

Building on the Ambitions and Aspirations of Newcomers: An Interview with Angela Blanchard

Angela Blanchard, President of BakerRipley (formerly Neighborhood Centers Inc.) shares her reflections on the past five years since the publication of Investing in What Works and her outlook for the future in an interview conducted by Laura Choi of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

Your essay in What Works¹ touched on some key themes like the influence of the Settlement House movement in welcoming newcomers to America, the characteristics and role of Houston as a city, and the power of people as a community asset. Reflecting on these themes five years later, what has changed for your organization, your city, and the people you serve? What remains the same?

We believe strongly at BakerRipley that the Settlement House movement and its underlying values—the importance of connection and opportunity for everyone—are needed now more than ever, and will be for decades to come. There are two worldwide trends that intersect in the highly functioning and welcoming city of Houston and they illustrate the continued need for onramps to opportunity. The first is mass migration. We are living in the most migratory period in human history. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, nearly 65 million people have been displaced because of war, weather or wealth.² That's 1 out of every 115 people on earth who doesn't have a home, a job and in many cases has been separated from their families. The second trend is mass urbanization. For the first time in history, more people live in cities than in rural areas.³ Approximately 3 million people are moving to cities each week.⁴ For Houston, immigration from across the globe has contributed to the city's tremendous diversity and rapid growth. Today, 1 out of 4 Houstonians is foreign born and the region will continue to attract people seeking stability and opportunity.⁵ We are pretty far along in this globalized, connected, migratory, urbanized period and there's no way to stop that movement.

1 Angela Blanchard, "People Transforming Communities. For Good," in *Investing in What Works for America's Communities*, eds. Nancy Andrews et al., Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco and Low Income Investment Fund, San Francisco, CA 2012.

2 United Nations High Commission on Refugees, *Global Appeal: 2017 Update*.

3 United Nations, "World's population increasingly urban with more than half living in urban areas," *World Urbanization Prospects, 2014*.

4 International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2015 Overview*.

5 U.S. Census. Quick Facts Table, Harris County.

In the five years since *What Works* was released, we've been sought out by cities and other countries who are also trying to find their way to long-term welcome and integration. Every city in the world is in need of landing places for the newly arrived. Leaders everywhere are working to figure out the balance between addressing the immediate challenge of welcoming newcomers and establishing long-term solutions that allow people to find a way to earn, learn, and belong. The successful cities of the future will be those that can most quickly turn desperation into aspiration, and aspiration into participation. The economy of cities depends on flow and connection; not only the movement of goods but also the exchange between people. There will always be a need for people to have the opportunity to work together, learn together, build and create together. We see cities as a container for the ambition and aspirations of people, and we must nourish these aspirations and foster meaningful opportunities for people to reach their full potential.

BakerRipley grounds its work in an approach called Appreciative Community Building. Can you explain what that means, and what you have learned through this approach?

For more than ten years, BakerRipley has used Appreciative Community Building to remain closely connected to our neighbors and inform our holistic community development approach. It's a rigorous application of appreciative inquiry principles, which are rooted in lifting up and leveraging strengths as a force for positive change. Through extensive one-on-one interviews and community meetings we conduct a relentless search for the strengths and aspirations that exist within a community. We believe the leaders we need are already in the community, so part of the search identifies the individuals others turn to when they need guidance or help. By identifying what's working, and who is already committed to helping the community, strengths and assets form the foundation for plans and investments. A narrative about how people are broken is not going to help us because you can't build on broken. People aren't the problem, they're the solution. That's a powerful tenet that is needed more than ever.

Appreciative Community Building doesn't ignore struggle, injustice or inequality. By marrying appreciative inquiry to asset based community development we can study and document what's working in every community and use these strengths to drive investment. We work with people to determine and assemble the available resources to "do what you can, with what you have, where you are, right now." We used this approach in building our Gulfton Neighborhood Center and now we're applying those same principles to our new project, the East Aldine Economic Opportunity Center. This new three-building eight-acre site will contain elements born out of what we heard from the people there. Aldine residents told us what they'd already accomplished on their own, what they wanted to learn from one another, and what they wanted to achieve.

Our inquiries revealed a story about a very cohesive community with a clear identity—a community that was intentionally excluded as Houston annexed more well-off surrounding areas and was left to fend for itself for all municipal services. Aldine residents had their

own theories about what made them able to move forward. We heard again and again the stories of neighbors working together, small businesses lending to each other, volunteers providing essential services and successful residents who returned to “give back.” In the face of uncertainty, people were making it up as they went along, which we found to be an incredible strength. We thought the best thing we could do is enable that improvisation and entrepreneurial energy. We built on their desire to take their small businesses to the next level by designing programs that provide the training and resource connections needed to grow family owned businesses. Community members spoke about the dwellings, products, and services that they've been able to create, invent, and fabricate on their own. Hearing of these existing strengths, Chevron and FabLab Foundation stepped up to build a fabrication laboratory (FAB Lab) as a part of the town center. It will serve as a place where people can do what they're already doing, but with better tools and more opportunities to learn from one another and from professionals within the larger community.

In East Aldine, the lessons we re-learned are twofold. First, assumptions, even when they're based on reliable data, rarely capture the story that we're after. When we went into East Aldine, the data painted a similar picture to the data we had on the Gulfton neighborhood—high poverty, with an extremely high dropout rate. We had all the same data and assumed that something was wrong in the schools. Rather, we learned that the kids who dropped out were going to work in the family business. Middle schoolers were serving as translators and working cash registers. These kids were working alongside their parents in a home-based or family-owned business because they were needed. It then became a question of how do we create an educational experience that recognizes what these children are doing and what they are contributing? The other lesson Aldine taught us once again is that the people in the community know the real story. They know exactly what's going on in their lives. They have a clear set of priorities. They really do know what the next steps need to be, and when we take the time to chronicle what they've accomplished on their own, and to create resources and programs that enable more of that, then we succeed.

A persistent challenge in community development is the lack of available resources, especially in light of the complexity and scale of poverty in this country. How are you approaching this challenge and what insight do you have for the broader community development field?

Over the years I've found that the three-legged stool of the public, private and non-profit sectors working together is really the answer to how to create good sustainable efforts. Different sectors bow in and bow out at various times. We see constructive action on the part of government sometimes, and then sometimes they're nowhere to be found. Then the corporate structure, same story—they're invested, extremely helpful, and then a shift happens and they're not available and not investing. In the future for BakerRipley, we're going to see projects look like the three-legged stool. Every effort will have a philanthropic leg, it'll have a business leg, and it'll have a public sector leg, either enabling efforts or providing direct support. That's really the key to sustainability and long-term impact.

Just as important is the activation of community voices and aiming the energy of the community—that's the fuel that propels all efforts forward. People have asked us about the time that we spend on our projects for doing this type of work. Isn't it expensive to spend all that time on the front end talking to hundreds of people, recording everything, digesting it all? Creating and publishing the “new story” of the neighborhood? And I tell you, nothing is more expensive than building something people don't need, won't use, and can't sustain. That's tremendously wasteful. We avoid that. I stand by what we said in the first go-around. The transformation is multi-year. It's not two years, and it's certainly not one grant cycle. So when we make a commitment to a neighborhood, it's a “come hell or high water” commitment. And it's Texas so we will have both.

A related challenge in the field is the difficulty of measuring impact and outcomes. What have you learned about effective measurement in your work?

Like many of our colleagues in the community development field, we feel a great desire to deliver results to those who support our work. We want to provide evidence that demonstrates it was worth the investment and stories that show appreciation. However, one advantage of having decades of experience is you begin to look over the patterns of the past, including the metrics. What we see again and again are funders falling into and out of love with one measurement model after another. They're interested in measuring what matters to them now, but that particular evaluative measure didn't matter to them last year. And next year it won't matter because they've moved on to something else. Logic models. Common outcomes. Collective impact. Randomized Control Trials. We've seen it all—documenting inputs, outputs, and short, medium, and long-term outcomes along the way.

While we have learned a great deal from these models, we have also learned the limitations of measurement. How do we best measure programs that help our neighbors identify their strengths and put those strengths to work in pursuit of their own aspirations? How do we capture the impact of continuously cultivating a community leader over the years, decades even? How do we measure the social capital created through the everyday interactions that happen at our centers? And how we do ensure that we avoid treating our neighbor as a test subject in the process? These are tough questions. Here's what we've decided.

We provide any data required by any funding agreement, otherwise we don't take the money. But as we sought dollars for this region, from national funders especially, we found that the models of measurement became too divorced from measuring those things that our neighbors most wanted to accomplish, and we often built upon intervention models that did not reflect our communities.

After struggling with a particular foundation requirement, we met and decided that beyond the agreed-upon metrics owed by contract, any additional measurement resources would be spent tracking only those things that mattered most to the people we serve. We're not going to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, as many agencies have, coming up with elaborate systems and tools to have a collective impact examination of what our work

has meant, because in two years there will be some new method for measuring that impact.

On the other hand, what we find—neighborhood to neighborhood, city to city, country to country—are people with three universal yearnings: to earn, learn and belong.

Earn

Every family we talked to either wants to hang on to more of their earnings or earn more. So when we measure whether or not that's happening, we're actually measuring something that matters to them and therefore it matters to us. Through the 11 career offices we operate, we helped 127,294 people who were unemployed find employment in 2016; 82 percent of those people were still employed six months later, and more than half were earning 20 percent more than what they were making at their previous jobs. That matters. At Gulfton, we opened the Promise Credit Union to help people hang on to more of their money instead of being gouged by check cashers or pay day lenders. We encourage saving through a matched savings program. In 2015, we saw 462 families open saving accounts and save a total of \$1.6 million dollars in one year—that's an average of \$3,463 per family. That makes a difference.

Learn

We have yet to meet anyone who didn't want their children to have a good education. And once their children are in school and doing well, the parents are more comfortable learning for themselves. Again, we ask, what does that mean to them? Is that a welding certificate? Is that the next level of English language acquisition? What did you set out to learn? Are you learning it? Are we connecting you to resources that allow you to advance in the way you want? This varies for every person, every aspiration. In 2016, we supported 1,047 adult learners make significant gains in English language proficiency, which we know enables gaining higher income, as well as better advocacy for one's child. We provided high-quality early education to 3,000 children, with 97 percent of applicable children demonstrating Kindergarten readiness. And, through a third-party study conducted by Houston Independent School District, BakerRipley Head Start students were found to have higher test scores than their similar peers in 3rd grade—showing lasting impact on academic success. That matters to everyone we serve.

Belong

The third one is harder to measure. We're measuring things like how engaged people feel and how trusting they feel of their neighbors. Are they coming to the centers to organize community meetings? Are they participating in more groups or activities outside of the centers? Do they know what the challenges are in their neighborhoods? Are they able to speak out and act on their own behalf?

In our Pasadena Neighborhood Center, the Community Engineers program is designed to help people learn how to exercise their voices on civic matters. Pasadena is now overwhelmingly Latino yet the decades-old power structure in place has not changed to

reflect the shifting demographics. This program takes people who are highly engaged and teaches them specific skills so they can become better community volunteers, and move into civic leadership like city councils or school boards. There was a recent story in the *New York Times* about a court battle in Pasadena because of what the courts found to be an intentional set of decisions that were meant to exclude Latino voices. One of the co-plaintiffs in that suit was a graduate of our Community Engineers program. The beauty of this approach is that it lasts, because once a mom knows she can run for school boards or fight a battle in court for the right to vote, these are the things that get handed down.

So: Earn, learn, and belong, and measure what matters to the people we serve. If you stopped anybody on one of our campuses and ask "What are you here for?" they'll tell you they're here for one of those three things. The rule of thumb for measurement is that we meet the standard for information that a prudent business person would need to make an investment decision. We found many of our investors didn't need some elaborate, costly research study. We found again and again that these were people who didn't want a mountain of data. They needed information they could understand. Information that spoke clearly to the actual services provided and what we were measuring. So it became much more straightforward to build a case for what we're doing and why we're doing it. I think that was one of the healthiest decisions we ever made.

What are you anticipating and how are you preparing for the next decade of community development work?

We sit in the fourth largest city in the country, emblematic of every demographic, economic shift that the nation talks about. The Urban Institute has identified Houston as one of eleven southwestern cities that will birth 75 percent of the nation's children in the next ten years.⁶ It's not Chicago, New York, or DC. It's cities like Tucson, Phoenix, San Antonio and Houston. That's the future of the country. I'm stunned that some national funders cannot find their way to see that what happens here is relevant to our country's future. Perhaps other city leaders will learn from our experiences. We work to learn from theirs.

We need to expand the lens of the places and solutions that we study. That lens needs to be broad enough to embrace new ideas about what makes a city great. Right now, the community development world has a set of unspoken implicit assumptions about what makes up great cities. I say the best cities are the ones where you can start at the bottom and work your way up. Cities where you have an opportunity to earn, learn, belong. That is how to define a great city. There's no question that every headline now feels like a threat. However, there's something you cannot kill off in this country, and that's the narrative about how we can begin at the bottom and work our way up. It is so appealing because it's the story of so many people.

⁶ Rolf Pendall and Margery Austin Turner, *Expanding Access to Economic Opportunity in Fast-Growth Metropolitan Areas*, Urban Institute White Paper, May 2014.

I find this globally connected, interdependent world that we're in now fascinating and thrilling. I think it's a great decade for cities. It's also enormously challenging. Over the next decade, the success or failure around community development is almost completely in the hands of regional and metro leaders. I like to say, "No one's coming," and what I mean by that is the future of a region is in the hands of the leaders that are already there. Waiting for the enabling investment, legislation, or whatever tends to come from elsewhere at the state and federal level—they're not likely to come in the ways that we need them, nor in time to make a difference. Leaders in key institutions and sectors that drive the economy—education, business and government—must be the ones who make sure their metros work for everyone. They're going to have to be the chief knowledge brokers so that the right things get done. The next decade will be defined by the rise of cities, where people will come for opportunity and learning. City leaders just have to make sure that wherever people start, they're not facing a dead end, but rather a landing place and onramp for their ambitions and aspirations.

Angela Blanchard is the President and CEO of BakerRipley, formerly Neighborhood Centers, Inc. Ms. Blanchard is a globally recognized expert practitioner in community development. Her breakthrough strategies have successfully revitalized neighborhoods, while providing a powerful roadmap for cities across the globe. As CEO of BakerRipley, Blanchard leads the largest community development organization in Texas which is among the top 1% of charitable groups nationwide. It currently serves more than half a million people in over 50 counties in Texas with an annual budget of more than \$250 million. She has been profiled in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and CNN. Blanchard has received three invitations to the White House and is sought out by leaders and thinkers interested in learning about BakerRipley's innovative, strength-based approach to community transformation.