Grassroots Education Alliance of Rome (GEAR)

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Purpose

- Addresses local problems and creates positive change in the primarily African-American and Latino communities of south and east Rome through community-based research.

Background

In mid-2000 Dr. Janice Morrissey, then a professor of sociology at Berry, met with members of two local grassroots organizations representing low-wealth minority neighborhoods to identify and recruit local leaders interested in engaging in community-based research.

That fall GEAR emerged as a partnership engaged in community-based research to address local problems and create positive community change. Twenty-five community members and 15 Berry students attended the first meeting.

The alliance's overall goal has been to build the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities to effect positive change through democratic education and research. The partnership, composed mostly of women, reaches across lines of race, color, class, and age to join students and community leaders in co-learning and capacity-building relationships.

GEAR received initial grant monies for community-based research from the Bonner Foundation. In December 2001 Berry's sponsorship of the partnership ended and the collaboration continued as an independent initiative sponsored by South Rome Community Association, Just Connections, and other private funders.

How It Works

Membership
GEAR is led by Janice Morrissey and officially partnered with the South Rome Community Association. Berry students, including Bonner Scholars, members of the East Rome Community Association, and others are involved in the organization. GEAR is a partnership based on mutual respect, exchange of knowledge, and equal participation in the research process.

Meetings
Members meet weekly in GEAR's offices at the South Rome Multicultural Center to plan events and actions. GEAR's staff, including a former South Rome Community Association president and a Bonner Scholar, work four weekdays and often travel on weekends to develop the group's initiatives. Other meetings and events take place as scheduled.

Community-based research
This research is a collaborative approach to investigating and solving the problems of local communities and challenges traditional kinds of "expertise" by empowering local community groups to develop their own knowledge. As community members work with Bonner to identify, investigate, and document their own problems, they acquire the tools and knowledge needed to bring about change.

GEAR has also linked efforts with other community-based research organizations. The group has collaborated with Just Connections to link to other Appalachian community-based organizations in the development process. GEAR is in the process of developing partnerships with other groups in Rome, including the College, elementary schools, and a technical school.

Research Philosophy
It is important for a community-based research organization to be organized around research but allow broad guidelines. As an organizing tool and to record its progress, GEAR utilizes the learning wheel developed by researchers in conjunction with University of Tennessee-Knoxville to gauge a broad range of developments in a community's learning and improvement process.

Education
Community members involved in GEAR have identified their goal: to raise the educational performance of children and adults in an effort to enhance their lives in every way. The group has performed two needs assessment surveys, created a "community resource brochure" to respond to those needs, offered a summer camp for late elementary-age girls in the neighborhood, and run a "Bucks for Books" reading program in a neighborhood elementary school. The organization is currently writing a funding proposal to create opportunities for parent involvement in schools to bridge the divide between teachers from outside the neighborhood and the families within the neighborhood.

What Makes The Project Unique

This organization provides a unique catalyst for change in communities that have many resources, such as caring people and vibrant churches, but are disabled by poverty, racism, or disinvestment. People who become engaged in community-based research discover that their horizons are expanded while they use their skills to make lasting positive change. The process is not easy and can often be disheartening and frustrating, but it is a very worthwhile experience.

The partnership allows community members to work alongside professionals, researchers, and volunteers to assess and treat the problems in the community. Opportunities for self-assessment and self-treatment serve as educational tool for the community and all others involved in the research and service aspects of the organization.

The project also broadens the scope of many of the students' volunteer experiences, with service in the areas of education, advocacy, and research. Knowledge gained through the combination of these components is a catalyst for change.

Students who are a part of this process develop tools for criticism and a sense of civic responsibility. During the research process power belongs in the community instead of the professional researchers.

Benefits

Those who benefit from community-based research include students, volunteers, members of the community, community organizations, researchers, and professionals.

Students develop an in-depth understanding of institutional racism and create strong and lasting relationships with people of a different race. They learn to challenge the status quo by helping to empower the community instead of "going above" the community.

Community members have the chance to develop their leadership skills and become empowered by the possibility of positive change. They also develop potentially beneficial relationships with professionals and colleges.

Together, GEAR's components of education, advocacy, and research serve as a catalyst for change. Members of the community learn how to assess the problems facing them. Members of the college community learn how to advocate for change by learning about assessment techniques and the needs of the surrounding area.

Resources And Partners

South Rome Community Association
• Provides sponsorship.
Just Connections
• Provides sponsorship and funding.

The Bonner Foundation
• Provides funding and office supplies.

The South Rome Multicultural Center and a local coffee shop
• Provide meeting space.

Overcoming Challenges

Funding
GEAR struggled financially at first, but leaders discovered that by focusing on funders' priorities and by starting small, they could obtain funding from private organizations.

Slow Pace of Development
GEAR's process requires stops and starts, with potentially slow and frustrating periods of development in the research. Because community members may change their priorities, move out of the area, and/or experience time-consuming personal difficulties, the project has to move when it can and accept slow periods. Developing patience for the process is one of the most difficult parts of community-based research.

Building Trust
Gaining the trust of community members has often been a tedious process. The development of trust has required countless conversations about the purpose of GEAR, an openness on the part of everyone involved, and the production of positive results that the community can see. Mistrust has sometimes led to the loss of participation by some community members and professionals and occasional difficulty in completing projects. GEAR is developing relationships with some people who have felt left out of the power structure and community initiatives in south Rome. As time passes and GEAR creates results, more community involvement will follow.

Evidence of Success

Many community members have demonstrated a growing trust, measured by openness about personal feelings and community issues. GEAR's latest needs assessment survey was very successful in terms of participation (over 90 percent of those asked to participate did so) and the number of participants who offered to be involved in our efforts for community change (around 85 percent of the respondents).

Community members have begun to attend meetings and offer their concerns, ideas, and advice. GEAR's growing rapport with community organizations and schools is evidence of an increased ability to develop community-based change in south and east Rome.

How to Make it Grow

Within the south and east Rome communities, GEAR must build on small successes in order to draw more community members and volunteers into the efforts.

GEAR must develop relationships with more official partners, including funders, schools, professionals, businesses, and community organizations. Periodic self-assessment is also key, giving participants an opportunity to reflect on progress, celebrate successes, and consider potential future developments.