community for many years. She attends city council meetings and other community organization's meetings to make herself and her ideas known. This then helps gain support and aids for development of her projects. Because community leaders are working with open systems, they need to engage with other systems and groups. Community leaders bridge links between these other groups to fill identified gaps in their knowledge, skills and material resources. Leaders fill "structural holes" between their community and outside networks and these connections were used for public, not private, gain (Onyx 2011:504).

Community energy groups in Martiskainen's case studies relied on volunteers that brought a mix of skills and resources. The leaders of the group were able to identify and bring people with a variety of skills together to build a bank of useful skills for their project (2016:85). In Nancy's case, she did not have the technology skills needed to develop a website for Neighbors to Friends. Because of her presence in the community and the fact that she voiced her needs and goals to the community, someone offered to assist her in creating a website.

Community leaders also need to have an understanding of practical management processes to enable the project to move forward. Establishing basic procedures and creating a division of labor is necessary in order for a project to grow. This must be done with coordination and good communication between the participants (Onyx 2011:504). Nancy is organized and able to coordinate with many different people to fill all of the roles that Neighbors to Friends has in order to run smoothly.

Both Onyx and Martiskainen identified the need for leaders to have a plan for potential successors. No case in Martiskainen's study had a plan in place but this shows how grassroots innovations can be vulnerable if they solely rely on one person or a small group of people to see the project through. Nancy explained to me that if she ever steps away from her role, she wants the group to continue as if nothing ever happened. This shows the importance of the volunteers of Neighbors to Friends and how they are the driving force of the group while Nancy directs the vision.

Overall, in Neighbors to Friends there is no sign of a hierarchy or anyone relying on the dominance of the leader to command and control the organization. Volunteers share in the decision making and draw on the knowledge and ideas of many different kinds of people. There is no central controlling authority figure, but that does not mean that there is no leadership. Nancy nurtures the group and enables it but does not try to command. The group itself has the power and is the driving force of Neighbors to Friends, not one individual leader.

"Beloved community"

The term "beloved community," made popular by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was the single and organizing principle of King's life and thought. According to Kipton Jensen, the "beloved community" is a community ordered by love. It involves empathy for the oppressed and a dissatisfaction with all forms of injustice (2016:254). King believed that this kind of radical love is needed to break down the barriers that separate us from one another. Smith and Zepp state that King thought that this notion of a community would be the ideal expression of the Christian faith (1974). Human existence is social in nature, and King believed that all humans should be united as one. Because all humans are interconnected, an injustice to

one is an injustice to all. A community like that at Neighbors to Friends strives to connect those that have been divided by classism. It strives to unite neighbors and treat everyone with love, kindness and acceptance. Neighbors to Friends meets the basic human needs of those suffering in the community, but a community driven by love and acceptance is open and inviting and draws people together.

Conclusions

Through participating with and observing Neighbors to Friends, I have gained a holistic understanding of how they operate and argue that while this organization meets the basic physical needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and poverty, they serve a larger purpose of creating a “sense of community” between the individuals they serve, their volunteers, and community partners. By the definition of “sense of community,” the use of food in creating community, and grassroots leadership styles, I have shown that Neighbors to Friends brings people together to create a “beloved community.”

People experiencing homelessness and poverty are often ignored and excluded from the greater society. Neighbors to Friends sees these individuals as fully human and deserving to be treated as an equally valuable part of the community. This organization seeks to turn strangers into familiar faces and transform neighbors into friends. Neighbors to Friends has shown that giving love and compassion to those that have been left on the fringes of society can transform a divisive community into one that is welcoming and accepting to everyone.

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