

# Learnings from the Road

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We are on the road a lot these days, and wherever we go, we continue to learn as much as (and often more than) we teach. Last month was no exception. A whirlwind 10 days showed us some of the extremes of life in America, and reaffirmed for us the importance of taking a more holistic and community-driven approach to the work nonprofits do.

What follows then is a bit of travel log, a bit of insight, and a tip or two for doing the work we do every day.

## **Danville, VA & Chicago, IL**

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### The Travel Log

Our trip began in the small Virginia town of Danville, and ended in the heart of Chicago.

**Danville** - a rural southern town trying to reinvent itself as its economy of textiles, furniture and tobacco are no longer able to keep the town flourishing.

**Chicago** - one of America's poster children for rebirth.

**Danville** - a place of classic Virginia gentility, where our favorite waitress, Dixie, nurtured us as if we were her own children.

**Chicago** - at the airport, the cabbie yelled at us for having too much luggage, yelled at us for not wanting to sit with it all in our laps, and yelled at us for not getting into the cab fast enough. (Thank goodness the rest of Chicago was kinder and gentler!)



**Danville** - our first day was blue sky sunny and 70 degrees

**Chicago** - our last day was blue sky sunny, with the wind coming off Lake Michigan and a wind chill of 14 degrees.

But most importantly to us, In **Danville**, we taught rooms full of leaders of small nonprofits - arts and human services and economic development - all struggling to help their community through each of their own missions.

And in **Chicago**, we taught leaders from Bar Associations across the country, daily trying to do their work in the most ethical ways possible, to help both their own profession and their communities overall, all while struggling against the stereotypes found in lawyer jokes and political spin machines.



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of taking a more holistic and community-driven approach to the work nonprofits do.

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### **The Work: Danville, Virginia**



In Danville, we did 2 intense days of facilitating and educating 15 or so groups at a time through our Capacity Planning model.

We confess that we love working in small and rural communities. In small communities, the challenges are harder, the resources more limited, and the spirit overwhelmingly willing to do what it takes. We

were happy, therefore, to be able to share a way of seeing organizational capacity that taps into the collective abundance in every community, even in a small rural community where the economy has certainly seen better days.

After those 2 days, we enjoyed a spirited morning, facilitating discussion among some of the region's funders, regarding ways they could work more closely together to create more impact for the community.

In Danville, one of our sponsors was a leader in the community's economic development efforts - the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research. We were impressed with how forward thinking the Institute is overall, but more impressed with their understanding that we cannot have strong communities without a strong sector dedicated to community benefit!

### **The Work: Chicago**



In Chicago, the American Bar Association's annual Bar Leadership Institute is a whirlwind of workshops for the leaders of state and local bar associations from all over the country - mostly board presidents and executive directors, and most of them attorneys. This year the conference creators added a day of workshops for those who wanted to hone specific skills. And they asked us to teach 2 brief workshops as part of that effort.

The focus of those workshops was supposed to be "Board Orientation." But one can't discuss orientation without discussing why we do orientation in the first place - so boards have the knowledge they need to govern accountably. Therefore, the sessions focused on far more than just orientation. They focused instead on doing what it takes to ensure boards remain consciously accountable.

We were struck by the forward-thinking of the ABA in bringing the topics of boards, orientation, and accountability to their conference. If bar associations are to be effective, it takes more than understanding the "bar" part of the job. It takes understanding what is needed to lead and govern an association. It takes asking those bigger questions: What is the association really here to do? What are we really all about? How can we do the job even better?

**In no particular order, then, some insights from the road... and a tip!**

## Boards and Governance

From attorneys running state and local bar associations, to mom-and-pop, all-volunteer organizations, these two trips made clear the critical need for all boards to understand why boards exist in the first place.

We know the common practice is to talk about what boards should “do.” But because those checklists rarely include the context of “why,” those lists can only assist willing boards in specific functions (such as accounting). Without that bigger context, those lists of board responsibilities won’t engage a board around walking a higher road. And that higher road is what governance is really all about.

However, when a board knows why it exists - when the context of the board’s work is the community it serves - then boards have a framework for making better decisions. When a board understands that its job is to ensure the community receives the very most benefit possible, and to further ensure that the organization’s work is performed within a core of community values, the knowledge of that context invariably brings an “Aha!” moment from which board members quickly figure out the right thing to do.

That’s exactly what we found in both Danville and Chicago (and what we find everywhere we talk about this topic). Board members enjoy discussing their shared vision for a better community, specifically as it relates to their mission. They enjoy discussing the core values and philosophies that will guide their work:

- ✓ ***How do we plan to ensure community impact?***
- ✓ ***How do we create a code of values and core philosophies to guide our work?***
- ✓ ***How do we ensure we have the capacity to get the job done, instead of a litany of excuses for why are not providing the extent of benefit the community needs from us?***
- ✓ ***How do we ensure we prevent risk and liability from eating away at our capacity to do that job?***

These discussions of the things that matter most for any nonprofit organization are significantly absent from congressional discussions and from the national standards we’ve seen. And we fear that will further urge nonprofit organizations to focus on money, rather than community benefit - their reason for existing.

If you are not familiar with our [Community-Driven Governance Model](#), you will find more information on this topic linked from this article’s [Resource Page](#).

[Click Here](#)

From the president of a large urban bar association, to the retired rural school teacher starting a program for disadvantaged kids, it was exciting to see our Community-Driven governance model resonate so deeply across disciplines and across communities cultures. In both Danville and Chicago, the discussions no one wanted to end centered around a vision for a better community, and the core values that inform vision. These are the topics that create amazing boards, leading amazing organizations, all towards creating amazing communities.

## Consent Agenda Tip

When we talk about community impact and core values, people often ask: “Our meetings are already jam-packed. How can we find time to talk about anything we’re not already

discussing?”

The answer is found in a consent agenda.

If you are not familiar with a consent agenda format, you will find more information on this topic linked from this article's Resource Page.

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With a consent agenda, it is critical that board members read their materials prior to the meeting. A common lament among boards using consent agendas is that board members don't always do that reading.

As a result, an item approved by consent agenda in April may come back up in July, only to have a board member say, "I don't remember voting on that! We need to talk about it!" And that's simply because he voted on the consent package without reading what he was voting on.

So here's a tip from the president of a bar association. I wish I had gotten his name, because I'd love to give him credit!

After approval of the consent agenda, a form is passed around, stating, in effect, "I have read the items in the consent agenda, and I am fully aware of all the issues approved on this date." After voting, each board member signs his/her name.

That board president said that this form went a long way towards "encouraging" board members to read their materials and to know what they were voting to approve. And so we share it with you!

### **Stop "Collaborating", Start Sharing**

Lately we have come to disdain the word "collaboration." While nonprofits are told that "collaboration equals success," in reality, that success is often elusive. Instead, what we see in "collaboration" is 2 or 3 organizations sharing decision-making and funding, often to disastrous results.

It is no wonder. The nonprofit world has been sold on a fantasy that organizational leaders will happily share control, share precious funding, share access to their key funders, just because they are told that is the only way their projects will be funded. Instead, human issues of ego, turf and control seem to rule many "collaborative" efforts.

A child of 5 could tell us this approach wouldn't work. Regardless how much ice cream is promised, it is the rare child who will happily take turns, share precious toys, share Mommy's love. Why are we surprised when it doesn't work with grown-up things like money, power, and community influence?

Having founded an organization based on a model of shared resources / functions at every level of the organization, we keep careful watch over what works / doesn't work about collaborations. Clearly, one of the most important factors is trust. And just as clearly, one can see why trust-based collaborations haven't worked: Funders continue to use competitive processes to award grants, and folks who compete have no reason to trust each other.

Oddly, though, many funders blame the nonprofits themselves for collaboration's failure. I wish I had a dime for every funder that tells us, "The nonprofits in our community just won't work together!" It never occurs to them to look instead at their own flawed logic - that a competitive funding system is not the place to force trust-based collaborations between otherwise competing agencies.

At Help 4 NonProfits, we believe systems fail before people fail. In our experience, when we find a better system, the people who were formerly considered part of the problem almost immediately become willing partners in the solution!

If you are not familiar with the core values and philosophies at the Help 4 NonProfits Community Driven Institute, this is just one of them!

[Click Here](#)

We have therefore worked hard to ensure that our workshops begin to create those systems of trust, shared learning, and shared experience. Both the subject matter and the structure of the workshops work to simultaneously help organizations build their own internal capacity, while building shared community capacity.

And that's the approach we brought to Danville.

First we facilitate all the organizations in the room as if they were one organization - asking a question, having them consider it together. For some exercises, we break up organizations, having individuals sit with folks they don't know - the science museum with the food bank; the sickle-cell anemia group with the tutoring organization.



For other exercises, we facilitate discussion among all 40+ attendees, to share the issues they face every day.

Only after that large-group discussion do the individual organizations break out to focus internally on the proprietary issues related to that topic.




As they go back and forth, from group learning and sharing, to individual application of that learning, organizations who might never be together all learn from each other. And one of the first things they learn is that all community benefit organizations, regardless of mission, want the same thing - a safe, healthy, joyful place to live.

The Capacity Planning sessions we did in Danville brought this home for us, as each of our sessions does, everywhere we do this work. Every organization assumes it should tackle Capacity Planning privately. Who would want to confess to a room of competing organizations that your board has trouble finding people to serve? That your personnel policies haven't been reviewed in so long you can't recall? That your signature event cost more to produce last year than it brought in?



But that's just what happened. Organizations new and old, large and small, arts and human service and education and economic development, all learned together about the issues common to all nonprofit organizations. They griped about their boards together; they griped about finances together; and they learned to build a vision together. Then they broke into groups within their individual



organizations, working on their own “stuff.”

And at the end of the day, folks took us aside to tell us they wished they had had more time to learn from each other.

The next day, when we met with Danville’s funders, they talked of their frustrations with competition, and we shared our thoughts about competition. Then we shared the comments from the day before, that the organizations do want to learn from each other and work together. We talked about building trust.

We encouraged that group to examine the behaviors they model to the organizations they fund. If they want organizations to work and share resources together, then funders should do the same. If they want organizations to avoid duplication, then funders should do the same. If funders can’t walk that talk, they should not be surprised when the organizations they fund don’t walk that talk either.

While we frequently share these observations with funders, here’s what we found in Danville: by the time we left, they were making plans to get together again, to begin figuring out how they **could** walk that talk. Had we done no work but this one session, we would have left Danville elated that change was possible, was beginning.

When we aim for a sharing of effort, a sharing of focus, a sharing of resources, all aimed at making our communities better places to live, it doesn’t need to be top-down, and we don’t need to call it “collaboration.” We just need to decide we will work together to make the community a better place to live.

When funders are Community-Driven, the possibilities that trickle down to the community are overwhelming. Danville reinforced that for us so clearly, that by the time our plane had left the ground, we had already decided to create a new e-newsletter just for funders. Thank you, Danville!

To sign up for our new newsletter, **Help 4 Funders**,

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### **Nonprofit Work is All Faith Based**

From the word “collaboration,” we note the irony of another common term in the world of nonprofits: “Faith Based Organizations”.

We note this with irony because all of us in this sector, working to benefit the community and the world - all of us live by faith. We may not be “Religion-Based” - may not have our activities stem from a particular view of God or worship - but one cannot do the work we all do without faith.

That becomes more and more clear as we work with more and more groups, from every walk of life. Faith isn’t about “established religion.” Faith is about the human spirit - the thing inside us that separates us from the other creatures with whom we share the planet. It is about life being better. And every person working in the nonprofit sector taps into that spirit every day.

If this trip brought no other subject home for us, it is the conviction that the work nonprofits do is all work of faith, from feeding the hungry to building glorious works of public art. And as we spent time talking with pastors and lay people alike, the one subject

all smiled and heartily agreed upon is that this is a sector filled with faith.

Our workshops in Danville raised this topic as we watched a broad diversity of organizations share their dreams for what Danville could be, long into the future. They quickly realized that they all saw the same future - a future rich in compassion, grace, respect, opportunity - a vision rich in the human spirit.

We were in Chicago the weekend of the St. Patrick's Day Parade, when Chicagoans tint the Chicago River the deepest Kelly green one could ever imagine - a green so out of place that you couldn't help but stop, smile, giggle at how GREEN it is! People laughed, pointed, took photos of themselves in front of it. That silly green river made a difference in their day, touching the spirit inside everyone who saw it.



Then there was music, or sculpture, or a musical sculpture - how to describe it? Long rods of rebar, sticking straight up out of the ground, each a few inches from the next, creating a huge musical instrument that could be played by the wind or by human hands - an 8 foot tall wind chime, held firmly to the earth. At first, I tentatively clanged a few of those bars against each other. Then more firmly. The next thing I knew, I was standing in the middle of them all, dancing and running between them, clanging those bars of different tones, making a joyful noise.

And of course, there is Chicago's architecture - a veritable picture book of faith and the human spirit, as Chicago recreated itself after the fire that eliminated almost the entire city over 100 years ago.



Art. Music. Faith that the community and the world can be a richer, more plentiful place for all. While the body and the mind make life possible, it is the spirit that makes life worth living. In Danville, discussions about the arts led to discussions about a "poverty of the spirit" that keeps poor people from ever thinking or hoping there is an end to their suffering. And in Chicago, at the Bar Leadership Institute, we watched as discussion arose not just about how to be more accountable to the dues-paying membership of those associations, but a larger accountability - an accountability to do good in the community.

Faith and the human spirit at work again.

We were fortunate in Chicago to spend time with the director of the Chicago Bar Foundation - one of many such foundations across the country, whose mission is to increase access to justice for those impacted by poverty, abuse and discrimination. For a single mom trying to collect child support. For an elderly victim of consumer fraud. For a disabled person fighting for the education that will allow him to live independently. Access to justice speaks directly to the spirit our country was founded on!

Faith and the human spirit.

It is at the base of all we do that is good. It is the way we express that which is meaningful inside us.

When we divide ourselves into mind/body/spirit, and believe one is more important than the other,

when we talk about feeding the poor without addressing that poverty of the spirit,

when we talk about teaching math but provide no means for children to express themselves outside the work of the mind,

we do indeed lead lives of quiet desperation.

When we define "faith" and "the spirit" as only possessed by churches, synagogues, mosques, temples - we are cheating ourselves of what is really divine in each of us.

That is what this whole sector is about - the faith that the human spirit can indeed change the world. It is truly the only thing that ever has (she says, with a nod to Margaret Mead...)


As we work to bring a Community-Driven approach to the nonprofit sector, we will continue to notice and talk about that integration of body, mind and spirit. We can only build whole communities if we understand what it is to be whole.

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We are honored and humbled, every day, to work with truly faith-based organizations - organizations of the human spirit. We learned more this past month, from the small organizations in Danville, from the funders in that small community, and from the bar leaders we met in Chicago, than we could have dreamed possible.

This nonprofit sector has so much to teach, so much to share. By tapping that very spirit, focusing organizations back on what's important - the communities they serve - we know the human spirit will be a big part of creating change in the quality of life in our communities.

After all, the human spirit achieves what it aims for. It was the human spirit that flew to the moon. It was the human spirit that created an internet that connects the whole world. Together, our collective spirit will make our communities better places. And we are honored to be part of that effort.

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