

## A potted (early) history of Asset-Based Community Development

If we take it for granted that Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) as a perspective is timeless, because it simply describes what communities do when they come together to effectively make things better where they live, and what they use to do so, despite the challenges they face.



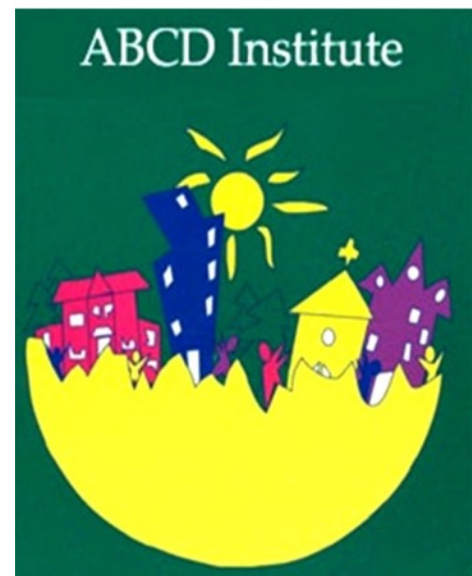
John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann

We still owe a significant debt of gratitude to John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann (Co-Directors of the ABCD Institute) for the clarity they have brought to the articulation of this perspective and the practices that flow from it.

They, along with their colleagues and ABCD enthusiasts throughout the world, have curated and analysed the stories of community relatedness that illuminate the irreplaceable and invaluable functions of communities.

Our ABCD Festival (June 2015) was an opportunity to celebrate their work and that of the faculty of the Institute, but also and indeed more importantly to celebrate and learn from the hundreds and thousands of local residents who on a daily basis grow their communities from inside out, having never heard the term ABCD.

Some grow their communities through time banking, others through principles and practices from within the slow food movement, yet others through community arts-the variations are endless-yet all have been at the vanguard of a citizen led movement for change; having thrown their lives into becoming the counter balance to a non-sustaining and unsustainable consumer culture.



In telling the ABCD story specifically, the chronology of events brings us to start with John L. McKnight, who is one of the world's most gifted storytellers, but he is also a public intellectual and provocateur. "He was raised a traveling Ohioan, having lived in seven neighbourhoods and small towns in the eighteen years before he left to attend Northwestern University, in Evanston, Illinois"

At university John honed his considerable natural talent in the art of public speaking and deepened his interest in Public Speaking and General Semantics, in so doing he came to understand that "words don't mean, people do". It also became clear to him that people make meaning in free association with each other, and that neighbourhoods provided an opportune place for such connectedness; since it is there that people can collectively define their challenges and agree and enact the solutions that fit their local context. And it is through this freedom of expression, and association, that democracy is co-created and sustained.

After his graduation he joined the U.S. Navy, where he spent three years in active service during the Korean War. On returning to Chicago in the mid 1950's, he worked with the Chicago Commission for Human Relations, the first municipal civil rights agency. This is where he learned the craft of Saul Alinsky-style community organising.

From 1960-63 John was Executive Director, of the Illinois Division of the American Civil Liberties Union – where he organised local chapters-John was then recruited by the Federal Government, where he worked under the Kennedy administration in a new agency which started the 'Affirmative Action Program'.

Later, he was appointed the Midwest Director of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, where he again worked on local civil rights issues within local neighbourhood organisations.

1969 saw John return once again to Northwestern University, this time to help establish a newly minted department, the Center for Urban Affairs. The previous year had been fraught with heartbreak and civil strife. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April, and Bobby Kennedy was shot in June of 1968. Civil protest had become the new norm. The Kerner Report was published that same year and the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders noted, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal."

It was from this tragic and disquieting backdrop that in 1968 Northwestern University opened the Center for Urban Affairs – now the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) – where a multi-disciplinary team of researchers, (including John McKnight, Ray Mack, Stan Hallett, Jody Kretzmann, Andrew Gordon, Fred Du Bow, Paul Arntson, Tom Dewar, Malcolm Bush, Art Lyons, Denis Detzel, Alice Murray), committed themselves to seeking a better understanding of the "real-world causes and consequences" of urban poverty.



IPR grew out of a faculty working group on metropolitan studies, led by Raymond Mack, a sociologist best known for his ground-breaking work on race. He became the new centre's first Director.

The centre got off to an auspicious start thanks to a sizeable Ford Foundation grant, which allowed it to expand its interdisciplinary faculty from three to twelve researchers and to undertake a number of ground breaking pieces of research.

This included one particular endeavour by Professor John McKnight, Professor Jody Kretzmann and eighteen of their associates, which was to become a corner stone for Asset-Based Community Development.



Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight

In the late 1980s, this endeavour saw John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann travel across North America, visiting over 300 neighbourhoods in 20 cities. Along with a core group of associates they set out to identify the basic building blocks of healthy urban neighbourhoods.

This four-year odyssey brought them into personal contact with thousands of local people who had hitherto largely been labeled and defined by their issues – unemployment, teenage pregnancies, poor housing.

When John and Jody entered these communities they had the presence of mind to shift the focus from



deficiencies and problems and to ask a different set of questions than was typical of academic ‘types’. They wanted to understand, despite multiple socio-economic and political challenges, how citizenship and community prevailed in low-income neighbourhoods.

It was no surprise to them when their research findings confirmed that low-income communities facing hardship can, and often do, become stronger and prosper.

Using only open and participatory processes they gathered 3,000 stories in response to questions such as, “can you tell us a story about a time when you and your neighbours came together to make things better around here?” The stories they gathered had in common some mix of the six key community building blocks. While not every story was possessed of all six, across the 3,000 stories gathered these are the ones that were most recurrent:

1. The skills of local residents
2. The power of local associations
3. The resources of public, private and non-profit institutions
4. The physical resources and ecology of local places
5. The economic resources of local places
6. The stories and heritage of local places

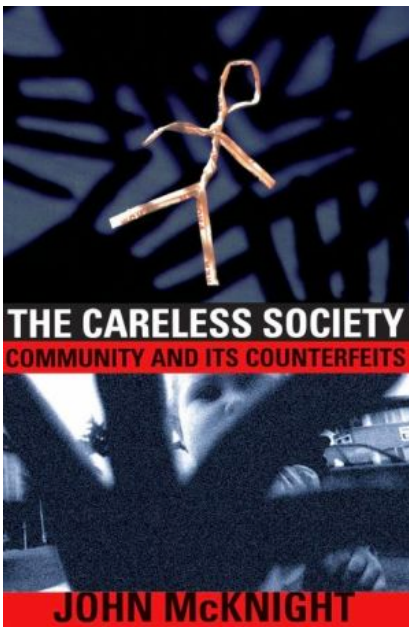
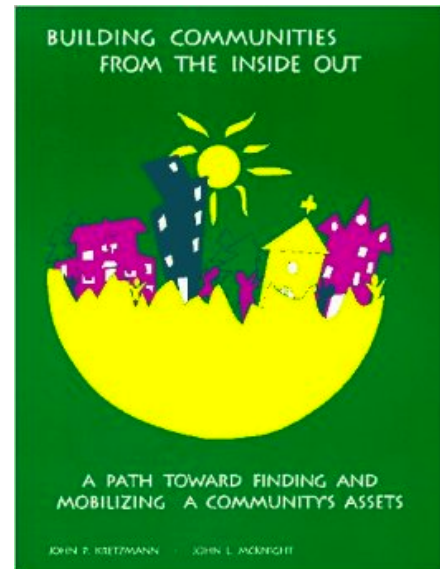
These building blocks, which John and Jody and their associates eventually categorised as “community assets”, reflected the local residents ‘down-to-earth, real-world’ accounts of their experiences in: nurturing their health and wellbeing, protecting the environment and the local economy, raising happy children, ageing actively and comfortably at home, responding to natural or man-made disasters, as well as being good stewards of local ecology and of deepening democracy, achieving social justice and nurturing local wisdom.

An understanding of the existence and value of these ‘community assets’ has since served to directly challenge traditional approaches to urban and rural development initiatives that have

maintained a focus, by the helping professions, funding agencies and policy makers on the needs and deficiencies of individuals, neighbourhoods, towns, cities and countries.

In their seminal work, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (1993), John and Jody described in detail this four-year participatory research project and also set down the principles and practices of the asset-based approaches which were informed by their findings.

In essence the book tells us what low-income communities who are becoming stronger do naturally. They use what they have within and around them, get it connected productively and inclusively, and from there secure what they need from outside to ensure their shared future. Encouraged by record sales of the book, John and Jody established the Asset-Based Community Development Institute in 1995.



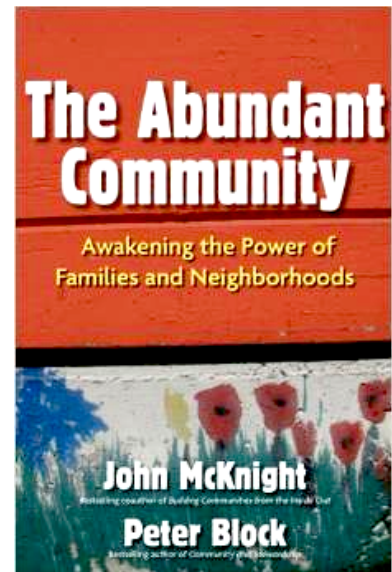
That year John McKnight published *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterparts*, a series of essays written during his 40 years of tireless work in the urban neighbourhoods of Canada and the United States.

The book offers a scathing commentary on “how competent communities have been invaded, captured, and colonised by professionalized services,” and spells out the devastating results of this colonisation. He also presents an unrivalled exposition on the capacity of communities to resolve many of the escalating social problems that they face.

Over the proceeding fifteen years (1995 – 2010) a range of hands-on workbooks and other publications on applying an asset-based approach around the world has been produced by the staff and faculty members of the ABCD Institute.

In 2010, John McKnight and Peter Block collaborated on a book entitled *Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods*.

In it they argue that, as well as needing a village to raise a child, a village is also the key to a satisfying and fulfilled life for everyone else across the life course. The book reminds us that we need our connections with neighbours and community to stay healthy and productive, to protect the land and to take care of ourselves, our young, our old and those on the margins. This book adds a deeper reflection on the role of families and personal efficacy than was contained in previous publications.



As we approach the Institute's 20th anniversary in 2015, the archives are replete with practical tools and probing analyses of modern society. Taken in the round they offer both a proscription and prescription of modern society.

The proscription: don't seek your good life in the market place, it will make you sick.

The prescription: in each of our neighbourhoods reside those, whose gifts and talents can produce almost all that we need to live well and to prosper, if they can discover, connect and mobilise them into productive and inclusive action.

Today the ABCD Institute and the principles and processes that it espouses occupy a central position in a large and growing international social movement, which affirms local 'community assets' as the primary building blocks of sustainable community empowerment and development.

There are also ABCD networks in Oceania, Africa and Asia, and of course across North America supported by the ABCD in Action Network.

Coady Institute for International Development, and Bank of Ideas, based in Australia (and operating worldwide) have also been leaders across the Global South and beyond in promoting an asset-based approach to community driven development.

With this rich history and the strength of global collaborations rooted in living neighbourhoods across the planet, we invite you to join us in celebrating the last few decades of our efforts, and in hatching the dreams and actions that will become visible in the decades to come. ABCD Festival took place on 15th-19th June 2015 at Ribby Hall, Preston, UK.

[Click here to access all presentations, pictures, etc. of the ABCD Festival 2015.](#)

Cormac Russell