Building Trust in the Heart of Community

BY ROB CORCORAN

Despite a history of slavery, segregation and resistance to change, something remarkable has been happening in Richmond, Virginia. The city has become a seedbed for a movement of trustbuilding, dialogue, and racial healing involving all sectors that could have far-reaching implications for America.

When my family came to live in Richmond in 1980, the city was in the midst of a political upheaval. Just three years earlier, African Americans had won a majority on the city council and elected the city's first black mayor, Henry L. Marsh III. For decades this conservative southern city had been controlled by a white establishment, most of whom grew up in the affluent West End and attended private schools and the University of Virginia. Many were Episcopalians and made their money in business, banking, or law. The city has always prided itself on its civility, and while in power the establishment had been magnanimous to their black colleagues. Once removed from power, "the old leadership became the highly vocal, visible opposition, backed by the two daily newspapers *Editorial Pages* and *Main Street Money*."[1] Margaret Edds, in her essay "The Path of Black Political Power," recalls that the editorials of the *Richmond News Leader* called the new black majority "monkey-see, monkey-do leaders of a banana republic" and "a bunch of clowns in a Chinese fire drill."[2]

Several fateful events had taken place during the previous decades that were to prove major stumbling blocks to the region's unity and progress. In 1970, Richmond annexed twenty-three square miles of neighboring Chesterfield County, an action that added some forty-seven thousand new residents to the city. Because most of these Chesterfield County residents were white, this action was widely perceived as an effort to dilute Richmond's growing black vote. A civil rights activist, Curtis Holt, sued the city, claiming that the votes from the annexed region cost him victory at the polls. The Supreme Court enjoined Richmond from holding local elections for seven years until the annexation controversy was resolved and then ordered Richmond to replace the previous at-large elections and to institute district-based elections as a condition for maintaining possession of the annexed area. Virginia's General Assembly subsequently put a moratorium on further annexations. Surrounded by three suburban counties, the city accounts for just five percent of the total land mass of the metropolitan region; each jurisdiction operates its own school system, police force, and fire service.

Richmond's painful slowness in integrating its schools finally led a judge to order cross-town busing in 1971. One year later an unsuccessful attempt to consolidate the city and county school systems caused near hysteria and a large percentage of the white population migrated across country lines to neighboring Chesterfield, Henrico or Hanover, or placed their children in private schools or academies.

As a prominent civil rights lawyer who had fought more than one hundred school desegregation cases in Virginia, Mayor Marsh presented a challenge to the old guard who found his refusal to bow to convention a bitter pill to swallow. Many of them never forgave his firing of the assertive white city manager, Bill Leidinger. For nearly two decades, city politics continued to be dominated by race. Governor (now Senator) Tim Kaine writes of his experience as a newly elected city councilman in 1994: "The city government and the city in general were starkly divided along racial lines. Richmond was congenitally resistant to change of any kind."[3]

Race has been at the heart of Richmond's political, business, and domestic life since its founding. When the first Europeans arrived in 1607, villages of the Powhatan Confederacy flourished along the banks of the James River that teemed with sturgeon. The subsequent colonization and the near eradication of native life was one chapter in a shameful history of domination and oppression. The first Africans were

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brought to Jamestown in 1619 and by the time Patrick Henry made his famous "give me liberty or give me death" declaration at St. John's Church on Richmond's Church Hill, Virginia was firmly established as a slave state. By the mid-nineteenth century, Richmond was the nation's largest interstate slave market. At least 300,000 women, men, and children were "sold down the river" from the downtown auction block or marched in chains overland to the Deep South in a vast forced migration. In 1857 alone, human sales at Richmond auctions totaled $3.5 million. Many enslaved people also worked in the Tredegar Iron Works and other industries that built the city's wealth.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Richmond became the capital of the Confederate states in a struggle that cost more American lives than two World Wars, Korea and Vietnam combined. The Union and Confederate armies fought some forty battles within a thirty-mile radius of the city. Today towering statues of Confederate generals on their horses line Monument Avenue as a tribute to the Lost Cause. After Reconstruction, Virginia—like all southern states—enforced Jim Crow segregation, a century of apartheid; and following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that outlawed separate schools, the state led a movement of Massive Resistance.

Catalysts of Change

In the midst of the turmoil of the changing political scene, a diverse group of citizens began to coalesce around the surprisingly bold vision that "the place of greatest pain might be the place where healing could begin," and that by facing its history honestly, Richmond might have something to offer the country as a whole.

In the 1980s an organic process of personal relationship building catalyzed by Initiatives of Change, in collaboration with local allies, developed a project known as Hope in the Cities. Initiatives of Change (IofC), a nonprofit organization now active in 60 countries, has an 80-year history of building trust across divisions of race, class, religion, and politics. Known in its early years as the Oxford Group, it provided the basis for the AA movement, and in post-World War II years it played a key role in Franco-German reconciliation. My own introduction to this movement came through my father, who encountered it as an unemployed shipyard worker in Scotland in the 1930s and who was captivated by its focus on connecting change in individual motives and behavior with social change. He subsequently adopted this philosophy in addressing labor-management issues in many parts of the world.

Having worked with diverse IofC teams in various conflict areas in Asia, South Africa, and Europe, my wife and I came to Richmond initially on a short-term basis in support of colleagues who were nurturing early racial reconciliation efforts in the city. They had built friendships with Mayor Marsh and the new members of the city council. We were inspired with the vision of some of the community leaders we met and decided to put down some roots "for four or five years." We are still here.

We chose to live in one of the city's first integrated neighborhoods and subsequently enrolled our three sons in the public schools where they were part of a tiny white minority. On the first evening we were welcomed by an African American couple who lived across the street. Collie and Audrey Burton were civil rights activists who had led the voter registration drive that resulted in the 1977 black majority on the city council. They were intrigued by our international experiences and with IofC's approach to change and we quickly became friends. The Burtons were carrying the scars of racial oppression and were also dissatisfied with the usual approaches to community change. Collie Burton remarked, "We spent so much effort in changing structures, but we had to keep going back and doing it again because we did not change the hearts of people."

"There had been a buildup of pain, anxiety, and frustration caused by racism, by the way I had been socialized and shaped by society," said Audrey, who grew up in Louisiana, the daughter of a Pentecostal minister. "There had been a need in myself to release a drowning spirit."

She and Collie began to experiment with regular times of reflection. Many years later she told a group of community leaders: "I had to reconstruct my model, to become free of hostility, anger, hate, and frustration. The people we meet at the community

level are full of these things. It was a spiritual transformation, not an intellectual one. Rather than constant confrontation, I learned to be quiet, to reconnect. My behavior and language changed. Way down, deep inside, God called me by name."[4]

The Burton home became a place of welcome, refreshment, and inspiration for people of all backgrounds. Over the next few years, they and others—both black and white—broke open Richmond's often segregated social life by hosting pot-luck dinners in homes across the region. Over fried chicken, spaghetti, or ham biscuits, prejudices dissolved and friendships formed. Sometimes a community leader—a police chief, school superintendent, or county supervisor—would join the group for informal conversion and a rare opportunity to meet with people who were not pushing an agenda. In unexpected ways, potlucks led to new partnerships.

One new relationship in particular stirred interest. The Burtons decided to extend a welcome to a senior white city administrator whom they distrusted and suspected of racism. Howe Todd had a distinguished forty-year career in local government but he and Collie Burton had clashed publicly over the allocation of community block grants. A cookout at the Burton's home was the start of an unusual friendship with Todd and his wife. They agreed to talk honestly. Some months later, an African American executive of a nonprofit organization remarked to me: "Howe Todd used to be known as someone who never listened. Whenever I went into a meeting with him, I always felt that the cards were stacked, that the decisions were already made. Now he really listens to what I have to say." Always the enthusiast, the veteran city manager was so convinced of the importance of his newfound perspective that he called a special meeting of all city government department heads to tell them about it.

From such simple beginnings, Hope in the Cities became known as a space where honest conversation could take place and where individuals could make courageous personal choices to move beyond their prejudices and hurts and take constructive action. The movement was characterized by the realization it must hold itself accountable to model the change and the new relationships needed in the wider community. It determined to take the risk of approaching as potential allies even those who appeared difficult to work with. It held up a vision of what the community might become, in the belief that difficulties—even painful history—if faced honestly can become assets. Finally, it recognized that transformative change requires a change in the hearts of individuals as well as in structures.

Walking Through history

In 1993, in an action taken in partnership with the city government, nonprofits, senior business executives, religious and university leaders, and with the endorsement of the elected officials of the four metropolitan jurisdictions, Hope in the Cities hosted a conference, "Healing the Heart of America: an honest conversation on race, reconciliation, and responsibility." It was attended by people from fifty U.S. cities and twenty-four countries. The highlight of the conference was a symbolic public walk by people of all backgrounds retracing the footsteps of enslaved Africans from the James River to the downtown slave market. The walkers heard stories and marked sites that had been too painful or shameful to remember. They also honored the memory of the thousands of young men who died in the Civil War. As my colleague Rev. Sylvester Turner said of the monument to Confederate Soldiers and Sailors: "When I saw that monument I saw pain, the pain I had suffered as a black man. But then I began to look at it from the perspective of grief, because descendants of the Confederates built the monument out of grief and they need to be healed as well."[5]

The first history walk led to the establishment by the city of a Slave Trail Commission and the highlighting of previously unrecognized sites as resources for education and community healing. Diverse groups of students, members of faith congregations and community organizations now walk the trail on a regular basis. On March 30, 2007, five thousand people celebrated the unveiling of a Reconciliation statue in the presence of ambassadors from Benin, Gambia, Niger, and Sierra Leone and a delegation from Liverpool. (Identical statues stand in Liverpool, UK, and Benin in West Africa—two other corners of the notorious transatlantic slave triangle.) Just one month earlier, Virginia had become the first state in the nation to offer a formal apology for

slavery. Governor Tim Kaine told the crowd at the unveiling that the apology was appropriate since Virginia had "promoted…defended…and fought to preserve" slavery.[6] Last year, a symbolic groundbreaking for a major memorial and heritage site to mark the former slave market was attended by our current governor, a Democrat, and our former governor, a Republican who had allocated $11 in state funds for the project (the City pledged $8 million). Richmond is also the first U.S. city to develop an American Civil War Museum dedicated to telling the story of the conflict from the perspective of Unionists, Confederates and African Americans. Black and white political leaders supported the initiative.

These developments illustrate a key element in the Initiatives of Change/Hope in the Cities process of trustbuilding: the need for traumatized communities to develop narratives that acknowledge the pain, shame, achievement, and pride of all groups. The ability to view stories from the perspective of the "other" can lead to new shared narratives. This does not mean that untruths or injustices should be overlooked or justified. It simply means accepting the complexity and ambiguity of history. "Citizens need time to learn hospitality to each other's feelings about their diverse, painful pasts," writes Donald Shriver. "But suffering, whatever its nature and circumstances, can evoke a common bond."[7]

Reaching Beyond "The Choir"

Under the leadership of Edward Ayers, president of the University of Richmond, the region's universities, museums, libraries, and other intuitions formed a consortium, "The Future of Richmond's Past," to organize events to mark the 150th anniversary of the Civil War and the beginning of Emancipation. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* noted that "instead of fracturing along familiar fault lines of race and mistrust" the commemoration built relationships among disparate groups. "A new focus on the nation's defining conflict has brought out different perspectives on shared experiences and developed a language of respect that enlightens rather than antagonizes."[8]

Indeed, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, a newspaper notorious for its support of Massive Resistance to school integration, is a striking example of a second important aspect of Richmond's trustbuilding process: the engagement of "unlikely partners." Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a number of reporters and editors were arguing for greater balance in news coverage. Hope in the Cities set out to build relationships with those who were working for constructive change within the institution. We approached senior editors to share a new vision for Richmond and to enlist their support in communicating the importance of that vision. After the 1993 conference, which the paper covered extensively, five editors met with a group of thirty citizens to discuss the newspaper's responsibility to the community. Editors and reporters took part in dialogues, community forums, and history walks. On the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v Board of Education*, the newspaper featured a history of Massive Resistance. It acknowledged its "seething advocacy" for segregated education, and an editorial lamented the "massive wrong" of the resistance.[9]

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Today the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* hosts frequent public forums on community issues. News reporting has become more responsive to community concerns, issues related to racial history, and our increasingly multicultural population. In a July 2015 column for the *New York Times*, Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, wrote: "The day after the flag went down in South Carolina, an editorial in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* made the stunning declaration that it was finally time for a truth and reconciliation commission and that Virginia should take the lead. 'Accounting has not occurred,' the paper wrote, 'the half remains untold.' This is precisely what history demands and what this moment requires. Perhaps a new reconstruction could truly take hold and inspire the rest of the country if it sprang from the region that resisted it in the first place."[10] An August 9 *Times-Dispatch* editorial stated: "Reparations seldom

appear on the agenda. The case for them appears stronger than dismissive critics think. Reconciliation depends on truth; truth requires intellectual courage. A dynamic dominion need not fear examining the status of self-evident truths."[11]

The public conversation about Richmond's history opened the way for public forums, widespread dialogues, and training models. Dialogues, typically with eight to twelve participants, are often sustained over several weeks or months. Often they bring together people who might never have been in conversation before, such as members of the Chamber of Commerce and community activists or leading Muslims and evangelical Christians. Carolyn "Cricket" White, who served as Hope in the Cities' lead trainer, says the most powerful moment occurs when someone takes responsibility for what their group has done to create or perpetuate a problem and can claim this in front of the other group. "It changes the whole dynamic because the other side knows already. It's not news to them!"[12]

Richmond's Hope in the Cities team has trained community groups in several states. The Dayton Dialogue, sponsored by the city government, engaged more than 3,000 people over the course of ten years. Oregon Uniting, the Hope in the Cities affiliate in Portland, Oregon, organized a "Day of Acknowledgment" in the State Capitol that was led by the Governor and leaders of both parties and highlighted exclusionary laws and a history of discrimination against African Americans, Native Americans, and Japanese Americans. Oregon Uniting's work resulted in a new curriculum, "Beyond the Oregon Trail," in textbooks in Portland's public schools. This curriculum includes stories of racist laws and the inspiring people who fought against them.

In an ongoing partnership with a Troup County's Trustbuilding Initiative in Georgia, more than 150 community leaders have taken part in training and a further 150 are signed up for future sessions. The initiative is led by Ricky Wolfe, a white former county commission chairman, and former state Rep. Carl Von Epps, who is black. Participants have included three city mayors and multiple city council member, law enforcement officers, pastors, and nonprofit leaders who have met for two-day sessions and bi-monthly community gatherings at LaGrange College. One participant is LaGrange's police chief, Louis M. Dekmar who in January 2017 extended a public apology to Ernest Ward, the president of the Troup County NAACP, for a lynching 77 years earlier when Austin Callaway, a black man, was dragged from a jail cell by masked white men and shot.[13] The lynching was the catalyst for the formation of the county NAACP.

Addressing the Legacies of Racism

In Richmond we are using the community's new understanding of history and willingness to engage in dialogue across traditional divides to address the socio-economic legacies of racism. The city and region are still deeply impacted by policies and structures that reflect a history of segregation and racial bias. Our public schools, housing patterns, public transportation system and employment opportunities all reflect this reality. About 39 percent of the city's children were living in poverty in 2014, more than twice the poverty rate for children across the state.

Starting in 2011, Hope in the Cities and its partners developed a project that we named, "Unpacking the Census." At the heart of this project was the work of Dr. John Moeser, Senior Fellow at the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond. John had studied census data for metropolitan Richmond with a focus on the impact of racially motivated policies over the decades. For example, the lending industry began "redlining" in the 1930s, shading in red on a map areas deemed unfit for investment. The Federal Housing Administration prohibited the sale to any home purchaser in a neighborhood whose population was "inharmonious" with the prospective homebuyer. Official maps of Richmond from that period show a clear correlation between the color-coded neighborhoods—ranging from green (most desirable) through blue, yellow, and red (least desirable)—and today's areas of wealth and concentrated poverty. Race was a major determinant in the coding. John Moeser says that when he and his wife purchased a home in the Carillon neighborhood in the 1970s, its deed had an X-ed out covenant prohibiting the sale of the house "to any person not of the Caucasian race or Christian religion."

In another example, the decision to build the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike—now part of Interstate 95—through Jackson Ward, the thriving black business community, resulted in the destruction of more than 700 homes and businesses. Many of the displaced residents ended up in public housing, which is concentrated in one area of the city.

Using John Moeser's study we developed a video presentation that linked the census data with the historical narrative. With our non-profit partner, the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, we trained forty volunteer facilitators and over the course of the next two years we conducted more than eighty presentations and dialogues for organizations across the region. We found that when people connected the data with the historical narrative there was an emotional as well as an intellectual connection. The result was both a raised awareness and a mobilization of citizens.

The project gave a platform to Mayor Dwight C. Jones' announcement of the city's first Anti-Poverty Commission. Task forces in seven policy areas were assigned to identify and prioritize actions. These recommendations were reviewed by a newly established Citizens Advisory Board, one-half of whom consisted of persons living in or near poverty or working in a high-poverty neighborhood. In 2014, the city created a permanent Office of Community Wealth Building. Mayor Dwight C. Jones called the effort "a testament to the difference that citizens working together with policy makers can make." He told a forum, "We need to understand that [systemic poverty] is no accident; it's the result of policy decisions made generations ago to cement in place the patterns of segregation that have defined our city for so long."[14]

The office of Community Wealth Building (OCWB) is recognized nationally as a promising model for implementing a holistic approach to poverty reduction, working across the key sectors—education, workforce readiness and employment, transportation, health, and housing.

The ambitious goal is to reduce the overall poverty rate 40 percent by 2030 and to reduce the child poverty rate by 50 percent by 2030. In numerical terms, this means reducing the number of persons in the city in poverty from approximately 44,000 (non-college students) to 26,000, and reducing the number of children in poverty from 15,000 to 7,500.

Dr. Thad Williamson of the University of Richmond, who was OCWB's first director, says, "Ultimately poverty is about money. So employment is at the center of our strategy. We are pursuing systemic change…What does it take to move a whole family out of poverty?" He notes that the city currently spends about ten times more in addressing the consequences of the high poverty rate than on its center for workforce readiness which moves families into employment. "OCWB relies on substantial partnerships among non-profits, city agencies, the philanthropic community, universities and businesses with a goal of creating "a culture of collaboration to achieve collective impact."[15]

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John Moeser advocates a regional approach, noting that from 2000 to 2014 poverty grew 59 percent in Chesterfield County and 73 percent in Henrico County and that there are now more people living in poverty in the suburban counties than in the city. "This is the reason we can't stop with an antipoverty campaign within just the city…. When will the Office of Community Wealth Building become regional?"[16]

In November, 2016, Richmond elected as its new mayor, Levar Stoney, a 35-year-old African American who put together a multiracial coalition. He ran explicitly on a community wealth building agenda and has put expanding its work among his top five-year priorities. In his campaign Stoney said one of his goals was that by the end of his tenure Richmond would no longer be referred to as the former capital of the Confederacy. Thad Williamson adds, "Perhaps we will become known as the capital of racial reconciliation…Imagine Richmond being known as the capital of community wealth building

with a racial equity lens and unabashed commitment to inclusion of and respect for all people."[17]

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The most-needed reforms in our communities are not technical. They require adaptive change: new attitudes, behavior, and relationships. They demand levels of political courage and trust-based collaboration that can only be achieved by individuals who have the vision, integrity, and persistence to call out the best in others and sustain deep and long-term efforts. Initiatives of Change and its program Hope in the Cities sees its mission as building the capacity of community leaders as trustbuilders who can facilitate difficult but necessary conversations and create partnerships across traditional divides. Our Community Trustbuilding Fellowship draws participants from Richmond and increasingly from cities across America, representing grassroots organizations, universities, faith groups, businesses, and local government. Each cohort meets over a residential weekend once a month for five months. Through case studies and experiential learning led by world-class faculty they explore the ingredients of authentic leadership, the power of history, the skills of dialogue design and facilitation, and the vital role of sustaining diverse networks. These trustbuilders aim to overcome the false hierarchy of racialized thinking and are working for healing, equity, and transformation of our structures.

Creating space for change in our communities is an art in which we are all learners. It requires skills of the head as well as the heart. Through inclusive dialogue we can hear each other's stories and invite others to share our journey. In acknowledging painful history we can move toward understanding, shared responsibility, and ultimately forgiveness and reconciliation. Through genuine partnerships and sustained teamwork, we can begin to build trust and to bring about change where it is most difficult and most needed.

Notes

1 Tom Campbell, Cassandra Wynn, and Bill Miller. "Old Leadership Not Swayed," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Septemer 22,1981.

2 Margaret Edds. 1985. "The Path of Black Political Power," *ARP Reporter* 8(3), http://aliciapatterson.org/stories/path-black-political-power.

3 Rob Corcoran, *Trustbuilding: An Honest Conversation on Race, Reconciliation, and Responsibility (*Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), ix.

4 Corcoran, *Trustbuilding*, 33.

5 *Healing the Heart of America*, Initiatives of Change video documentary, 1993, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QJZRjPnw0I

6 Corcoran. *Trustbuilding*, 228–230.

7 Donald Shriver, *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember Its Misdeeds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139.

8 Catherine Calos, "Civil War 150th: Divisions of the Past Give Way to Shared Commitment to the Future," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, March, 28, 2015.

9 "Brown & Interposition," [editorial] *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 16, 2004.

10 Isabel Wilkerson. "Our Racial Moment of Truth," *New York Times*, July 18, 2015.

11 "Segregation's Consequences Persist" [editorial], *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 8, 2015.

12 Corcoran. *Trustbuilding*, 87–88.

13 "Nearly 8 Decades Later, an Apology for a Lynching in Georgia," *New York Times*, January 26, 2017.

14 Quoted in Rob Cocoran, "A Call for Regional Action on Poverty," Initiatives of Change web page, March 24, 2016. http://us.iofc.org/call-regional-action-poverty

15 Quoted in Corcoran, "A Call for Regional Action."

16 Ibid.

17 Quoted in Rob Corcoran, "Closing the Racial Equity Gap Benefits All," Initiatives of Change web page, March 21, 2017.

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