

*Renters Together – A Critical Reflection of an Immersive Community
Organizing Experience in Rural, Midwest America*

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Final Report

During the summer months of 2018, the Morse Scholarship generously supported my proposed project – to encourage the development of equitable and affordable housing policy through grassroots community organizing. The strategy was simple: I was to immerse myself in an ongoing community organizing campaign with the objective of passing new city housing legislation to make Manhattan a more renter-friendly community. The project, as it was proposed, ended up being different than what occurred in practice. Our efforts to pass housing policy reform in Manhattan before the midterm elections ultimately failed; however, though unsuccessful, I learned a great deal about grassroots community organizing. In this report, I will describe in detail my scholarship activities as well as the lessons I learned from the experience.

As conceived, organizing renters in Manhattan was a four-phase process. First was canvassing – meeting personally with renters in Manhattan to give them a space to reflect aloud about their housing story. While available statistics paint a broad yet concerning picture of what the housing situation looks like in the aggregate (fifty percent of people spend more than they can afford on housing, a burden born disproportionately by marginalized and disadvantaged populations; only 27 affordable, adequate, and available housing units exists for every 100 low or extremely-low income resident in need of one), there is no substitute for hearing about the lived experiences of

a Manhattan denizen directly from the source. There is just no way to quantify one's experience perfectly. The next three phases, which I will elaborate on later in the report, were to 1) organize a coalition of passionate and knowledgeable renters in the Manhattan community, 2) lead the group in discussions to elucidate which policies were most in need of reform based on the shared experiences of the members, and 3) to lead them in advocacy training so they can create the political will necessary to enshrine those policy(s) into law.

For a few months, I canvassed, door-to-door. When I began, I reflexively approached each house with trepidation, as I had never done anything of that sort, and I was not yet comfortable. It did not take long, though, for trepidation to turn to anticipation. I was surprised to find that, overwhelmingly, people were eager to discuss their housing situations – many of them invited me into their house to chat further – when I explained why I knocked on their door. Quickly, I was made aware of the severity of many people's circumstances. One man I met had a sign on his door which read, "I'll be out soon, please don't knock." After a nervous knock, he came to the door, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw I wasn't his landlord. The man told me his landlord was kicking him out for being unable to pay rent. It did not matter to him that the renter could not produce the money because his roommate stole thousands of dollars from him and fled. Later that week he packed all he could into an old van and officially became homeless, with his dog by his side. One family of four decided to endure the tedious and time-consuming process of moving to escape the dreadful tyranny of their landlord, just to claim a property a few houses down the street. Countless others were frustrated with

overpriced housing draining their bank accounts, unresponsive or disrespectful landlords, dilapidated structures, and flooding and mold problems.

Canvassing was foundational to the organizing strategy, and conversations needed to be tactical. The goal was ultimately to lead people to a place where they felt that they were not struggling alone – that there was an entire community of people around them who shared their distaste for housing that was unsafe and too expensive, and that they were capable of changing the system for the better if they acted in concert with the rest of their community. No small feat. The dialogue usually followed a similar yet powerful pattern. To begin, I simply asked the renter how satisfied they were with renting in Manhattan, on a scale from 1-10. Whatever their response, I asked them to elaborate on why they chose the number they did. Although there was a plethora of 1s and 2s, most often the answer ranged somewhere between 7 and 9, indicating that they weren't totally satisfied, but overall it was a good experience. When asked to reflect on the number they chose, the renter's response was usually that their landlord was unresponsive, the housing was far too expensive, there were problems with the property itself or some combination of the three. It quickly became evident that renters in Manhattan had grown so accustomed to poor housing that they were habituated to the experience, meaning they struggled to see that something like mold in their bathroom or outrageously expensive apartments didn't have to be normal.

Getting them to realize this was challenging, but critical. I found that an effective first step was to ask them what a 10 on the scale looked like. That is, what would need to change for their living situation to be perfect. By and large, the answers put forward indicated that implicitly people thought being completely satisfied was impossible in

Manhattan. They would say things like, “well I wish I didn’t have to pay so much, but it’s just the way things are here.” Or, “Our windows are drafty and don’t lock, which is driving up the electricity bill and sometimes makes me feel unsafe. I wish that they were fixed, but it’s not too big of a deal.” I wanted them to understand that it doesn’t need to be this way and that *it is* a big deal. So, I would ask, “how does it make you feel that you are stuck paying so much for rent?” or something of the sort. Through the process of talking aloud about how it was affecting them, they would often progressively realize that they are justified in being aggravated with their situation and wanting something better.

This was another critical junction in the conversation. I wanted them to realize that by taking action, they were not acting on behalf of themselves, but for everyone in the community who together was on the journey to more fair housing. Connecting their story to the larger, structural problems in Manhattan helped them see that they are a node embedded in a vast network of people who have collective power. The final and perhaps most vital step in the process was to present them with a task that they could perform that would help address the problems they and others were facing. Often, this was requesting a free rental inspection from code services at the city to ensure their house was safe and to promote a culture where rental inspections were normal. Many people said they would be likely to request an inspection, but I have no data on how many people followed through with this. I carried a variety of materials to try and meet people’s needs, whatever they were. For many people, it was important for them to become better renters who were knowledgeable about theirs and their landlord’s rights and responsibilities. In these cases, I handed them a hard copy of the Kansas Tenants

Handbook. Some were in tight situations and needed legal help, so I gave them the number for Kansas Legal Service. For anyone who was interested in being a part of a large group of renters to advocate for more equitable policies, I invited them to come to a tenant's meeting. This meeting was intended to be the formative gathering of a coalition of Manhattan tenants who could band together and form a small community of action-oriented individuals. Seeing this meeting into fruition was the next phase of the community organizing plan, and many dozens of people expressed interest in participating. However, this is where problems began to arise.

Before canvassing began, we established the day of the tenants meeting so renters could be given a concrete date to mark on their calendar no matter when we arrived at their house. What we did not account for was the inevitability of diminishing interest. Someone who was galvanized and excited in March would have come to a meeting in March, but a ten-minute interaction is hardly enough time to persuade someone to attend a community organizing event in three months. Sadly, we did not do an adequate job of following up with people who expressed interest, and it became apparent that very few people were likely to show up at the tenants meeting. If true, paltry turnout would topple any chance of cultivating a formidable team of advocates, and the proceeding phases of the action plan would be stymied. This looming concern began to worry people in our group, which consisted of three professors and four students. Many started to have doubts that the project would pan out – the professors especially – and a rift grew among us.

Community organizing requires a team of people who are united by both their shared passion for justice and ideas about how to achieve the established goal. At this

point in the project's progression, we were all steadfast in the former but wavered in the latter. My conviction was that to make lasting changes to the housing system, policy reforms needed to manifest in the city of Manhattan's government, or even the state's. On the other hand, the leaders of the group believed that we were getting too ahead of ourselves in thinking that we could organize and train a group of strong advocates with such a small group of part-time organizers. Instead, they felt we needed to change tactics: switch our focus away from building a tenant's coalition from the ground up and instead pour energy and resources into using social media to tell the stories of as many Manhattan renters as possible. In theory, this would build awareness within the community. Essentially, the circulated media would attempt to inspire those who saw it – much in the same way a canvassing conversation often did.

I was not at all compelled by this change of course. I still firmly held to my belief that advocacy was necessary if anything was to change seriously. Building a robust social media platform is not trivial, meaning that there was little chance, unless we were fortunate, that a significant number of people outside our existing social circles would see what was posted, let alone be inspired to act after viewing it. I wanted to do things differently. But while I understood what I wanted to do with the project, I could not assume the responsibility that was previously dispersed among seven people. After a long deliberation, I decided in late July that it would be best if I split from the team and pursue my own project. I recognized that it was a huge gamble: abandon the structure of a group project and create my own, without any help, and risk it falling apart. I was apprehensive, worried that deviating would merely result in nothing happening at all, especially with the beginning of school encroaching. But I had to try.

In short, my fears came true. It is just about impossible to be an independent, part-time community organizer. But I did learn valuable lessons from the project that are noteworthy.

First, for Manhattan to make substantial progress on the issue of unaffordable housing, it needs to have a centralized group within the community that is dedicated to mobilizing people to address the problems we face. Currently, there are many different groups working toward different ends. This is not inherently a bad thing. It indicates that many people here are passionate about working toward a more equitable system. However, severe fragmentation risks squandering the political will – the lifeblood of community organizing – that each group is working to create. This leads me into the second lesson: many, many people in Manhattan are profoundly compassionate and want to see this problem solved, and many more can be mobilized with a compelling pitch. More research needs to be done to better understand how community members respond to messages about acting on behalf of the community. This means investigating how social media can best be utilized to serve this purpose. It also means refining a canvassing pitch to persuade as many people as possible, regardless of income or identity. I am confident that our community, with a common goal, can harness the existing political will to make Manhattan a better place to live for all of its renters. Whether that change happens now or in the distant future depends on how quickly the community can come together.

Thank you again to the Morse family, Dean Goetsch, and Ms. Jane Schillie for giving me the opportunity to take on this project. It has been a great pleasure, and I am deeply grateful.