

Helio**gram**

Solutions to strengthen people and communities

Volume 1, Number 1

A Heliotrope Publication

Summer 1998

A New Unfolding: Heliotrope

It was time for a name. After four years of independent practice, Nancy Ashley decided it was time for her work to be encompassed by a name and a look, creating a space for growth and new possibilities.

But what do you call a practice that focuses on seeding positive change by providing planning, consulting, training, facilitation, writing and coaching services? One that serves human and community development through local and state governments, non-profits, neighborhoods, funders, local and national initiatives and collaborative groups?

How do you express the strength of an asset-based approach? Or values such as:

- People are a community's most valuable resource
- Recognizing and building on the assets of people is essential for positive change
- Building assets requires integrity, skill, innovation and excellence
- Human development deserves the same dedication and risk-taking as putting a person on Mars.

It was an interesting process. The list of potential names grew large, and at times, comical. The grit of creativity rubbed against practicality and business sense. Some came tantalizingly close — others missed by a mile. Then one day the metaphor sprouted, so to speak, in Nancy's brain in the form of the word **HELIOTROPE**.

heliotrope 1. A flower that turns to face the sun. 2. An instrument for making long-term observations. 3. A purple that is bluer and stronger than cobalt violet.

It was vivid, forward looking and ALIVE.

Heliotrope took shape in word and soon, in image with the wonderful logo designed by Barbara Edquist, an image of many possibilities suggesting growth, the lens for observation and the wings of flight to a better way of doing things.

Heliotrope was born.

This newsletter is one of the first physical manifestations of Heliotrope. In coming issues, you will find updates, information, inspiration and news from Nancy and her collaborators. Let us know what you think, what you'd like to see or share your stories. **H**

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Nancy's Reading Corner . . .

I've been inspired, amused, and surprised by my new subscription to *YES! A Journal of Positive Futures*. Recent issues have included themes such as: MONEY! Print Your Own! (one of my favorites); GETTING FREE: Moving Beyond the Consumer Culture; and SUSTAINING WATERSHEDS of the Pacific Northwest.

YES! looks at the connections between the well-being individuals, families, communities, and the planet. It highlights the common themes and synergy among those components. It fits nicely with my view of the power of the developmental assets framework.

The most recent issue, entitled "Millennium Survival Guide" moved me to action. How often can we say that a publication actually made us change our behavior? The articles that intrigued me were those that described the millennium (whenever it actually is!) as a once-in-a-thousand-year opportunity to leave behind the habits of thought, institutions, and assumptions that are not serving us well. The authors urged readers to join others in creating their own millennium gift.

Millennium gifts are an object or action we choose to give to sustain our world. That leaves the door pretty wide open. I liked this idea so much that I called two friends and asked if they wanted to work with me to develop an idea for a millennium gift and to carry it out together. We've had our first

planning meeting, and have another one scheduled.

In the meantime, at a recent gathering of community leaders to talk about out-of-school time and Seattle's MOST (Making the MOST of Out-of-School Time) Initiative, we were asked to suggest an audacious goal for this issue. I offered the following:

Inspire everyone in Seattle to turn off their televisions for one year, and use half the time saved doing something with and for kids.

It wouldn't cost anything, it is something everyone can do, and it overcomes that well-worn excuse that "I don't have time."

I encourage you to consider a millennium gift. And if you can't think of one, you can try my easy option. For more information about *YES!*, call 1-800-937-4451. **H**

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Looking at the World Through a Different Lens

Why Use Strength-Based Approaches?

It is all too easy to see the evidence of needs and problems in our young people, our families, and our communities. We have mastered the art of measuring and tracking child abuse, teen crime, domestic violence, substance abuse, divorce, hunger, homelessness, and community decay. We create elaborate plans to solve problems, reduce needs, and offset deficits. But in doing so, we have severely limited our possibilities and options. It's time to look at the world through a different lens.

At Heliotrope we use a different lens and start with what is *right*. We believe in using strength-based approaches in every project. Here is why:

- **We need to aim for what we want to achieve, not what we want to avoid.**

The absence of illness does not equal health. A school with a low dropout rate is not necessarily an excellent, caring school. Using negative outcomes to direct policy and programs is like steering a car by looking in the rear-view mirror. The aim, it often seems, is not the pursuit of success, but avoidance of failure.¹ This is not good enough.

- **Americans strongly agree that building strengths is the best way to help young people.**

Regardless of age, race or ethnicity, people are riveted by one goal – the necessity of teaching all children the values of integrity, ethical behavior, concern for others, respect, civility, compassion, and responsibility. They believe that these values are the most important tools children need to become responsible adults and to benefit society.²

- **Change is more likely when its tied to local investment, creativity, hope and control.**

Historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort.³ The same theory applies to human development.

- **Common sense may be the best sense.**

We may chuckle at a headline that blares “Love Conquers What Ails Teens,” but we shouldn’t overlook the importance of it. Last fall, the first report from a long-running \$25 million study (the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health) found that kids who have a strong sense of connection to their parents were less likely to be violent or indulge in drugs, alcohol, tobacco or early sex. And feeling close to teachers is by far the most important school-related predictor of well being.⁴ The largest study ever undertaken of the causes of crime and delinquency has found that there are lower rates of violence in urban neighborhoods with a strong sense of community and values, where most adults discipline children for missing school or scrawling graffiti.⁵

Operating from a positive perspective

Heliotrope applies strength-based approaches in all aspects of our projects. We invite our clients and collaborators to do the same. There are some

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My Favorite Quotation

“The future is not a result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created – created first in mind and will, created next in activity.

The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination.”

John Schaar

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interesting combinations of strength or asset-based approaches emerging.

During creation of the Human Development Element of the Capitol Hill/First Hill/Pike Pine Urban Village plan, the community committee interlaced three core goals:

- *Address a human support need* that is currently underserved,
- *Realize a potential* within the community that is being underutilized, and
- *Build a community* by strengthening connections among community members.

They cataloged community assets, looked for ways to build the developmental assets of young people and adults, and built capacity by intensifying relationships. In this way, they are positioned to meet their human support needs.

Strength-based approaches are not about ignoring needs or wearing rose-colored glasses. They do not suggest that we should stop reducing threats such as guns, racism, family violence, or drugs. They do not diminish the need to meet basic needs – economic security, food, shelter, and safety. They do add a powerful route by which we might better reduce risks and help all kids, families, and communities be more successful. They provide us with more strategies and options.

When we think about vulnerable or disadvantaged people or communities, we often assume the first step is to fix problems. But it is a commitment to development – the offering of relationships, networks, challenges, opportunities to contribute – that motivates growth and change. The problems must be fixed. But assuming that “fixing” linearly precedes “development” reduces the likelihood that either will happen.⁶

Strength-based approaches ask us to change the lens we’re using. Why not focus on survivors, instead of casualties? Research indicates that the lessons learned from resilient kids can teach us how to help *all* kids – regardless of their circumstances –

handle the inevitable risks and turning points of life.

A closer look at assets

Child psychologist Emmy Werner began studying the children of chronically poor, alcoholic, abusive and even psychotic parents to understand how failure was passed from one generation to the next. To her surprise, one third of these kids looked nothing like children headed for disaster. She switched her focus to these “resilient kids” who somehow beat the odds. By doing so, she was able to identify a number of “protective factors” or assets in the families, outside the family circle and within the resilient children themselves that enabled them to manage quite well under very difficult circumstances.⁷

What kids need to succeed

Many of resiliency factors identified by Emmy Werner are contained in Search Institute’s developmental assets framework. Search Institute, an independent education and research organization in Minneapolis, has boiled down the formula for helping kids succeed to 40 developmental assets. These 40 assets represent the common sense that’s been lying dormant in many of us—bombarded as we are with information about what’s wrong with kids.

“Asset” is a convenient label to help us express the idea. If you call to mind the good things you do for kids (your own children, nieces, nephews, the child you tutor, the kids on the block), they are probably assets. For example, assets include family support, adult role models, holding high expectations, service to others, caring, integrity, responsibility, cultural competence, and having a sense of purpose in life. The more assets a young person has, the more likely he or she is to be a leader, help others, and succeed in all areas of life. Better yet, young people with more assets avoid school problems, substance abuse, violence, and

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making poor decisions. They can bounce back from adversity.

Community assets. Developmental assets. Resiliency. Positive youth development. Strengths assessments. Heliotrope embraces them all. While unable to claim authorship of any of them, we strive to learn from all of them. In that vein, we are not alone. President Woodrow Wilson once said, “*I use not only all the brains I have, but all I can borrow from others.*” **H**

- 1 Washington Kids Count, The State of Washington’s Children, December 1997 (University of Washington: School of Public Health and Community Medicine), pp. 9, 16
- 2 Public Agenda, Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation (1997 Public Agenda)
- 3 Kretzmann, John and John McKnight. Building Communities from the Inside Out (Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1993)
- 4 Carlson, Margaret. “Here’s a Precious Moment, Kid,” *Time*, September 22, 1997, p. 101; Resnick, Michael D. et. al. “Protecting Adolescents From Harm,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1997, Volume 278.
- 5 Butterfield, Fox. “Study Links Violence Rate to Cohesion of Community,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1997.
- 6 Pittman, Karen J. “Community, Youth, Development: Three Goals in Search of a Connection,” *New Designs for Youth Development*, Winter 1996.
- 7 “Invincible Kids,” *U.S. News & World Report*, November 11, 1996, pp. 63-64; Werner, Emmy. “Children of the Garden Island,” *Scientific American*, April 1989, pp. 106-111.

Resources

Here are some Web sites, journals, and books on strength-based approaches. If you have a favorite, please let us know and we’ll add it to our list.

- Search Institute 1-800-888-7828
e-mail: search@search-institute.org
Web: <http://www.search-institute.org>
- Resiliency In Action, quarterly journal (articles on research, evaluation, practice, and resources in resiliency and related fields). Call (505) 323-1031 for subscription orders or inquiries
- Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets, related video training program and other books
- Asset Based Community Development Institute
John P. Kretzman and John L. McKnight, Co-Directors
Institute for Policy Research
Northwestern University
2040 Sheridan Road
Evanston, Illinois 60208-4100
(847) 491-3214 or (847) 491-3518
- The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research
Academy for Educational Development
1875 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20009
(202) 884-8267
<http://www.aed.org/>
- New Designs for Youth Development (quarterly publication of the National Network for Youth dedicated to voicing progressive, humane, and caring approaches to the development of youth and community). Call (202) 783-7949 for information or subscriptions

How This Small Business is Building Assets

When I first began learning about developmental assets and the power of caring adults to prevent such tragedies as substance abuse and early pregnancy by young people, I loved the theory. I became very excited about the research, about how the framework of assets was developed, about how different communities were working to build assets. I could see endless possibilities for application of this simple yet profound concept. I became a messenger. (Some people thought I had gone too far when I struck up a conversation about kids with the shuttle bus driver who transported us from the Search Institute conference to the Minneapolis airport last fall, and left him with a brochure about assets).

Then I had a startling thought. Building assets probably meant me, too. Doing it, not just talking about it to others. I may have realized this at the moment I first heard Peter Benson, the President of Search Institute, suggest that this was everyone's job: "If you're breathing, you're on the team," he said.

I like to think I'm a quick study. Once I got a good look at that asset builder in the mirror, I started acting like one. Here's how my small business is working to be part of the solution:

- Hiring neighborhood kids for jobs like addressing newsletters (the expensive part is the food!).
- Ensuring that my assistant has a flexible schedule that allows her time for family priorities.
- Providing a volunteer time-release program for all full-time employees (me!) to tutor twice a week.
- Providing more financial and neighborly support to the puppet theater next door, which provides a wonderful creative program for children.
- Sending at least two postcards a week to thank a person or organization for helping to build assets in my community.

I've changed a few personal habits as well. I speak first to children I meet on a hiking trail, and then the adults with them. I smile at teens on the street. I attended basketball games in which kids in my neighborhood are playing.

Has this changed the world yet? Probably not, but I plan to keep looking for more ideas and trying them. And I probably won't stop talking about assets. **H**

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