

## ENGAGING TRADITIONALLY DISENFRANCHISED RESIDENTS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Fifth Avenue Committee, Inc.  
Brooklyn, NY

*"Our approach to community development and engagement is not just telling people what to do, but bringing them along so they can understand what's required of them to really control their own environment, their own space, their own building, and their own future."*

Ibon Muhammad, Director of Special Projects, Fifth Avenue Committee

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**SUMMARY:** South Brooklyn's Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC) annually engages 5,000 low and moderate-income residents in the economic development of their gentrifying neighborhoods. FAC is a community development corporation that goes beyond traditional housing development. Its programs are national models for partnering with community residents to create affordable housing and living-wage employment, form community benefit agreements with developers, and enable individuals returning from prison to rejoin society. It organizes diverse grassroots leaders to impact their elected officials and to have more control over their lives. FAC's approach includes the following:

- **Enable Community Residents To Develop Projects:** FAC gives community members the chance to take on even potentially risky projects. An individual who returned from prison who originally worked as a FAC building manager now guides its criminal justice program. In one low-income neighborhood, FAC created a local advisory council to direct a \$13 million housing development project. Says Ibon Muhammad, "When we leave, people will know what happened and will be able to do it again on their own."
- **Magnify The Influence Of Local Leaders:** Staff, board and community leaders all contribute to the organization's cause. FAC links them through strategies that include housing associations and a resident council. In addition, more than 500 people drawn from FAC projects and the local community are "FAC Activists" who sign-on to the organization's larger mission and participate in committees, campaigns, and neighborhood events.
- **Turn Constituents into Political Activists:** Many residents first learn about FAC through development projects. FAC then provides training, campaigns and forums with legislators to enable people to share their experiences and put forward solutions.
- **Have an Extensive Impact:** FAC forms mergers and partnerships with other organizations. It replicates and spins-off its programs. Locally and nationally, it is creating a legacy of changes in zoning, tax, and mandated programs that secure affordable housing, produce education and job benefits, and promote criminal justice reforms.

The following case example explores FAC's programs and strategies:

## **CHANGING THE TERMS OF THE STRUGGLE**

### **Fifth Avenue Committee, Inc.**

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*"It is a place of action and a place of conscience."*

– Former Fifth Avenue Committee executive director Brad Lander

### **Offering Opportunities**

Darryl King served 25 years in prison on an unfounded murder charge. King always maintained his innocence and had been a stellar prisoner; his term was distinguished by various accomplishments and service. He was introduced to the Fifth Avenue Committee, Inc. (FAC) by a community activist, who advised then-FAC Executive Director, Brad Lander: "This is a great guy who's been wronged, and he also knows about property management. You should hire him."

It was a chance to offer an opportunity that Brad Lander remembers well. Hiring King, says Lander, "really was about taking the justice component of our mission seriously: to advance social and economic justice." So FAC hired King to manage their buildings. King not only proved to be a valuable employee, but also a steady contributor to the organization's vision/growth. Over the next few years, King "got involved repeatedly in trying to call the organization to what he saw its mission would mean on criminal justice issues," says Lander.

King helped FAC develop policies opposing rental practices that discriminated against individuals who had been incarcerated, and pushed for policies that made it a priority to house and support them. He organized FAC's Criminal Justice Working Group, led by people with histories of incarceration, to guide FAC's work in this new area. His perspective shaped FAC's Developing Justice program, which has become a national model that mobilizes local resources to ease the re-entry of recently released prisoners back into society and their communities. King, now Director of Developing Justice, has become a national spokesperson and advisor on criminal justice reform policy.

Such transformations are not at all uncommon as a result of FAC's approach to community development in South Brooklyn, New York. FAC consistently gives people a chance to take on potentially risky, controversial projects and run with them, say FAC leaders. It's a level of trust and flexibility that FAC staff and supporters say comes naturally as part of FAC's operating approach, which emphasizes shared leadership among staff, board, and community leaders.

### **Working Toward Vibrant Community**

The Fifth Avenue Committee, Inc. is a not-for-profit, community-based organization serving the South Brooklyn communities of Park Slope, Red Hook, Gowanus, and Sunset Park. FAC began in 1977 as a group of neighbors "working together for a vibrant, diverse community where all residents have genuine opportunities to achieve their goals, as well as the power to shape the community's future," according to the group's mission statement.

FAC develops and manages affordable housing, creates employment opportunities for local residents, organizes residents and workers for political action, provides adult education, and combats gentrification and displacement through a variety of strategies that combine community development, grassroots organizing and skills-building to help residents control the destiny of their own neighborhoods.

Starting with more than 200 vacant buildings and 150 vacant lots, FAC has developed 600 units of low-income housing and 15,000 square feet of commercial space. The organization has leveraged more than \$50 million dollars in public and private investment for new construction, building rehab and employment training. Low and moderate income families live in and often manage their own FAC buildings, and more than 600 people have obtained living-wage jobs through FAC's local business and job training efforts. FAC's influence has been steadily growing, say those involved with the organization, as pilot projects become national models, and as they extend their reach through collaborations and organizing in new neighborhoods.

Those who have followed FAC's activities say what is particularly remarkable about the success of the organization is that the work it carries out is done in a potentially fractious ethnic environment. South Brooklyn is roughly 50% Latino, 25% white, and 20% African American, with a growing Asian and Arab presence. Meanwhile, the neighborhood is experiencing widening economic disparity--more than 30% of local households have incomes below the poverty level, many residents receive public assistance; schools are overcrowded, and dropout rates are high. At the same time, South Brooklyn has clear and growing strengths. Amenities such as gracious brownstone buildings, park access, thriving small businesses, and healthy, active religious and civic institutions, have made South Brooklyn a highly desirable area in which to live and work.

The challenge for FAC has always been to work within such an economically and culturally diverse community to ensure that traditionally disenfranchised residents benefit from local development, and that residents are not priced out of their own neighborhoods.

### **Diversity Equals Strength and Results**

Fundamentally, FAC has taken that diversity and turned it into a strength. It is "an organization that has taken the awareness that there's a value to having an inclusive neighborhood in all senses of the word, racially, socio-economically, and then making sure that the issues for disenfranchised folks are paid attention to more than on an intellectual level, but on a real resource level," says Michelle de la Uz, FAC's Executive Director. The approach, adds Brad Lander, is based on "a sense that a wide set of people would live here and that they would share and benefit in more equal ways than generally holds."

FAC ensures that community members are part of planning and guiding local development projects. As Ibon Muhammad, FAC's Director of Special Projects, puts it, "Our approach to community development and engagement is not just telling people what to do, but bringing them along so they can understand what's required of them to really control their own environment, their own space, their own building, and their own future."

Among the housing created by FAC are transitional units for the formerly homeless, low-income tax-credit rentals, limited equity co-ops and mutual housing (developed and owned by non-profit organizations and managed by residents), as well as homes for moderate and middle-income families. Frequently, FAC's housing development leads to a broadening spiral of community-controlled change, say FAC activists. For example, in the Red Hook neighborhood, FAC held planning sessions for public housing tenants and other local residents, showing land use trends and development options, including the possibility of significantly increasing home ownership. The residents decided to work with FAC to build 61 units of affordable, mixed-income cooperative housing. Based on the community's design, FAC found a local bank willing to be the lead investor, and began to negotiate an agreement with a construction union to hire workers from the community. Local control was reinforced by the creation of

the FAC Red Hook Advisory Council, comprised of housing activists and representatives of local grassroots groups, who helped FAC direct what became a \$13 million housing project. In the wake of the Red Hook council's successful housing development effort, they have embarked on other projects ranging from waterfront development and industrial retention, to job creation and equitable economic development. Ibon Muhammad reflects, "I guess we could easily feel really good as an organization if we got this project, hired a lot of people from Red Hook, gave a couple of contractors subcontracting opportunities and bought some supplies from local vendors. But the difference here is that our measure of success is not what we gave, but that we leave an empowered class. When we leave, people will know what happened and will be able to do it again on their own."

### **Building an Economic Base**

Programs such as those in Red Hook, where local residents are recruited and involved in the work, is one way that FAC has attacked the most fundamental problem facing struggling neighborhoods: poverty and limited job prospects, which stubbornly persist despite the area's redevelopment and growing affluence. "We had all this money coming through doing development projects--\$2 million, \$5 million--and we said, 'Well, wait a minute. We have to make better use of this economic development opportunity,'" recalls Muhammad. So FAC both fights exploitative development, and negotiates with developers for project labor agreements that support local and minority hiring, along with contracting opportunities for local businesses.

One of the ways that FAC expands on the concept of economic justice is through its workforce development affiliate, Brooklyn Workforce Innovations (BWI), along with its social purpose business, First Source Staffing. BWI and FAC's other workforce development and staffing efforts target niches of labor demand that local residents can fill, which not only allows unskilled workers with limited education to get key training, education and job experience, but also helps them overcome potential barriers involving both race and criminal records.

Unemployed individuals are eased into permanent work through training programs that for example, help people obtain their commercial driver's licenses or become certified telecommunications cable installers. FAC also mobilized unemployed and low-wage women to help win a major job-creation bill in the New York City Council aimed at women on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The women went on to create a new group, Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), which evolved into an independent organization that mobilizes citywide and national campaigns for jobs, education and training for public assistance recipients. On a larger scale, FAC also co-founded The Alliance for a Working Economy, a statewide coalition that promotes progressive economics, such as investing public money in creating living-wage jobs and training, rather than corporate subsidies.

### **New Leaders: A Grow-Your-Own Approach**

In order to multiply the impact of its community development work, FAC makes it a point to groom new leaders with each new project. "Once you set that table, people step up and want to learn more and become leaders," says Lander. "And before you know it, you have lots of people who feel it's a genuine space for their leadership and influence."

Over 5,000 participants are served by FAC each year. From housing programs, to job training and employment, to adult literacy and political action, many of those who are impacted by FAC's work are then encouraged to assume leadership roles in their buildings, projects and neighborhoods. FAC's approach cultivates commitment and self-determination; reciprocity is part of the design. For example,

a training curriculum created for people returning from prison was intended to "educate, but also build leadership skills so that they would be able to take something and give something back," says FAC board co-chair, Linda Techell. Another training program, Residency Occupancy Ownership Training (ROOTS) equips tenants to handle building management and group leadership.

FAC frequently engages volunteers in challenging work, simultaneously deepening their commitment and drawing upon their expertise to enrich the organization's programs, say FAC leaders. Techell and de la Uz both started out with FAC as volunteers. Techell's social work background helped to shape FAC's work with ex-offenders. De la Uz, a former congressional staff member, helped develop political strategies. Volunteers who in other settings might have been written off—those returning from prison and their families or those who had been experiencing long-term welfare dependency—now handle tasks such as helping set policy and design programs.

Another common path to leadership is that taken by low-income tenants who end up planning, designing, owning, and managing their own buildings. "Our vision is of a diverse community where everyone has the power to shape their community's future," says Lander. "A good way of getting involved is to shape what your building and your block are going to be. If you can then own the building, that's an easier way of making sure something good happens." Tenants progress from organizing for better conditions, to increased control of their buildings, often to tenant managed or resident ownership. FAC prepares and trains residents and supports them as they take on more and more responsibility. "Once they've learned that they have the power and that influence to make change, it's very rewarding," says Ibon Muhammad. Especially, she says when they are individuals who have never before felt they had any control over their own future.

To magnify the influence of local leaders even further, FAC has employed a variety of strategies. For example, tenant leaders in individual buildings are linked through Mutual Housing Associations as a way to encourage pursuing collective ownership strategies. Leaders from FAC's tenant associations, cooperatives, and Mutual Housing Associations, participate in FAC's Resident Council, which guides FAC's housing development, management, and policy-making.

"What you need is to collect and mobilize aggressive, strategic, result-oriented organizing that really builds leadership," explains Benjamin Dulchin, former Director of Organizing. In 2001, for example, FAC created a new group to pull together their diverse organizing and leadership efforts. More than 500 community leaders drawn from past projects are now "FAC Activists" who sign on to the larger mission of the organization, says de la Uz, and participate in committees, campaigns, community events, or other volunteer work. Meanwhile, those specific committees elect representatives to FAC's board, which helps ensure that "community residents with a stake and a point of view in something, are at the table, making the decisions and helping move the work forward," says Lander.

### **From Community Activism to Political Action**

As it builds leadership at the community level, FAC has also been able to create and help mobilize a powerful political action network. FAC has created an environment "where people's personal experiences can be translated into real policy objectives and then into electoral politics," says de la Uz. Everyone associated with FAC - staff, board and community members - is encouraged to contribute ideas to shape FAC's political analysis and strategies. And FAC taps into its natural constituency to build a network of activists. "A meaningful number of people who are involved in the organizing campaigns are people who have gotten some concrete benefit from Fifth Avenue Committee," says Lander.

FAC then helps train those community leaders to shape and present their position to policy makers, training that they get to apply during such events as the annual South Brooklyn People's Agenda, when neighborhood residents have the opportunity to communicate their ideas and concerns to local elected officials. "Elected officials see the power in numbers and that people are engaged and informed around particular issues," says de la Uz. "What makes it so powerful is that the community folks, the activists, can really speak directly from their own experience about the issues, and have an informed voice, to ask the elected officials to take a stand and a leadership role in resolving key issues."

The political action that FAC supporters engage in is not restricted to local politics. When U.S. Senator Charles Schumer visited Brooklyn in 2000, FAC made sure that local residents had an opportunity to sit down with him. "He wound up listening to a lot of people," says Lander. "And in most cases, people that have been involved in thinking pretty strategically about the issues. They weren't just saying, 'Here's my story.' They were saying, 'Here's my story and I'm working with these other people and we would like this because here's the larger problem.'"

FAC's political organizing around housing, employment, and public welfare, lends political muscle to community demands. They frame issues according to neighborhood concerns, and focus on "what's a winnable concrete change, who can deliver it, and how do we build enough power to make them do it," says Lander. Adds de la Uz, "And elected officials aren't given license to say, 'I'll think about it.' They are asked, point blank, 'Do you support this or not and what are you going to do about it? What leadership position are you going to take on this? Are you going to do something beyond just voting in a certain way?'"

But FAC is certainly capable of street-level action when that is what is called for, in many cases tapping into the power of a constituency that may have come to FAC for help, turning them into political activists and leaders. "It's interesting to see a community development organization that can construct a six-story new project over here, and over there set up a demonstration and have people on the street picketing with signs," says Ibon Muhammad. "And that's what happens here."

For example, in dealing with the issue of affordable housing, FAC has had to wrestle with the fact that most of the housing stock in its neighborhoods is not covered by New York rent regulation and control, which exempts buildings of six units or fewer. FAC's response has been to establish a Displacement Free Zone (DFZ), where low-income tenants are vigorously defended and where landlords that jack up rents unreasonably are encouraged to change their ways. "We developed a systematic campaign where we marked out a 100 square block center of the neighborhood and put up posters all around saying, 'This is a displacement free zone. Different set of rules here. If you're a landlord in this neighborhood and you're kicking out tenants because you want to triple the rent, we're going to target you,'" says Dulchin. "We're going to get so much publicity that we hope that we not only win in some cases, but that we proactively keep away those landlords who would evict people and then raise rents, before those landlords even come to the neighborhood."

The DFZ involves hundreds of community members who pursue letter-writing campaigns, boycotts and legal strategies to protest unjust evictions. The DFZ approach also involves "creative confrontation," such as impromptu block parties in front of a landlord's home, with clowns, cotton candy, and boisterous picketers. FAC's designs often influence the campaigns of other groups, and the DFZ concept has been replicated both locally and nationally in other communities facing gentrification and displacement.

The combination of working with political leaders while pursuing more visible street action has proved to be powerful, note FAC activists. For example, FAC helped produce state legislation in 2003 and 2004

supported by both major political parties in the New York legislature for a Community Stability Small-Homeowners Tax Credit, which offers a property tax abatement for owners of small (one to five units) unregulated buildings that rent apartments to low-income tenants below market rate. Currently, FAC is mobilizing to preserve low-incoming housing in citywide zoning regulations.

### **Justice Branches Out**

Like many community development corporations, FAC realized years ago that building community is a complex, multi-tiered proposition. And one of FAC's great strengths, say those who have followed the organization's work, is that FAC tackles local needs at their root – even if they are rooted in national and global conditions. A prime example of a new program area inspired by challenging needs is FAC's work with individuals who were formerly incarcerated and their loved ones.

Their Developing Justice program is an alternative approach to criminal justice that addresses what many view as a criminal justice system that is disproportionately harsh when it comes to the poor and minorities. In recent decades, there has been an explosion in the number of people incarcerated or on parole - nearly 7 million today - requiring the investment of billions of dollars in prisons and services, all fueled by a get-tough attitude toward crime, including mandatory minimum sentencing laws.

In New York State the number of correctional facilities expanded from 19 to 70 in the past 25 years, and the prison population grew fivefold to over 71,000 in 2002. Yet well over half - 62.5% of all New York State's prisoners - have been convicted of non-violent offenses, usually drug related. Ninety-four percent of drug offenders are African-Americans and Latinos. Eighty percent of New York State prisoners, meanwhile, come from the New York City metropolitan area, mostly from poor, troubled neighborhoods like those in South Brooklyn. FAC sees this disproportionate impact on poor and minority individuals as part of long-standing socio-economic inequity.

Meanwhile, more than 650,000 prisoners nationwide and 20,000 in New York State are released and return home each year. Most of those returning from prison face a host of difficulties, such as a lack of education and other skill deficits, mental health problems, addiction issues, health issues—including HIV and hepatitis infection—stigmatization, and discrimination. Although returning prisoners require multiple supports to make the transition to productive lives on the outside, resources to boost education or rehabilitation are limited, which FAC activists say helps explain why the national recidivism rate is between 32 to 60 percent (50 percent in New York).

FAC's Developing Justice program is aimed directly at helping individuals returning from prison successfully rejoin their communities as contributing members. It is a position based not only on the solid belief that helping individuals returning from prison to reintegrate is of clear community interest—no one in the community is served well when those returning from prison re-offend—but it is also based on the belief that strengthening individuals and communities is a critical piece of criminal justice work. Moreover, community development corporations are well positioned to support returning prisoners.

Inspired by Darryl King, FAC reached out to other individuals returning from prison, including Brian Colon, who arrived at FAC at age 21, just out of prison and eager to make a fresh start. He began as a volunteer and was soon hired by FAC's Ecomat dry cleaning business. This allowed Colon to move from his troubled home into a FAC-managed building. Once Colon was on his feet, he joined King to mobilize FAC around helping those like him who were simply being dumped back onto the streets with little or no support. In talking to Colon, says Lander, the young man made it clear that he felt that there wasn't enough being done in the community to help people like him and their families—both before and after involvement with the criminal justice system. "There's a thing going on here," Lander says Colon

told him, "and we all know it, that people are coming here who have served time, people's family members are here while their folks are serving time. We say we're about housing and jobs and justice in the neighborhood. We have to approach this issue differently."

Working together, and using their personal stories, Colon, King, and other FAC leaders were able to persuade the Annie E. Casey Foundation to fund the criminal justice initiative. Colon now works for a city-wide organization dedicated to alternatives to incarceration, has served on FAC's Board, hosts a website, and runs a motivational speakers bureau for individuals who have spent time in prison.

Staffed by people with histories of incarceration, Developing Justice in South Brooklyn helps individuals recently released from prison plan to stay out of prison by allowing them access to needed resources, and by providing a forum through which they can support each other and also advance criminal justice reform more broadly. In fact, as a direct result of the Developing Justice program, criminal justice agencies now work more closely with community groups, and many community development programs address criminal justice. Judges in Brooklyn are now exercising the option of sentencing non-violent offenders to community service—through FAC—and the FAC model of reintegrating returning prisoners is being replicated nationally.

In addition to providing concrete supports, the program includes an 18-session course on leadership development and organizing, and encourages ex-offenders to advocate for criminal justice reform, such as joining the Drop the Rock campaign, aimed at repealing of the state's infamous and harsh "Rockefeller" drug laws, first pushed and passed by former Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller.

### **Putting Communities in Control**

Although FAC focuses on a target area in South Brooklyn, their initiatives have more extensive impact. Growth and influence are current strategic goals, which FAC is pursuing through mergers and strategic partnerships, extending and replicating their models, and spinning off new organizations. FAC's legislative and policy initiatives are leaving a powerful legacy of changes in zoning, tax, and mandated programs that secure affordable housing, produce education and job benefits, and promote criminal justice reforms, say those who follow FAC's work.

But FAC's most lasting legacy is clearly its drive to include everyone who is part of a community, especially traditionally disenfranchised people, in actively deciding that community's future. By cultivating authentic grassroots leadership, by employing inclusive strategies that leverage resources and create the infrastructure to sustain lasting reforms, and by ensuring that potentially marginalized residents benefit from local development, FAC has fundamentally changed the terms of the struggle.

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