



The Power of Inquiry: *Betsy Santiago-Layne*

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IS A POWERFUL thing—allowing people to honestly speak out—it's like passing the microphone and not hearing crickets but applause because your audiences are intrigued and want to learn. Without some process like this, programs tend to forget who they are serving. I believe that if you don't include the people that you've intended to serve in thinking about what needs to be done; then your program is not successful at all."

So says Betsy Santiago-Layne, originally from Brooklyn, New York. When she ended up in Boston 15 years ago she had not finished her high school education and she was financially destitute. Single and the mother of two girls, she entered a shelter for homeless families in Dorchester.

What she found at the shelter was an extraordinary community that believed in her and helped her focus on her intelligence and energy. Within months, without any formal secondary education, Betsy found herself involved in a number of research projects that were to change the face of the services available to homeless families across the state. Betsy saw this activity as part of her quest to strengthen herself by deepening her understanding of the situation in which she found herself.

"One of the two research projects that I was involved in while I was still in the shelter included many one-on-one interviews with other people who were poor and homeless. When you

do one-on-one interviews, you capture people's true emotions. You give people the opportunity to really explain their situation. You bring life to their stories instead of getting a whole bunch of numbers and not really knowing why the numbers are what they are. You get to understand what these numbers mean from the perspective of those who are living it.

"When you do a focus group or an individual interview you're able to tell the person 'its ok, this is your moment to let it all out—vent—whatever, and your name will be protected.' The truth is that people shy away from saying really what they need or what really bothered them or hurt them in their situation partly because they are not used to being asked. Most people are simply told what they need, and what they have to do in order to get it. In many situations people feel that they are at risk and vulnerable and they will naturally opt not to give more information because they're afraid to be exposed or expose their family. When an individual or family goes to any social service to access assistance, they are asked basic questions; those questions don't capture how that individual or family got there, or what really affected them and brought them there in the first place. That is the difference and why you are able to capture that missing piece if you approach it right—like you want to know who they are and what they need. Just because you are single with two or three children doesn't mean you all need the same thing. Like me, a lot of these people are single strong women that

Betsy saw this activity as part of her quest to strengthen herself by deepening her understanding of the situation in which she found herself.

One of the most striking facets of participatory research is its capacity to further build the skills and confidence of individuals—in other words, their leadership capacity.

have overcome a number of challenges before they even stepped into that social service or shelter. They've dealt with unimaginable circumstances and giving up their social security number is the least of their problems. Yet, at the same time, they've already given it to about 10 different social services agencies in order to get what *they* need and they are frustrated. In research we don't need or want their social security number or anything like that. We want to know what could have made the difference in the person's life and how we could help to make changes in state policies. Hopefully, as a result, people won't have to give up their social security numbers, their birth dates and such to strangers who are just processing them through one program after another.

"The gathering of stories is one of the things that must be done if you want to make real change. It gives you a better understanding of the elements and the surroundings in communities and the dynamics that are going on there. This has to be tied to the information; that there's x number of homeless people or x number of people on welfare, or x number of people that are on unemployment or living in poverty—and this is why. Usually it's not the person's fault—not completely—society has a lot to do with it.

"I was able to decipher certain things as I was going from case to case and interview to interview. I accumulated all these numbers in my head and they were attached to real people (that's the *big* difference). I would go to the state house whenever there was a rally or something like that and I was able to tell the truth in a different way than others did and policy makers paid attention. This came out of the research.

"Usually when I interviewed peers I felt connected and I understood—and I think they got that in return. Since at the time I was homeless myself, being a part of the research helped me understand that I wasn't by myself. I saw people that were out there going through similar situations—of course with differences—and it empowered me to speak out and be heard and not just for myself but for those that didn't have a voice to be heard.

"Eventually it didn't matter who I was interviewing—I felt comfortable at it. One of the projects I was involved in at the time was one where I had to interview shelter directors. It was fright-

ening at first; but at the same time it was fulfilling. The strange thing was that being the researcher felt like I had the upper hand; and that somehow gave me the strength to interview them. This gave me a better understanding from their perspective of what it took to run a shelter. I think that the way the interviews were conducted made them think differently about how to include people who were most affected in their decision making.

"From there I went on to further my education. I got my GED and met a lot of mentors—people that really encouraged me to move forward in my education and attend the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Later on I ended up working at UMass as a research assistant at the McCormack Institute. I worked on major studies relating to welfare, poverty, and homelessness. These were used in public policy."

Building Skills

Participatory research is a methodology that accomplishes many things at one time. It produces information, but because it is performed by and includes the observations of people who are directly affected by the things being studied, it also engages those same people in learning, and in owning and using the knowledge acquired. Thus it is partly an organizing tool, useful in building a common agenda while building an active constituency for the agenda.

But one of the most striking facets of participatory research is its capacity to further build the skills and confidence of individuals—in other words, their leadership capacity. The disciplines learned in a well run participatory research project—interviewing and surveying; discernment of themes and trends; the mixing of numbers and stories into a cohesive narrative; finding a way to strike the balance between involvement/empathy and observation—these are high level skills for community workers.

"In my personal life I have learned from what I've gone through and the opportunities that have been given to me but most important, I have learned to question the 'facts' and find out what is going on around me that might lead to a particular situation I am facing. I have also been able to raise three girls that do this. So, I have given them something valuable and it makes me feel so happy because I see them passing it on to their friends. It's a chain that makes us all stronger."

Copyright 2006. All rights reserved by Third Sector New England, Boston, MA. (Volume 13, Issue 1). The *Nonprofit Quarterly* features innovative thinking and management practices in the nonprofit sector. For reprint permission or subscription information please go to www.nonprofitquarterly.org/subscriptions.