

Creating Brand New Beginnings: One Story of Women's Organizing

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The Women's Empowerment Project (WEP) was created by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH). Its goal is to empower women who are homeless to advocate for their right to decent and affordable housing, child care, and livable wage jobs.

Critical to these efforts was the acquisition and development of an abandoned building on Chicago's South Side: the Brand New Beginnings Project (BNB)¹, a 24-unit, subsidized rental building for low-income women and children. The Brand New Beginnings Project was developed by women involved in WEP and by organizers at CCH.

In the course of my fieldwork in 1999, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 28 people, did two phone interviews, and compiled my own observations from coalition meetings, dinners, shelters, and appointments with the Brand New Beginnings lawyer and developer. All names and identifying characteristics (except those at the CCH) have been changed to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

A History Lesson or Two

During the 1980s, Chicago Mayor Harold Washington recognized homelessness as a city crisis. He established a task force on homelessness as well as the Low-Income Trust Fund to help subsidize the cost of housing in the city.

When Washington died in 1987 and Richard M. Daley became mayor, the task force was dismantled, and the Department of Human Services took on the issue of homelessness. According to members of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, the Daley administration sees homelessness as a social problem, not an economic one. Coalition members see the introduction of tax increment financing (TIF) properties and the tearing down of public housing as



indications that the city is not willing to deal directly with a housing crisis that has economic roots. For example, between 1990 and 1999, the Chicago region lost 50,000 units of affordable rental units. In addition, 200,000 households earn less than 30 percent of the area median income (about \$21,000 for a family of four). In Chicago, a worker must earn at least \$17.31 an hour in order to pay rent on a fair-market apartment (www.chicagohomeless.org, 2002). Clearly, it is not drugs or violence that affect homelessness, but the lack of affordable housing and living wage jobs that contribute to the growing housing crisis.

In recent decades, as Chicago residents left the city for the suburbs, Chicago has been losing its tax base. During his administration, Daley has promoted the re-development and growth of certain downtown neighborhoods, particularly the west and south Loop. These areas have historically been low-income rental areas, surrounded by dying or abandoned industrial properties and single-room occupancy units.

¹ Brand New Beginnings opened in 2001, and is home to 24 families of women with children. BNB continues to grow in support services, which include a tenant counselor and support groups.

The Daley administration has offered incentives to redevelop these areas by offering tax breaks (TIFs) to developers. The city has declared some neighborhoods as “blighted.” When this labeling occurs, revenues from the tax base in those areas are frozen, and the money supports redevelopment, not parks or schools in the neighborhoods. Developers then bid to redevelop the area, and consequently raise property values and push out low-income residents (Dixon, 1998, Dye and Merriman, 2000).

This gentrification of inner-city neighborhoods, although it has regenerated some areas, has also displaced many folks. As a result, the loss of public and low-income housing has been great, and homelessness has increased. For example, the Chicago Housing Authority has demolished over 18,000 low-income rental units in the past five years; some will be replaced, but a net of 13,000 will be lost (www.chicagohomeless.org). In addition, many rental units have been lost to re-development - the transformation of rental units to condominiums or single family homes. Also, there was a 35 percent increase in the number of families seeking admission into Chicago area shelters in 2001. Consequently, finding shelter and affordable housing is an increasing problem in Chicago.

Focusing on Women

Enter two groups: the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, a 20-year-old grass-roots advocacy group created to organize homeless people and fight alongside them to secure decent and affordable housing; and the Women’s Empowerment Project, developed out of the coalition organizing wing in 1992 to address the needs of homeless women.

Organizers with the Women’s Empowerment Project, developed by Della Mitchell, CCH staff member since 1989, visit different women’s shelters once a month. During these meetings, the organizers at CCH listen to the concerns and issues facing homeless women and help them develop strategies for creating change.

At its inception, CCH had no specific focus on the needs of homeless women. Yet those needs were considerable. For instance, many homeless women are also mothers; this means they can’t just “up and run out,” as one informant said, to a rally or demonstration. The WEP was created to ascertain and address the unique needs of homeless women and their children and to organize homeless women in ways that take gender and motherhood into account.

Indeed, a gendered analysis of homelessness is often absent from the discussion of affordable housing, which for women is complicated by domestic violence, lack of affordable child care, and the lack of jobs with a livable wage.

When Mitchell and fellow CCH organizer Virginia Warren first visited the shelters, they began by simply listening to the women’s concerns. One former WEP participant explained that whenever someone made a comment, they were encouraged and respected, even if fellow participants didn’t agree with the person’s opinions or decisions. For example, one woman at a South Side shelter, who had been in an abusive relationship, decided to return to her batterer. Although other WEP members did not believe this was a good decision, they nonetheless respected her right to make that choice.

Another unique aspect of the project was that the women eventually began to run the meetings themselves. This gave them the sense that the WEP gatherings were their meetings; their issues were what counted.

Out of these meetings, CCH organizers decided to train women who wanted to become community leaders. This led to the seven-week, Saturday training workshops in 1991. A number of issues emerged during the Saturday sessions. The group talked about power relationships and looked at the nuts and bolts of social action and teamwork. The workshops also gave women tools to organize people, lobby politicians, research issues, build a supportive, grass-roots base of power, develop leadership skills, and do public speaking.

Fighting Back

During the course of these workshops, the women began to recognize they were being blocked by the city’s tax-breaks to wealthy and powerful developers and business owners who wanted to redevelop “deteriorating” inner-city neighborhoods. At one of the Saturday meetings, the women arrived with a clipping from the newspaper; it was an article about Presidential Towers, four high-rise apartment buildings in the west Loop whose developer had to be repeatedly bailed out of debt by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) because of several mortgage foreclosures.

As the women read the article, it dawned on them that their right to affordable housing was being eclipsed by the city’s insistence on helping wealthy land developers. In their view, the bailout of Presidential Towers used city and fed-

eral housing funds, money that could have just as easily been spent on low-income housing for homeless women and children. Since Presidential Towers was subsidized by HUD, they and others felt it should have set aside 20 percent of its apartments for low-income families; however, it had been



exempted from this regulation by an amendment introduced by Representative Dan Rostenkowski.

Soon the women became “fired up,” as one participant said, and decided to take action. They began by trying to rent apartments at Presidential Towers.

Della Mitchell, a 50-year-old African-American, was the first woman to approach the rental office. Though she was given a lukewarm reception, she was nonetheless shown portions of the building.

Next, another 50-year-old woman, Sister Joan Keller, who is white, a nun, and who had been a shelter provider, visited the rental offices. She was shown a “grand tour” and given more information than Mitchell.

After Keller, Daniela Moore, a young, light-skinned woman of mixed race went to the offices; she was not shown around but was given an application.

Finally, a young African-American woman, Crystal Smith, visited the rental office to see if she could rent an apartment; she had to wait for an hour before anyone would even speak to her. Even then, she was not allowed inside the building or given a tour. She had one child accompanying her.

When the women reconvened to discuss their experiences, they quickly realized that African-American women were treated differently than white or lighter-skinned women. It was also apparent that older women and women without children were treated better than younger women

and those with children. This perceived discrimination became another rallying point.

The women, together with other CCH members, then organized rallies and marches at Presidential Towers. They did a “move-in,” where they pulled up at Presidential Towers with a U-Haul and announced that they were moving in. However, hundreds of police officers blocked them. The women also protested at a board meeting at the bank that planned to help bail out Presidential Towers. They effectively shut down the board meeting, and the bank backed out of its support. The women also helped organize a sit-in at the McDonald’s restaurant that was located inside one building of Presidential Towers, disrupting lunch for the many Loop business people eating there. All these actions drew attention to the discrimination taking place at Presidential Towers and to the lack of affordable housing for low-income women and children.

Eventually, the developers of Presidential Towers agreed to set aside seven percent of the units for low-income residents, and they gave a lump sum to the Low-Income Trust Fund. The women had “won” the issue and had successfully organized, led, and participated in a drive to secure low-income housing.

Next Steps

Bolstered by their success at Presidential Towers, many of the women who had been involved in the Saturday workshops began discussing the need to secure housing for themselves. Seeing the abandoned buildings that littered the city, the women wondered if they could develop their own living space.

Along with CCH leaders, they looked into buying an abandoned building and creating a housing cooperative for low-income homeless women and children, one which would include services such as child care and job training classes. The idea for the Brand New Beginnings Co-op was born.

The first task was to locate a building. The women chose a 24-unit building at 58th Street and Michigan Avenue, drawn by the neighborhood’s good schools and the building’s proximity to public transportation. The women then began the long process of securing funding for the project, buying the building through the city’s abandoned properties program, being trained to become co-op owners, developing bylaws, and becoming a corporation.

During the past few years, the project vacillated, at times coming to a standstill. At the time of the research, however, the project was in its final stages. Funding from the city had been secured, and most of the women originally involved in the project were still involved. The building was funded by a loan from LaSalle Bank, the Department of Housing, the Illinois Housing and Development Authority (IHDA), and a city loan. As the lawyers discussed last-minute details, the construction companies readied for rehabilitating the building. However, the project went from co-op to a subsidized rental building for low-income women and children. Through hard work and perseverance, the women made their vision come alive.

How They Did It

CCH leaders used several techniques for organizing the women in the shelters. Once a month, coalition organizers held meetings at the shelters, where they listened closely to the women's concerns. Out of these meetings, representatives from each shelter were chosen to attend a monthly Saturday meeting at the coalition. This group of women formed the Women's Coordinating Committee.

Sometimes the coalition offered basic organizing trainings or workshops on basic life skills. These were also held on Saturdays and were open to all women involved in WEP. Finally, a Women's Advisory Committee, made up of non-homeless women who are professionals and service providers, helped secure resources for members of WEP and brainstormed ideas for group activities.

The most important aspect of WEP—the component that the women named as critical to both their initial and sustained involvement—was the focus on each woman “sharing the story” of her experience with homelessness. Time after time, each participant who was interviewed for this project agreed it was important “to hear survival stories” of other women who had experienced or were experiencing homelessness. By making the women's experiences and lives central to the group's activities, WEP has been able to tackle the issues most important to its members.

The project also let women talk about their experiences and problems without fear of judgment or retaliation. One woman, Tania, a 27-year-old resident of a South Side shelter, said some women were uncomfortable telling their case managers or shelter providers about problems in the shelters; some women even had difficult relationships with the staff at these shelters. The women needed to have a space

where they could talk about their problems without fear of being evicted from the shelter. The women could talk about other hurtful parts of their lives without being judged for their decisions or actions. The women also received child care, bus tokens, or meals, which also helped support their attendance at the Saturday meetings.

The content of the meetings varied. At some meetings, the women shared prayers or positive thoughts, told stories, or sang songs. It seemed to be important to the women to have the freedom to share whatever ideas they wanted to, in whatever form they desired. Neither religion nor spirituality were “pushed” on the women, said one participant, but the women were encouraged to think about spirituality or seek spiritual comfort and community outside the shelter.

The meetings also addressed the women's immediate needs. One young woman, Sheila, who was homeless as a result of domestic violence, told me she did not have the identification needed to obtain a job, since she had only recently moved to Chicago. She recounted how organizers at WEP walked her through the process of getting a state ID. Although the organizers emphasize organizing for long-term structural change—as opposed to “Band-Aid” solutions—they also acknowledged the importance of meeting short-term needs.

Similarly, another woman, Toni, had trouble balancing her budget and paying her bills; she was also looking for a job and needed experience in going on job interviews. The WEP addressed the women's needs for basic life skills by providing workshops or trainings on particular skills. For example, they might conduct a workshop on resume writing, computer skills, or stress management. These workshops helped the women obtain basic skills for obtaining a job and living independently.

What Worked . . .

The greatest strength of the Women's Empowerment Project has been the focus on women sharing their stories. WEP members I spoke with repeatedly described the importance of “being heard” and “hearing stories.” Personal narrative is an important tool for empowering people and organizing for social change. It also helps support the work of the shelter providers. Moreover, the meetings gave women a place to talk about their grievances with shelter life while helping to diffuse those problems. One shelter provider, Delilah, said that the work of WEP “reinforces the

positive work” that goes on at shelters and gives shelter providers information about housing issues they may not even have been aware of.

The tactics used by the organizers of the coalition played an important role as well. One former board member, Renee, remarked that the organizers at the coalition are “O.K. with failure” and understand the need to address long-term goals, as well as immediate needs. Likewise, organizers for the most part are consistent in their visits to the shelters and in their actions with the women, which builds trust within the group. Another former board member, Katie, said WEP benefits from the people who act as intermediaries (shelter providers, coalition members). When one shelter provider, Joan, became involved in an action against Presidential Towers, it demonstrated to shelter residents that she cared about the issue of homelessness and was willing to stand with the women in their fight.



The organizing model used by the coalition is based on participation. The women themselves played an active role in their own training and organizing. The basic organizing skills workshops also coalesced a committed core of people, some of whom became leaders in the movement. Through shared experiences, they forged a common identity and commitment to the cause. By maintaining the trainings and recruiting new women who saw the success of previous participants, women were attracted to and remained involved in the movement. Finally, these organizing skills must be “taken to the streets,” as one participant put it, so the women can see the importance of knowledge put to action.

By far, the comment made most often by participants in the Brand New Beginnings Project was that the women had “ownership” of each project. From acquiring the build-

ing to designing the apartments, to fund-raising and developing building rules and guidelines, the women have been primary decision makers. One formerly homeless woman, Angela, talked about the importance of having input into the design of the apartments in the Brand New Beginnings building. Designing a building for families with several children is a challenge: living spaces must provide optimal room and enable mothers to monitor their children from different areas of the apartment. Security was another big issue. Having a secure building and the option of a doubly secure room in the apartment (in this case, the women opted for a double lock on the bathroom door as well as on the front door) was important for women who had experienced domestic violence. The women also wanted a community space for those who lived at the building, as well as the space for a potential child care center.

. . .and What Didn't Work

There were numerous obstacles to the acquisition and development of the Brand New Beginnings property; however, some of these problems were beyond control of coalition members and the board members of Brand New Beginnings.

The three biggest obstacles were:

- Inability to retain the initial developers, three of whom dropped out of the project, and thus made the development process that much more lengthy.
- Multiple sources of funding.
- The coalition's tenuous relationship with the city.

One of the biggest problems that the Brand New Beginnings Project faced was the dismissal and/or loss of several developers. At the time of the research the group was working with its fourth developer, who appeared able to see this project through to the end. However, when he was hired in January 1998, he was basically starting from scratch, trying to secure funding and re-doing the entire budget, since costs had changed over the years. At the suggestion of Della Mitchell and with the approval of Brand New Beginnings board members, the concept of BNB was changed from that of a co-op to a low-income rental building. With this change, the fourth developer was able to secure adequate funding from the city and private lenders. According to coalition members, HUD and city officials were reluctant to subsidize a co-op run by homeless women, assuming that they would not be able to run the co-op efficiently and/or adequately.

Earlier failures to obtain city funding stalled the project, since funding from HUD and others depended on the city for matching funds. One improvement, suggested one developer, would be more involvement by key players at CCH, such as the director, who might have more clout with the city than the organizers or BNB board members.

The political climate and the tenuous relationship between the city and the coalition, which had battled the city and city policies on several occasions, made this venture difficult. Even though Brand New Beginnings and CCH are two separate entities, the coalition is connected to BNB in its role as the parent group. Because Brand New Beginnings got its start out of the Women's Empowerment Project at the Coalition, as such it has ties to the Coalition, even though it is not a Coalition-funded or driven project. However, as Brand New Beginnings changed some of its plans to accommodate the funders, i.e., changing the project's structure from a co-op to a low-income rental unit, support from the city followed.

The multiple sources of funding presented another challenge. Usually, a "small" project like the \$2.7 million, BNB gut rehabilitation has only one funder; however, having four lending institutions complicated matters. Four sets of requirements for securing and developing the property have to be met before the project can move into the construction stage. For example, every group has different rules for the management agreement and the agreement with the architect. The city wants to have the power to evict tenants who do not pay their rent; IHDA is more laid-back in its approach to the management agreement. Brand New Beginnings members, on the other hand, want to make sure that those who do not pay their rent don't end up homeless again. Accommodating all these requirements is tedious and time consuming. But, until the requirements were met, the project could not move forward.

Other problems were subtler. The women involved with the project encountered many funders and government officials who held false stereotypes about homeless women. There is a great stigma attached to homelessness, and the women felt this when they visited city officers at times. Some felt that they were not being taken seriously or that people didn't understand that homelessness affected women differently than men. This often prevented funders and even developers from taking on the project. In addition, having social services in the building raised other considerations. Before such services can be proposed, funding for them must be secured. This often held up funding negotia-

tions, since the original plan was to have social services and a child care center on the ground floor. Not surprisingly, potential funders wanted to see how those services would be funded by other groups; however, this funding never came through.

Conclusion and Looking Ahead: Ideas for Further Research and the Next "Brand New Beginnings"

Given a different political climate, a clientele with more capital, more consistent developers, and more support from the city, this project might have taken only a few years. However, it is remarkable that many of the women originally involved in the project are still involved. The success of this project might make it easier to get funding and government support for Brand New Beginnings II.

Developers suggested several ways to improve future BNB projects:

- Keep accurate records of the development process, since it is often hard to rely on one's memory to understand the long development process.
- Have the city and HUD on board with funding before securing other funding. (BNB organized the women first, secured some private funding, and then sought city funding for the project.)
- Organize or choose a group of women to be part of the board/co-op. This way, the women don't have to wait several years for the funding, which might prevent them from dropping out of the project. However, this defeats the purpose of having the women involved at all stages of development.
- Hire a person full-time to direct the project, because development and fund-raising are time-consuming and require constant attention.
- Have only one big lender for the project to simplify negotiations.

These suggestions can help improve the efficiency with which other projects might be developed that are similar to Brand New Beginnings. Since the development process was so tedious, it might be helpful to have developers be as much a part of the project development as the co-op and coalition members themselves.

In addition, I recommend several areas for further research. First, in my interviews with the women involved in WEP, many mentioned their experiences with welfare-to-work programs and the problems inherent in these pro-

grams. It would be worthwhile to explore how the new welfare reforms have affected the lives of homeless women.

Second, according to some of the women, welfare-to-work programs contributed to their continued transience and displacement from jobs and/or housing; the jobs they secured through these programs were not high-paying, stable jobs with benefits. The women were also stigmatized in the workplace by bosses or colleagues who labeled them as welfare-to-work employees, treating them as somehow different or incompetent.

Securing a building permit was also difficult. Since the project took so long, the building deteriorated over time, and the estimated costs of the rehab increased. As construction costs changed, so did plans for the building design. And when architectural plans change, they require approval by a variety of city departments. Thus, every change had to receive the blessings of a dozen different people. One suggestion is to start the permit process earlier and to assume it will take at least two years to secure a building permit. For further research, one might look at the structure of and process of development in creating affordable housing in Chicago. One question to study is how the city might act as a “gatekeeper” to the development process for certain groups of people.

Finally, it is important to continue to research and understand the experience of homelessness using gender as an analytical tool. My own research has revealed a dearth of articles on homeless women; while race, immigration status and ethnicity figure prominently into the analysis of homelessness, there is a startling lack of information on gender and homelessness in the literature. It is nigh impossible to talk about homeless families—a growing number of which are headed by mothers who are single—without speaking of gender.

Apart from these nuts-and-bolts suggestions, it is important not to lose sight of the human side the project. As one formerly homeless woman said when telling me about her involvement in WEP, “When I was homeless, they picked me up and dusted me off, and now I do the same for other women who are going through this.” Sharing and listening are as important as action and cooperation in agitating for social change and in eradicating homelessness. Brand New Beginnings would not have been created or developed without the Women’s Empowerment Project, which has long supported and organized homeless women all over the Chicago region. The process of supporting homeless women be agents of social change in their own

lives and in the community is important for the long-term development of a project like Brand New Beginnings. It is also important to have the support in place, from developers to city officials, to create long-term results in addressing women’s homelessness.

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