

***The Grantmaker Forum on
Community & National Service***

**2nd Annual Conference
Citizens Serving Together:
Idealism in Action in the 21st Century**

**Keynote Address
by
Angela Glover Blackwell
Sunday, November 7, 1999**

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service was founded in 1993 to represent the interests of grantmakers nationwide who share a belief in the power of service and volunteerism as powerful community problem-solving strategies. The Grantmaker Forum has over 1300 members, spanning the full spectrum of philanthropy, from corporate foundations to family foundations, from private foundations to community foundations. The Grantmaker Forum is devoted to building awareness of the value and ethic of service and volunteerism and to maximize opportunities for all Americans to give of themselves for purposes greater than themselves. We believe that service rewards not only those who receive it, but also those who give it and that the ethic of service is the foundation of civic responsibility and self-reliance. Though focused primarily on the philanthropic sector, the Grantmaker Forum strives to build a broad-based, cross-sector support for our work.

In November 1999, the Grantmaker Forum hosted its 2nd Annual Conference, *Citizens Serving Together: Idealism in Action in the 21st Century*. The conference showcased ways in which people coming from different backgrounds, communities, age groups, and neighborhoods are working together to solve problems through service. More than 120 grantmakers, service leaders, and government representatives came together to explore the relationship between service and civic engagement.

Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and president of PolicyLink, gave the keynote speech identifying the qualities necessary to ensure a thriving democracy. Ms. Blackwell challenged the audience to view the creation of a vital democracy through a new lens, one that necessarily rests upon broad civic engagement, an equitable opportunity structure, and broad economic participation. The following is the transcript of Ms. Blackwell's keynote address.

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I'm happy to be here because I appreciate having to think about service in relationship to the broader issue of revitalizing democracy. In reading the materials, it was clear that there's been real debate among you about the role of service, with some concluding that one of the reasons to advance service is to get people involved with the broader society, and get them thinking about democracy and what it takes for democracy to survive.

When I was at the Urban Strategies Council, we did a report on mentoring and examined what could be done to encourage more mentoring programs. We started a mentoring center, that still exists in Oakland, to help organizations doing that work connect with the support they need. As a person who grew up in a home where service was important, who has been involved in a number of organizations that needed volunteers, and who worries about the problems of young people and children and families — I absolutely understand that volunteering is essential.

I love young people. I actually argue about young people with one of my best friends who doesn't think much of young people. He is always complaining about how this generation doesn't have values, and how people aren't involved. He finally said to me a few weeks ago, "You know, you're always talking about these young people. I'm going to have a dinner with the ten young people who I think are really great, and I'm going to have it at your house because I want you to know them." I said to him, "I don't think you know ten young people that you think are really great!" And what was so funny is he ended up only inviting nine. He didn't know ten. But I know hundreds. I know hundreds of young people who have my complete admiration. And the idea of young people finding outlets for channeling their commitment to building a better world really inspires me.

But for all the personal gratitude and affection and appreciation I have for service, I'm not so sure that service has revitalized democracy. I'm not so sure. And so I was happy to have to think hard about it because I was forced to confront the shallow notions that I was carrying around in my head and develop arguments to support them.

I came to democracy really when I made the journey from the Urban Strategies Council to the Rockefeller Foundation. I guess, like so many people, I was happy to live in a democracy, and I had used the word many times. It was not until I went to the Rockefeller Foundation and started developing the Building Democracy Program there that I understood how committed I had

always been to democracy, and that one of THE most important contributions that anybody makes to democracy is to do local work.

I have had my best job, and there's just something both sad and nice about that. The sad thing is to know that you've had your best job, to realize that no matter what else you might do, you have already had your best job. But the nice thing about it is to have had it — to have had it. My best job was the time that I worked at the Urban Strategies Council. Before I worked at the Urban Strategies Council, I had worked at a national public interest law firm. Before that I had been a community organizer.

The Urban Strategies Council focused its efforts on Oakland, California. And for all the impact we may have had beyond Oakland, our work was to make Oakland a better place by bringing the best data and information that could be amassed to the job of building community in Oakland. We tried to get all of the people who worked there — whether in government, business, or foundations — as well as those who lived there, to understand the challenge. We worked day in and day out to the point that I couldn't run around the lake or go to the grocery store or go out front and get my newspaper without somebody engaging me in conversation about Oakland. I even grew to care about what happened to the Oakland Raiders and I don't even like football! But, you know, the city loved the Oakland Raiders so much that I, too, actually started to care. That complete connection between your professional life, your personal passion and the place where you live is the best it ever gets. I had that job.

At the Council, we were trying to build community from the point of view that everybody had to do well. And that equity had to be our driver.

When I went to the Rockefeller Foundation and I started telling people about the work, I realized that I knew more about democracy than many of the people at the foundation who were thinking about it. That was because every single thing we did in Oakland was about creating voice, about building participation, about understanding the relationship between practice and policy, about

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understanding that everybody had to be a part. And we found that our approach of trying to solve problems in a real place for real people was the best way to engage issues of class, race and inclusion. Those issues would just naturally bubble to the top.

When I went to the Foundation and started thinking about a building-democracy program, I knew that it had to ultimately translate into the language that people could understand on the ground. If it didn't translate, it was merely a dialogue that was interesting and engaging but it wasn't about really building democracy. As I thought about the things that we needed to focus on if democracy was going to thrive as we entered the new millennium, I realized we had to be quite clear about the conditions that would be necessary. It's funny, when you talk to people — particularly to young people — they think of democracy as voting and representational government. Those are the mechanisms of democracy, but they are not what democracy is really about. Those aren't the conditions that allow democracy to really thrive. The conditions that allow democracy to thrive have to do fundamentally, I think, with three things. One is broad civic

engagement. The second is an equitable opportunity structure. The third is broad economic participation.

Without those three things, we don't have the foundation that allows democracy to thrive. And while we need, of course, to watch over things like policies that are aligned with democratic practice, it's basically those first three. Working on those three is precisely what community building is all about.

Let me go back and talk about broad civic engagement. I think Robert Putnam, the author, has done an extraordinarily good deed for this country in terms of getting people to think hard about their associational life and their engagement in the civic life of their communities. Those two things are related to each other, and relate to democracy. I first came to know Putnam's work through the book *Making Democracy Work*, which was about Italy. I was working in Oakland at the time and *Making Democracy Work* spoke to everything I was doing there.

In *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam was making the point that the difference between Northern Italy and Southern Italy had to do with the way people were associating with each other, and that there were a great number of associations, particularly in the form of choral groups, in Northern Italy. When he turned his attention to this country, however, I don't think he did as good a job. He has a book coming out called *Bowling Alone*, which is based on an article that he had written. When the book comes out, it may well be strong. But until the book comes out, I still have to go on the article that he wrote and the conversations that he's been having.

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The piece I think he's missing about this country is that our associational life is not going to be what brings us together until we learn how to get comfortable with difference. He doesn't deal enough with our discomfort with difference, the fact that we haven't dealt with race, the fact that we really don't know how to have an associational life that crosses the lines.

As I think about this country, it becomes clear to me that focusing on our problems will be the thing that causes us to get involved and change the way that we live. Broad civic engagement is what happens when people come together to solve their problems. If they come together authentically, and do their job thoroughly, then their efforts will lead to the kind of revitalization of democracy that can only come from crossing lines of difference.

One of the things that I did while I was at the Rockefeller Foundation was spend a good deal of time focusing on national dialogues around race, and I found that when we zeroed in on race as the topic, we didn't get very far. It is when you try to solve problems you have in common and try to understand them in all their nuances and complexity, that race rises to the top, and people are more comfortable engaging it as an issue. They understand why they have to engage around race, and what's wrong with the way we were doing it before. Very often the reason we have problems is because we haven't dealt with race very well.

So when I think about broad civic engagement, I'm really thinking about people coming together to problem-solve and to problem-solve in ways that cause us to spiral upwards. There are some great examples of this. One is the Ten-Point Coalition — a wonderful example of churches, community residents, police, and courts all coming together to really think about what do to about youth violence. The effort there has worked. It's had a profound impact in many different areas because people at the local level came together and decided to work on solving the problem. Doing what they could on a voluntary basis, professionals and residents working together came up with solutions that are making a difference.

Another example is the Alliance Schools in East Austin, Texas. There, parents got involved with their schools as volunteers, working to support what was going on in the classroom. The more they got involved, the more they understood fundamentally what was wrong. They got involved in classroom issues, but they also got involved in health issues and after-school issues, and now these schools are making remarkable progress.

I think that it's not until we figure out how to engage people in problem-solving that we're going to figure out how to build the inclusive society that we need. One of the things Putnam did not list when he talked about all the reasons people were bowling alone in this country is the increasing ethnic and racial diversity that we have in this country. Often, the groups where people used to go to gather have become so diverse that they don't naturally lead to social relationships any more. It used to be you'd go to the PTA and then end up saying, "Well, let's have dinner together on Sunday." Then you'd go to the Lions Club and say, "Let's get our families together later on." But as those places have become more diverse, people have become more uncomfortable and it is no longer quite so easy to make that transition.

Whenever I've been invited to speak at groups such as the Elks and the Lions and I talk about equity and inclusion, I say to myself "This is not what people signed up for. This is not why they joined this group and I don't know how many of them are coming back next time." We have not figured out how to overcome those barriers. But if we start working on our problems together, we can go forward. We've got to figure out how to have broad civic engagement that crosses all the lines.

We also need an equitable opportunity structure. Democracy will not survive if we continue to have this growing apart of the "haves" and "have-nots." I spent some time while I was at the Rockefeller Foundation going to meetings on international security. These meetings identified growing inequity in the world as the greatest threat to international security. That same trend will take democracy down in this country. You've seen the data from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. We are further apart than we have ever been. People are poor or poorer than they have ever been, and people are getting richer and richer at the top. And the middle class, for all that we hear about the growing economy, is shrinking.

We need to make sure that we start leveling the playing field from the very beginning. Here in Oakland we have the Eastmont Computing Center at Eastmont Mall which is training young people in how to use technology. There are other examples like Youth Build, which works with young people that others have written off and brings them back.

But we also have to talk about things like Affirmative Action. I don't know what the language is — maybe this is the wrong term — but the concept remains an issue unaddressed that we need to figure out.

Again, I think it comes back to race. I have a bit of good news to tell you about race. I actually think that the American people, when it comes to the issue of race, are better than they seem. Better than they seem. I think we've made enormous progress since the 1950s. During that time, we were in a position in which our public values were better than our private values. People in this country knew that they were not ready to include others, and it took the editorial pages of progressive newspapers and federal policy to be able to pull the American people to a different place. Our public values were better than our private values. History shows we know how to make change when that's the case.

The situation is now reversed and our private values have become better than our public values. Privately, people have gotten comfortable with the notion that they're going to have people who are different from them in their community, and they want other people to go to college, get a job and buy a house. We also think that it's not fair for people to be denied any of those things because of their color. I don't think that the Civil Rights Initiative, also known as Proposition 209, would have passed in California if it had been called the Anti-Civil Rights Initiative. The people in California would not have overwhelmingly voted for it because people, in general, are not comfortable saying that they are against civil rights.

But for all of my optimism about the fact that people have actually made progress over the past 40 years on this issue, we haven't figured out how to translate that progress into policy. We haven't figured out, when our private values get ahead of our public values, how to move our public values along. It is a challenge to harness that information and develop policies that get everybody excited. We could spend time talking about how we're going to meet the challenge. But the point is, we have to do something in the realm of what we used to call Affirmative Action, because that job is not done. We need to level that playing field. We need an equitable opportunity structure and we do not have one.

The next key condition for democracy is broad economic participation. People must have a stake in the economy if they're going to have a stake in the nation. Too many people in this country don't have a stake in this economy. Yes, I am talking about everybody being able to work, and being able to make living wages, with benefits. People who abide by the rules should not be poor. Absolutely not. Yes, I am talking about that.

But I'm also talking about something more. Having a stake in the economy doesn't just mean having a job. Melvin Oliver, who was at the Ford Foundation, has written a book with Thomas Shapiro, called *Black Wealth/White Wealth*. In that book, they make the point that while the income gap exists, the real gap in this country is the gap in terms of wealth. There are any number of explanations as to why that's happening, but that gap threatens the very base of the nation. I think we have some good ideas for addressing the gap and we need to build upon them. This whole notion of Individual Development Accounts, which are asset-building strategies for

the poor, is a promising approach. Another is the Community Reinvestment Act which is an excellent way to get financial institutions engaged.

I also think the Metro Alliance in Los Angeles is an example of an excellent strategy. Metro Alliance engaged in an advocacy campaign to make sure that the local community benefited from a big subsidy that the city of Los Angeles was giving to the Dreamworks movie studio to build its business there. In the end, Metro Alliance negotiated an agreement with Dreamworks that included working with community colleges to train people for the entertainment industry, so Los Angeles residents could get prepared for those jobs. This is another example of broad economic participation.

We need to struggle to figure out what it takes to disperse economic opportunities more widely. We have to get our business partners involved with us in thinking through this challenge and how it relates to their role in democracy. The notion of global markets is a challenge to democracy but we must work together to be able to ensure that economic participation is available to all.

I've gone through these things at some length because these are the issues I think we have to figure out — along with their connection to service. It is not just getting people to volunteer that's going to revitalize and save democracy. We also have to have a framework outlining what we think it will take. I've offered mine. You may have a different one, but we have to have a framework.

I've spent a good deal of time in the past seven or eight years on airplanes and, because I get those nice little upgrade certificates, in recent years I've been spending quite a bit of time in business class. Interestingly enough, I think people talk more in business class than they do in coach. I think the reason for that is people assume that if you're in business class that you're like them. People don't know who's in coach, you know, but in business class people feel that they're among peers. I've been very struck by that.

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And I'll tell you something else — there are not a lot of women in business class! So I have spent time talking to men, and oddly enough, most of those men have been businessmen — I mean business class is called that for a reason! It turns out that many of these businessmen that I have been talking to have been involved in mentoring. It has

really surprised me how many of them have done this.

What's been so interesting is that most of these white, male business people have had very good experiences with their mentoring programs in that they like the young men that they mentor. But it has not helped them to have a good policy orientation regarding what we need to do to increase economic and social equity. As a matter of fact, I regret to tell you, for most of them, I think that mentoring has done just the opposite. I have found in these conversations that while the mentors actually have a good opinion of the young, black, not-so-good student who wears all the baggy clothes, they end up having their stereotypes reinforced and their politics either not touched or

moved to the right on these issues because that student usually hasn't been able to finish school or hasn't been able to keep a job, or has gotten in trouble with the law.

So I've thought that these mentoring programs aren't really giving us the approach we need because they're not building policy. They do not lead us to build an understanding of what the real problems are and what it's going to take to solve these problems. And I think that should be very troublesome for you. It is troublesome for me because I have been an advocate of mentoring.

So we need a framework. If you're really thinking that part of what we're doing by promoting service is promoting democracy, we need to think about what it really takes to promote democracy and make sure that we're making that connection. I think what we need to do is to get people involved not just in service but involved in policy dialogue. I don't know how we do it at scale, but I think that's our challenge. We've got to find places for people to come together and talk about what they're seeing, examine some data, explore some alternatives, look at some policies, and think about how to move forward.

If we're going to get people involved in service, we have to think about the people that they are going to connect with in those places, and what they're going to learn. I started off by talking about how good service is. But if part of what we want to do is revitalize democracy, to have people understand what the conditions are for democracy, some portion of it has to very consciously connect people.

The other thing that I think that we're missing here is that we're not telling the stories. We're not telling the stories about what's working in community, and we need to have people who are involved in service telling those stories. One of the things that I have been very annoyed by recently is the way that we're spinning the decline in black teenage pregnancy and the reduction in crime. I don't know if any of you have been annoyed.

In the city of Oakland, for example, there's been a 30% reduction in black teenage pregnancy. Now I happen to know Oakland, and there have been real conscious efforts on the part of the Oakland community to reduce teenage pregnancy. People have been in coalitions, they have been studying data, they have been collapsing programs, they have been linking one thing to another. One piece of data they found out in Oakland — and this is probably true nationally — was that the most likely contributor to teenage birth was a teen who already had a baby. Well, that is a wonderful piece of data to have because it means we know who they are and we can target them. That's exactly what Oakland did which I think is part of the reason that teenage pregnancy has gone down by 30% in Oakland. It's gone down 17% in the African American community nationally. We must be doing something right.

But yet the spin on the reduction in teenage pregnancy is that welfare reform is working. That people realize that they cannot get another check for having another baby, that people understand that they're going to have to go to work. Well, maybe that is part of the contribution, but part of the spin we ought to have on that story is that people in community have been working hard on this issue and their efforts are starting to pay off. Where's that spin? If people get involved in

programs, they need to tell the stories about what's going on in those programs, so that gets to be part of what we are talking about in the broader society.

Crime is another example. Crime is down in every category. Crime is way down in some categories. Well, the spin on it is that it's the police and the great job they are doing. The spin on it is it's three strikes and policies like that. Well, I will tell you, a decade ago people who lived in communities where crime was just rampant said, "We cannot have this happen in our community." And you couldn't go to a community where people were not organized around this issue. "Mad Dads" were out on the street corner at 2:00, 3:00 in the morning, talking with young boys. Grandmothers and great-grandmothers were coming out, even though they were afraid, to say "we're going to make this block safe." People started talking about safe passages, they started saying we've got to talk to young people, we've got to reconnect to young people. This was happening all over the country. Where's that spin? Why are we not claiming those successes? That's service, but service without storytelling, I think, sort of misses the point.

So we've got to figure out ways to get people claiming those victories, telling those stories, and turning those stories into policy dialogue. That's how we're going to build democracy.

I actually am excited about these times. I think that part of what has me so hopeful is even though I can't point to anything that's really getting better, I can point to the right conversation that's happening in almost every area that I've been a part of.

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Take education. While it doesn't look so good at this moment we are having the conversation that we need to have about public education. For one thing, we are talking about whether or not it ought to be public, what the role of public education is in a democratic society, how we make sure that

we educate all children. Before this, we've been very nostalgic as a nation, and I think that that's what the '90s were about in terms of the policy world. It was a decade of nostalgia, when we were thinking about how the schools used to work, how it used to be when we were all bowling together, as Putnam would say.

I think that we're in the right conversation when we talk about educating all the children and bringing everybody in. We're in the right conversation about equity. We're in the right conversation about regionalism, and smart growth. We're questioning whether or not we should continue to sprawl outwards, and if not that, then what? What excites me is that we're in the right conversation. And I think that if we can build the kind of leadership that we need for the future, these conversations will turn out right.

One of the things that I talk about a lot is minoritarian leadership. There is an approach related to minority status that I think is beneficial. People who have had minority status in this country or who have been outsiders, when they are successful, they are successful because they listen for the common ground. They try to find the strategies that include. They try to understand the point of view of the other. And the reason they do that is because unlike Captain Jean Luc Picard on *Star*

Trek, they can't just say, "Make it so." They have to make it so by working with others to get there. The kind of leadership that comes from that minority point of view is what can lead us to the new places. And there are many examples of this kind of leadership because we're a nation in which we are all minorities. None of us can say "Make it so." We'll only make it so because we listen, we understand the interests of the other, and we then think about how to translate that interest as we understand it into the policies that we need so that we are truly inclusive and democratic. Thank you.

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