

6.

# PEOPLE AREN'T PROBLEMS

---

“ In the end, a good society is not so much the result of grand designs and bold decisions, but of millions upon millions of small caring acts, repeated day after day, until direct mutual action becomes second nature and to see a problem is to begin to wonder how best to act on it. ”

RICHARD CORNUELLE<sup>1</sup>

---

**W**hat would you do if you had to struggle to put food on the table? How about if you were addicted to drugs and not sure how to break free? What if you were shut out of basically every job you ever applied for? And what if you didn't know where you would end up every night because you had no place to call home?

Thankfully, these questions are hypotheticals for most of us. Sadly, they're a daily reality for tens of millions of Americans. Many communities are filled with people struggling to get on their feet, let alone stay standing. Such was the case with Abillyon, a young man I met a few years ago.

Abillyon grew up in Dallas, Texas. He never knew his dad, and his mom was in and out of his life, so his grandparents raised him. They both worked to make ends meet. When his grandfather passed away and two incomes became one, life got a lot harder. Abillyon tried to help his grandmother however he could.

As Abillyon puts it, he did "things I wasn't supposed to do to get money." He believed he had no other choice. It wasn't long before he ran afoul of the law.

Abillyon wound up in the Dallas juvenile detention system when he was only 14 years old, and he was stuck there for two months. That short stay threatened to derail his life to an even greater degree. Abillyon was well on his way to becoming a statistic.

The juvenile justice system is notorious for ruining kids' lives. Nearly 60,000 young Americans are incarcerated at any given time, and about two million are in and out of prison or jail every year.<sup>2</sup> Most

of these kids never committed a violent crime.<sup>3</sup> Once they leave, they tend to become repeat offenders. Exact figures are elusive, but reasonable estimates indicate that more than 50 percent of those leaving the juvenile justice system are arrested again within 12 months.<sup>4</sup> It's a vicious cycle of joblessness, crime, and unrealized potential.

The people who work in juvenile detention facilities have a name for their charges: "throwaway kids." It speaks volumes about the expectations our society has for rehabilitation and personal transformation once a kid makes a mistake. The assumption is that they're a lost cause, worth little in the eyes of others.

But there's no such thing as a throwaway kid. Abillyon and his peers have unique abilities and the capacity to contribute. We're talking about teenagers who should be learning what their gifts are and how to constructively apply them rather than wasting their talents in detention facilities. Instead of making them feel worthless, the juvenile justice system should be helping them recognize their innate self-worth and constructively apply their abilities. For many, guidance and mentoring should be tried first, not sentencing.

That's where the institution of community comes in.

## DEFINING COMMUNITY

If you recall from chapter four, community is what's all around us, all the time. It includes every aspect of civil society, such as family, neighborhoods, religious groups, nonprofits, volunteer groups, clubs, sports, entertainment, and much more. (Schools will be covered in the next chapter.) This definition is expansive, but so is our need for community.

Individual success depends on the health of our communities. A good community provides us with a sense of belonging and a safe environment. It's the relationships—love and friendships—that define a

huge part of who we are. It's the bonds with those around us that cause us to support each other in both cases. It's recognizing our common interests and concerns, which enables us to join together to solve common problems. It's learning at an early age what mutual benefit looks like in practice. Community provides the first safety net we turn to—those nearby who can assist us when we fall on hard times.

## Individual success depends on the health of our communities.

From the day we're born until the day we die, community is all around us, influencing our ability to grow, contribute, and thrive.

To those of us who have benefited from strong community bonds, this sounds commonplace. But for many people (maybe some of you reading this now), this description of community sounds fanciful.

Community is flourishing in certain places and floundering in others. The places where it's thriving share similar characteristics—strong families, strong friendships, strong involvement in social organizations like service groups and churches. People come together, supporting each other in times of need.

Where community is struggling, those qualities are either deteriorating or nonexistent. Families are broken; friendships have given way to distrust; violence and crime are spreading; social organizations are withering; gang membership is more appealing than school or church. Where this is the case, people are hurting, not helping, one another.

In his book *Alienated America*, Tim Carney documents the consequences.<sup>5</sup> In strong communities, people's needs for friendship and self-esteem are met, giving them the foundation to discover their skills and find fulfillment. The result is more opportunity, more optimism, and healthier habits. Problems like addiction still exist, but the community provides support for those afflicted. A strong community

quietly but powerfully points people toward a mind-set of contribution, shaping their lives for the better.

The opposite is true in struggling communities. About 60 percent of Americans now report feeling lonely and isolated, and for Millennials, the feeling tends to be more acute.<sup>6</sup> (This was prior to “social distancing” and self-isolation during the 2020 coronavirus outbreak.) Absent the strong bonds we all crave, and often in the face of harmful external conditions, people develop self-destructive habits and attitudes. The consequences ripple outward, hurting job prospects, earnings potential, and mental health while pushing people toward crime, addiction, and dependency.<sup>7</sup>

Carney also shows that no one is immune to a community’s collapse. We’re so heavily influenced by our surroundings that even people who are doing well in a struggling community eventually start to exhibit the psychology of their neighbors—alienation, addiction, anger.<sup>8</sup> Some might escape these places, but that’s not a long-term solution. It’s tragic when the only option to save yourself is to leave your community.

Both types of community are self-reinforcing—one headed up, the other spiraling down. Yet the latter isn’t foreordained to collapse. If some communities are healthy due to strong relationships and social cooperation, then rebuilding those bonds can save struggling ones.

This can’t be mandated from the outside; it must evolve from within. Strengthening communities depends on building on their

**A strong community quietly but powerfully supports people and points them toward a mind-set of contribution, shaping their lives for the better.**

essential nature, which means empowering their members to assist one another. It depends on, in the words of the innovative thinker Richard Cornuelle, “millions upon millions of small caring acts, repeated day after day.”

## THE TYRANNY OF EXPERTS

Sadly, empowerment isn’t the approach of the vast majority of anti-poverty efforts.

Take the War on Poverty, which President Lyndon B. Johnson launched in 1965. He declared the aim was “not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it.”<sup>9</sup> The government created dozens of agencies and programs designed to lift Americans from poverty to prosperity. Philanthropists largely adopted the same approach, assuming that people outside, not inside, struggling communities know the best way to fix them.

More than a half century later, the poverty rate has barely budged, and intergenerational poverty is still a massive crisis.<sup>10</sup> For example, Tom Fletcher—the impoverished man whom President Johnson met in 1964, moments before launching the War on Poverty—died essentially destitute in 2004, despite decades of government support.<sup>11</sup> And his family has continued to struggle.

All told, our country has spent \$15 trillion and counting in this titanic struggle, and what do we have to show for it?<sup>12</sup> Poverty has become easier to endure but harder to escape.

Public policy failures are not the only failures—far from it. Foundations and individuals have spent enormous sums trying to lift up the least fortunate, with little to show for it. In 2018 alone, philanthropists gave more than \$50 billion to poverty-related causes, and tens of billions more to issues that indirectly address poverty, such as education and healthcare.<sup>13</sup>

I know many of them personally and can attest that their intentions are good. I can also attest, after brainstorming with quite a few, that they are disheartened by their lack of effectiveness.

Why do such efforts fail, whether governmental or philanthropic? Why are so many Social Entrepreneurs trying and failing to make a difference? Because they generally view the people being helped as problems that need to be solved, rather than as the source of the solutions. Their efforts are based on top-down control, not bottom-up empowerment.

The “logic” behind top-down control is that the smartest people can design a program that will make everything right. Adherents to this idea truly believe they have the best knowledge, enabling them to create a one-size-fits-all formula capable of fixing anything. They may not come right out and say it, but it is clear from their actions.

This mentality is nothing new. People have always fallen for simple solutions to complex problems. For some, it reinforces their self-esteem. For others, it feeds the desire for power and prestige. Either way, both policymakers and philanthropists have bought in to top-down control. The people they intend to help are paying for it.

William Easterly calls this approach the “tyranny of experts.”<sup>14</sup> The tyranny stems from the so-called experts’ control mentality, leading them to force their “solutions” on others. Convinced of their own superior abilities, philanthropists and policymakers impose their vision, their values, and their plans on the downtrodden, without understanding the facts on the ground. They fail to account for the infinite complexity that stems from each individual’s unique needs and talents. The least fortunate, who are typically seen as needing a caretaker, pay the price.

Additionally, the people and programs devoted to helping the least fortunate are typically measured on inputs (dollars spent) instead of outcomes (individuals empowered). Similarly, those who are charged with supporting the poor are generally focused on managing them

instead of enabling them to rise. I've read that some members of the Black Panthers had a name for this in the 1960s—"poverty pimping."<sup>15</sup> They predicted the slew of programs would help the anti-poverty workers more than the actual poor. They were right: dependency has become the standard for these programs, not self-sufficiency.

Fifty-plus years of such efforts demonstrate that this approach doesn't work. America has a poverty-industrial complex that uplifts shockingly few people at a shockingly high price. More than 75 percent of Americans agree this approach has failed.<sup>16</sup> There's got to be a better way.

## EVERYONE HAS POTENTIAL

The poverty-industrial complex is almost entirely focused on people's deficiencies. Sadly, this convinces them that they really are deficient. (Remember young Abillyon and the idea of "throwaway kids.") Over time, such a negative approach destroys their self-belief and motivation and reduces their aspirations.

Yet by focusing on what the least fortunate *lack*, policymakers and philanthropists miss what they *have*—the potential to overcome the obstacles holding them back. Even the most downtrodden are capable of unique and valuable contributions.

Just ask Mauricio Miller, who grew up in poverty. Having spent his professional life in the field, and having firsthand experience with the anti-poverty programs created by politicians, bureaucrats, and philanthropists, he argues that the entire system basically "hides [the poor's] talent and potential."<sup>17</sup>

The introduction to Mauricio's book, *The Alternative*, is aptly titled "Disrupting the Deficit View." *The Alternative* is a powerful argument against the status quo and a call to action for anyone who really wants to help the least fortunate succeed. For his novel way of thinking,

Mauricio won the MacArthur Foundation's Genius Grant in 2012. The organization he founded, the Family Independence Initiative (FII), is a great example of his ideas in action. More on FII shortly.

Mauricio's wisdom bears on every Social Entrepreneur who cares about issues like poverty, addiction, or any other ailment afflicting communities.

If you're focused on deficiencies rather than contributions, your efforts will reflect it. You'll double down on the wrong approach—more good money after bad, more control, more programs that prevent people from becoming the best version of themselves. You'll hurt those who are struggling, even as you try to help them.

Conversely, if your focus is on potential, you'll approach people in a spirit of support and encouragement, helping them find how to contribute and succeed. You'll empower, not stifle—and therein lies a better way.



More than half of the kids coming out of juvenile detention go back within a year. Less than 15 percent of those who go through Café Momentum have ended up behind bars again. (Los Angeles, 2019)

## COMMUNITY REIMAGINED

Which brings us back to Abillyon.

Abillyon doesn't see himself as a throwaway kid. When he introduced himself to me, he said, "I'm Abillyon—that's easy to remember because I'm going to be a billionaire." Whether he makes a lot of money or not, what he's thinking and doing will give him a more fulfilling life. He's discovering his abilities and contributing, leaving a life of debilitating financial hardship and crime behind.

Why? Because he was fortunate to find a transformative project that empowers people: Café Momentum.

Café Momentum is the brainchild of Chad Houser. Once ranked among Dallas's best up-and-coming chefs, he bought in to a restaurant in 2007. Then in May 2008, through a volunteer program, he taught a few young men in juvenile detention how to make ice cream. One of them told Chad how much he enjoyed it, saying, "I just love to make



Chad Houser founded Café Momentum, a transformative restaurant that helps kids coming out of juvenile detention believe in themselves. (Colorado Springs, 2019)

food and give it to people and put a smile on their face.” Chad left a changed man, a Social Entrepreneur, and it wasn’t long before he founded his own restaurant—one with a very specific mission.

Café Momentum gives young adults with criminal records a job, enabling them to get back on their feet and build a foundation for future success. Instead of telling the kids that they’ll never amount to anything, which they hear constantly and come to believe, Café Momentum shows them they have talent. Then it demonstrates, day in and day out, that there are people willing to help them develop and apply it in a positive way.

Abillyon started in a 12-month internship at Café Momentum. He did basically everything there is to do in a restaurant, from prepping food to waiting tables to the back office. By working in a variety of positions, he learned where he excelled and where he didn’t. He also wrote a résumé and went through mock interviews.

All Café Momentum interns go through the same experience. Many, if not most, won’t end up in the food industry. But the lessons they learn



Abillyon’s story shows how Café Momentum enables people to overcome barriers.  
(Super Bowl LIV, Miami, 2020)

at the restaurant prepare them for a life of contribution, no matter what they choose to do.

Abillyon knows that Café Momentum transformed his life. He says that if it weren't for the restaurant, he "would probably be in jail or on the streets or dead right now." Instead, he says, "I feel like I have a purpose, like I'm doing something that's actually helping people."

Nor is Abillyon alone. In Dallas, while more than half the kids coming out of juvie end up back in the justice system within a year, less than 15 percent of those who go through Café Momentum end up behind bars again—ever. Empowerment instead of punishment puts them on an upward path.

But Café Momentum is doing more than just helping these kids. It's challenging the "throwaway kid" mind-set—and changing people's perspective on how to uplift the least fortunate.

Most of us write off kids who go through the juvenile justice system, if we ever think of them at all. That changes the moment Abillyon steps up to a table to greet diners and take their orders. When he looks his customer in the eye, smiles, and asks what they'd like, they no longer see a throwaway kid. They soften and realize these kids can contribute, just like anyone else.

What makes this story even better is that Café Momentum is consistently ranked among the best restaurants in Dallas.<sup>18</sup> These kids don't just contribute—they do so at the highest levels!

Furthermore, many benefits arise from the tens of thousands who eat at Café Momentum every year. Employers may look at a job application from a kid like Abillyon a little differently next time. Teachers may react differently when a kid acts out in class. Others may tell friends about the extraordinary meal and mind-set change they had and encourage them to check it out themselves. I can attest that once you experience Café Momentum, there's no chance you'll keep it to yourself. It creates a ripple effect of changed lives and minds.

This is already happening. Chad and Café Momentum caught the attention of the NFL, leading to a national profile on *NFL 360* and multiple pop-up restaurants in cities with NFL teams.<sup>19</sup> One pop-up was organized in conjunction with the NFL draft in Nashville, causing the city to consider changes to its juvenile justice system. Another pop-up restaurant was established through a partnership with the Los Angeles Rams. It, too, spurred some serious rethinking.

These efforts led to Café Momentum doing a Super Bowl event and forming a partnership with the Players Coalition, a player-led initiative to fight injustice. These are only a few of the ways that Café Momentum is changing the conversation about helping kids in the juvenile justice system.

## SOLUTIONS, PLURAL

In Café Momentum, we see the seeds of institutional transformation. Transforming communities involves finding projects that empower, celebrating success, and challenging others to get engaged.

Whatever problem you're focused on, know that there is no single solution. That's a paradigm that must be dispelled—that one approach, one program, or a one-size-fits-all initiative can make everything right. When you look at these issues from the bottom up, you don't go to communities and tell them what works. You go there to *find* what works and learn how you can help it improve and spread.

Café Momentum is far from the only transformative project out there. In the past five years, Stand Together has discovered groups with a similar philosophy in more than 200 cities in 47 states. We support nearly 200 community-based initiatives, and we're just scratching the surface. Each one focuses on how people in poverty are the source of the solution, rather than problems to be solved.

Take the Family Independence Initiative, founded by Mauricio

Miller, whom I just mentioned. His years of work in top-down, control-based anti-poverty projects completely disheartened him. He knew that approach didn't work, and he saw what did in the families that refused to participate in the programs he ran.

This led him to found FII, which has a simple guiding principle: believe in people. Instead of telling people how to live, it supports them in pursuing their own path while helping them build community.

The results: On average, families that stick with FII for two years see their monthly incomes rise 27 percent, their savings jump over 200 percent, and their dependence on government assistance drop 36 percent. Nearly 90 percent of students in these families do better in school. Such results are unprecedented in the anti-poverty space. Recently, FII introduced a technology platform that has enabled them to begin scaling nationwide.

Or take Safe Families, which is focused on foster care. An estimated 437,000 kids are presently in the U.S. foster care system, a number that grows larger every year.<sup>20</sup> Kids in foster care are more likely to struggle with education, employment, and emotional stability.<sup>21</sup>

Safe Families helps prevent that from happening. When parents fall on truly tough times, it partners them with families who temporarily take care of their kids. They don't have to give up parental rights, as they would in the traditional foster system. Remarkably, 93 percent of families are reunited, compared to less than half of those in foster care.<sup>22</sup>

## REAL RESULTS

Think back to chapter five, where you encountered The Phoenix and met its founder, Scott Strode, now in substance abuse recovery for more than two decades. Scott's exercise-based model accomplishes what other treatments fail to provide: long-term support in a strong community setting.

# DANA SMITH

## TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE

---

**DANA SMITH IS REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR THE PHOENIX. SHE STRUGGLED WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER FROM 2000 TO 2009.**

There I stood in a Colorado alley, remembering how I got there. It's where my life took a radically different course. It was there that I realized I had finally found what I had been looking for. It was there that I found the strength and the community I needed to walk away from addiction forever.

Standing in that alley, I thought of everything that had brought me there. It started with some really bad choices I made when I was in high school. I craved excitement, which led me to drugs. What started with pills turned into heroin, then into dealing and arrests.

My thoughts turned to my last arrest. It came after I drove under the influence, drifted into oncoming traffic, and hit a man on a motorcycle. He never made it home to his wife and daughter.

I remembered walking into prison after my conviction. All I wanted to

do was forget about what I'd done, but I couldn't. So I tried to distract myself in any way I could. The only thing that seemed to help was running. It was the only time I felt like I was worth anything. But I still felt alone.

From that alley, if I closed my eyes, I could still see the little plastic TV in my prison cell, all those years ago. There was a man on the screen, talking on CNN. His name was Scott Strode. He talked about his gym where they boxed and about going rock climbing, something called The Phoenix—a place where people who struggled with addiction were coming together to find a way to heal and let go of the shame. His words gave me hope that I could one day do the same.

I vividly recalled the promise I had made to myself that day watching Scott. I said I'd finish my sentence, complete my parole, and move to Colorado to be part of The Phoenix



Dana Smith broke free from drug and alcohol addiction while in prison. Now she's helping others do the same as a leader at The Phoenix. (Colorado Springs, 2019)



The Phoenix builds a community around each person that helps them recognize their unique potential and break free from addiction.



Scott Strode suffered from substance use disorder, which he beat through exercise combined with community. Now he's helping thousands of others do the same. (Colorado Springs, 2019)



The Phoenix is well over twice as effective as traditional addiction-recovery efforts. It shows a better way to end addiction—getting people to believe in themselves.

community. Four years later, that's exactly what I did.

I remembered the first time I walked into The Phoenix. Almost immediately, we got to boxing. I was so nervous. I didn't know what I was doing. But people welcomed me. And no one asked me what drugs I did. Instead, we talked about our families, our recovery, and how to throw a right hook. Hours later, I left happier than I'd been in years.

And that's how I found myself that night. In that alley.

I realized I was standing in the same spot where Scott stood in the video that I saw back in prison, with my hands on the same fence. On one side of the fence was The

Phoenix. On the other side was the world that I'd come from years ago. I could still hear the words of hope that Scott had said on CNN. He said his goal was to bring people from the other side of the fence into The Phoenix community.

Everything I'd done up to that point was rushing through my head. I knew I could never give back what I'd taken from that family so many years ago. But what I could do was dedicate my life to doing for others what Scott had just done for me.

**—DANA SMITH**

---

Watch a video about the Phoenix's partnership with the Boston Red Sox at [BelieveInPeopleBook.com/stories](http://BelieveInPeopleBook.com/stories)

---

The Phoenix is based on a philosophy of empowerment, viewing everyone as an individual, meeting them where they are, and helping them get to where they could be and *want* to be. Scott's approach to overcoming addiction is to believe in people.

This approach strongly contrasts with how society tends to address substance use disorder. For instance, with opioids, the default is to use medication-assisted treatment, or MAT for short. This includes methadone, a synthetic opioid that often comes with side effects and can itself be addictive.

Think what that means: we're swapping out one drug for another, instead of turning away from drugs altogether. While methadone can be lifesaving, it only treats symptoms. Rather than tapping into the intrinsic resiliency of the human spirit, it says, "This is the best we think you can do." This is common with attempts to help those who are struggling, and not just with substance abuse. It certainly isn't based on a belief in people.

The Phoenix takes the opposite approach, focusing on beating, not treating, addiction. And it works! As I mentioned in chapter five, after three months, a remarkable 80 percent of its members are still sober. To put that in perspective, the three-month relapse rate for traditional recovery methods is between 50 and 70 percent. For The Phoenix, it's 20 percent, making it well over twice as effective.

The Phoenix's peer-support approach is vital. It helps people learn what they're capable of in a nonjudgmental environment. Three out of four participants report having more confidence in themselves, a better ability to cope with stress, better self-esteem, and more purpose in their lives, as well as renewed connection to others. This directly affects their long-term success. More than half of The Phoenix's participants live in poverty, and a quarter are unemployed when they join. Studies show that as former substance abusers regain belief in themselves, upward mobility becomes much more likely.

This is huge. The Phoenix isn't just beating addiction—it's helping address the root causes of its participants' poverty.

Scott's work is inspirational, which is no small feat in an often bleak field. When people dealing with substance use disorder see the transformation in The Phoenix's participants, they realize they have the ability to break free too. Scott sets the tone, wearing a shirt emblazoned with the word "SOBER." You can't miss it. And you come to believe it's possible for you too.

Others are affected. Family members and friends regain hope for their loved ones. Members of the media and medical profession are also taking note.

Unsurprisingly, The Phoenix takes off everywhere it goes. Scott started small, in Colorado, with only one location. But he kept developing his model and his own abilities, allowing him to expand and help many more. Within a decade, he had grown The Phoenix to seven outposts across the country. Since we started working with Scott nearly four years ago, The Phoenix has grown to more than 50 locations, with further expansion on the horizon.

One of its most recent expansions was in Boston's "Methadone Mile." Named after the abundance of local methadone clinics, the area is also home to an open-air drug market. Addiction is its defining characteristic. Efforts to bring hope to its inhabitants fail no matter how much money or resources are thrown at it.

Enter The Phoenix.

The outpouring of interest and involvement has been extraordinary, with more than 1,500 people helped in Boston in 2019. The Phoenix now serves over 10,000 people nationwide, a number that is rising by leaps and bounds. Scott Strode's next milestone is to reach one million people, and he's well on his way. With more than 21 million currently in need of treatment for substance use disorder, this could be a tipping point in how our country thinks about addiction.<sup>23</sup>

## CHANGED LIVES CHANGE MINDS

Just as The Phoenix relies on empowerment to solve addiction, Urban Specialists is doing the same to address gang violence and crime in cities. As you read in chapter five, Antong Lucky and Bishop Omar Jahwar come from communities where gangs are a major problem, which gives them a unique window on the solution. As a former gang leader, Antong in particular has special knowledge about what draws young men to that life and what can help them leave it.

Bishop Omar also knows the problem he's trying to solve. Like Antong, he grew up in South Dallas. But instead of founding a gang, he started a church and a community group. When violence hits his community, he is among the first on the scene. This was the case in 2016, when five police officers were killed by a sniper in retaliation for police violence, including the killing of black men in several cities.<sup>24</sup> Bishop Omar's insight and calming influence saved lives.

His experience as a pastor made him see that people could choose a better path. He began working in schools and prisons and was the first gang specialist hired in Texas to negotiate gang truces in incarcerated populations. In his prison work, he brought gangs together and, through furlough programs, brought people back to their neighborhoods to show that transformation is possible, even in the toughest environments.

Under Bishop Omar's leadership, and now in partnership with Antong Lucky, Urban Specialists has already mentored more than 18,000 people, transforming many lives. Nearly every school where it has a presence has experienced a culture change and a big drop in violence. Some had been designated by the State of Texas as "Improvement Required" schools, a label more than 90 percent overcame.

Now Urban Specialists has launched a new program called OGU—Original Gangsters United—to train a new generation of catalytic change agents. More than 100 OGs were trained in 2019, and that number

should grow tenfold in 2020. And the number of kids the OGs mentor is expected to more than triple every year. For the record, when I say “mentor,” Urban Specialists places OGs at bus stops to break up fights and mediate gang conflicts, among other courageous interventions.

OGs who come from other cities are taking the Urban Specialists model home with them and finding new ways to break the cycle of violence. The group has expanded into Atlanta and Baton Rouge, with more cities targeted. Urban Specialists has been able to successfully grow by remaining faithful to its model, drawing on the experiences and insights of people in its communities.

**Progress will come as more  
people stop looking at the least  
fortunate as problems to be  
managed or controlled and start  
seeing them as individuals who  
have contributions to make.**

And as with Café Momentum and The Phoenix, Urban Specialists’ success has drawn attention from policymakers, reporters, educators, philanthropists, and many others. People see their transformative work and want to help them accomplish more.

## A ROLE FOR EVERYONE

These inspiring examples show that we can make enormous progress on issues that seem intractable. I’m proud to work with many other

partners to help them scale. But much more must be done. For a truly seismic shift, we need increasingly more effective and larger solutions to all the barriers holding people back. There needs to be a bevy of initiatives that empower people and inspire the nation.

If you have the ability and experience necessary to start something like Café Momentum, Urban Specialists, or The Phoenix, I applaud you. If you don't, don't give up—there are plenty of other things you can do.

Philanthropists can provide the funding to expand successful initiatives or get other promising local projects up and running. Businesses can partner with these efforts to help those who are struggling develop and apply their abilities. Activists can look for creative ways to help effective projects reach more people. Even if these options present too high of a bar, anyone can volunteer or otherwise provide support. When you encounter these incredible organizations, make their success known in your conversations or on your social media. Anyone can get involved in their own way.

Determining how you can get engaged begins with discovering the available opportunities. Think creatively, and you'll find quite a few. Now imagine helping to scale the other organizations I've mentioned, the many others I've been fortunate enough to support, or the countless others I'm unaware of. (You may already have some in mind.) Supporting effective ones and celebrating their successes can create a chain reaction.

Progress will come as more people stop looking at the least fortunate as problems to be managed or controlled and start seeing them as individuals who have contributions to make. It will come when we believe in those who are struggling and empower them—one at a time, then 10 at a time, multiplying and inspiring ever more people to participate in the transformation.

There's no going back once you start down this road. Once you see the injustices caused by control, you will do something about it. Once you see how many are being held back, you will work to break down the barriers that stand in their way. Once you recognize what people are capable of, you will see that it is possible to transform the institution of community to help every person rise.