

In memoriam

John Leonard McKnight, November 22, 1931–November 2, 2024

John Leonard McKnight, 22 de noviembre de 1931–2 de noviembre de 2024

The death has occurred, peacefully, at the home he shared with his wife, Marsha Barnett, in Evanston, Illinois, of John Leonard McKnight on 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2024. John will be missed by the thousands who followed in his footsteps in pursuit of the Holy Grail of Asset Based Community Development, building on the foundations laid at Northwestern University, in Evanston, by Saul Alinsky and in partnership with Jodie Kretzmann.

John L McKnight was brought up in small town neighbourhoods in Ohio before moving to study as an undergraduate at Northwestern University where he soon became immersed in political activism, opposing racial and religious discrimination and towards the goal of active citizenship. After a period of National Service in the U.S. Navy in Korea he returned to Chicago to work with activist organisations in the Alinskyist tradition of community organising.

After President J.F. Kennedy's election, in 1960, he joined the federal government in a new department that created the Affirmative Action Programme, a theme that was to imbue his life's work. He subsequently served as Midwest Director of the United States Civil Rights Commission where he worked with the civil rights movement in the later 1960's, a time of significant radicalisation and turmoil in American cities.

Unusually, for one who only had an undergraduate degree to his name, in 1969, Northwestern invited him back to help initiate an interdisciplinary initiative to support progressive urban policy and action and awarded him a tenured professorship. John's family background, together with the influence of radical thinkers of the period, Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich,<sup>1,2</sup> fed into the Alinskyist tradition, and how John then developed his novel approach to community organisation. Freire and Illich, in different ways, advocated for a community development approach to social change and challenged the domination of institutional responses to social problems. John's father, also John McKnight, had been a pastor with the United Methodist Church and its emphasis on service and empowerment within communities.

As a result of a national study of the critical success factors involved in effective local neighbourhood initiatives, McKnight and his long term colleague, Jodie Kretzmann, co-authored an innovative guide to Asset Based Community Development, based on a robust framework for mapping the assets of communities. This book *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Identifying and Mobilising a Community's assets*<sup>3</sup> became one of the best selling guides to community development with worldwide impact. Subsequent books have included *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterparts*,<sup>4</sup> *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods*,<sup>5</sup> with Peter Block, and *The Connected Community, Discovering the Health, Wealth and Power of Neighbourhoods*,<sup>6</sup> with Cormac Russell.

Among his many contributions to local, national and international life, McKnight could claim a role in the formative influence over a President of the United States of America, having been one

of Barack Obama's trainers as a community organiser and he was an attendant at the presidential inauguration.

Seen from a public health perspective McKnight's influence in community organisation was not immediately apparent, with its roots in the conditions in the inner cities running in parallel to the emerging agenda of the New Public Health as advocated by the World Health Organisation.<sup>7,8</sup> However, a paper he gave to The Other Economic Summit in 1985, titled *De-Medicalisation and the Possibilities of Health*, prefigured the convergence of the two traditions that was to come. In the paper, McKnight asks "How did we get so distracted by medicine?": an unhealthy obsession, with its addiction to medicine" and "the medicalisation of oldness". He describes modern technological medicine as "a tool in search of a use", and quotes Mark Twain as saying "if your only tool is a hammer, all problems look like nails".

In a recent *Conversation with Albert Dzur*,<sup>9</sup> the distinguished democratic theorist, McKnight identifies five steps of an ABCD power ladder away from subservience of the citizen to professionals and institutions to citizen enablement (a form of community autonomy): from victims; via clients and consumers; through being advisers; then advocacy; and finally to be producers. McKnight used to say that the etymology for client was 'on your back', and that "health cannot be created, only enabled".

At some point after the adoption of the World Health Organisation Strategy of *Health for All by the Year 2000*, in 1981, with its emphasis of public engagement, partnership working and tackling health inequalities and McKnight's 1985 paper at The Other Economic Summit there was a meeting of minds and a sharing of traditions and approaches. 'It takes a village to raise a child' a common adage in third world health development, and the notion that 'individuals and communities are half full, rather than half empty', paved the way for convergence on practical ways forwards. In the health arena the global WHO Healthy Cities networks provided a ready complement to those already forged by John and his colleagues.<sup>10</sup> Public Health colleagues in the European Public Health Training Consortium, now in its 32<sup>nd</sup> year, have been particularly enthusiastic adoptees of ABCD and the mentorship provided by John McKnight's alumni.

As we reflect on a life well lived and pay homage to an outstanding teacher, mentor and change enabler John Leonard McKnight will live on through his storytelling and aphorisms.

## References

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