

## **THEory into ACTion**

### **A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice**

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#### **“Do It Yourself Lowell”: A Resident-Led Approach to Community Building**

Bill Berkowitz, University of Massachusetts Lowell

What if your community collected its best ideas; posted them online; asked residents to vote on them; and worked toward implementing those most favored? And what if all the day-to-day operational details were handled not by government, not by a nonprofit organization, not by college faculty or students, but simply by interested and motivated community members? Would this be possible where you live? And would it be desirable?

If you're interested so far, then welcome to DIY Lowell (Do It Yourself Lowell), which is turning this concept into reality. But first, a little background:

Participation is a key community psychology value, and the lifeblood of successful communities most everywhere. But how do you build participation in community life? At a time when many are still struggling to make a living, when even many with disposable income feel overworked and overwhelmed, and when a great many have multiple home entertainment options at their disposal, how do you get more people to be actively involved in making their communities better places to live?

It's a difficult question, without easy answers. You can attempt it through government policy. Public or private sector organizations can launch initiatives. Moral leadership can be exerted. You can rely on self-motivated volunteers. Closer to the grassroots, you can ask directly, apply peer pressure, offer modest incentives, appeal to one's better nature. Sometimes these work; but sometimes they're not enough. So as community psychologists and as concerned citizens, we're always in the market for new approaches.

DIY Lowell offers such an approach. It is entirely resident-based and totally volunteer. Yet what distinguishes it from other citizen initiatives is that it goes beyond simply identifying and implementing an idea (painting a mural, cleaning a park), but rather creates an overarching, resident-based structure that in theory can keep generating community-building ideas in perpetuity.

Chris Hayes and Aurora Erickson, who work and live together, came to Lowell from out of state two years ago to start new jobs. On their arrival, they wanted to get involved in the community, believing that their new city should be a vital and exciting place to live. "And if you don't get involved quickly, you may not get involved at all. So you'd better take advantage of it."

Chris had attended a conference sponsored by the Congress for the New Urbanism, which featured presentations on "tactical urbanism" – small-scale, low-cost, and short-term projects that could lead to more lasting change. He and Aurora thought,

“It would be fun to do something like that here. But we wouldn’t do the projects ourselves – we would help somebody else do them.”

No one in the city was doing what they had in mind. And so Aurora and Chris decided to start DIY Lowell, in their spare time, apart from their day jobs, and on the proverbial shoestring. They describe it simply as “a citizen initiative to help the community brainstorm, vote on, and implement ideas for small-scale events and projects.” Here’s what they did, here’s how it works, and here’s where it is going:

- Before launching, they talked to a lot of people – about 60 of them – to get suggestions and feedback. They were systematic: They kept records on a spreadsheet. People were generally supportive: “If you are enthusiastic and warm, people are receptive, and you can get a good response.” And they did.

- Based on feedback, they then formed an Advisory Committee among their interested friends, and began to work out the specifics.

- A next step was to create and publicize a web site: [www.diyloowell.org](http://www.diyloowell.org).
- On the site, viewers are asked to think of and post a small-scale, low-cost community idea.

- Anyone with a Lowell connection can then vote on their favorite ideas.

- The chosen ideas will then be discussed at a public community meeting, billed as a “citizen’s summit.”

- At the summit, the best ideas will be discussed further, and working groups formed to move the ideas toward implementation.

Can this really happen? The first steps are happening already. At this writing, more than 30 ideas have been posted on the DIY Lowell site. Some examples: mini-libraries at bus stops; art spaces in empty store windows; sidewalk poetry, stamped in fresh cement; an urban food forest; hammock parks; public chess matches; colorful crosswalks; a Dog Day afternoon, dedicated to all things canine, and featuring a dog parade. Voting will take place later this month, and the first citizen's summit has been scheduled for July, after our press deadline.

What will happen then? Chris and Aurora can't really know for sure: "There's an element of it that's outside our control." But regardless of what occurs, there are already some takeaway lessons for community psychologists and practitioners – not so much new knowledge, but more like needed affirmations of what is already known or sensed:

- The motivating force of good creative ideas to capture imagination and response
- The need for dedicated and committed people to turn ideas into reality
- The readiness of residents to participate in community life, given the right opportunity
- The power of online technology to generate community participation from people previously unknown

- And, perhaps especially, the potential to create significant community impact at little cost.

But what about the future? The final answers are not yet in. For Chris and Aurora, though, their main concerns are with the here and now:

“We haven’t been doing long-term planning; that runs counter to our whole philosophy. The goal is for more people to get involved. And our idea is to do a few exciting things – that would be wonderful. It’s important that a city have a feeling of excitement, that new things are happening all the time.

“In the future, it’s not important that there is a DIY Lowell, but that there are exciting things in the city. We’re trying to create that excitement – in a way, it’s a little bit selfish, because it keeps us here. And if we can also provide a path for someone else who wants to create change, that’s something we’d like to do.”

Points worth considering. At the same time, if DIY Lowell can keep finding and implementing new community ideas in the present, while also creating an sustainable idea-generating structure for the future, that combination would certainly seem like an approach well worth emulating.

(Those attending the SCRA Biennial this June can meet Chris and Aurora at a community leaders forum on 10:30 on Thursday morning, June 25. (See the online Biennial program for details.) For more information, or to subscribe to their newsletter, visit [www.diylowell.org](http://www.diylowell.org).)

*This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at [underwoodtabitha@gmail.com](mailto:underwoodtabitha@gmail.com).*