

PROLOGUE

The Women's Community Revitalization Project (WCRP) knows that low-income homeowners are struggling to keep their homes safe and habitable. They know that Philadelphia's home repair programs just do not meet the needs of most people. They are in the neighborhood, in the houses, and this is what they have seen and heard. But the "anecdotes" of advocates are suspicious. What they need are credible data and, most importantly, numbers. Those numbers should be crunched by someone with a Ph.D.

We've been sitting here for what feels like hours. It is summer and humid, and it seems like we are circling around and around this question of numbers. Sandy is trying to explain why we cannot mix data from the American Housing Survey and the U.S. Census, two different databases that use different units of analysis. We all agree that if we could combine all of the questions and information, it would be much better for our analysis and for our case. But what about the numbers? Can't we come up with a round number that would stick in people's minds? The advocates are trying to impress upon us the importance of having information that is easily digestible and stays in people's memories. Numbers, they say, that will resonate. They are as exasperated with us as we are with them. We take turns, Sandy and Roland and I, as do our advocate partners, asking and answering each other's questions in a different way in the hopes that maybe this time around we will understand each other. This is where it helps when we can turn to David and ask how his family is or turn to Jen and ask her how her classes are going. Can somebody pass a donut? I'm so glad that Brad got us coffee. This is going to be a long meeting. It's a good thing we've grown to like each other, and we know that we're all good at what we do because we're in it for the long haul.

Months later we are all together at City Hall. There is a meeting with City Council staff. Neighborhood residents are here to testify. Nora and other WCRP staff are there, talking to City Council staff. They are handing out material, as are our other community partners. Karen is outlining the details of the glossy, condensed report and informing the City Council staff that they can refer to the detailed report. This is the one with the data: our report. Sandy is going to testify. This is it. We found some numbers, we have collected stories. We are out there. City Council is listening. A few months later there is more money in the City budget for home repair. This is what it feels like when it works.

—From Corey Shdaimah’s reflections, summer and fall 2004

This book is about research. Contrary to most books about social research, it is not about how research has to be done independent of the people and communities who are affected by that research. Instead, it is about how researchers can maintain their credibility as researchers while collaborating with those in the community who are pushing for social change. Our story shows that researchers who collaborate with community partners can conduct credible research while empowering their clients and community partners to obtain the social changes they seek and do so in a way that helps promote more dramatic changes in the future.

Our book is also different because rather than talking about research principles and procedures in the abstract, we tell a story to illuminate how research and advocacy can be combined to produce social change. Our story is not a depersonalized account about other people’s efforts; it relays our own experiences and the experiences of our advocate partners. This sort of first-hand account provides an effective way to understand the relationship of research to advocacy by examining it from the inside out, from the bottom up, and from personal experiences to more generalizable principles. We share our experiences of being involved as social work researchers in a successful campaign that resulted in a significant change in public policy. Our involvement was exciting for us; we hope this story is educational for others.

CHANGE RESEARCH

