

SOCIAL CAPITAL

by Paul K. Haeder
photos by Makenna Haeder



An Investment in our Culture

The universal question is:

what makes for a good community or a strong family or supportive team? I asked a wide variety of people to help contextualize and characterize what social capital and social movements can do to build a “community of sharing, fairness and resiliency.”

Even after getting responses from a minister, a director of a non-profit peace organization, a membership coordinator of a business chamber, a professor of social work at EWU, and a Pittsburgh author/leader in the social capital discourse, as well as excavating my more than 11 years working in Spokane with every sort of “community” imaginable, the

truth is we have nothing really more powerful to count on than “community.”

For Christopher Zilar, membership director for Inland Northwest Business Alliance, social capital is paramount to everyday inter-relationships. “Social networks have value, whether it be a child playing on a youth sports team or a business owner attending a meeting. Social capital is the sort of currency one spends when networking; it’s the ability to persuade others or control the conversation within one’s social network.”

A New Spirituality – Community Rising

Interestingly, asking a Spokaneite who’s deeply ensconced in social systems and community healing and activism the same question, *what is social capital*, we get a similar answer: “Social capital is the capacity of a

community to organize themselves to create the community in which they want to live and work,” says Reverend Deb Conklin, spiritual director of Liberty Park United Methodist Church. “It includes awareness of how we impact both the world around us and our neighbors. It includes the willingness to work to move from the world as it is to the world that we want.”

Rev Deb (as she calls herself) has been in Spokane going on 20 years, working in a shrinking congregation, something she likens to “hospice” work – taking care of the dwindling (dying) churches she serves. Conklin, as do many social capital incubators and growers, looks for a different way to reach people in their hearts and their minds to do the good work that is the foundation of “community.”

“That ‘something different,’” Rev Deb says, “has been to work to grow community around the work of discipleship instead of around worship. Our formal incarnation of this is called *The Oak Tree*. We do not have a weekly worship. Instead, our weekly gatherings are conversations about current events and moral issues. We also have seminars – about three or four times a year we offer a four to six week series on specific topics. We’ve studied David Korten’s work on building a New Economy. We learned about the Mondragon model of worker-owned cooperatives. We’ve studied issues of embodiment and media propaganda about our bodies, and issues of food justice.”

Other transplants to this area working on disseminating what it is about our propaganda systems and lack of justice include an expert on exploitation of girls and women in the sex “trade” business of disembodied humanity.

Going Abroad to Know One’s Capacity

An assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Eastern Washington, Bipasha Biswas instructs the next generation of social workers to tap into the power of community, and sometimes that has to be through international work. That means for some students, they get to travel with Biswas to learn about community building in her homeland of India.

She’s clear that social work is not a clock-in/clock-out profession. “We cannot do social work 9 to 5 because poverty and domestic violence do not stop at 5 p.m.,” she says. “Social work is my identity. Social justice is my faith.”

Both the professor and the clergywoman have worked locally around poverty, social justice, and the Occupy movement, most notably with Spokane Alliance and Peace and Justice Action League (PJALS) of Spokane. Liz Moore is the executive director of PJALS, having been associated with the non-profit for 24 years. Her take on “social capital” is simple and focused: “Relationships informed by respect and a track record.”

While fighting for sanity inside our state’s justice system and against Washington’s death penalty, Moore also looks to youth as a bright light not just on the horizon but in the present to illuminate a pathway toward a sustainable future. PJALS embraces youth

involvement in their annual Action Conference because for Moore it’s vital to know how community social change agents, like her, might best be both mentors and teachers for the next generation:

“We ask them things like what do they need from community organizations, what do they care about, what do they not want from other activists,” says Moore. “The answers have a clear pattern. They tell us, ‘we want to see your face at our meetings. Give me a chance to learn. I need your wisdom, not your cynicism.’ For me, the lesson is clear: approach youth, listen to youth, believe in and make space for the rightness of their perspective. Support youth as leaders of today, not just of some mythical tomorrow. Many youth see very clearly the crises we are

in as a society. We ask them to name their own values and we support them in leading change around those values.”

Communities of Diverse Abilities

I had a chance to listen to and speak with the keynote presenter at the Employment First conference in Bend, Oregon, where more than 300 professionals working in job development for youth and adults living with disabilities gathered at what is called, “Meet at the Mountain.” Al Condeluci is an energetic Italian-American who teaches university courses on social capital and is also the CEO of CLASS, Community Living and Support Services, and teaches at the University of Pittsburgh. His definition of social capital is framed around creating better cities.



“Social capital is at the core of a caring society,” Condeluci told me. “When people know each other, they are more prone to watch out for each other. They are more apt to be reciprocal, and to be kind. To this end, if people in a community develop more connections they will want these friends to have the same things they have (or aspire to). This translates to better schools, transportation and other community amenities.” Condeluci was in Spokane a few months ago at Spokane Summit.

No More Business as Usual

From a business standpoint, according to Condeluci, social capital can either be positive or negative, and he uses the gang as an example of social capital used to bring

together people with similar goals and backgrounds but whose end game is doing harm.

“Social capital is not positive or negative,” says Condeluci, who is author of several books, including *Social Capital: The Key to Macro Change*. “Those elements are driven by the people you relate to and influence from those social connections. Consider gangs, which use social capital and the power of affiliation to do negative things. Remember your mother trying to pick your friends. She understood the positive and negative aspects of social capital.”

For Rev Deb, PJALS’ Moore and EWU’s Biswas, social capital is an infinite blessing, but economic capital is a true leveler and gatekeeper to billions of people’s destinies globally, tens of thousands here locally.

Biswas works in her country around HIV/AIDS prevention in the Sundarban islands, and also assists with Spokane AIDS Network. Her academic studies are characterized by looking at cultural elements intersecting with poverty and with stigma related to women, marginalized and oppressed people. “This refers to a nexus of poverty, gender inequality, trafficking, violence against women,” she told me. “Ask the ninety-nine percent of women trafficked into prostitution in India – the root of the story is the same: poverty. Wait for a maximum of six months after the Nepal earthquake – you will see a flooding of young girls in brothels in places like Bombay.”

The United Methodist Church spiritual leader sees direct action around corporations as a way to make social change real. “The only way we change leaders of big business is to find ways to hit their pocket books,” says Conklin. “I believe that means that we organize local economic institutions: a community bank, a local currency, worker-owned cooperatives, small entrepreneurial projects. We do everything we can to move our money out of big banks and withdraw our business from the big corporations.”

For the University of Pittsburgh adjunct, he sees social capital as the lynchpin to local change, which translates into large change, or tipping points: “When we think about specific agendas like jobs, or housing, social capital can offer better strategies than large legal initiatives,” says Condeluci. “That is, when people know people, we are able to circumvent some of the legal or policy barriers that can get in the way. In the job development area, mom/pop shops that have greater flexibility offer more realistic stepping stones for people who have traditionally been left behind.”

When we consider Inland Northwest business, INBA’s Zilar sees young people as both intentional and strategic in their desires to go into business to be part of the local social capital of business. “I am very excited about how our young adults are driving businesses and corporations to live according to a mission,” says Zilar. “More and more businesses – especially those owned by young entrepreneurs – are businesses of intent, i.e. not in it just for the money. I see so much potential good in terms of young people becoming business owners. And part of that is because

of their sense of connectedness to the world.”

Sustaining the Sustainable – We Are All in this Together

Ironically, I’ve been involved in this concept of reinventing community and planning sustainable communities around the five E’s – Equity, Environment, Education, Economy and Energy – while also intersecting with folk like PJALS’ Moore and Liberty Park UMC’s Conklin. These women, like many community social change agents in Spokane, see the big picture in almost every action, every breath they take.

“I think Industrial Areas Foundation has one of the most effective strategies for empowering communities,” says Conklin. “One of the fundamental principles is that you never do for others. You help people realize that they can do it themselves. So IAF puts a great deal of effort into teaching everyone who is interested (not just the formal leaders) how to be an effective community organizer.”

There is this push-pull inertia around empowering communities to tap into the most basic yet foundational aspect of social capital – participatory democracy, community-directed growth, and community-based action. Some might even call into question the role of capitalism in destroying communities and Balkanizing us so we fail to see the power in numbers and mass protest movements.

For Bipasha Biswas – whose classes on women’s rights, and human rights with the School of Social Work and with Women’s and Gender Studies at EWU define her focus – she sees dysfunction created by the forces of individualism and consumer capitalism our youth face.

“I come from a socialist country where family instead of the individual is the unit of society,” she says. “Capitalist values of profit at any cost does not allow for community building without significant challenges. Young people in this country grow up with mixed messages, such as, corporations are people. I would say it is much harder to take an inward look without seeing the outside world. I encourage my students to join the Peace Corps and travel outside their comfort zone to get a sense of what diverse communities look like and how sharing resources is a way of life instead of a communist agenda.”

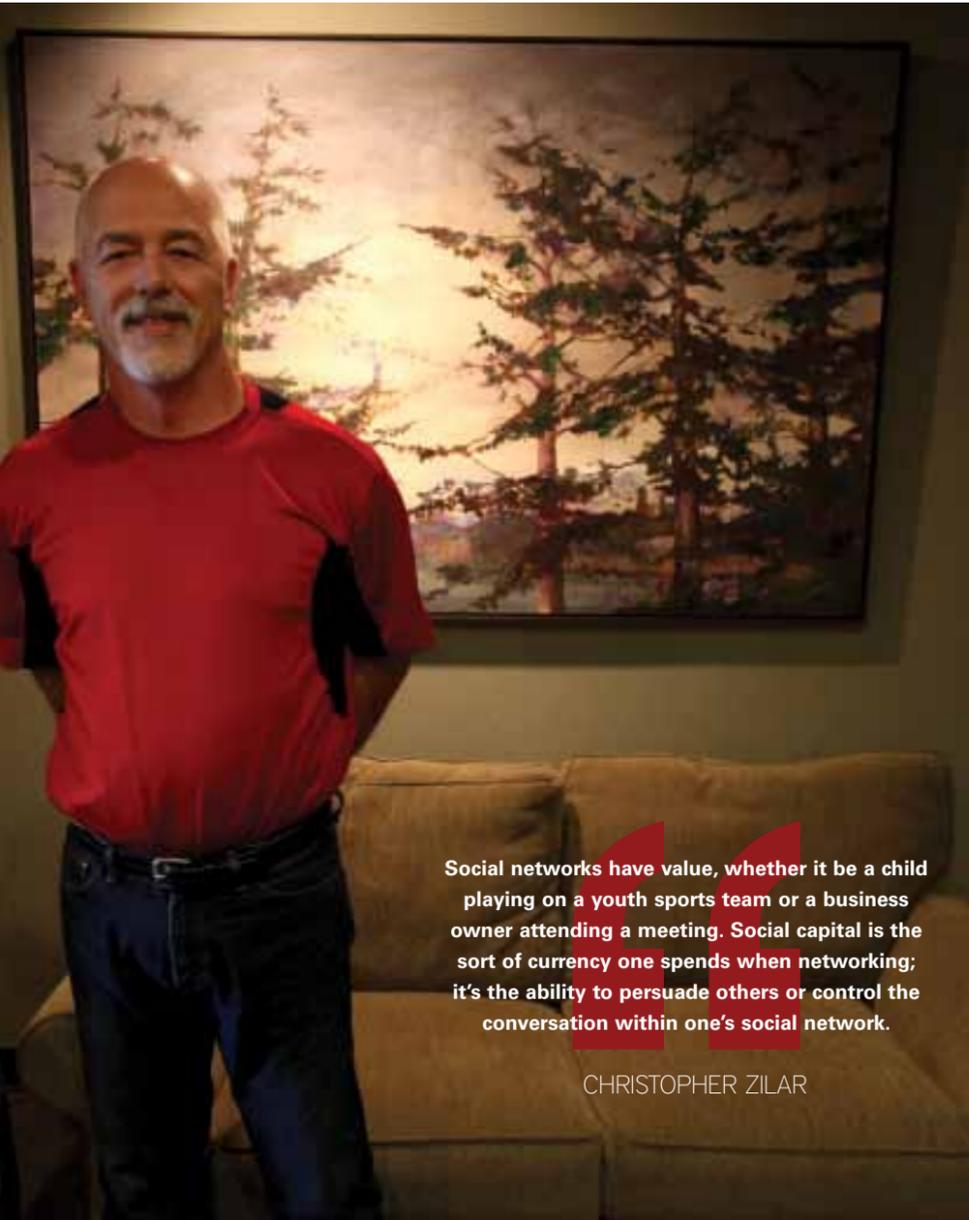
Interestingly for Zilar, whose mission is to grow the business base of Inland Northwest Business Alliance, community resiliency is an oversimplification of a confluence of factors. “Community resiliency is too complex an issue,” he told me. “You cannot define one problem or one solution. Nonetheless, factors to community resiliency may include the overall health of the community, the diversity of industries, the mindfulness of infrastructure planning, the educational opportunities, etc. I suspect that thinking in silos contributes to problems, whereas systems thinking contributes to solutions.”

In the end, social capital tied to building community means coalescing together and finding power in numbers and dominant similarities – 80 percent of people in the U.S. have about seven percent of the economic power, while 20 percent control 93 percent. We are powerful in numbers, not economic might.

For PJALS, which has been at the forefront of peace movements, the action toward police accountability and educating around social action, real power can be gained in grassroots movements, with our embodied social capital. “The dominant model of power tells us that the folks at the top hold the power, and they act upon the rest of us through laws, norms, myths and institutions that perpetuate and enforce this distribution of power,” says Moore. “That’s accurate; however, it’s also accurate that to use a people-power model that turns that model on its head. We the people hold the power. We have our own individual and shared autonomy and authority. We can choose to abide by and cooperate with the dominant model. Or, we can withdraw our consent. We can choose not to cooperate with the norms, myths, and laws, and we can change them. To me, it is fundamental that in order to have an empowered community we need to start with a belief in the power of the community members, the power of everyday people.”

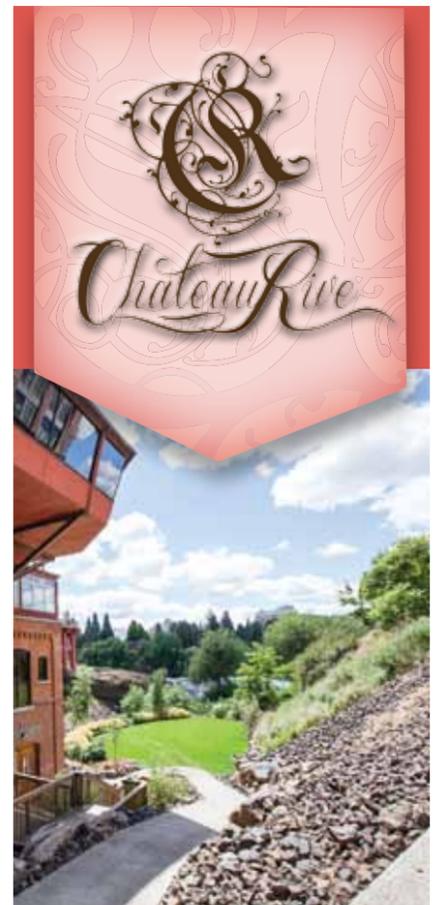
Paul K. Haeder is a freelance writer who worked in Spokane as a community college instructor and journalist for over 11 years.

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