

# PEOPLE TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES. FOR GOOD.

**Angela Blanchard**

*Neighborhood Centers, Inc.*

**N**eighborhood Centers, Inc., has a long and rich history in community development, beginning with our origin as a part of the Settlement House movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s, meant to welcome newcomers to the United States and designed to make sure people knew how to live in the new world in which they found themselves. When Alice Graham Baker founded the agency in 1907, she declared the intent to help every resident of Houston have an opportunity for an education, for health, for work with dignity, and to become an informed participant in democracy. Today, everything old is new again as Houston has become the nation's new Ellis Island. The most diverse city in the country, Houston relies on organizations like Neighborhood Centers to build the first rung of the ladder so that people who come here can take advantage of the opportunities in Houston.

We are very clear at Neighborhood Centers about why we exist and the principles by which we intend to operate. Although many organizations like ours have come to identify closely with one or two services or distinct programmatic efforts, Neighborhood Centers is different. We define ourselves in terms of our purpose. That leaves us free to change what we do and how we do it, and we have done so for more than a hundred years. Quite simply, as Houston grows, we grow. As new issues emerge, we evolve.

At Neighborhood Centers, we believe that what makes Houston, and all great metro regions, dynamic and vibrant engines of recovery are our neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are the bridges between individuals and the regional economy, and when we take a targeted and thoughtful approach we can create real and lasting change. Strengthening underserved neighborhoods raises the quality of life for everyone in the region. If we are to transform our economy and our country, we must start out person to person, door to door, neighborhood to neighborhood building bridges to opportunities. Neighborhood Centers exists to keep our region a place of opportunity for everyone who is working for a better life.

## **WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT HOUSTON?**

In Houston, we have a flat social structure. If you come here and work, you belong. Well over half the people who live in the region came from somewhere else. We don't share a past, we share a future. It keeps us looking forward. This is a fertile place for the growth of people willing to work for a life better than the one they were born to. Here, there is a new immigrant formula. In the early days, immigrants came to this country and hurried to set aside their old ways of life. They often sacrificed language and culture in the interest of belonging. The new immigrant formula is economic and political assimilation, and cultural independence. So Houston is fed by a rich source of cultural alternatives. It also is as close to a meritocracy as you can get. This is not just about immigrants. We like to say whether your journey takes you across the tracks, the river, or the ocean, we want you if you are ready to work for a better future.

## WHAT ARE THE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

The first principle of community development is that the people are not the problem, people are the asset. The second principle is that the leadership needed in every neighborhood is already there. Community development is about unlocking that asset, releasing people's potential to move forward together.

Every person needs community. Families are not strong all alone; they are strong together, supporting and reinforcing one another, helping and connecting so that they can all move forward.

Researchers have tried to put a dollar amount on the value of community. What is the value of a neighbor who will give you a ride when you need one, or sit with your child while you take another one to the clinic, or lend you a truck to help you move? How do you price someone who shows you how to use the public transportation system or guides you to the best school? People connected in communities have priceless assets in one another. They work together day by day to get ahead.

We believe that the people who have found their way to Houston, no matter how they came—whether from some small town in Texas or from overseas, displaced by a storm, forced by political oppression, or driven by economic desperation—already have the most important ingredient for success when they arrive. At Neighborhood Centers, our job then is not to fix them. It's not to define goals for them so that they might live according to our expectations. Instead, we must listen deeply, study rigorously, document faithfully what motivates them, and build on that. We build on strengths and skills. You can't build on broken. In the past, many communities were demoralized by formulas that forced them to show up on the bread lines of government assistance, proving first that they were sufficiently broken to require help. It did not work. It will not work. We have to capture instead the deep longing of people to better themselves, to nurture their children, to learn and to contribute—that is what fuels a sustainable approach to community development.

## HOW DOES THE WORK BEGIN IN A NEW NEIGHBORHOOD?

We operate in many locations, and people in struggling neighborhoods often approach us asking for a community center. We believe in putting a roof over community. But when we are asked to build a center, we say “first you build the community, then you build the center.” So we engage communities wherever we work—and yes, we knock on doors. Repeatedly. We go from door to door, house to house, business to business. And we ask questions. Not the old, worn-out “needs assessment” questions that demoralize even the interviewer—a brand-new set of questions, because we believe the change begins with the first new question. What works here? Who really cares about this community? What are the sights, sounds, and smells that make this neighborhood feel like home? Who do you go to when you want advice? Who knows the history of why this street, this building, this school matters so much? What is your most treasured hope for your child?

These are powerful questions, and it is challenging to ask them over and over. Many communities have already been so well trained to think of themselves as broken that they automatically answer with what is wrong even when you are asking what is right about the place they call home.

When you think as we do—that there are strengths and assets in every community—it can sound like people are on their own, that they shouldn’t need any help. But that’s not how it works. Everyone wants to live in a neighborhood where they can be connected, where there is a good school, where there is a financial institution they can trust, and a clinic, and a grocery market. Poor people are not different, and any approach to community and neighborhood development premised on an idea that they are somehow distinct as a group—a group lacking in some respect—is doomed to failure. Under that model, you may provide a service, but you will never achieve a transformation.

We don't ignore the problems. In fact, we are only interested in those neighborhoods with the biggest challenges. We fulfill our mission to bring resources, education, and connection by working side by side with people in neighborhoods. Simply put, we go where we are invited and we do what we are asked to do.

## **HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHERE AND HOW TO WORK?**

When a small community group from Gulfton/Sharpstown came to us eight years ago asking for a community center—asking for a Ripley House—they did so because they knew what we had accomplished in several other Houston neighborhoods. They had seen Ripley House in the East End. They knew children went to school there. They knew residents took their children to a clinic at Ripley House instead of to the emergency room. They knew that if you were struggling and at the end of your rope, someone there would help you. They had witnessed the rebuilding of that center, after 70 years, into a new 75,000 square foot building on eight acres. They wanted a Ripley house, too. Many of them were already our neighbors—clients, if you will—in Head Start or one of the other many programs we offered in 60 locations. But they wanted a place of their own.

Gulfton/Sharpstown is Houston's most diverse, most densely populated neighborhood. Everyone outside of the community knew only the stories they had heard: the highest juvenile crime ZIP code in the nation; police didn't want to go there; non-English-speaking immigrants; overrun with the uninsured, the undocumented, and gangs; absentee landlords; unbooked and unbanked; and on and on. These were the only Gulfton/Sharpstown stories told in the larger region. Home to more than 55,000 people from more than 40 countries, Gulfton/Sharpstown was both the biggest challenge and most important opportunity.

Using our appreciative, asset-based approach, we changed the story of the neighborhood. We took the dreams, hopes, and aspirations of hardworking people and put them up on a big screen. We published their stories and held them up as examples of what is best about our country. We told all of Houston how

much the Gulfton residents were like the people who built Houston—hardworking, ambitious, entrepreneurial, passionate about their children.

While we were reintroducing Gulfton as a place of opportunity, a community worthy of investment, we began dreaming more specifically about what should be in the center. Working with residents, we outlined a plan and a campaign. It was clear that local check-cashing booths and payday lenders were ripping off residents. It was obvious that tax preparers who took 50 percent of the returns for the “service” of filing a 1040 had to be replaced. It was clear that the hunger to learn English, especially “vocational English” you could use in your job, was a priority for families.

People spoke passionately about their children’s education as the motivation for all that they did. They showed us their entrepreneurial efforts and told us about their desire to remember the old ways and celebrations of their cultures. And most important of all, they said, “We don’t want just a place where we get help. We want a place where we can give to others, as well.” So we began a plan for Baker Ripley, to create a village center for this precious community. One of my favorite memories is of a meeting with 300 people from more than a dozen countries conducted in eight languages, all planning their future together. Inspired by them, Neighborhood Centers staff and volunteers took the show on the road to funders, many of whom had heard only the old stories of Gulfton/Sharpstown. We went out with the new story to raise the money and put together the resources to invest in our neighbors.

We are convinced that real transformation comes from an integrated, focused approach to neighborhood transformation, not from an “either/or” set of choices like housing or school, health or financial, infrastructure or immigration. *All* elements of what makes a neighborhood a great place to live, grow, and raise children are necessary. Although we do not believe that one organization has to do all of it for every neighborhood, we do

believe that organizations, funding, and communities can come together for powerful integrated approaches.

## **HOW DO WE SECURE INVESTMENT FOR A FOCUSED, INTEGRATED APPROACH?**

Let's be very clear. There is nothing simple about securing investment for this work. It is not fast. No single funder will write the check for what will need to be done. When we answer the call of a community for transformation, we must have the courage to make a commitment well beyond what any funder will make to us. We will gain and lose grants, partners, and collaborators over the course of the work. All along the way we will be told that it is impossible, that the neighborhood is too broken, that the people are the problem. We will be urged to set our sights lower, even as we are chastised for failing to produce more results more quickly.

Each of the deep governmental silos—federal, state, and local, covering housing, health, education, economic matters, and more—has its own requirements. Every funder has a different theory of change. Every paradigm has different reporting demands. Different definitions of accountability abound. We must build very strong organizations and make internal investments in infrastructure so that we can meet those differing demands where we cannot change them. This cannot be ignored. It is absolutely critical to create effective organizations, with a firm platform of processes and tools to secure and manage resources and information. Passion is insufficient to the task, and all the knowledge about neighborhoods will not be a substitute for good fiscal management. It is essential to address the old nonprofit dilemma of choosing between more investment in programs or more investment in overhead: *both* are necessary. Nonprofits must anticipate and plan for growth, considering the “new and the next” in every budget year. As difficult as this is, disciplined efforts year after year to strengthen infrastructure will ensure the organization can deal with the complexity inherent in community development work, and enable it to tackle the challenge of integration.

Every day we witness the need for integrated efforts and investments that work together to tackle housing, education, economic opportunity, health, and infrastructure. If we want to see true transformation, we must find a way to bring all the disparate investments together. When we look back, we see many failed attempts to revitalize and transform neighborhoods on the back of just one element—the siloed school, heroic housing, a transformational clinic. These attempts fall short. If we imagine we are “setting the community development table,” we must imagine it as a giant potluck where the dishes, plates, and morsels are contributed from many sources. It becomes the job of a community development organization to create an artful arrangement that feeds the hunger of the community.

We cannot afford to leave any dollar on the table, and the best and most sustainable efforts take advantage of public, private, and nonprofit elements. Although we cannot underestimate the difficulty of crafting integrated approaches in a siloed world, the return is worth any amount of effort.

## **WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?**

With Gulfton/Sharpstown, we were successful. Funders responded to the new story, and they responded in a big way. In the most difficult of fundraising environments, in the midst of an ugly national debate on immigration, despite the complexities of an integrated approach, people in our region came together to invest. When Baker Ripley was completed, our celebration crossed all boundaries—political, social, economic, and cultural—to bring together the true face of the Houston region. It was extraordinary, and we love to watch our many visitors from around the country discover Houston through the lens of Baker Ripley Neighborhood Center.

Today Baker Ripley—five buildings, 75,000 square feet, on four acres in the heart of Gulfton/Sharpstown—stands as a monument to the dreams and aspirations of 55,000 hardworking residents. These are people who reached beyond the safety and certainty of what they knew and sought a better future—people who in every



way represented the values and strengths that built the rest of Houston. The philanthropic dollars that built this village center, and the public and private dollars that keep the doors open on a credit union, charter elementary school, immigration services, reunion hall and indoor/outdoor stage, tax center, art shop, and playground, are a modest investment with an unlimited return in realized potential and fulfilled promises.

In our first year and a half of operation, 23,000 people passed through the doors. More powerful than the beautiful, accessible, colorful, joyful structures themselves is the incredible power of integrating education, financial opportunity, health services, and performing and visual arts into one site. Despite all the complexity, neighbors coming to the site see only the place they helped to build, one place with many doors, all of which are open to them. But we know about the dollars returned to the community, the improvement in graduation rates, the reduction in juvenile crime, and the number of new citizens. These are priceless accomplishments. While our visitors comment on the absence of fences and security, we are proud of the number of partners that work out of the center and are inspired by the sheer energy of the place. We recognize that the future leaders of Houston will come out of Baker Ripley and know they will remember the investment made in their families.

Side by side with the community, supported by Houston philanthropy, using public dollars and private investment, nurtured by a strong agency built to last, we changed the story of Gulfton from a problem place to a place of promise. For good.

---

**ANGELA BLANCHARD** *is the president and CEO of Neighborhood Centers, Inc. Through her more than 25 years of experience, Ms. Blanchard has reached an epiphany: a community should be defined by its strengths, resources, achievements, and hopes, not its degree of "brokenness." By focusing on strengths, Ms. Blanchard has found success with her work at Neighborhood Centers, Inc., and giving speeches around the world on the power of the human spirit, community development, and overcoming personal and communal tragedy. Ms. Blanchard has been honored by a number of organizations for her advocacy on behalf*

*of working immigrants as well as her excellence in nonprofit leadership and community service initiatives, including being named as the ARAMARK Building Community 2011 National Innovation Award Leadership Honoree.*