

NeighborWorks® Achieving Excellence in Community Development

Profile: Yvonne Stennett, Community League of the Heights

A few years ago, the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City found itself in silent warfare—unspoken tensions between the once entirely black community and the growing Latino population were taking root in the community's fiber as residents avoided one another on the streets, violence erupted in school gangs and festering hostility went unaddressed. Desperate to unite the two populations and find answers for her community, Yvonne Stennett, Executive Director of CLOTH, successfully applied to the *NeighborWorks Achieving Excellence in Community Development* program (AE). She encountered tremendous honesty and helpful guidance from peers, Harvard instructors, and the coaches in the program, who urged her to find a common denominator to which all of her residents could relate. After much deliberation, she realized that the best solution would come from improvements in the neighborhood's school system, an effort that not only could unite the hostile neighbors under one shared goal, but could also benefit the community for years to come.

Although Stennett initially wanted to create an advocacy group to lobby for educational reform, she abandoned this plan after really listening to neighborhood students, who told her, "We don't need an advocacy group. We need changes in the schools." She knew the real change meant turning up the heat in the community even more and went on to raise \$48 million toward the development of a new neighborhood school. Backed with the support of elected officials, local businesses, and residents of Washington Heights, Stennett built partnerships with local employers and agencies that would make them accountable to the neighborhood in which they worked. She arranged mentoring programs and internships with the local hospital and geriatric center, the primary local employers.

In September 2006, the school opened its doors to a staggering enrollment of 162 students from grades 6-12 -- the highest enrollment for new schools that year. After its first year, the school has demonstrated high attendance and high parent participation rates. While the long-term impacts in the community are yet to be seen, Stennett has noticed healthier relations among different community groups and partnerships forming between agencies that normally would not communicate. Looking forward, CLOTH plans to leverage the \$48 million it has raised to begin construction on a community center that will house a new school building and will be used on nights and weekends for broader educational opportunities and community building, such as adult classes, lectures and community events.

For Stennett, going through the AE program represented a "human change," and provided "a realistic check-in on both a personal and professional level." Stennett says that the AE thought process made CLOTH more strategic and more fiscally prudent. As new challenges emerge with the program, Stennett has used and plans to continue using the resources and insights from the AE program to adapt to the ever-changing situations in her community.

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