

*Changing Lives, Changing Communities:
Oral Histories of Participants in Action for Boston Community Development,
1962–2001*

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INTRODUCTION

ABCD has lasted so long because of the help they give people, and because they are trying to do more and more to help poor folks. They give people a break to get ahead. . . . Now we have to have a college program, like we helped kids finish high school and to get their GED before.

—Stanley Williams, ABCD Board President, 1988–1991

Action for Boston Community Development, Inc. (ABCD) began in 1962 as a demonstration project to organize low-income neighborhoods and provide opportunities for youth in Boston. Initially formed to complement Boston’s urban redevelopment plans, the organization envisioned itself as attending to “the human side of urban renewal.”

In 1965, ABCD became Boston’s official anti-poverty agency, funded with federal money as part of the War on Poverty. Today, through its neighborhood organizations, Head Start centers and affiliated agencies, ABCD operates hundreds of programs to address individual, family and neighborhood poverty in Boston. ABCD is now the nation’s oldest, and New England’s largest, anti-poverty agency, with a total budget of over 100 million dollars and more than one thousand employees.

Early participants in the organization offer us a chance to look back and remember the earliest challenges:

Mrs. Melnea Cass played a mediator role. She understood that in this city in particular there has to be some structure. But she also was a person who had fought for the rights of people. Coard had understood our point of view to some degree and knew that we were young and that we were brash. She sometimes kind of mediated between Bob and us, saying things like, “You all have to take your time, you have to move slowly.” And we would say, “We don’t want to take our time, we want the money, we want to set up the programs.”

—Sarah Ann Shaw, former ABCD Neighborhood Services Coordinator and former
WBZ-TV News Reporter

When I became Director I started to make sure that neighborhood people were hired. Because they lived in the neighborhood, they were dedicated to the neighborhood and they knew how to work in the neighborhood. They knew what houses needed help. It was my feeling then that we needed their experience to know when the technically experienced people should be used. But we needed our neighborhood workers to get out there in the neighborhood and work. They live there; why can't they get paid and work there?

—**Doris Graham, former Director, Dorchester Area Planning Action Center**

A disgruntled SNAP employee once said to me, "Your problem is that you think this is a mission and not a job." I said, "You're precisely correct. It is a mission." And I believe that. To me, it's an extension of my work in the civil rights movement. For most people, it is a job. The vernacular changes: "customers," all of a sudden we have "customers." I say we don't have any "customers" at SNAP; I refuse to use the word. Poor people are not "customers." I have a hard enough time saying "clients"—I like "constituents" much better.

—**Pat Cusick, Director, South End Neighborhood Action Program (SNAP)**

The history of Action for Boston Community Development(ABCD), is a multi-layered story.

One the one hand, it is the tale of almost forty years of plans and programs. From its origins in the early 1960s, the story of ABCD quickly becomes one of Boston politics, of foundation-funded initiatives, of President Johnson's War on Poverty and of policy reactions to an activist Civil Rights movement moved North. Throughout, another narrative can be told of the possibilities and perils involved in building democratic institutions at local and city levels. The sometimes dramatic but ever-present story also emerges of a community-based, nonprofit agency surviving sporadic presidential opposition and growing by attracting public and private dollars in the intense environment of increasing governmental "devolution."

On the other hand, the history of ABCD is the story of people. There are people who come to ABCD for services in their neighborhoods and downtown—including services for children and youth, employment services, GED programs, fuel assistance, training sessions and Urban College courses, to name a few of the many vital activities. At the same time, it is the story of people who work at ABCD, often because they discovered unknown opportunities when they themselves received services, and also because of their commitment to others confronted by the barriers of poverty. Here too is a chronicle of leadership development, of how residents of Boston's neighborhoods learn to serve their communities, their city and their state—as neighborhood activists, elected officials, community board members and policy advocates.

Finally, as with any history, ABCD's story is one of struggle, of unmet expectations as well as achievements. Context matters. What seemed possible in the early 1970s—a lively network of ever-growing community organizations, for example— was harder to imagine in the 1990s, when time for

participation became increasingly competitive with job and family demands, and the links between service provision and community empowerment often seemed less clear. At the same time, the dramatic loss of low-income housing and federal welfare benefits, coupled with an increasing immigrant population, means that the realities within neighborhoods are changing rapidly.

The result is a constantly changing ABCD, even as leadership and underlying structure remain remarkably stable. The “story” becomes that of survival, of keeping one increasing purpose, while other agencies merge or disappear. And as, perhaps, poverty itself becomes less compelling a social issue, buried under broader concerns for economic development and entrepreneurship.

*To tell the history of ABCD you interview everyone—the more the better,
because there are so many sides to the story.*

—**Mel King, long-time community leader and activist**

As we enter a new century, and ABCD approaches its 40th anniversary, it is a natural time for reflection on and documentation of changes, achievements and continuing challenges. We are University of Massachusetts professors writing an authorized independent history of ABCD. This forthcoming publication, a book-length narrative and analysis, will be the first full history on ABCD since Stephen Thernstrom’s *Poverty, Planning and Politics in the New Boston: The Origins of ABCD*, published in 1969.

In the midst of our process, we have chosen to prepare an interim sampling of the stories entrusted to us. We do so because, after interviewing more than 70 individuals, we want to document the richness of the whole story, as well as its complexity. We also hope to inspire others to contribute to our efforts—since we are still looking for photographs, documents and people to fill in the missing pieces of the story.

When we began, in January of 2000, we thought it would be enough to interview perhaps 36 to 48 people, to review the ABCD documentary record and the set of materials concerned with federal poverty programs as well as Boston efforts to understand and fight persistent poverty.

What we found was both encouraging and daunting. We found a process of dramatic change since ABCD’s earliest days, when Boston’s political leadership, its traditional social agency leaders and Edward Logue, the head of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, together created an institution to “research and demonstrate” new approaches to urban poverty. Aside from noted community leader Mrs. Melnea Cass, few people of color and no low-income residents, were involved.

Interviews with early actors in ABCD's transition into one of the nation's first official "Community Action Programs," funded by the new Office for Economic Opportunity, led us to expand our task. They inspired us to discover more before writing a full history, and they helped us identify five critical questions that inform much of the history of ABCD.

- 1) How have neighborhood concerns been expressed through ABCD's local structure, and what have the changing relationships with the central office meant for "community participation" at ABCD?
- 2) What explains the continuity of leadership at all levels within ABCD, and what has been the impact of this continuity?
- 3) How has the relationship between ABCD and the City of Boston evolved and how have low-income communities been affected by the relationship?
- 4) What has been ABCD's role as African American efforts to achieve civil rights and political/economic power have ebbed and flowed, and been joined by parallel struggles of increasingly diverse Hispanic, Asian and other immigrant communities?
- 5) How has the provision of human services, always at the heart of ABCD's activity, been linked with its broader goal of fostering "action for Boston community development"?

With these questions in mind, we read and reread the transcripts of our interviews, more selectively seeking to edit them into stories that serve to give breadth and depth to the story. For now we wanted to let our interviewees present a narrative of what it has meant to create a city-wide organization with a broad anti-poverty agenda, within the wider political and social shifts of Boston, Massachusetts and the United States. We found the caution of John Drew, Executive Vice President, especially helpful:

ABCD's got to be very, very careful it doesn't get stereotyped as one single type, like, "Oh, you're a child care entity." We've got to be careful to say, "No, no, we're a department store. Any product that's out there that we can find to put on the shelves for poor people or others, who need an opportunity, we'll find it if we can, we'll put it on the shelves and we'll try to get it to you.

—John Drew, ABCD Executive Vice President

The voices included here were selected because they offer a range of insights around the five questions above. For the sake of length, we have made the painful choice to present only brief selections from the full interview transcripts. They are presented in a somewhat chronological order, with breaks made for the sake of highlighting linkages between neighborhoods, events, or issues. At the same time, each person's excerpt is meant to stand on its own, as one part of a larger story. The longer transcripts are on file in the ABCD Documentation Project Office and will be used in developing our full narrative history.

In short, this oral history publication is an “insider story” of ABCD, told by people who have been served by and/or worked for ABCD at some point during its almost forty-year history. We decided not to include excerpts from the people who only provided a broader context for the history, or who helped us understand how ABCD is viewed from the outside. Overall, we believe that the selections presented here reflect the injunction given to us by ABCD Director Robert Coard, when he authorized the funding of our project:

*The history of ABCD is the history of the people. People come and grow through ABCD.
The story of what they tried to do, and have achieved, that is the story that needs to be
told.*

—Robert Coard, ABCD President and CEO

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