

first person

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Responsive Community Development



The abandoned Rau Fastener factory in Providence in 1996.

Sharon Conard-Wells has been a community activist practically from the cradle. She recalls that as a young girl she helped her mother and brother make posters supporting teacher pay during a school strike in the South Bronx. At night, she often guarded the front door while her mother, a door monitor and tenant-association floor captain, went to wake up Sharon's father for his night job. Neighborhood involvement is in her blood.

In 1980, Conard-Wells moved to Providence with her husband, working as a computer scientist and becoming active in the West Elmwood neighborhood. Although she now lives in Warwick, she is identified with West Elmwood for her many initiatives there. One project is perhaps the best known—the project that everyone said was impossible. That was the conversion of the abandoned Rau Fastener factory into mixed-income rental housing. It took years, but the journey demonstrates how responsiveness to a community can lead to miracles.

C&B: Let's start with West Elmwood Housing Corporation's history.

SCW: In the early 1970s, the neighborhood was suffering from neglect. Residents got together, formed the non-profit West Elmwood Housing, and fought for municipal services. They also tapped a federally funded program that provided down payments and closing-cost assistance for first-time homebuyers. After that program lost funding, the group disbanded, but one board member kept the corporation alive, paying fees and doing filings.

C&B: How did you get involved?

SCW: Soon after I moved here, people came around talking about issues, and I started going to meetings. I have a lot of opinions, and I found myself becoming block captain, secretary, treasurer of the West End Coalition. In 1986, business owners offered us neighborhood-improvement money, but we couldn't accept donations without a whole legal process. A priest remembered a parishioner with a corporation on paper and brought everyone to a meeting. Several members of the old group came, and we merged, becoming "West End Coalition doing business as West Elmwood Housing." Our goals were to improve city services, clean up the neighborhood, and influence the disposition of vacant buildings.

When our first director left, the board wanted someone energetic to help the new director. I became the administrative assistant in 1989. When the second director resigned in 1991, I applied.

C&B: What does community organizing mean to you?

SCW: It means "Meet 'Em Where They're At." I ask myself what individuals' needs are. How do I engage senior citizens knowing that they don't like to come out at night for meetings? How do I engage young people? What do parents need?

One Saturday I was in the office, and a local kid came to hang out. Then somebody else came, and before I knew it, I had a group of kids hanging out. A board member stopped by, and we were all sitting around talking. A kid asked about something, and the board member said, "Come back next week, and I'll help you with that."

Our Young Voices program grew from there. The kids were 7 to 16, which was a challenge. We ended up having the older kids come on Tuesday night and help plan for the younger kids. Parents were grateful. One parent asked us to help a younger child who couldn't read.



2006: The old Rau Fastener factory is now Westfield Lofts, attractive mixed-income rental units.

They began to see us as the answer to many things.

C&B: You responded to the needs parents brought you?

SCW: We don't try to solve everyone's problems ourselves. But when parents and others come to us saying, "I called the police six times, and they didn't come," we take the time to show them how to help themselves.

We serve three overlapping needs: community development, housing, and economic development. For community development, we get people engaged in block associations. We make calls about stop signs, potholes, etc. We also offer Summer Sweeps, a program for middle school

kids. They get a stipend for sweeping in front of businesses, removing graffiti, watering grass, planting trees. They must open bank accounts and deposit a certain amount every week before getting paid. At the end of the summer, they can take some out for school clothes. Rhode Island Housing helped us the first five years, and now Coastway Credit Union supports us, too.

C&B: Those activities address the community part of your mission. What about the housing and economic-development pieces?

SCW: Our loan program relates to both. We offer down-payment and closing-cost assistance and home-repair loans. We make character loans when banks won't.

Our loans can be sold on the secondary market. We service them in partnership with a CPA firm. We provide home-buyer education, one-on-one counseling, credit repair, mortgages, and foreclosure prevention. And we're announcing a program on predatory lending.

Another new program, ClearCorps, clears lead paint from homes in partnership with the city of Providence through a national lead-abatement grant. We train local people and get them certified. They assess, clean, test, and certify that buildings are lead safe. And we're working with Cranston Street merchants to start a business group. The city has offered a program called Neighborhood Markets, and Rhode Island Housing has raised funds for a façade program. So now we can say to neighborhood businesses, "Look, we have funding; tell us what to do with it."

C&B: Let's turn to the project that couldn't be done, the one your colleague in Woonsocket begged you to reconsider.

SCW: I was glad that a friend like Joe Garlick was the first person to give me the "Are you crazy?" look. A neighbor of the abandoned Rau Fastener factory had come to the board and convinced us we had to tackle the factory. So one day when Joe was here, I said, "Let me show you our next project," and we drove over. The look on Joe's face! He said, "Are you crazy? No, Sharon. Please! That project will put you under." I got accustomed to that look from people.

Rau Fastener was an operating factory up until the mid-1990s. It opened in 1892 to make jewelry and snaps. In 1996, the owner abandoned it. A neighbor kept asking me, "What are you going to do about the factory?" and I would say, "We don't do factories." She persisted: "Your job is to fix the neighborhood, and that needs fixing." She gave the board a petition from residents, and we said we'd try to

If we didn't take control of our destiny, we could become a bedroom community of Boston, and we might not be able to stay.

interest someone in the factory. I didn't really know how the game was played, but I knew there was a building, somewhere a business needing a building, and somewhere money. But no one bit.

C&B: What turned the tide?

SCW: Mills became cool. To make a long story short, we bought the factory for \$2,500 after an auction where no one made an offer. The board thought deeply about the next step. What if we develop it and fail? What if we don't do it? What if someone is hurt and we're liable?

The board knew it was a great location, two blocks from major bus routes, close to two high schools, two minutes from Route 195, five minutes from downtown, a 20-minute walk to the hospital, with three banks nearby—Sovereign, Citizens, and Bank of Rhode Island. If we didn't take control of our destiny, we could become a bedroom community of Boston, and we might not be able to stay.

The board understood the project could put us out of business. But we were careful. We brought in environmental specialists, historic site experts. We knew we didn't know it all.

C&B: Were past funders supportive?

SCW: Not at first. I got lots of "Sharon, this is no reflection on you, but no no no no no." And then one day, somebody sighed and said OK. All I needed was one. I'd been working with a group of Providence CDCs interested in doing a test project on economic development.

With my first \$8,000, I could do a market study. And because mills were popular, there was a market to study. We learned we could get good rents. The Clean Land Fund got money from the Rhode Island Foundation and helped us get an EPA Region I environmental assessment grant. The most contaminated part fortunately did not meet historic standards, so we could tear it down. Without that, the project wouldn't have been feasible. Fleet Bank gave the CDC partnership some predevelopment money. LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation) pitched in.

The factory is now Westfield Lofts, mixed-income rental. We have three rental levels: 22 low-income units, units for people whose income is just over the low-income tax-credit guidelines, and market-rate units. Most units are in the affordable range (\$750 to \$1,000 per month). We're about 70 percent rented since launching in January.

C&B: I understand you're developing five acres in the area.

SCW: Yes, in addition to the mixed-income rentals in stage one, we'll have green space, commercial space, low-income homeownership, and market-rate homeownership.

C&B: And all this started with responding to a neighbor's complaint.

SCW: She convinced us. She said that if it was easy, someone else would have done it but that West Elmwood Housing was supposed to tackle neighborhood improvement. It took us a while, but we did it.

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