COMMUNITY RADIO SHOW

"Lessons Learned from International Community Strengthening Efforts"

Community Radio Show Text

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Guest: John Kretzmann (Jody)

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TODD: Welcome to the February Community Radio Show, "Lessons Learned from International Community Strengthening Efforts." My name is Todd Wellman and I am with The Leadership Practice, the Community Strengthening Training & Technical Assistance provider of the Corporation for National & Community Service. Today's call is sponsored by Strong Communities, the premier community strengthening institute held on March 22nd & 23rd in Milwaukee, WI where you learn to increase buy-in from stakeholders, create more sustainable programs, and expand the capacity of your organization. For more information, visit [Institute has passed]. Our guest today, Jody Kretzmann, will be a featured speaker at that institute.

TODD: We have approximately 45 minutes scheduled together today split into two main parts: an interview dialogue and an open question time. A housekeeping note: please do not put your phone on hold at any time during the show. The use of the hold button will effectively stop this show, most often due to hold music and other related functions. To eliminate background noise, use your 'mute' or 'mic' button so that you can continue to hear today's speaker. If these are not working, you can also press *6 to mute your phone. You press *6 again to un-mute your phone. If there is an emergency, feel free to hang up and then call back in.

For the first half, Jody Kretzmann, co-founder of the ABCD Institute at Northwestern University will shares lessons garnered from his International work.

He will share how young people, local associations, and physical surroundings are great assets to your organization and community. We will discover how people from around the world are utilizing these three assets to make communities thrive, to establish a sense of community ownership with local residents, and to build respect for the natural environment.
John Kretzmann, who goes by 'Jody.' is a much-traveled researcher, speaker, trainer and author of the popular book, Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets (1993, with John L. McKnight) and several other publications. Jody received his PhD in Sociology and Urban Affairs from Northwestern University. He has been a community organizer in Chicago's West Side, has consulted with a wide range of neighborhood organizing and development groups, and has worked to develop community-oriented public policy at the national, state, and local level, especially in Chicago. He serves on a wide range of civic, community, and foundation boards.

Please welcome Jody to the show.

TODD: So, let's just jump into it Jody. Tell us a little bit about the ABCD Institute.

JODY: Well, the ABCD Institute—the Asset Based Community Development Institute—is at Northwestern

University and we are a small group, at least at the center, and we are organized to work with communities, mostly struggling communities, across the United States and Canada, and now onto five other continents as well. The Institute grew out of decades of work that my colleague McKnight and I have done in Chicago neighborhoods and other neighborhoods. We are both community organizers and I have a great deal of respect for all of the kinds of inventions and creativity that communities have evidenced over the decades. ABCD isn't really new; it builds on a lot of the work communities have done. It's an attempt to report back to friends and colleagues in community building work what the lessons are of successful community building, particularly at the local level in tough circumstances. Obviously the core idea that keeps coming up, we keep relearning in different sorts of contexts all over the place, is it…it's not as helpful to focus solely on a community's needs and problems and deficiencies. As it is, to take a look at the fuller part of the glass, recognizing that every community, no matter how economically challenged, is filled with resources and assets and people and its local voluntary groups and its young people and its local institutions and that the powerful way forward, the powerful way forward in a community is to take advantage of all of those resources and to connect them and to mobilize them. That's the core set of ideas, and we've just been learning an immense amount about how those simple core ideas get used in a wide variety of contexts including now on six different continents.

TODD: So, what are your ultimate goals with all this work? It's sounds really great, but can you focus this in a little?

JODY: Well, the core goal we have is to multiply and enhance the number of vital and lively and successful urban neighborhoods and the number of vital places in rural areas as well; to do that with as many colleagues and partners across North America and beyond as we possibly can. People thrive when their communities thrive, families thrive when their communities thrive, [and] young people thrive in vital communities. So, we think some of the core work of building a better society has to take place at the local level and has to involve everyone in the effort.

TODD: Okay, so in other words, these rural areas, these urban areas, wherever you are, will become more sustainable over time when you do this more asset-based work. Can I say something like that?

JODY: I think that's absolutely accurate. It's what we've seen over and over again. You know, neighborhoods are clearly, and rural areas as well are clearly, not islands unto themselves. They exist in larger contexts. But they interact with those larger contexts, when we're talking about states or regions or national governments, they interact with those more powerfully when they've recognized their own capacities and begin to act on them.

TODD: Okay, so, I'm trying to think. You talked a lot about the local work and sometimes people don't realize that, as you said, there's this global expanse as well, that you're doing this work on other continents. That's the focus for today's call, so can…talk about some of your international partners in that work?

JODY: Yeah. We almost never enter a community or a country for that matter without an invitation from a potential set of partners that are local and respected in a variety of ways. Partnerships and collaborations are how we do our work. I think that, I want to mention, one of our major international partners, probably the major partner, particularly for our work that we are doing in the global south: Africa, Latin America, India, Philippines, and South East Asia. Our major partner there is a wonderful group called the Coady Institute, Coady International Institute—that's C-O-A-D-Y—named after a wonderfully inventive community building Jesuit priest named Moses Coady. The Coady Institute is located at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia of all places, and it is the largest training institute in North America for community development people from the global south. So every year they get hundreds of people from NGOs and communities from across the south coming to Nova Scotia, some for a long

period, five to six months, others for a shorter certificate course of three to four weeks. All of their curricula, all of their hands-on training and teaching, [is] done from an asset based point of view. They have a marvelously wide spread network of NGOs throughout the world, in the global south in any case. They have just been wonderful companions as we sort of explored how this work develops in contexts that are very, very different often from North American contexts.

TODD: Do you find with this group in the global south or in the whole world—either way this question goes for—are there any patterns or important contexts that you're seeing in this international work?

JODY: If I were to step back and think about it for a minute, I think there are three different kinds of patterns depending where we are doing the work outside of the United States. There are three different realities across the globe these days, and community building takes different shapes in each one. We do a lot of work in advanced industrial countries. We've done an immense amount of work actually in Australia. There's now an ABCD network in Australia. There's a network in northern Europe, Sweden, Denmark, Holland; we've done a lot of work in the UK, Ireland—and I think in those countries a lot of the issues are similar to the kinds of issues that you would get in the United States. People there are interested in ways to involve people who often are marginalized, who are pushed to the corners of the community and are regarded as problems, as people with all kinds of needs, people who need to be fixed in a variety of ways—and these are mostly communities that are interested in shifting the identity of those folks from patients or victims to contributors or citizens, people who have something obviously to give in the community. So, we often find ourselves working with communities on ways to get young people involved. We find ourselves working in the European contexts of ways to engage the growing Muslim communities. How can people be regarded; how can a new population of people be regarded not as a problem to address but as a huge set of assets to engage in the community. So, those are the kinds of things we are interested in, tend to be involved in, when we are involved in industrial nations.

It's a little bit different in the second area when we are invited to work in the context of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In those contexts—and I, myself have done less work in those contexts, but we have colleagues who have done quite a lot—often the challenge is, after many years of a very, very strong state Communist government where the reality was a strong state interacting with the individual, what has happened to civil society? What has happened to voluntary associations? What has happened to religious life? What has happened to all the groups that we take advantage of and think of as part of our fabric here in the United States? Many of those have been squelched in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In a sense the challenge there is what's left of civil society groups and how do you find them and how do you make them stronger once again—because, I guess, through all of this our assumption is that a good society is, to use a simple analogy, is like a three-legged stool. It needs three strong parts to function well. It needs a strong public sector or a government, it needs a strong private sector—a creative and open economy, and third, it needs a strong civil society, neither government nor private sector—places where citizens do things, a place where the civic agenda is hammered out and worked on by people. And that's a task in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that's on the top of their agendas, and we have a long way to go.

The third context beyond the advanced industrial nations and the former socialist and communist is the developing south. That's the place where we do most of our work and a lot of it is with our friends at the Coady Institute. There the challenge is often how does someone interact with really quite desperately poor and pre-industrialized communities, both urban and rural and work with them to discover their capacities and strengths and build on them. We are frequently involved in and work with indigenous communities. The agenda there is often: how do you rediscover the power and the history and the culture, the native skills the people have? How do you build on that to connect those communities in ways that make sense to the twenty first century world around them?

TODD: With that third group, sometimes a concern that people have is that you're just trying to make them like everyone else. How do you respond to that?

JODY: I think it's a constant tension, Todd. I think we try to do the work with as much lightness of hand as possible. We try to work with people who have a good deal of respect for people's culture and history and background and who have a good deal of interest in preserving as much of that as possible—and in that process, I think, local communities and cultures often find very creative ways to interact with the larger world. I think particularly I'm thinking about a wonderful visit I did to a set of tribes in a valley in South Africa, a set of Zulu-related tribes in South Africa, where some young people had been away at college and discovered this thing called the internet and were back talking to the elders in the villages about ways in which these villages could market some of the things they had made, crafts and arts and so forth that they had made for centuries, to a much broader kind of public and secure some economic sustainability along the way. So the challenges I think are always there, but they can be at least addressed as people are interested in strengthening what they've already got.

TODD: Well, when we're going into—and I hate to use the phrase "going into;" I guess it's better probably to say "working with" someone who's there already—

JODY: Yep

TODD: —who's into this work, I've you talk in the past about the related strategies, that ABCD is not a specific strategy, and it's not the [only] way to do things, that there's a whole set of related things that are part of this. Can you talk about those strategies?

JODY: Yeah, we've learned as—particularly as we've worked with Coady, and Coady is trying to codify some of this—that there are a lot of generally strength based approaches being worked with in the developing world. A few include our sister discipline of Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry of course is the wonderful art of having a conversation in a community—or it started actually in the corporate world—but starting with a question like "When were you proudest in this community?" or "When was this community, in your eyes, at its best?" or "When were you valued most by this community?" and then building on those conversations to try to understand how those good things happened and then how more of that can happen in the future. It's a way to get people into very hopeful conversations about the future that are not just pie in the sky but in fact have their roots in reality because people have already experienced these things and all we have to do is experience more of them. So Appreciative Inquiry, we're finding, is being used in lots of different contexts in the developing world and is a very, very powerful kind of tool.

We also find a lot of the work in the developing world is organized around the idea of resiliency, the conversation there is: this community has been through a lot; we've had flooding, we've had disasters, we've had economic problems, we're in the middle of a drought, and we've had all these things in the past and we've bounced back. How have we bounced back? What made us resilient in the past? And understanding what made us resilient in the past, how do we build on that to move into the future?

A third set of approaches sometimes goes under that label "The Sustainable Livelihood Approach." For a while that had a sort of base at the United Nations development program when we were working with [*word lost*] quite a bit and it's a combination of approaches that really does center on how can we think about economy and people's livelihoods in sustainable ways? And what sort of policy implications does that have for national and regional work?

Finally, there are a lot of really interesting pieces of work going on under the rubric of Participatory Rural Appraisal—and it's exactly what it sounds like. It's a kind of a planning process that engages as broad and wide of a conversation as possible within a village or a region and tries to keep people with there eyes on the future and their analysis from the current situation. What we're finding the ABCD stuff, the asset based community development work, sits very nicely with these other kinds of approaches: the Appreciate Inquiry, the Sustainable Livelihood, the Resiliency, Participatory Rural Appraisal—and one of things we're learning a lot about is how these various approaches can complement each other. Where are the synergies? What are the combinations that work best? One of the next steps that I'm really excited about is Coady is convening about 10 or 12 of their most asset-based NGOs from around the world in Thailand in June and we're going to spend 10 days learning from their experience. Which of these approaches do they find to be the most useful and why? What kinds of contexts and…? So, I think we're ready to pull together people's wisdom and experience from the last few years.

TODD: Excellent. Before we go to Q and A, can you talk about some guiding principles that we could almost think of as a tool of sorts that people could take away from the call saying that if they did these three things, that they might be able to do this work, you know, apply it in their own communities in a way? Maybe on around villages, one around, kind of, unpaid volunteers, and one around the natural environment?

JODY: Well, I mean, you ticked them off, Todd. I think the lessons are many and various, but they are at least these three. That's villages and local communities thrive when they take their young people seriously. When young people are thought about not as problems to be addressed or incomplete people who are in the becoming stage heading toward adulthood, but when they are taken seriously they are absolutely critical contributors to local community building today. Young people bring enormous energy and creativity to this work, and it proceeds much more powerfully when it is intergenerational, when young people and older adults work together to do the community building work.

Secondly it is often the case internationally as it is in the United States that when you get together with a local community you're often at first blush coming together with only people who are paid to be the local community, the governmental officials, or NGO officials, maybe local business, but we're not getting often all of the other folks in the community who also have a very clear and deep interest in the future of their community, but that they're just not asked. So, I think we're constantly trying to encourage colleagues to look at all of the local networks and all of the local relationships, sometimes organized around kin or extended kin relationships, and to involve those unpaid local networks in the community building sessions and plans and implementation processes as well. We're just constantly finding that this work goes much more successfully when it's, when it's deeper and broader and when the processes that are put into place are constantly inviting more people to become part of them.

And then finally you mentioned the natural assets. It's absolutely clear, particularly in rural areas in the developing world. So much of what can be done and is possible is determined by the natural environment and reactions of the, the built environment. What do we…how do we interact with the land and the water? How do we think about sustainability in terms of the crops we plant and the ways we extract wealth from the land? What's the seven generations kind of picture here? Do we do things that won't wreck the land around us forever? And I think that's a struggle in the developing world and in the United States. Somebody said to be the other day in the US we take about two acres per minute out of the farming functions into the development functions. So in a sense there are some similar kinds of challenges in the developing world as well. The last thing I'd say about it, though, is one of the wonderful refreshing things about working in the developing world, and I'm sure some of the people on the call have had this experience, is if you're working in a village in Guatemala with folks or, or in Brazil or Kenya, you are working with people who for the most part don't have the slightest expectation that anybody from the outside is going to solve their problems. They have not gotten much from government, they certainly

haven't got much from philanthropy, so there's more of a sense if our village is going to survive and thrive, it's going to be because we do it ourselves and if we take advantage of the resources that we already have. That's often an energizing kind of insight to encounter.

TODD: That's a perfect segue to go to audience questions, I think. Remember audience to come back in, hit *6 to ask a question for Jody. To maximize our time today, remember that when asking Jody a question, please limit yourself to questions regarding today's topic instead of sharing best practices or stories from your work.

This text serves as a reference for the Community Radio Show but it does not serve as an official transcript of the recording.