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Book Review: *The Concept of Community: Lessons From the Bronx*

By: Angela M. Eikenberry

DeRienzo, H. (2008). *The Concept of Community: Lessons From the Bronx*. Milan, Italy: IPOC di Pietro Condemmi.

As the field of nonprofit studies grows and more preservice students elect professional-level courses, instructors will need to be able to give students a feel for what it is *really* like to work “in the trenches” in the nonprofit sector. Even students with several years of experience in nonprofit organizations could often use a new perspective on their work. Case studies, internships, and interviewing or shadowing a nonprofit professional help, but these experiences often lack a longer-term perspective and rich, detailed analysis of the political, economic, and social environment in which nonprofit organizations and professionals operate. Book-length biographies and autobiographies of people working in the nonprofit arena can provide this missing long-term perspective and rich context.

I was scouring the Internet for just these types of books to assign to my students this semester when *The Concept of Community: Lessons From the Bronx* showed up in my mailbox. The book is primarily about Harold DeRienzo’s nearly three decades of experience in community organizing and community development in the South Bronx, New York City. It is part autobiography, part history of housing in the South Bronx, and part argument for revitalizing the “community” in community development (lost, as he argues, with the growth and professionalization of the field during the past few decades). Although the book is somewhat fragmented in its approach and sometimes lacks a middle ground between the author’s life experience and more abstract theories of community organizing and development, it would nonetheless make a good supplement to more theoretical works in these areas and in nonprofit management. DeRienzo provides a sense of what life is like in the field and how one might think about one’s role as a nonprofit professional in relation to the community and community building.

This book may be unique in the nonprofit management literature in its concern for the importance of reinvigorating community for democracy in the United States. Although nonprofit management literature has increasingly focused on the need for professionalization and entrepreneurialism in the field, in many ways this book argues for the opposite: a reframing of the field going back to traditional notions of how voluntary institutions might contribute to community building and civic engagement. DeRienzo proposes a deprofessionalization of the field, or at the very least a more even balance between professionalization and building community (p. 65). I tend to agree with him. In our drive as practitioners and academics to make nonprofit organizations more professional, more sustainable, and so on, we have focused less on the democratic potential of these organizations.

In the field of nonprofit community development, DeRienzo describes a pertinent case, Banana Kelly in the South Bronx. In the mid- to late 1970s, the city of New York was in turmoil financially, and fires and mayhem in the South Bronx led to the abandonment of entire neighborhoods. Arson sponsored by landlords or their agents caused residents to flee the area and antisocial elements to move in (p. 15). Against great odds, on the street known as Banana Kelly, a few resident-volunteers and community organizers, including DeRienzo (who during that time moved to live in the area), stayed and began to clean out and occupy several buildings on the street. The group eventually formed the Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association, Inc. and obtained contracts with the state and the city to hire staff

(DeRienzo became the chief executive officer) and begin programs to make several buildings on the street habitable again. The Banana Kelly community development corporation (CDC) grew to become a multimillion dollar operation. However, as DeRienzo notes,

this success came at a price. In the process of quickly going from an entirely volunteer effort to a funded organization, the dynamics of our group had changed substantially. By 1981, our volunteer base was small [and] . . . in the process of growth, our leaders became managers, our organizers became employees, and our members became clients. (p. 39)

The growth and professionalization of Banana Kelly also put a strain on DeRienzo's relationship with the core volunteer leadership, and membership of the organization suffered. As he describes it,

I was the one person at Banana Kelly capable of managing our contracts and contacts from the "outside." As I made commitments and took each commitment to heart, I used my position as Executive Director to force our group leaders, now our managers, to either perform or leave. . . . By 1981, what started in 1977 as cooperative and mutually supportive relationships became openly antagonistic. (p. 40)

DeRienzo resigned as executive director of Banana Kelly in 1982 (though he remained active with the board for several more years), having learned many valuable lessons that he imparts in this book.

Banana Kelly is not unlike many other nonprofit organizations that must balance the tension between grassroots, community action and financial sustainability and growth. The assumption is typically that financial sustainability and growth are the primary indications of success and that these ends cannot be achieved without a professionalized (and increasingly more businesslike) organizational effort. DeRienzo tells the story of Banana Kelly to make the point that a nonprofit CDC cannot be successful with financial resources alone. It also needs strong, established institutional backing, for example, from a neighborhood church *and* a broad and active membership—and these factors in turn require community building. With the growth and professionalization of Banana Kelly, its connection to the community eroded, and DeRienzo's work as community organizer suffered.

What could DeRienzo and the staff of Banana Kelly have done differently to find a better balance? DeRienzo does not provide clear guidance on this point, although many of his stories of successes and failures in community organizing and development, provided throughout the book, offer some clues. The most important is that CDCs must work to build community, in particular community building that is *transformative*. This approach seeks to "organize residents in ways that rebuild meaningful relationships between them" and enable them to generate local plans of action (p. 84). In this way, DeRienzo writes, "a new power dynamic that affects the broader scheme of existing power-sharing processes and institutional arrangements" can occur (p. 85). Such transformation is not so easy to achieve, however, and DeRienzo offers little in the way of "how-tos." One might hope that DeRienzo's next book will focus more directly on how to implement transformative community building. In the meantime, the stories he tells are worth the telling. Students, practitioners, and researchers can learn from them.

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