



Agents of Change: A chronicle of the collaborative efforts between Swarthmore College and the Chester Housing Authority during the last phase of the Receivership



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Introduction

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this report is two-fold: to encapsulate the outcomes culminating from the collaborative efforts between Swarthmore College and the Chester Housing Authority during the last phase of the Receivership and to encourage the beginning of and/or deepening of relations between other institutions of higher learning and providers of public housing. It has been produced with the aspiration that it will serve as both a comprehensive and objective resource for the respective communities involved, and also for other individuals and institutions with an invested interest in the subject matter.

Swarthmore College: A Brief History

Swarthmore College is an elite liberal arts college located 11 miles southwest of Philadelphia in the borough of Swarthmore. A committee of Quaker leaders from Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore founded the College in 1864 and though the College is now secular, Quaker values remain an integral part of College culture. Deriving in large part from those Quaker values is the College's strong commitment to social justice through student and faculty service, activism, and research.

The College reaffirmed its commitment to social justice in 2001 with the creation of the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility. Eugene Lang, class of '38, provided the College with a generous donation in order to establish an endowment for the Lang Center. Since its inception, the Lang Center has served as a catalyst for the development of community partnerships and implementation of social justice initiatives.

Chester Housing Authority: A Brief History

The Chester Housing Authority (CHA) is the largest provider of affordable housing in the city of Chester. The Housing Authority was chartered in 1937 and the first developments were completed in the

early 1940s. Over the course of its history, the Housing Authority suffered a decline beginning in the 1980s at the hands of irresponsible management.

In 1991, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced that the CHA had substantially breached the Annual Contributions Contract. Consequently, both the city of Chester and the CHA's Board of Commissioners released control to HUD. HUD failed to improve the conditions at the CHA and consequently, CHA residents brought a class action lawsuit asserting "constructive abandonment." The Honorable Norma L. Shapiro of the US District Court of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania appointed Robert C. Rosenberg as Receiver of the CHA, to report directly to the Court. He assumed control on August 31, 1994.

In 1997, the CHA came off HUD's troubled list, achieving "standard performer" status. The CHA was subsequently awarded three HOPE VI grants that promoted its growth and redevelopment. In 2003, the CHA achieved "high performer" status and a search began for a new executive director to assume control during the last phase of the Receivership. Steven A. Fischer joined the CHA as executive director in 2005.

Body

Brief Overview of the Relationship

Swarthmore College and the Chester Housing Authority have been working together as long as the two entities have coexisted. Swarthmore students have always visited CHA communities to volunteer their time to serve Residents and Residents have matched the students' concerned generosity with warm hospitality.

This report will focus on how the relationship between the two entities has blossomed during the last phase of the Receivership. The growth of the relationship during this period of time can be attributed to a committed social justice body, an enthusiastic professor, several motivated students, an accommodating executive director, and a patient community.

When the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility was established in 2001, Swarthmore College sought to make connections with several organizations in Chester, including the CHA. At the time, the CHA had demonstrated to the College remarkable progress since being designated a troubled housing authority and was applying for its third HOPE VI grant. During the application process, the College offered its support in a formal letter. The CHA was eventually awarded a third Hope VI grant in 2003.

When Steve Fischer assumed the role of Executive Director of the CHA in 2005, he was determined to strengthen the relationship with the College. Fischer engaged students when called upon, appearing as a guest speaker in College courses and as a guest panelist at events. The campus soon accepted Fischer and reinvested their trust in the CHA. In previous years, Swarthmore students had been vocal in their criticisms regarding the corruption and mismanagement that had plagued the CHA.

In 2007, the Lang Center launched a new summer internship program that served to place willing and able students at proven non-profit organizations in Chester. The program, which has since

been named the Chester Community Fellowship program, reinforced the College's commitment to the city of Chester and in doing so, the CHA.

That first summer featured the CHA as a prominent partner of the program. Randall Keith Benjamin ('09) joined the CHA as its first Chester Community Fellow and worked directly under Fischer. As part of the Chester Community Fellowship program, a weekly project in common was held in Chester to encourage collaboration among the Chester Community Fellows.

The first ever project in common also featured the CHA. Benjamin led the project, which was to research and publish a booklet that would serve to benefit all 2,500 CHA Residents. That summer, Fellows took pictures in the community and interviewed Residents for the booklet. "Building Community" was the product of the project in common; it took all the information Residents needed to know and condensed it into an attractive, accessible piece. The piece was dedicated to Jeremiah R. Riley, long time CHA Resident and board member who had recently passed away, and it remains a regularly distributed document by the CHA.

Also in 2007, members of Earthlust, an environmental group at the College, began preliminary discussions regarding the creation of a community garden in Chester to help meet the need for fresh fruits and vegetables. News of their plans eventually reached Fischer and in the winter of 2008, Fischer helped to propel the project forward by providing a site for the garden: a piece of land at the Ruth L. Bennett Homes development. The garden would eventually break ground in the spring of 2009, representing one of the many accomplishments in the eventful year of 2009.

The Chester Community Garden Project was pioneered by an energized group of Earthlust members that left to form a new group, Environmental Justice (EJ). EJ was especially concerned with food access issues in the city of Chester and it saw the community garden as an environmentally sustainable approach to address those issues.

Partially funded by a Swarthmore Foundation grant, the garden was able to expand its facilities and produce inventory.

The summer of 2009 saw a second Chester Community Fellow join the CHA: Hugh Montag '11. Montag worked closely with Rick Goldstein, director of Business Development for the CHA, on his time exchange project. In 2008, HUD awarded the CHA with a Neighborhood Networks grant totaling \$400,000. Goldstein joined the CHA in January of 2009 and utilized the funds to establish substantial Resident programming. Neighborhood Networks was then rebranded to Chester Housing Authority Tech (CHAT) and the umbrella of programs quickly grew. An essential element of CHAT, as Goldstein had hoped, was to create a time exchange among Residents. The time exchange would function with alternative currency, one's time, and would build community by helping Residents network and develop skills. Montag played a crucial role in educating the Residents about the time exchange, recruiting support for the time exchange, and planning its implementation.

In September of 2009, Anna Baeth ('09) founded Chester Neighborhood Bike Works (CNBW). Baeth had spent the summer of 2009 working with the Philadelphia Neighborhood Bike Works (PNBW). Baeth's experiences at PNBW inspired her to start CNBW and she received a grant from the Swarthmore Foundation to jumpstart the project. CNBW began as a student group on campus, working out of the Chester YWCA and providing afterschool programs for Chester Youth. It would not be until 2010 that CNBW joined hands with the CHA and became part of CHAT.

During the period of expansion and transition, Jeff Cao ('10), another Swarthmore student, led the program. Cao succeeded in establishing the Earn-a-Bike (EaB) afterschool program that provided youth with homework help and lessons on bike safety and maintenance. Youth that graduated from the program received their very own bicycle to use and maintain.

The first student group to merge with CHAT was another that was started in the fall of 2009. Professor Doug Turnbull of the Computer

Science department at the College had been teaching a seminar entitled "Socially Responsible Computing." As part of the course's syllabus, a group of students were set to work with the CHA to employ the resources stemming from the Neighborhood Networks grant to address issues of computer literacy in Chester. ChesTech, a new student group and CHAT member, was the final product of the seminar.

Five of Turnbull's students worked together to form ChesTech: Joel Tolliver ('10), Emanne Desjardins ('11), Ivana Ng ('12), Kwame Osei ('11) and Maria Kelly ('10). Community computer labs were established at the William Penn and Ruth L. Bennett housing developments. A third community computer lab was later established at the new Booker T. Washington community center. The five students worked together with other volunteers to set up the computers at each of the three computer labs. They then started the drop-in center, which served as an afterschool program for middle and high school students. There, students were able to acquire computer skills and learn about how to look after the computers. The TechTeam was also created and provided technical support for the computers at the three sites.

In 2010, CHAT welcomed the addition of CNBW and the Booker T. Washington community center began to host volunteers from another student group, Swarthmore Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA). The VITA program had been a well-established program sponsored by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and passionately supported with volunteers from Swarthmore College. The volunteers had previously worked out of the Chester YWCA, but the YWCA closed and they were in need of a new host site for the upcoming tax season. Fischer stepped in and proposed using the Booker T. Washington community center as a VITA site. The match seemed to work well and ChesTech volunteers helped to accommodate the site for the VITA volunteers. Starting in February, the community center served as a VITA site and over 300 returns were completed over the course of the tax season, totaling more than \$200,000 in returns for CHA Residents.

In the summer of 2010, the CHA hosted its third Chester Community Fellow, Andrés Bueno ('12). Like Montag, Bueno worked under Rick Goldstein with CHAT. Bueno played an integral role in all programs working out of the Booker T. community center, including with the CHAT computer literacy program. Bueno served in the drop-in center and trained others to serve in similar capacities.

The CHA again featured prominently with the CCF program during the summer of 2011. Two Chester Community Fellows, Julio Alicea ('13) and Natali Cortes ('13) joined the CHA as summer interns and the CHA also hosted the cohort of Fellows for a day of service at the community garden. Alicea worked closely with Steve Fischer at the central executive offices and Cortes worked closely with Rick Goldstein at the community center and community garden.

Alicea devoted his efforts to three main causes: researching and composing a comprehensive report that would catalogue the collaborative efforts between the College and the Housing Authority, facilitating the enhancement and expansion of the CHA's website, and serving as a teacher-mentor to Chester youth first through the Agora Cyber Charter School and later through the Youth Anti Violence Initiative (YAVI), both of which worked out of the Booker T. Washington community center. With the help of Cortes, Alicea also organized a project in common day at the CHA. The cohort of Fellows worked on and learned about the community garden. Afterwards, they met with Steve Fischer for a compelling discussion on food access in Chester.

Cortes catered to the community garden, treating the soil, harvesting produce, and leading expansion efforts. Cortes worked with Residents of all ages, educating them about the harvested produce and encouraging them to incorporate the fresh produce into their families' diets. In a related endeavor, Cortes worked with Rick Goldstein to implement his Community Health Worker (CHW) initiative. The CHW initiative intended to provide CHA Residents with access to avenues that led to health-related careers. Cortes trained CHWs, facilitated planning meetings, and led door-to-door canvassing campaigns in the community.

Conclusion

Reflection on the Relationship

As evidenced by the recent history, the collaborative efforts between Swarthmore College and the Chester Housing Authority have experienced extraordinary success, characterized by redemption and reciprocity. The two entities were able to redeem their relationship during the last phase of the Receivership and it has thrived ever since.

The Housing Authority has welcomed the College into its community with unrivaled opportunities to participate in meaningful work that addresses palpable problems plaguing the community. The College has responded with passionate, concentrated efforts that engage the needs of the community responsibly and effectively.

Going forward, the two entities must broaden their means of engagement in order to maximize the potential of their joint efforts. Institutions of higher learning and providers of public housing are naturally complementary; both offer opportunities to communities of need. Through collaboration, the two entities are able to combine resources to become powerful agents of change that make lasting impacts on their communities.

Appendix

Chester Housing Authority Tech Program Profiles + Pictures

➤ Chester Neighborhood Bike Works

The Chester Neighborhood Bike Works (CNBW) program is one of many successful coactions undertaken by Swarthmore College and the Chester Housing Authority. CNBW aims to promote the positive growth and development of Chester youth through bicycling. CNBW hosts an Earn-a-Bike (EaB) afterschool program where Chester youth can receive homework help and lessons on bike safety and maintenance. If students commit to the program and graduate, they receive their very own bike, at no cost to them. When students are not participating in EaB, they are welcome to participate in another CNBW afterschool program, the Cash Flow Club (CFC). In the CFC program, youth help to manage the bike shop by caring after the bikes and preparing them for sale. If bikes are sold, CFC members can earn half of the profit from the sales.

Anna Baeth ('09) of Swarthmore College started the Chester Neighborhood Bike Works program. After spending a summer interning for the Philadelphia Neighborhood Bike Works program, Anna decided to start a similar program in Chester. In September of 2009, Anna received a Swarthmore Foundation grant from the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility to create CNBW. CNBW started as a student group and grew over time. The program began working out of the YWCA of Chester, before partnering with the CHA and moving to the William Penn community center. Jeff Cao ('10)

took over the program once Anna graduated and facilitated the partnering with the CHA. Thanks in large part to the CHA, CNBW continues to be an effective and sustainable program that supports Chester youth.



➤ Youth Anti Violence Initiative

The Youth Anti Violence Initiative (YAVI) is a relatively new youth education and mentoring program working out of the Booker T. Washington community center. YAVI works mainly with non-traditional students from the nearby housing developments and other communities of Chester. YAVI hosts the its learning center where students ranging from eighth to twelfth grades enroll in the Agora Public Cyber Charter School. In addition to Agora, students are also invited to participate in leadership training and computer literacy courses as part of the Digital Connectors project.

During the summer of 2011, YAVI welcomed the assistance of two Chester Community Fellows from Swarthmore College. Julio Alicea ('13) and Natali Cortes ('13) were working with the Chester Housing Authority for the summer and both invested time and effort into working with the youth from the YAVI program. The two provided the Agora students with academic assistance and test prep. Alicea served in a more formal capacity, as mentor and teacher to the students; Alicea assisted in the preparation and presentation of Digital Connectors curriculum and supplemented the curriculum by designing leadership activities and expeditions, including a tour of Swarthmore College.



➤ Chester Community Garden Project

The Chester Community Garden Project is a collaborative effort brought forth by students from Swarthmore College and Residents of

the Ruth L. Bennett Homes, a public housing development owned and managed by the Chester Housing Authority. There was and still remains a large need for fresh fruits and vegetables in the city of Chester, and the community garden was established to help meet that need.

The idea for a community garden in Chester was first discussed in 2007 at meetings of Earthlust, a student environmental group at Swarthmore College. Students were aware of the need for fresh produce in Chester and they wanted to do something hands-on that would reconnect Residents with the land. Those students formed Environmental Justice (EJ), a new environmental group, to work on the garden project. In the winter of 2008, Steven Fischer, executive director of the Chester Housing Authority, offered the group of students and Residents a site for the garden near the Bennett Homes. The project officially broke ground in the spring of 2009. The project has experienced great growth since ground was broken. With monetary support coming from a Clinton Global Initiative Grant and a Swarthmore Foundation Grant, a fence was built and other expansion efforts were completed. In the spring of 2011, the project seemed to solidify its presence in the community when it collaborated with the Amish farmers market, a community partner of the CHA, to host a plowing party at the garden.



Swarthmore College Student Group Profiles + Pictures

➤ ChesTech

The Chestech Community Labs are the result of a joint effort between Swarthmore College and the Chester Housing Authority. ChesTech strives to increase community access to computers while simultaneously providing members of the community with the skills necessary to operate computers.

ChesTech originated from a seminar entitled, "Socially Responsible Computing." The seminar was taught by Professor Doug Turnbull of the Swarthmore College Computer Science department in the fall of 2009 and five of his students worked together to create ChesTech. Steven Fischer met with the seminar on a regular basis to plan ChesTech.

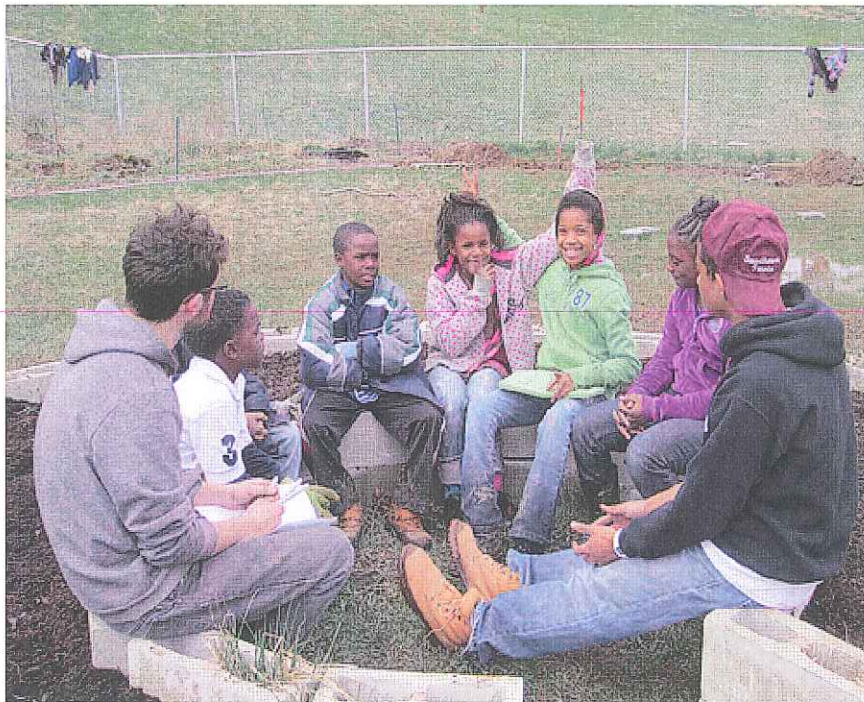
There are currently labs at the Ruth L. Bennett Homes, William Penn Homes, and Booker T. Washington community center. ChesTech volunteers now host a drop-in center, which is an after school program for middle and high school students. Additionally, the volunteers have formed the TechTeam to look over and maintain the computers at all three sites.



➤ Environmental Justice

The Environmental Justice (EJ) group at Swarthmore was formed by members of Earthlust, another environmental group at Swarthmore, who wanted to engage in more hands-on work with environmental issues. EJ recognized the severe food access issues in Chester and devoted their energy to finding a way to address those issues.

EJ successfully entered into a partnership with the CHA to establish a community garden at the Ruth L. Bennett Homes development. The group worked hard to gather resources for the garden, finding a free shed via the internet, acquiring donated cinder blocks from a local business in Chester, gathering soil and seeds from green organizations, and recruiting volunteers from the college to visit the garden.



➤ Volunteer Income Tax Assistance

The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) is a program sponsored by the Internal Revenue Service. It aims to provide free tax preparation for low-income families and also offers basic tax preparation training for volunteers. The program's branch in Delaware County is supported by the Delaware County Asset Development organization. Swarthmore students have participated in

the program as both volunteers and coordinators with multiple sites across the city of Chester.

The Booker T. Washington community center became a VITA site in February of 2010. A cohort of fifteen Swarthmore College volunteers alternated shifts at the site. They served Mondays and Fridays from 4:00 to 8:00 PM and on Saturdays from 10:00 to 2:00 PM. In total, the volunteers completed about 300 returns that returned over \$200,000 to the community. The site was a great success and was the only one not to have any reported mistakes in the preparation of tax returns.



Timeline

- 1864 – Swarthmore College founded
- 1937 – Chester Housing Authority chartered
- 1940s – First housing developments completed
- 1991 – HUD announced that the CHA had substantially breached the Annual Contributions Contract.
- 1994 – Robert C. Rosenberg assumed the role of Receiver of the CHA.
- 1997 – CHA came off HUD's troubled list for the first time, achieving "standard performer" status.
- 1998 – CHA received HOPE VI grant
- 2000 – CHA received HOPE VI grant
- 2001 – Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility established
- 2003 – CHA achieved "high performer" status; CHA received HOPE VI grant
- 2005 – Steven A. Fischer joined the CHA as executive director
- 2007 – First Chester Community Fellow hosted at CHA; Project in Common held at CHA
- 2008 – CHA awarded Neighborhood Networks grant
- 2009 – Second Chester Community Fellow hosted at CHA; ChesTech started, Chester Neighborhood Bike Works started, Chester Community Garden Project started
- 2010 – Third Chester Community Fellow hosted at CHA; Booker T. Washington Community Center became a VITA site
- 2011 – Fourth and Fifth Chester Community Fellows hosted at CHA