



### 'The Art of Engagement'

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#### **Overview:**

Denys focused this small seminar on the belief that communities are better places to live when people have an active sense of connectedness, identity and confidence. He discussed how attention to these qualities has to go hand-in-hand with the brickwork, and this is harder to achieve when communities are weakened by conflict, depopulation, economic decline, environmental neglect or a negative reputation. His experience in post-industrial cities in the USA, notably Pittsburgh's Hill District, offers hope that communities can recover, and that mindful community development work assists and sustains recovery.

#### **Key ideas:**

- Partnership working should be about having mutually trusting relationships.
- Insider / outsider role important in work with communities.
- Essence – to work in an effective and accepted way in any area, it is important to try to capture the essence of the area.
- 'The periphery' – to be at the periphery can be both positive (innovation possible at the periphery) and negative (exclusion; 'peripheralisation')
- Perspective – of different groups / people, and from different geographical locations.

#### **Summary**

The majority of us would say we work in partnership - what does this actually mean? It should be about having mutually trusting relationships, but this is not always the case as insufficient thought is often given to what this means for policy, practice and conduct.

Denys highlighted the difficulties involved in putting in place new and innovative ideas / ways of working in terms of the time constraints resulting from on-going and immediate work priorities. He also discussed his 'insider / outsider role' and the benefits this brings to working with a community. As an insider, Denys is accepted by other professionals based on the positive reputation he has gained from previous work. However, as he is not employed by an agency, he is viewed by the community as an outsider in terms of his relationship to statutory services.

Denys gave a brief history of Pittsburgh and explained some of the 'essence' of the area, including the history of creativity and innovation associated with the area known as the Hill District, largely in terms of the arts and the jazz music scene. He also highlighted that Pittsburgh had been a magnet for migrants during the steel period. It was where many people came to realise their version of the American dream. He showed various photographs of the Pittsburgh area at different periods in time, including an image showing 'downtown' during a phase of redevelopment and expansion, following demolition of a number of buildings in the Hill District. Denys likened this image to the site of the World Trade Centre post 9/11, as the landscape was left looking "wounded". He highlighted that such demolition can be an emotional experience for residents due to the memories and experiences they may have associated with these buildings. In general, Denys made a point of not showing depressing images of Pittsburgh but of showing its beauty and assets.

The Hill District of Pittsburgh was described as a deprived area with a high minority ethnic population. 'Find the Rivers!' is a pilot programme connecting the Hill District community to Pittsburgh's Rivers aiming to: "expand economic, social and cultural opportunities by linking residents and communities to Pittsburgh's rivers". Denys explained that to work in an effective and accepted way in an area, it is important to try to capture the "essence" of this area / place. Why is this place different from any other? What makes it what it is? The answers most often have their basis in the history of the area although there is no final, definite answer as to what the essence is and it is very much a growing and changing concept.

Other assumptions on which the Find the Rivers! pilot program is based are:

**Beauty is an economic asset.** In terms of visual beauty the Hill District's elevated position means the area has fantastic views of Pittsburgh. Denys also placed importance on beauty identified via history and stories.

**Dream big** – beyond existing obstacles i.e. between the Hill District and the rivers there are various physical obstacles, such as a freeway.

**Re-connect urban fabric** – peripheral vision. Encourage residents to look beyond their own small area, expanding their peripheral vision. Re-connect people to themselves, to each other and to their history as well as physical re-connection of areas. Art movements tend to be generated at the periphery before being adopted by the mainstream.

**Work from the inside out.** 'Organic partnering' is used rather than 'partnership'.

Denys talked of re-inventing ways of getting people involved in the conversation and of the value of getting people to view their community from a different perspective e.g. taking people from the Hill District out on to the river to look back at their area. He stressed the importance of giving consideration to the different perspectives of different people in community development work.

Health promotion was discussed and Denys argued that the health behaviours that are promoted may be onerous for people to adopt or the community would already be doing these things. It is necessary to present an alternative choice that is clearly preferable for people to their current behaviour, otherwise why would anyone change to this new alternative? Denys gave the example of gang culture which is associated with notions of identity, group membership, sense of community, status etc. Something must be offered to young people to rival this.

Denys made clear that community development work should build upon current/existing activity. A 'map of value' (current and historical) largely based on stories had already been created for the Pittsburgh area which the Find the Rivers! project built upon. Also, the project had 'political coverage' in the neighbourhood i.e. some of those people Denys and his colleagues had built relationships with over time helped local acceptance by acting as advocates.

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In discussion, the group re-visited the notion of ‘the periphery’ and concluded that, to be on the periphery (as those in the Hill District are on the periphery of Pittsburgh) can be both a positive and a negative experience. Innovation is possible at the periphery as there are more levers in the place where everyone is not looking for them. Conversely, to be on the periphery can be excluding (‘peripheralisation’). However, notions of periphery are based on perspectives and assumptions. A future model might not be of centre and periphery, but of a network of nodes relating to each other in different ways.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.