

## STEPS TO INTEGRATION

by Susan Downing

### Panel II: An Interview on Equity and Community Building



What does inclusivity look in a community and how can it be integrated? This was the main discussion point of An Interview on Equity and Community Building. Led by Katherine Correll from the Downtown Colorado, Inc. along with Nita Mosby Tyler of The Equity Project and Brian Corrigan of Futures United Network, the panelists explored how the integration of inclusivity can be approached on many different levels from state to individual as well as sharing anecdotes about how inclusivity has impacted their lives.

The discussion started with a question about how comprehensive investment of a place can effectively be communicated. Brian Corrigan equated this idea to being invited to a birthday party as a friend versus as an obligation. The difference between genuinely feeling accepted and part of a community instead of forcing that interaction is one of the most vital parts of successful integration. In his words, “you’re invited to the party but you’re not really invited to the party, you don’t really belong”. Letting people feel like they belong in a community is key to integration and the use of arts and design are tools that can help them feel like their voices are being heard. Brian summarized it clearly when he stated, “how we get people integrated into the process where they feel like they were invited because they want them there not because of what they are but because of who they are.”

Knowing who someone is and valuing them for that means acknowledging what an asset they are to the community. This line of thinking led to the panelists discussing how important it is to focus on the assets in a community as well as what the community itself represents as an asset.

Nita Mosby Tyler shared a story about living in Five Points and being the only African American family on her block even though historically the neighborhood was predominantly made up of African American residents. She shared how many of her new neighbors didn’t know any of the area’s history and that it saddened her to see people not taking the time to appreciate the history of where they now live. On the other hand, she also met an older white man in the neighborhood who had lived in Five Points for many years and had even refused to move when segregation was implemented in the area. The point of this story was to show that someone like that man is a valuable asset to the neighborhood, especially as the history of the area is being ignored. On the other end of the spectrum, Brian Corrigan shared a story about his experience with the integration of the gay community in Denver. When he first moved to the city, he said he only lived and hung out in Capitol Hill because that was the only place where the gay community was present. Nowadays, he says he is starting to see gay bars pop up in neighborhoods all over the city. This shows that market acceptance can help organically facilitate integration into communities.

The discussion then moved on to a question about the role and responsibility of each person as well as how to intentionally plan interactions and awareness. Most of the panelists agreed that this question really boils down to the word equity. What that word truly means and how it relates to inclusion were key to understanding how a person affects integration. To create equity, it is important for people to work on advancing the systems that they are creating so that everyone in

the system can thrive. It is key to identify the elements that need to be in place so that inclusion can happen. No matter what system is being improved the key to inclusiveness is making it a win win for the community, win win for the organization or whatever is being represented, and a win win for the individual. The panelists pointed out that typically it is a win win for the individual that is skipped, which can lead to people being invited to the table only as a token. To avoid this situation, it is important to design interactions that let people connect in authentic ways which can lead to more positive interactions.

A large part of the discussion was then spent talking about how an individual can help integration and what can be learned by engaging with individuals. Listening to individuals in a community and determining what is important to them is the key to understanding what they need from that community. Nita Mosby Tyler talked about her decision to move to Denver as an example of this. She was being recruited by Kaiser Permanente and when they offered her the job, they asked what it would take for her to feel like she belonged in Colorado. After listing things like where the black salons and black communities were Kaiser Permanente came back with a compiled “tool kit” of everything she had asked for and more. This attention to her individual needs is what made her decide to take the job and move to Denver. This principle of asking people what they need is at the heart of creating inclusive communities. It is a simple question but it is vital to creating communities that are stronger. All it takes is listening to an individual’s needs and paying attention, especially to the people who might be on the edge of a community and understanding why they don’t feel included or welcome. For the people who are already a strong part of the community it is important that they realize their responsibility to share the place they love with new people. As Brian Corrigan pointed out, this doesn’t always mean everything has to run smoothly and often times it’s better if there is some friction. “Friction is good, it means you’re touching down” and it “means that people are paying attention”. This friction allows the important issues to be brought into the forefront for discussion and without that there would be no change in a community.

The idea of an equity circle was brought up by the panelists in regards to this line of thinking. An equity circle is the intent to gather a group of people in order to learn what people need but at the same time teaching them about what equity is. This allows for the exchange of resources by teaching and gathering information simultaneously. By learning from other people and asking questions it is easier to understand what they truly need from their community. The panelists discussed how most people in today’s society are hungry for interaction and authentic connections with other people. When someone becomes curious and starts asking questions and understanding the needs of others it usually can lead to creating these organic, authentic interactions that have become rarer.

The last part of the discussion touched on the role of the public sector and private sector in creating integrative communities. For the public sector it is about creating systems that “allow for all different levels and all different people to come into the community”. As Nita Mosby Tyler pointed out, there has never been a system of true equity in this country, so the first step is to acknowledge that fact and own up to it. After that it is about creating a more equitable model as we go and looking to other models for inspiration on how they can handle the intersection of many different systems that are already in place in this country.

The focus the panelists had when talking about the private sector’s role in integration was in the workplace, specifically the hiring process. Nita Mosby Tyler shared that when she was head of HR at Children’s Hospital it was important to her and her colleagues that they employ people who lived in that community. This meant they had to determine what that looked like, what jobs were present on campus but not being filled, and most importantly, how to get people from the

community into those jobs. They made Children's Hospital into an anchor institution that committed to hiring individuals who already lived in that community. This showed that there are "no brainer processes" that companies can get on board with that engage and make a commitment to the community they are a part of.

The three panelists all brought unique perspectives on equity to the discussion and their stories were well chosen to highlight the topics being discussed. While the stories were good at supplementing the ideas being presented, I felt like they dominated too much of the discussion. It would have been more informative if more actual strategies were presented and talked about instead of only hearing about specific cases that happened to the presenters. One part that could be improved was that there were many big topics being presented and instead of being able to focus and delve into one of those ideas in depth the presenters had to quickly discuss one then move onto the next. It would create a more cohesive discussion if there was only one main topic to discuss and that would allow the panelists to explain more of their thoughts and strategies to a fuller extent. Overall, this panel covered many important issues in regards to integration in a community and each panelist introduced intriguing ideas on how to define equity in a community.