



Jerry Blasingame seeks opportunities for ex-offenders and others struggling with transition in the growing Greenville region

“I began working out of the living room in my house, went to conferences, and read books on non-profits and community development. At the time, re-entry was an issue that people didn't want to be involved in,” says Jerry. “I understood the problems that people face who are leaving prison. Before you can help, you have to know where the person is coming from, and they have to be able to relate to you. It’s an important part of leadership—building a relationship and trust.”

While investigating job opportunities for ex-offenders, he went to SCACDC for technical help and learned about the IDA program. His CDC, Sotera, founded in 1999, has one of the largest IDA programs in the state, with 45 participants. Additionally, Sotera has three transitional houses in operation—two for men

and one for women. They currently are renovating seven additional houses. The Redemption World Outreach Center church provides mentors for all of the men and women in the programs. Sotera works with the local One-Stop job center and the local technical college, offering a program to teach welding, carpentry, data entry and other job skills to displaced workers as well as ex-offenders.

In October 2004, Jerry helped launch a Grassroots Development Initiative for the Greenville Region, patterned after the program originally developed by SCACDC on a statewide basis. Participants now meet every third Tuesday. The group is composed of about 15 local grassroots leaders, including representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, City Council, the local college, local police, the county redevelopment authority, the housing authority, the upstate homeless coalition, neighborhood associations, and more. They are targeting businesses that will hire people who have criminal records as well as displaced workers and workers from distressed areas.

“Greenville is an old mill town,” says Jerry. “The mills are gone and the textile manufacturers have disappeared. Workers need retraining. But there are opportunities too, with increasing construction and IT (information technology) work. Traditional leaders aren’t interested in poor inner cities and undeveloped rural areas. We want to build up leaders who are part of the community and see its promise—that’s very important.”

Moving Forward Today While Preparing For Tomorrow

Through the exemplary leadership of Mazyck and SCACDC, grassroots leaders and elected officials across the state are emerging as new champions and voices for rural, low-wealth communities. Even so, more must be done to recruit and train the next generation of leaders. Julia Dawson, SCACDC program associate, points to this challenge in South Carolina and elsewhere. “We have 40 members, and we have a wealth of experience and expertise among those leaders and others involved in the Grassroots Development Initiative. But most of those individuals are in their 50s and 60s now. They have been leading the charge since the Civil Rights era. We need to groom young leaders to move up behind them, capture the wisdom and experience, and make sure it is passed on. Involving youth and getting them excited and inspired is crucial. Whether it is through internships, conferences or grassroots activities—we need to engage them in a meaningful, life-changing way.”

As Bernie Mazyck explains, the Association’s job is to create an environment where every community can have a voice in the policy process, with strategies that promote economic development. SCACDC’s leadership programs are working hard across the state to find, nurture and empower those voices.

For more information, visit www.nrfc.org. To learn more about the work of SCACDC, go to www.communitydevelopmentsc.org.

GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP PLAYS MAJOR ROLE IN SOUTH CAROLINA'S PROGRESS

The National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRF) believes that rural poverty is persistent due to decades and generations of environmental and economic disinvestment, cultural and social isolation, and barriers of race and class. This article is one in a series that highlights community transformation to address rural poverty. Strategies include: creating community wealth, transforming leadership through civic participation, and increasing self-sufficient families. NRF seeks to overcome disparities of poverty and race in rural communities through support for asset-based rural economies in which all persons can participate, benefit and lead.

The story of the South Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations (SCACDC) is one of “transformative leadership”—embodied both in the example and work of its CEO, and in the programs it has developed in the state’s low-wealth, largely African-American communities.

To speak of leadership in South Carolina has often been to speak of privilege in a largely rural state where politics have been dominated by an overwhelmingly white, male majority in the statehouse, and where economic development has been the bailiwick of entrenched leaders or wealthy developers creating coastal playgrounds for their peers. Whatever leadership has meant in South Carolina, it has typically not meant empowerment of African-American residents throughout the small towns and rural areas that account for the majority of the state. Thanks to Bernie Mazyck and SCACDC, that is beginning to change.

The Power of Transformational Leadership

Bernie Mazyck, president and CEO of SCACDC, got an early education in the interplay between government, politics, business and philanthropy. A native of Summerville, SC, Bernie spent several



Bernie Mazyck, SCACDC's president, is working to broaden the ranks of grassroots leaders.

post-college years working for Mayor Harvey Gant, the first African-American mayor of Charlotte, NC. From that post, he returned to South Carolina to become the vice president of community development at the Charleston Chamber of Commerce, followed by a stint as program director for the Community Foundation in Charleston. These were unlikely positions of influence for a young African-American man in South Carolina, and they helped Mazyck see the challenges and opportunities presented by rural poverty and stagnation.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT LEADERSHIP

- *Strengthen the voice of grassroots leadership. It is essential to building stronger communities and overcoming historic imbalances where low-wealth communities have been excluded from the decision-making process.*
- *Provide a forum where grassroots leaders can help to set the agenda at the state level. This is a crucial step to connecting local and state-level decision-making.*
- *Think in terms of “both/and” rather than “either/or.” Building new leadership structures must include both advantaged and disadvantaged constituencies; both dominant and non-dominant communities of color; both wealthy and low-wealth communities.*
- *Draw youth and young adults into current and future leadership development efforts. If this is not done, leadership development progress will be short lived.*

At the Community Foundation, Mazyck worked with leaders from across the state to create an organization to support fledgling community development corporations (CDCs). These early CDCs—community-based corporations working to develop needed small businesses and affordable local housing—represented a seed of hope for creating new economic opportunities in long-impooverished, predominantly black communities and the promise of cultivating a new class of leaders to bring about change.

After spending several years supporting these emerging CDCs on an ad hoc basis through the Community Foundation, and with help from the Main Street Program of the South Carolina Downtown Development Association, Mazyck and several colleagues presented to the economic development subcommittee of the South Carolina Legislative Black Caucus the idea of a statewide association to support this emerging contingent of CDCs and grassroots leadership. “At the time, we did not know that two other groups with similar plans had approached the Caucus, seeking their support and recognition,” says Bernie. “Our group was integrated, and we stressed the importance of being grassroots based and not taking a top-down approach. The other groups were all-white, and they had a different structure in mind. Our group won the support of the Caucus, and this made a tremendous difference.” Mazyck and the SCACDC began the process of creating a new vision for leadership in the state—racially integrated and community-based—or, in other words, “transformational.”

Cultivating Leadership from the Ground Up

In 1998, SCACDC was chartered with Mazyck as its president and CEO. Since that time, the statewide association of member CDCs has grown to more than 40 mature and emerging CDCs across the state. Progress has been steady, but not without challenges.

The South Carolina Legislature passed a bill in 2000, authorizing the state to provide \$10 million in grants, loans and tax credits for CDCs. This was to be made available in \$5 million over five years (\$1 million per year) in grants and loans; and \$5 million for state tax credits. However, despite the five-year-old commitment, the funds still have not been appropriated.

Nevertheless, in line with its mission of supporting development in communities that have been left out of the economic mainstream, SCACDC has placed great emphasis on identifying, encouraging and nurturing grassroots leadership. Every year, in August, about 50 leaders from across the state participate in the Association’s Grassroots Leadership Retreat. There they work to identify, define and promote community issues that need to be addressed by policymakers and to develop general leadership skills among the Retreat participants. This work is then continued through the year-long Grassroots Development Initiative: participants return to their regions, meet together to refine their thinking, and recruit and mobilize other residents to join them. Using what they learned in the Retreat, they develop a policy agenda that is informed by the specific needs and challenges of their area. Those concerns, in turn, are reflected in the policy agenda of the SCACDC. Current priorities for SCACDC include: (1) getting the CDC Act funded; (2) establishing policies to improve access to community development block grant (CDBG) funds; and (3) supporting entrepreneurship and microenterprise.

Of the work to cultivate leaders from within distressed communities, Mazyck says, “It’s not always obvious who the leaders are. My work at the Community Foundation taught me that you have two types of leaders—you have the individuals who are obviously going to fill those roles, but you also have ladies who sit on the front porch and know everything that goes on in the community. They also are leaders—just not the traditional type. They are guardians of values and culture, they know the dynamics of the community, and they have tremendous influence.”



Participants at the August 2005 Grassroots Leadership Retreat share their experiences and challenges.

The Two South Carolinas

Although it may be tempting to divide South Carolina strictly down lines of race, the racial balance of leadership is shifting. Seven of 46 state senators and 23 of 122 state representatives are now African-American. Yet South Carolina still is very much a state divided—between communities of persistent poverty and communities of wealth, and between the isolated rural “low country” and small cities experiencing some measure of urban sprawl. SCACDC is working in both environments—with very different community development and leadership challenges—to build coalitions and promote prosperity and more inclusive leadership structures throughout the state.

On the one hand, is the Pee Dee region, in northeastern South Carolina, with the highest unemployment in the state and a long history of deep-seated poverty. The four counties of the region (Marlboro, Dillon, Marion and Williamsburg Counties) have pressing needs for housing, housing counseling, financial education, and new business support.

In Marlboro County, the Reverend Charles Malloy is the executive director of the Marlboro County Community Development Corporation. “We started the Marlboro County CDC so that we could work with the SCACDC in offering individual development accounts (IDAs) to folks in our area. IDAs are a three-to-one match in South Carolina, and they offer a good opportunity to start saving. But almost right away we realized that we were going to have to do more. We found other collaborative partners and resources, enlisted help from VISTA volunteers, and moved toward trying to make our communities stronger and better.”

The five CDCs in the Pee Dee region meet periodically to discuss issues, search for innovative solutions, and bring their concerns to state legislators and their Congressional delegation. “Rural communities must learn to collaborate and search for innovative ways to strengthen their economies and reverse the trends of dwindling populations and increasing poverty,” says Reverend Malloy. “fifty years ago, this was a farming region. As the economy changed, agricultural jobs disappeared and the out-migration began. Young people would leave and not come back. We didn't make the transition very well. Marlboro County now has a population of just over 28,000. We have a large number of very low- to middle-income people. There are tremendous credit and debt problems and a preponderance of predatory financial practices, like payday loans and check cashing. With no health insurance, many people are just one sickness away from bankruptcy.”



Rev. Malloy is expanding his CDC work to include housing, financial education and more.

He sees leadership development as crucial to the search for solutions. “Rural areas must grow and empower community leaders to address these problems. Education is the key—the investment in human capital. We must work together to innovate and improve access to resources and education. We need to develop skills around community development and collaboration. The Governor's Institute, a SCACDC program that is held on three weekends in the fall and spring, does just that. It’s a training institute for practitioners, policymakers and others who are getting involved in CDC work.”

By contrast, in upstate South Carolina, Jerry Blassingame, executive director of the Sotera World Outreach CDC, in Greenville, is laboring in an area somewhat different from Pee Dee. While the Greenville region faces many of the same challenges—unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and vulnerability to predatory financial practices, unlike Pee Dee it is facing growth issues fed by urban sprawl. Like Reverend Malloy, Jerry was initially drawn into community development work through SCACDC’s IDA program.