

CIVIC LEAGUE OF GREATER NEW BRUNSWICK: An Evolution of Success

Community Development Case Study

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INTRODUCTION “EVERYTHING HAPPENS BY OPPORTUNITY”

When you have been at an organization as long as Dr. Roy Epps has, you have seen a lot of change. The Civic (then Urban) League of Greater New Brunswick began in 1945 and Dr. Epps, President and CEO, has worked there since 1967; almost 44 years. The world has changed, New Jersey has changed, New Brunswick has changed and the people within this very community have changed. Certainly, the Civic League of Greater New Brunswick has evolved over the last sixty-five years. As Dr. Epps explained during a recent audio interview, it is always a challenge to continuously address the needs of a community as they arise, to take a position and not sit on the sidelines (Epps, 2010). Throughout its journey, the League has never been on the sidelines; it has grappled with significant challenges, which has resulted in great accomplishments. From civil rights to housing, healthcare to employment, and voting and safety to education, the League has fought for it all. As Dr. Epps said, “you either love Roy Epps (League) or you hate Roy Epps (League)” (Epps, 2010). It probably depends on whether you are fighting with the League or against it.

However, the League does not fight for fighting’s sake. Dr. Epps stresses the role of opportunity and partnership. Perhaps it comes from his years of experience, but it seems as though Dr. Epps has always understood the roles of opportunity and partnership in community development.

“Everything happens by opportunity. You have to have the passion and the resources. You can have the passion without the resources and get frustrated. You have to be clear about what you want to accomplish and need the resources to say how you are going to accomplish. Be moderate enough to understand that you have to take small steps and you can’t think you’ll go changing everything- understand the restraints” (Epps, 2010).

By taking small, and sometimes large steps, the League has sought to make change. Opportunity, partnership and community have shaped its evolution. A historically Black organization, now in a largely Hispanic neighborhood, transformed itself to meet the new needs of a new population by shifting its focus from housing to education.

FROM URBAN TO CIVIC “EVERYTHING IS BUILT ON SOMETHING ELSE”

Established in 1945 as an affiliate of the National Urban League, the Civic League of Greater New Brunswick is the oldest professionally staffed non-profit organization serving African American and minority communities in central New Jersey (60 Year History, 2005). The League began as a call to action. In 1943, the League of Women Voters, the Women’s Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Center, and the Public Affairs Committee of the Y.W.C.A held a forum in New Brunswick where the Executive Secretary, Harold A. Lett of the New Jersey Urban League gave a talk called, “The Negro in Our Community - What are Our Mutual Responsibilities.” Highlighting the lack of an organized effort in New Brunswick concerning Black residents’ rights, he challenged the organizations to take action. The women gathered funds and additional neighborhood resident support. In 1944, the National Urban League approved their charter for a local Service Council in New Brunswick. The League’s organizing group planned and petitioned for 60 federally funded units of housing for Blacks in New Brunswick. Although they did not get the housing on the site they wanted, the project did come to fruition as the Paul Robeson Village at the intersection of Van Dyke Avenue and Somerset Street. Quickly, the Council gained recognition. That same year, Paul Robeson, the famous bass-baritone Broadway star and Rutgers graduate, performed a free benefit concert and raised money to create a scholarship fund and the funds to become a full-fledged Urban League. On October 11, 1945, working out of make-shift home offices, the group officially became a sanctioned Urban League.

The Civic League of Greater New Brunswick has evolved since those early days. In the 1960’s and 70’s, coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement, the League’s influence grew. Dr. Roy Epps came to the League in 1967, and by 1970 he was the director. Though he had a background in biological and chemical sciences, Dr. Epps had been volunteering with young people when the rebellions occurred throughout the nation, more specifically in Plainfield and Newark. He began searching for a paid social work position in the New Brunswick area; ironically a newly established staff position at the League became available. Epps has been at the League ever since. With all the organizational changes, the League needed a bigger space and in 1970 it moved into a former bakery at 47-49 Throop Avenue, on the corner of Townsend Street, where it exists today, just outside of downtown New Brunswick.

In 1983, the League cut ties with the National Urban League and became the Civic League of Greater New Brunswick. Dr. Epps explains the separation. He states, “Publicly it was around dues, but there were some philosophical differences as well. We, the New Brunswick affiliate, were very much against the Apartheid policies in South Africa—not that National embraced it. They allowed it. They went silent. The Poor People March in May 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King, the national body elected not to participate; there were a number of progressive issues we felt strongly about and felt that National should have taken some strong positions on” (Epps, 2010). Despite the split, the Civic League maintains some relationship with New Jersey state affiliates and the National Urban League (60 Year History, 2005).

Continuing Partnership

Partnership has always been a strong suit of the League. Internally, the League has five full-time staff members in addition to Dr. Epps and more than thirty part-timers in after school programs. Many of them have been with the League for 5 to over 30 years. Dr. Epps tries to run the League like a profit-like business and loyalty is high. Perhaps that is why the League maintains such strong partnerships as well. The League's board includes members from the education and corporate sectors, along with community residents. The board comes together with its range of experience to holistically determine programmatic initiatives. Members can be individuals or business partners. Several major funders have been with the League for decades. The League understands that receiving funding comes with many obligations, and they will not take funding from anyone for any program outside the mission. Doing only what they set out to accomplish, the League has returned money to funders who may cause the mission to shift. The League's accomplishments, while staying true to its founding values, show how successful the League truly is.

Now in its 65th year, the League continues to be a strong presence in New Brunswick. Involved in the statewide Mt. Laurel litigation (the League's housing zoning suit against 23 of the 25 Middlesex County municipalities was included in the state Supreme Court Fair Share housing decisions), actively pursuing fair share housing in New Brunswick and advocating for tenants' right during the HOPE VI program, the League maintains its voice in affordable housing and equitable urban revitalization in New Brunswick. Employment and neighborhood development programs complement the housing initiatives for a balanced community strategy. Additionally, the League focuses on the educational gap in the minority community and facilitates a plethora of programs aimed at advancing youth academically and technologically.

MISSION AND COMMUNITY “A MISSION IS LIKE FLYING TO THE MOON”

The League, never one to avoid a challenge, has an ambitious mission. Its mission is to narrow the gap between minority and majority communities and give opportunity to those who are less fortunate. Dr. Epps says that a mission, especially one like ending disparity, is not a goal or a conclusion. “A mission is like flying to the moon, thereby, getting a sense of where you'd like to go. Accomplishing the mission is when I'll be dead and gone” (Epps, 2010). As a community based organization, they strive to narrow the gap by strengthening families through advocacy and services designed to empower residents and improve their quality of life (Brunswick, 2008). The Civic League cites two challenges to achieving its mission, “Bridging the educational and technological gap through Programs for Students” and “Balancing the benefits of Urban Re-vitalization” (Brunswick, 2008). Over the past 30 or 40 years, the League has tweaked the mission only slightly, but its approaches have evolved (60 Year History, 2005).

Organizations change and how one strives for justice changes. Moreover, neighborhoods change. Over the past 65 years, the Civic League of Greater New Brunswick has reflected national change, changes in New Jersey and changes in New Brunswick. The Civic League started as an Urban League and was an organization focused on African Americans. The people the League first worked with are now grandparents, Dr. Epps jokes. Their experiences were completely different than those of the people he works with now. New Brunswick demographics have changed significantly since the organization's founding. In 1980, only about 7% of the greater New Brunswick area was African American, and approximately 5% was Hispanic (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration Bureau of the Census, 1982). By 1990, New Brunswick was 29% African American and 19% Hispanic (U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration Bureau of the Census, 1992). The most recent available Census data from 2000 shows New Brunswick as 39% Hispanic and 24% African American. When one accounts for the population of undocumented immigrants, the Hispanic population is likely even higher than the numbers show. While the African American percentage of the population certainly increased for a period of time, the Hispanic population quickly gained ground and surpassed it. Despite a major community shift, the League remained unfazed. Dr. Epps says they embraced the new population, “Particularly Hispanics who share a similar background. They just got off the ship a little different than we did. We work all those new groups into our programming. Sixty to seventy percent of the programs' participants are Hispanic” (Epps, 2010). As Dr. Epps attests, community development has always been about the opportunity to “engage people around their needs” (Epps, 2010). When the people change, the needs change.

IN THE BEGINNING, A “FIRESTORM” OF HOUSING

In its earliest years, the League focused on housing for African American veterans. Housing has been a major activity of the organization ever since. The George Street Urban Renewal Project helped shape the direction of the League. An urban renewal site on George Street had existed for years and the League, hoping to develop the land for affordable housing, made a proposal to the housing authority. In the words of Dr. Epps, a “fire storm” ensued (Epps, 2010). After battling with city hall, the freeholders, and the involvement of the National Urban League and Johnson & Johnson, the Civic League lost. It was an “interesting and challenging time” (Epps, 2010). The project was granted to the Soble Construction Company, which had not previously been mentioned as a contender. Fortunately, the League remained involved in the project and helped pick the site for the 222 units along Commercial Avenue and Route 18. Despite losing the bid, the League decidedly won in that the battle changed the way the community viewed the organization. Previously the League had operated mostly as a social service agency. After the George Street Urban Renewal Project the League moved into advocacy. Most notably, the

Civic League played a role in what was to become the Mt. Laurel suits. In 1974, the League filed a suit against Middlesex County for discriminatory zoning laws. The League subsequently won orders for the development of nearly 10,000 units of affordable housing distributed amongst Middlesex County neighborhoods (O'Neill, 1990). Only a few years later, the League became plaintiffs in Mt. Laurel.

PLAINTIFFS IN MT. LAUREL

When the League sued Middlesex County (and won) the suit combined to become part of the Mt. Laurel case. During the 1970's, New Jersey fought a slew of Mt. Laurel cases and eventually established COAH, the Council on Affordable Housing. To this day, Dr. Epps helps to ensure fair and affordable housing in Middlesex County. Due to his involvement in the cases and his ongoing Fair Share authority, any action taken concerning Fair Share requirements or COAH in Middlesex County must have Dr. Epps sign off on it. Years later, in 1994 when the New Brunswick housing stock was rapidly changing, the Department of Housing and Urban Development gave the League a Federal grant to monitor Fair Share housing. United Way additionally funded the League for a period of time until the League determined that it could no longer accept funding from a group that differed substantially in their approach to housing and gentrification and would be its "adversary in the courtroom" (Epps, 2010).

Formation of COINCO- Their very own development agency

During the Mt. Laurel litigation, the Civic League decided to take housing into its own hands. In 1974, the League created a partner organization called COINCO, the Community Investment Corporation. During the 1980's, funded through Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), COINCO built or rehabbed over 40 units between Throop and Remsen Avenues, the neighborhood immediately surrounding the League. Dr. Epps, the only person at the League with a housing background, realized that taking charge of both organizations simultaneously proved difficult. COINCO found itself stuck between creating housing, hoping to give people an affordable option, and the reality that tenants still may not be able to pay the rent. Though the organization stopped building units in 1989 during the housing downturn, they managed housing until 2000 when the Board and staff chose to dissolve COINCO.

Hope VI

Towards the end of the COINCO era, the League advocated for tenants' rights during New Brunswick's HOPE VI program. The New Brunswick Housing Authority gave the League a grant to work with the transition from high-rise public housing to the new HOPE VI homes seen on George Street today. Aware that HOPE VI may move forward without a thorough study of what types of housing tenants would actually prefer or where tenants would actually want to live, all the while keeping in mind true affordability, the League gave the grant money to the tenants' organization so that the tenants might have more power to negotiate (Casey, 1989; Epps, 2010). They developed plans ranging from demolition to voucher programs, and from tenants managing their own public housing to private sale. Private ownership would have, unfortunately, necessitated uniform rents, so the tenants decided demolition would be in their best interest (Jones, 1996). Nine years later, the demolition had still not occurred. In 1997, HUD gave the city permission to raze the high-rise public housing buildings, but the city did not have the money to do so and rehabilitation was not possible. The long neglected structures would have needed nine million dollars in rehabilitation to be up to code (60 Year History, 2005).

Neighborhood Change

Starting in the late 1970's, New Brunswick began large-scale revitalization. Dr. Epps had helped form DEVCO, the New Brunswick Development Corporation and simultaneously created New Brunswick To-morrow. He served on the board of DEVCO for years until he left due to differences in opinion on development approaches. New Brunswick had been undergoing significant changes and its redevelopment had been criticized for the use of urban renewal techniques (Knox, 1989). During the same time, the League joined forces with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) over concern that the State had plans to develop certain cities, in particular New Brunswick, that did not appropriately take into consideration the needs of low and moderate income people. Concern was mounting that New Brunswick would not fulfill its Mt. Laurel Fair Share duties, or that the substantial increase in high-income housing would use up all available developable land; the League filed a suit against the city in 1990. Perhaps to the surprise of the League, a subsequent study showed that New Brunswick had five times its required affordable housing. The League dropped the suit.

Current Neighborhood Development

Though the League no longer directly works in housing, they do work for neighborhood revitalization. Currently, neighborhood residents, in partnership with the League, New Brunswick Tomorrow, Sharon, Faith Hope, and Mount Zion Ministries Baptist Churches, the New Brunswick Board of Education, and the City of New Brunswick are working on the Georges Road Gateway Project. Neighborhood residents are the experts on community change, and this partnership strives to give residents the resources to create change. The project began in 2003 and already the residents have established a neighborhood task force addressing improvement of the Pine Street Recreation Park, traffic control improvements (speed bumps, portable digital speed control) and neighborhood building code enforcement activities (60

Year History, 2005). Residents additionally hope to work on housing, traffic and safety issues, as well as to promote employment opportunity and retain a diversity of residents (Brunswick, 2008).

BIG CHANGES – NAME, PEOPLE AND METHOD “WIN WIN, WIN WIN WIN SITUATION”

Education

In more recent years, the League has shifted its focus to education. Dr. Epps was the only person at the League with a background in housing. Housing development can drain an organization, financially as well as emotionally. The League found it was caught between creating housing opportunity and then not receiving rent. In 1987 the last COINCO housing was built. Several issues simultaneously collided to provide the opportunity for change. In 1983 the League separated from the National Urban League. While the separation might have been in the League’s best philosophical interest, they no longer had the legal power they once did (Jones, 1993). Housing legislation became more of a challenge. Also, New Brunswick’s population was rapidly changing. With that, the needs changed and education came into focus. The League had always promoted education. In the early days, the League raised money for scholarships and obtained dormitory housing for students of color at the New Jersey College for Women, now the Douglas Campus of Rutgers (60 Year History, 2005). In 1968 the League established the Urban Youth League and worked within the schools, particularly during the civil disturbances after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Not until the 1990’s, however, did the League truly delve into education.

One more change provided the perfect opportunity to delve deeper into education. Dr. Epps began close ties with New Brunswick education when he became the first Black president of the school board in 1976. His partnership on the board created a strong relationship and the perfect opportunity to increase the League’s involvement in education. For fifteen years the League used this partnership to conduct education programs. However, with Epps on the board, the League could not receive funding for educational programs. When Dr. Epps stepped down from the board in 1986, the League’s involvement in education took flight (Brunswick, 2008).

Greatest Success

During the 1990’s the League worked on “Project 2000”, which Dr. Epps calls one of the League’s greatest successes. He describes it as a, “win win, win win situation” (Epps, 2010).

Over 500 volunteers from major corporations helped over 7,000 students. The aim of the program was to bring a professional corporate world of minority males, or simply a male, into the classroom to be a positive role model for children in grades Kindergarten through 8. Eventually, the program expanded and brought in professional females as well. Each volunteer served one half day a week as a teacher’s assistant. Funding and support came from AT&T, Merrill Lynch and Johnson & Johnson. The program ran harmoniously at no expense to the district.

Receiving half a million dollars annually in addition to corporate grants, the League has become the afterschool arm of the New Brunswick education system. They now have programs in every grade from elementary to high school. In 2000, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Initiative began with corporate volunteers, parent teambuilding exercises, afterschool leadership and recreational enrichment activities. Additionally, several summer institutes were developed during this period, 1990-2001, to keep the commitment to education strong all year long. The Whitney M. Young Jr. Summer Institute and the Rosa L. Parks Education/Employment Summer Institute both focus on skill development and career opportunity. Whitney M. Young Jr. caters to ages 14-15 and works on decision-making and problem solving. If students maintain good grades they become eligible for Rosa L. Parks, which expands into presentations and trips to career sites. Attending conferences, writing a research paper, and SAT prep are also part of the curriculum. Being so comprehensive, the League can really support what happens the whole day of the youth (60 Year History, 2005).

The League’s educational programs have been so successful that the organization has to reevaluate its 2020 vision. Initially, the League hoped to expand services to young people. Now that programs exist at every level of education, the League is reworking its goals. Partnership with the STEMS (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) program will soon increase. Lower grades of students will work with robotics and rocket science. The mission is to empower young people without them knowing they are becoming empowered (Civic League of Greater New Brunswick, 2010).

INTO THE FUTURE “IT’S ALL ABOUT EMPOWERMENT”

Recently, Dr. Epps and the League have put more focus on organizational sustainability than ever before. Now in his 44th year, Dr. Epps knows he will not be at the League forever. He is working with the community to ensure that programs, particularly the resident driven Georges Road Gateway re-development, carry on. Epps says, “It’s all about empowerment” (Epps, 2010). The Civic League of Greater New Brunswick will continue to change as will the New Brunswick area. All the collaboration, all the partnerships, has established the League as a fixture in the New Brunswick community. From healthcare to employment, from housing to education, the League has

evolved to rise to the needs of the community. The longevity and success of the League illustrate its ability to change, to evolve. (Georges Road, Gateway Redevelopment Brunswick, 2008).





