



# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: WHAT'S IN A NAME!

BY JOHN STANSFIELD

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# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: WHAT'S IN A NAME!

GUEST EDITORIAL BY JOHN STANSFIELD

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COMMUNITY development, my second craft after automotive engineering, has been the love of my life. It is a discipline that has nourished me, entranced me and given me rich, rewarding and colourful experiences that give meaning to life.

In 2013, after a 10 year sojourn back in the field – including a stint as CEO of the Problem Gambling Foundation, leading a social enterprise in waste elimination and as advocacy director for Oxfam – I returned to Unitec as Head of the Department of Social Practice. I was keen to be part of the renaissance of Community Development in Aotearoa New Zealand and the broader Pacific region. The greedy period of rampant neoliberalism that swept across New Zealand carrying Maggie Thatcher's epithet "there is no such thing as society" had all but driven the discourse of community development from academic language. To speak its name was "verboten" and as we witnessed the rise of more fashionable terms like social enterprise and social bonds it seemed that the sun was setting on community development. Indeed if you had asked me in the 1990s or first decade of this century to give an opinion on investment in community development I would not have rated its chances.

*Something though has begun to change in the fortunes of my beloved craft.*

Little sentinels appear across the landscape that bellow a change. That most blokey and engineering place, the solid waste department of my local Auckland Council, has begun to employ community development specialists. The jobs feed that runs, banner like, across my computer every morning, has begun to signal a renewed faith, by employers, in the skills of community development practitioners. Meanwhile in international development, Governments who had long since ceased to fund community development at home but continued to invest abroad, are beginning to awaken to what works. A grow-

ing clamour is emerging, calling for the rebuilding of the community behind the community development practice.


ANYONE who aspires to leadership in the community development sector is probably a candidate for the society of self-harm. We seldom treat our leaders well; it's part of our anarchic tradition. But anyone who aspires to leadership stands on the shoulders of those who lead before them. In my case they are broad shoulders indeed and in his 76th year I name Gavin Renne as the longest serving teacher, practitioner, mentor and leader in my community of community development practitioners.

I first met Gavin in the late 70s, when he was already well established as a supervisor and mentor for young community development practitioners. A seasoned veteran of change within the bureaucracy, Gavin was the first community development practitioner employed by the then Waitemata City Council in Auckland, New Zealand. In 1976 we worked together in South Auckland, amongst some of the city's poorest communities, struggling to de-colonise the social work profession. Together we built an organisation to challenge the pathologising and racist practice of the local health authority.

Later in the mid-90s Gavin as an established academic invited me to develop a graduate programme for community leaders and managers. He became my boss, a position to which few aspire and fewer survive.

When I returned to the academy in 2013 my old friend was still teaching, and regaled me of stories of the decline and rise of interest in popularity of community development amongst our undergraduate and postgraduate students (at one point enrolments for his class were apparently down to one student – how he hid that from the Dean I will never know).

Gavin will retire this year from his academic role and has been nominated for the prestigious "Friend of Community Development" award conferred at the annual CDS conference to be held in Minnesota later this year. Our inaugural



editor for Whanake, this journal might not have been possible without his store of contacts and bank of goodwill amongst practitioners across the land. Enterprises like academic journals and ACDA, our latest collaboration, rely on being able to excite others in a shared vision and this issue of the journal is proof again that Gavin has engaged some fine minds.

ONE OF THE other great things about having a long-term mate like Gavin is that we've never really been too fussed about the perfect definition for community development but are pretty sure what is not. Since being back in a university environment, Gavin and I have spent much time discussing the general context we wish to place discussion about community development within. There are some stellar shoulders to stand on, in regards to giving definition to the practice.

As long ago as 1948 the United Nations defined community development as follows: "Community Development is a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation and fullest possible reliance upon the community's initiative." (Quoted in Head, 1979:101)

Others, particularly the [Scots](#), who have great passion for the craft, continued to refine and debate and further refine a definition. Meanwhile, Biddle, in the highly rated Journal of Community Development, has debated what he defines as the 'fuzziness' of definition of community development (1966). Heade also discusses the long and proud history while attempting some taxonomy, and organisation [Infed](#) puts collective action and social justice at the heart of their definition. The clever folks at the UK based Community Development Foundation have taken things one step further and built an entertaining online [quiz](#) to inform and test our knowledge on what Community Development is. My favourite definition however, comes from my partner, dear friend, fellow conspirator, and lifetime social change activist Denise Roche MP. In her [maiden speech](#) to the New Zealand House of Representatives she said: "Community development is the crucible of democracy,


the place where citizens come together to share their dreams and plan their common futures."

When I began back in the department we talked about the fact that – despite not needing a solid definition – there is risk that the body of knowledge and skill that is Community Development might be lost or diluted if it was not celebrated, reinvigorated and protected. This journal was formed to do just that. Fitting within a broad framework of what Community Development should be, Whanake was born of wanting to create a place where citizens from across the Pacific region can come together to share their dreams and plan their common futures – safe guarding the many fine definitions that our community of practice has been built upon. Of celebrating, reinvigorating and protecting the conversations Gavin and I have held dear.

This issue of Whanake hence continues a fine tradition of challenge, which began in Volume 1, Issue 1, with Alastair Russel's polemic "[Yes we do politics here](#)". Among other articles, in this edition Paul Woodruffe challenges the contemporary neo-liberal view & champions the value of belonging. Geoff Bridgeman and Elaine Dyer take us through a highly innovative approach to place-making with the Toddlers Day Out, which emerges as a "challenging to measure" triumph of neighbourliness. And from the Himalayan foothills I bring tales of resilient communities growing their own futures.

I CAME BACK to Unitec in 2013 because I saw a bright future for community development and somewhat of a vacuum for the thinking and research that would inform it. I had an ache for the long gone gatherings, hui and conferences. I saw a risk that unless we as a profession and community of practice reclaim the intellectual space and reclaim the language, then others, probably philistines impressed with their ignorance and proud of their greed would steal the language from us and sully and pervert the brand of what we hold most dear.

So that's my take on community development and what its name, and this journal, are about. For me community development will always be a grassroots (or 'flax roots' as we often say New



Zealand), people-centred, collective approach that is informed by social justice and a history of struggle. It will understand and hold as sacred the principles of community empowerment that give primacy to the community voice and trust the processes that are part of it.

George Santayana is said to have gifted us this thought process of looking back in order to move forward. “Those who are unaware of history are destined to repeat it,” he mused. Amidst the leaking Panama papers and the rot of the Global Financial Crisis new shoots of hope are emerging, zero hours are rolling back, the greed that robbed societies of the income to build a just world, is being exposed. Journals like Whanake are here to challenge the status quo and remind practitioners that there is renewed energy within in the practice of community development.

Be vigilant and keep your eyes open, there are pretenders and brand thieves on every bend ready to steal what we collectively have built and would gift to those who come after. We owe this much to the Gavin’s of our world who kept the craft alive in a hostile environment in an earlier time.



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## Author Bio

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