

## Working with NeighborWorks

By Abhinay Sharma

### Week 1



Kathy Dorgan and the author at NeighborWorks Office

Hoping to learn more about how architecture can contribute to the development of our community and to understand the broader meaning of sustainability, I started my internship at NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley in Woonsocket, Rhode Island as the inaugural William A. Doebele fellow.

On the first day I had the opportunity to meet Duncan Speel, deputy director of Woonsocket Housing Authority, with my mentor [Kathy Dorgan](#) (LF 2002) and attended an intensive brainstorming session at Capitol Hill with representatives of Rhode Island Housing, HUD and CDC's from all over the state. The interesting format of what was called Café Table discussion allowed every person to throw in issues and challenges facing our communities, and after a 10 minute quick discussion presented topics of common concern to ponder further on. The wide variety of participants included ex-planners, architects, social activists, entrepreneurs and college students and provided a wide lens for us to look at building sustainable communities.

Later in the week I had the opportunity to interact with the NWBRV staff and visited many refurbished houses in the locality. It was surprising to see the quality of refurbished units which were as good as newly constructed houses with costs at times equivalent to the costs of the new houses. When I asked Paula Rezendes, project manager at NWBRV, she described affordable housing not as low cost construction but as construction that makes living affordable for the resident by lowering heating and cooling costs.

The following day I teamed up with Jane McIntyre, an AmeriCorp volunteer, to conduct a community survey about quality of living in the neighborhood and what improvements



Jane McIntyre, AmeriCorp VISTA volunteer

residents felt were required. I visited the **3Cs** afterschool program, which surprisingly also had a small radio station where students broadcast their own radio show. The amount of effort and commitment put in to develop vocational proficiencies in children was commendable; here children learned computer technology, arts and crafts and many more skills.

Recently I went for a site visit to Veteran's housing, which is going to be our major community development intervention in Woonsocket. Our challenge is to reorganize the existing units and recreation areas to develop a

more vibrant neighborhood that provides better living units and communal areas. For the next couple of days we will be focusing on drawing out information about the lifestyle of people in Veterans Housing and the use of public space through some very interesting events and innovative use of technology that I will be covering in my next reports.

## Week 2

This week I engaged in a range of activities from conducting neighborhood surveys, working with young artists at RiverzEdge and organizing community events, each providing a different learning experience. In the beginning of the week the whole office was involved in a massive survey of around 200 houses in the neighborhood. It was motivating to see all the staff members - from young volunteers to senior members - all excited to go out in the streets on a day when it was pouring really heavily.

After a brief introduction and instruction session I joined Ainsley Morisseau Cantoral and Margaux Morisseau for the survey. Because of the rain we could make it to only about 10 houses before we had to call it day and head back to the office, where a sumptuous lunch of pizzas and pastries was awaiting! It was interesting to hear the varied experiences in the neighborhood where some of respondents were very interested in survey and gave their opinion while others were not so hospitable. One surveyor, Shane Culliton, encountered a person who wouldn't even come to the door and shooed them away from the window.

After lunch Deputy Director Chris Caldarone distributed appreciation certificates to teams who were able to get the most surveys done, which I felt was a good way to acknowledge the effort.



The NeighborWorks team all set for action!



Kids at RiverzEdge working on the contour plan

Another highlight of the week was our interaction with the kids at RiverzEdge. RiverzEdge is a studio that provides opportunity to talented underserved youth to produce artwork. We involved the youth at RiverzEdge in helping us build a topographic model of the whole neighborhood. I was amazed by the quality of work the young artists produced and the variety of mediums they had used, from paint, screen printing, sketching and computer illustration to huge wood and metal sculptures. RiverzEdge clearly shows

the power of a “social enterprise” and what impact it can have forming and honing the skills of talented youth. The kids were very excited to be a part of site model building exercise and helped us build the base and color the contour plan. The plan looked like a masterpiece.



Kathy Dorgan and Jason Waisnor

The next day we had a community event to engage with the residents of our site and get their opinions about the type of development they would prefer in their neighborhood. For this we planned three events- a visual preference survey, a room layout activity and a mapping exercise. In the visual preference survey we displayed pictures of different types of houses and asked the residents to mark the ones they liked with a sticker. The second activity asked the residents to lay out the furniture on a printed plan of one-two or three bedroom apartments. This allowed us to get a sense of how the residents would like to use the space and what more would they require in a new development. The last activity asked them to point out their areas of interest on a map of neighborhood and any specific activity that they would like to add to improve what they already have. Taken together the activities provided a good view of what the community expects in its neighborhood.



Visual preference exercise boards



Layout activity station



Ainsley Morisseau and Kathy Dorgan discuss the mapping exercise with residents

These events were my first interaction with the community and were a memorable experience; discussing room layouts and design, engaging with people in fun activities gave me a better

understanding of the community that I am working with. Our next major event takes place on 10<sup>th</sup> July and we have a lot of ground to cover before that, till then I am looking forward to more engagement with the community and exploring the neighborhood.



Young people discussing recycling with our design team

**Abhinay Sharma** is a graduate student of architecture pursuing Masters in Design Studies in Energy and Environments at Harvard University Graduate School of Design. He has two years of experience of as a professional architect and is interested in exploring the common ground between sustainability and architecture, the social and economic aspects of design and how it can create an impact in a neighborhood and society. His aim is a holistic understanding of the concept of sustainability and its application beyond building materials and construction methodologies.