

RECOGNIZING AND SUPPORTING NATURAL HELPERS OF WELCOME DAYTON: A NON-DIRECTIVE APPROACH

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Welcome Dayton, an immigrant-welcoming initiative, offers recognition to anyone who welcomes and supports newly arrived non-native born community members. The Natural Helpers initiative is an intentional and systemic recognition of the members of ethnic communities who act as cultural brokers, have networks within the community, and are able to provide direct assistance to individuals.

It's a Saturday morning in late Spring, and the vast parking lot is empty. I enter the pre-designated door — there are several entry ways into this building — and I walk into a large, deserted open area. In front of one of several doors leading to hallways, offices, and non-descript rooms is a tri-pod with a sign that says, “Welcome Natural Helpers.”

This building's regular open hours do not include Saturdays. This one-stop Jobs and Family Services Center has made an exception for our first Natural Helper training session. Previous polling of our first Natural Helper cohort revealed that this was the day and time that was available to them to participate in this and all subsequent sessions.

The story of Welcome Dayton is written elsewhere, but I want to note that as a principal organizer of this initiative, our process was based on a belief that a focus on conversation would serve to: offer recognition to individuals and how they relate to one another; uncover and reveal human riches that betray attempts to evaluate; perpetuate people-to-people relations that are never ending; and, eventually, change the ecology of the community. We held four conversations, which resulted in citizen volunteers writing the Welcome Dayton Plan that elected officials were asked to endorse and to support.

The work of welcoming in the U.S. is revealed in every immigrant's story. Emily, born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1946 to immigrants from Eastern Europe, reports that her parents arrived with nothing and knowing no one. A church group welcomed them, and it was these people who helped her parents thrive in their new home. Emily, a first-generation immigrant, is a

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prominent local attorney. Whether it takes one, two, or three generations to support integration (if not assimilation), depends on how open and effective we are to “welcoming” newcomers.

A Process of Engagement

Within the evolving Welcome Dayton Plan was a task to develop a “welcome center” for immigrants.

Welcome centers are becoming more and more common as a result of a nearly unprecedented increase in immigrants over the past 25 years. They are designed to be informal meeting places and to provide access to information as well as community and governmentally sponsored services. For immigrants who are not recognized as refugees or are otherwise “undocumented” residents, governmentally sponsored fiscal and social benefits are often non-existent, but most community-based welcoming efforts are available to any and all newcomers.

The development of the Welcome Center was tasked to a small group of people drawn from the Welcome Dayton committee, local agencies, and interested individuals. We soon abandoned the idea of a welcome center, however, because it was cost-prohibitive. We also realized that we were all oriented towards more non-directive and person-centered processes. Even as we realized this about ourselves, we had continued to pursue a directive approach by accepting the “welcome center” concept without checking in with the people it was to serve.

As a mediator with a long history of using the Transformative approach, I still find it easy to slip into a problem-solving approach. As a group, however, we caught ourselves and intentionally recalibrated how we were relating to each other and how we proceeded to consider supporting and welcoming Dayton’s immigrants. We wrote a guiding principle: *Whatever vision or action we put forth needs to be congruent with our understanding of the expressed needs of our local ethnic groups.* Not having realized this principle, our pursuit of a welcome center was our first example of a “border,” or a dividing line in how we were learning to relate to each other.

Borders are commonly understood as edges that mark a separation or a difference. Understanding borders relationally, or as those interactions that change understanding or produce a (mis)understanding between people, helped us notice when we needed to slow our interactions and mostly listen better to each other. We came to see these borders, or moments of awareness about how we were interacting, as fortuitous. The very act of noticing, reflecting, and deciding how and what we needed to change contributed to a more successful Natural Helper initiative.

These borders became the exact places we wanted and needed to explore. They surfaced when we noticed experiences of “otherness,” i.e. when our interactions were not pleasant, produced misunderstandings, or made someone shut down or express themselves in a distressful emotional manner. Noticing these confusing or emotional interactions became a practice and we began to help each other change how we spoke and listened to each other.

The result was that we changed how and what we were doing either in that moment or in the way we managed or facilitated an aspect of the Natural Helper initiative.

The Natural Helper Initiative

The task of developing a welcome center was replaced with a process to seek out and listen to the people who were already doing what we were setting out to accomplish. We eventually named our initiative the Natural Helper program: A program that sought to formally train a cohort of established immigrants who were already helping these newcomers.

The number of people in our community who would be seen as “natural helpers” is unknown. When asked, though, they responded and revealed what would help them do what they do better. Within our organizational working documents, we defined natural helpers as “members of ethnic communities who are able to act as cultural and linguistic brokers, have networks within the community, and are able to provide direct assistance to individuals.” Our time with them revealed the spontaneous assistance they offered, and that such assistance is so much a part of everyday life, that its value was often not noticed nor given recognition.

While developing and implementing the first Natural Helper cohort, we committed to being sensitive to noticing when a person’s agency or voice was being replaced by or denied by us or others during our interactions. We brought a micro-focus to our interactions by noticing when our interactions, at these borders, produced scripted “counter effects” of dismissal, exclusion, or misunderstanding. We grew to understand the initiative to be more than an exchange of content, but also an opportunity to disrupt this script. Intervening at these borders disrupted their disempowering effect, orienting the participants to conversation as well as orienting them to making their own decisions about how they wanted to act or “be” in that moment.

Our conversations and our committee work included a robust reflective practice, e.g. How are we doing? Are we listening well? How do we know we are listening? What is the effect of what we are doing? Are our interventions fostering continuing conversations that appear to bring clarity where once questions and/or confusion reigned? We wanted to focus on the ways we acknowledged, recognized, and understood each other as we engaged with each other. As a result, we noticed three potential areas that were ripe for misunderstandings or were creating difficult interactions. These were:

- 1) Engagement between us and the Natural Helper cohort members;
- 2) Engagement between the Natural Helpers and agency experts; and
- 3) Engagement among the Natural Helpers themselves.

Engagement Between Us and the Natural Helper Cohort Members

The decision to build the one-stop welcome center was based on an assumption of what newly arrived immigrants wanted and needed, as well as research about how other communities had responded to the needs of immigrants. We were thwarted when we determined its cost, but that was a fortunate obstacle. We set aside our assumptions and instead offered four community conversations in four different locations to ask what the Natural Helpers, who were already doing the work with immigrants, might want in order to make what they do more effective.

The invitations were sent to individuals and organizations, and they included a request to forward it on to others in their communities. An African coalition set aside a regularly scheduled meeting to have this conversation. A Hispanic outreach worker organized and facilitated

one of the conversations. A group of Muslim religious leaders offered an open invitation to a conversation. A fourth group, of Middle Eastern women, established their own time and place to have a conversation.

These conversations provided us with information on what Natural Helpers were currently doing and what they believed they needed in order to be more effective. This information became the basis for the workshops that were provided to the Natural Helpers and resulted in four 5-hour sessions covering the following topics:

- Ethics; Navigating the Job Center;
- Education; Immigration and Justice Systems;
- Healthcare; and
- Advocacy.

The first cohort, developed through an application process, requested ongoing education workshops on topics of their choice in the subsequent year.

Engagement Between the Natural Helpers and Agency Experts

While the subject matter of the workshops was based on the expressed needs of the Natural Helpers, the way we designed the workshops favored the experts we brought in to do the training. It was only after seeing the effect of this that we listened again to the trainees and began to actively facilitate the sessions to support the voices of the Natural Helpers in the sessions so that they would be heard by the trainers.

We eventually understood that the trainings needed to be discussion-based and use case-studies to highlight specific circumstances and questions. Handouts from presenters were encouraged, while PowerPoint slides and formal presentations were limited.

Additional lessons we learned included the following:

- The trainings were offered in English. While interpreters were not needed, breaks were built into each session for Natural Helpers to process the material in their home languages amongst themselves.
- The trainings were offered at the locations related to the topic. The cohort members were thereby given direct contact to some of the actual people who could help them when necessary. Case studies were developed with the agency offering the workshop in order to give the cohort members an opportunity to process the most important components through a simulated experience.
- We actively noticed when the presenters used language that needed interpretation. We tried to be aware of jargon or the use of acronyms. Whether the presenter was finished or not, we tried to notice when there was a misunderstanding or confusion with any of the cohort members and intervened when someone needed to make a comment or ask a question. We got better and better at facilitating actual interactions between the presenters and the attendees and amongst the attendees themselves.

Engagement Among the Natural Helpers Themselves

When we designed the workshops, I do not believe we understood the need to attend to relational issues between the cohort members. We came to see that how the Natural Helpers interacted in the workshop sessions affected all of the members. These border areas, when clarified or given attention to, produced greater understanding between the members and helped us hear how the members wanted workshop design changes to be made.

Our interventions were focused on: supporting everyone without silencing or thwarting anyone's voice; intervening when attending to one person's concerns seemed to concern the group; and designing multiple ways of interacting in order to accommodate different learning styles and to help people connect with each other.

One of the cohort members had little difficulty asserting herself during a lecture or presentation to ask questions. At times, she could also dominate a conversation, leaving the less assertive members to be merely listeners.

While the workshop was designed in part to have a subject matter expert presenting, we actively inserted ourselves into the interaction by reflecting, summarizing, or checking in when one of the cohort members continually brought the conversation to bear on his/her own concerns and questions.

For example, Roxanne was assertive and had a strong command of the English language. She also had a way of steering a conversation by making a point with a story — stories that in content had purpose, but whose length dominated time.

Again, supporting the interaction by checking in with Roxanne and the presenter, we provided the opportunity for both her and the presenter to decide to continue or to broaden the focus to the whole group.

Kai was a quiet person and usually deferred to others in a conversation. Her English was not as proficient as most of the others. She never spoke in the big group. Her teenage daughter always accompanied her to the sessions. Her daughter also did not speak out.

Once or twice during a session we asked the members to take a turn to make a comment or ask a question. Each person could do so or pass. Kai and her daughter did pass at times but also, at times, spoke out. Their contributions were reinforced by the ensuing conversations amongst everyone after they had spoken.

A workshop design-change was to help the presenters develop case studies about their subject matter. The cohort members would break into small groups to discuss the case studies amongst themselves and then bring their understanding, comments, and questions back to the large group. In this way, because of the small group, everyone had an opportunity to speak.

Another design change that came from listening to the cohort members was to provide time at the beginning of each session for everyone to reflect on how the last session was helpful, what worked or did not work for them, and what needed to change in order for the sessions to be effective.

Conclusion: Engaged Listening and a Supportive Response

Intentionally offering recognition for their work led the Natural Helper initiative in an unexpected direction. While the Natural Helpers work within their own constructed social networks, the more they met for the workshops, the more they articulated to each other common themes related to needs, issues, and roadblocks. This understanding resulted in a request for training in how to be more effective advocates for individuals and for community-wide issues. They also asked for formal letters of introduction to many of the agencies they interacted with for their community members. Along with the letters, they asked for name tags that identified them as Natural Helpers — both material and symbolic elements of recognition.

At a recent holiday gathering, Sarah, a Natural Helper cohort member, was telling a story about a family she was assisting. While Sarah was talking, Diane, who was not a cohort member, revealed quietly that she had helped Sarah when she first came to the U.S. While Diane was now raising her family of three children, her husband had stepped up to become a member of the first Natural Helper cohort with an official nametag.

The Natural Helper program evolved from a pre-conceived concept, the welcome center, because we got out of the driver's seat and instead listened to the people we sought to serve. We learned to notice the "heat" that rose when misunderstanding occurred, when a voice was silenced or dismissed, and to step in gently and tentatively. We learned to notice when these interactions impeded communication or quieted voices. The result was a continuous space for intercultural collaboration and an intentionally sensitive way of interacting for developing meaningful relationships.

Supporting the Natural Helpers has had an empowering effect on them. They are "helpers," yes, but they are also change agents in their own lives and in the lives of other immigrants in Dayton.

Addendum

Since this essay was written, events have transpired that I would like to mention. The definition of a Natural Helper has been changed from requiring membership in an ethnic group to anyone who is acting significantly as a "helper" of, or cultural broker for, immigrants. A change in staff personnel resulted in a break in developing new yearly cohorts. Currently, a position description has been drafted and recruitment of an intern is taking place to provide a continuation of the program.

Also, in the time period from Memorial Day to nearly Labor Day 2019, several events have literally torn apart families and houses in the Dayton area. Our community experienced 14 tornadoes that devastated hundreds of homes; a mass shooter killed nine people (one of the victims was a refugee²), a person under the influence of drugs wrecked his car causing the death of two six-year old children; and a person, "in the defense of his castle," shot and killed two youths who were using his garage to hang out in.

² <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/archdeacon-oregon-district-shooting-victim-had-survived-escape-from-tyrannical-country/Z1cKQ781Xmia0QkxQpynNP/>

How do any of these events relate to the Natural Helper program? Since 2011, Welcome Dayton³ has branded Dayton as a welcoming community. Dayton Strong (borrowing from others here) has recently been a stance that is expected to gird us to maintain mental and physical health.

Natural Helpers have always been with us. Welcome Dayton, as well as the Natural Helper program, offered acknowledgement to those newcomers and to those people who were helping them in their new homes, respectively. Some of those newcomers experienced violence in their previous homes and have survived. Their experience and the violent experiences of the last few months in Dayton are all a part of the ecology of our time and place.

Notes

The “We” in this article started as a committee of about 10 people drawn from the Welcome Dayton committee, local agencies, and interested individuals. As we recalibrated from developing a welcome center to supporting Natural Helpers through engaging the community and developing and conducting the workshops, the committee assigned the work to a smaller group of people. Of this smaller committee, three of us, Sally Lamping (Wright State University and Charles Sturt University), Melissa Bertolo (formerly Welcome Dayton and currently Welcoming America) and I, subsequently documented what happened and wrote an article published by the *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, “Activist Citizens in an Immigrant-Friendly City: The Natural Helpers Program.”

While I take full responsibility for this article, I also acknowledge my good friends. They are true colleagues and fellow practitioners and without them this essay would not have been possible.

I want to acknowledge Michel Agier (*Epistemological Decentring: At the Root of a Contemporary and Situational Anthropology*, 2016) as it is his theory on the concept of interrogating the border that I explore in this article.

Finally, I want to acknowledge Baruch Bush for editing suggestions and both Baruch Bush and Joseph Folger for their articulation of the Transformative Framework. Their work led the field to reconsiderations of directive approaches to mediation practices as well as the development of a distinctly unique practice of mediation and other conflict intervention processes. I continue to be inspired by this framework and especially as it affects my civic involvements in the community.

³ <http://www.welcomedayton.org/>

