

>> I have the great good fortune of working with an incredible group of people at Neighborhoods Centers Inc. and it's been a wonderful journey. So here's a story about something really important that we've learned. Now of course, there's a question -- what comes to mind when you think of a poor neighborhood? And you know that I'm going to tell you to think differently. So go ahead and tell me what you usually think. Help me out. I'm replacing the neuroscientist.

[Laughter]

Don't leave me up here all by myself. What usually comes to mind?

[Multiple Speakers]

Crime, graffiti -- oh, what? -- Hopelessness, rundown.

[Inaudible Answers]

Yes, Yes, Yes, violence. So that's our story that we have about poor neighborhoods. It's crime, and it's violence, and it's broken stuff. Well, this is my story and this is where it started. This is my family. I'm the one with the -- you know, drugstore perm.

[Laughter]

Because I grew up in a little town in Texas and you all know if you're a Texas woman hair is everything. And we didn't have a lot but our hair was fixed. And there were six of us in here but ultimately there were eight of us and those are my 26-year-old parents with six kids. Now here's what I remember. I remember going to the grocery store with my family and I remember having people look at us and shake their heads. They were sure this story could not have a good ending. And we lived in the neighborhoods that you think of, when you think of poor neighborhoods and our house looked like what you would think it would look like. It was kind of broken down. I always say we weren't dirt poor because we still had a floor. We were just a few inches from dirt poor. So -- but my parents had this amazing ability to see beyond that. They were creating a life for us out of their own imagination. Neither of them had ever had anything. My father grew up in an orphanage, my mother grew up without anything but they were determined that there was a different way to live and they were going to pursue it. So they inspired me. I went off into the world saying, this has to be true for everybody. Everybody should be able to make that journey out of their own imagination. How does this happen? Well, the first thing that happened is I got trained. And how I got trained? I was trained to look at poor neighborhoods like this. I was trained to read report after report and to look at what was missing, what was lacking, what were the needs, what were the gaps, what was broken. And in the work I do everyday, we go into those neighborhoods where nobody wants to be. And everybody says, everything in there is broken. There's -- I can say them -- high school drop out, non-English speaking, uninsured, low birth weight, basic, adult obesity -- we've heard it all and you can recite that litany. That's how we think. We want to help so we look at what's broken and

we study it. And we pile up that stack of paper, and we tell everybody in the neighborhood -- pretty soon we've studied so much about what's wrong with them we start to think that they're the problem. They're broken and we almost train people to think of themselves, their neighborhoods and their families that way. Now I had that great good fortune -- we didn't know we were broken. We didn't know we couldn't do anything. My parents just didn't know any better. And all those people looking at us and shaking their heads and thinking well, this is going to turn out badly -- they were wrong. But here's what I learned in my work -- that we stand there with these incredible people and we look at them in terms of what's missing and then we try to help them. And then we help them again. Oh my God, we keep helping them and we keep trying to fix them and we do it some more -- and then when they just won't be fixed and do what we expect of them, we get frustrated. Then we say, well they really are the problem. But you know you really can't build on broken. You never went to college on an application that said -- tell me everything you're lousy at.. Nobody ever asked you to join a business association and said, on the application tell us what you don't do very well. Be sure and put down all the ways you fail. You can't build on broken. And we know that. We ask the wrong questions. So where do we go from here? Well a few years ago, at Neighborhood Centers Inc. we said, why don't we find a way to tell about the people we work with in all these troubled neighborhoods the way we really see them. What I saw, were people like my parents trying to create a new life out of their own imaginations. And they've come here to Houston from all over the world and we are graced by their presence. So what do we say? We say now, that change begins with the first new question. It's not what we are fixing, it's not what we're delivering, it's not a service, it's not a unit, it begins with the first new question. It begins when we say instead, what do you need? We say instead, what do you have? What works? Who's working in this community? Who's connected? Who do you go to? Who do you go to when you have a concern about your child? Where do you -- where do you go when you want information about how to succeed in this city? And we find over and over and over again amazing strengths -- resiliency -- powerful people who've done extraordinary things. We find them right here in every neighborhood, every time. And for the folks who said to us, well that's just a little too Pollyanna, that probably -- that's not going to work.

[Laughter]

So we listened carefully and then this new story came out, right? You've heard some people talk today about giving voice to the voiceless. Sometimes we have to give ears to the earless because everybody's been trained to think a certain way and if you go and ask them to help you help some folks, well they want to hear the litany of lacks, gaps, needs, wants, broken stuff -- and you don't have that story. You have a brand new story about extraordinary people traveling thousand of miles to build a new life in a city where it's more possible than any place else in this country right here in Houston. Where we embrace you. We embrace you for what you bring and what you can do. And that's the way we want to study people. That's the story we want to tell about them. So you can build on that. When you are working with someone around what matters most to them, you don't have to motivate them. If they need training they'll get it. You don't have to browbeat them into a certain way of thinking so they can be fixed. When you will

work with them around what matters most to them -- their child's education, caring for their senior parents -- the thing that they are driven to do out of their own imagination and they cannot help it. When you stand side-by-side with them, it changes. You can change an entire neighborhood. And in every neighborhood in Houston we find these amazing strengths. We find these phenomenal stories of brave, passionate people pursuing a better life. And in case you think it only works in some places -- it even works when there's a disaster. I'll never ever forget sitting across the table from people coming to the city from New Orleans -- some with so little in their hands -- one piece of clothing, one picture, one thing. And I said now this is a test. Can we ask these people -- what do you have? What are your assets? What are your strengths? Can we ask them that in this raw and painful and excruciating moment? And we found we could. And when we began to say, "Tell me about the friends you have here? Tell me what you saved?" They changed the way they sat in the chair. And we watched as people began to sit up straight, and their eyes got brighter and they began to tell about what they could do, who they did know, and they could see the outlines of that first step on a path to a new story. It works again and again. I stood in lower ninth with a woman rebuilding her community -- it works. I've been in troubled community, after written off-neighborhood, after hopeless situation and again and again -- if we ask the right question a change occurs, because as it turns out all of us have those deep aspirations. That imagination and capacity to imagine a future different from the life we've lived and to move toward that again and again. Now those of us who want to help, here's our job -- to stand beside people, not in front of them, not behind them, but beside them. So, imagine now, we're at Neighborhood Centers we have a brand new story. So now we've got all these people that have funded us. They give us money to help people and we decide we can't wait to tell them the new story. But the story they've always heard is it's really bad, it's really terrible, and the people are suffering and it's is -- and it's worse this year than it was last year. Isn't that it? Don't you -- haven't you heard it? If you've ever helped, you know what that sounds like. That's the story. So I'm on my way to raise some money for this community that everybody had written off. The police said, we don't even want to go into this community. And I've got this brand new story and I am excited. I am excited because I'm saying this is the neighborhood of the future, the leaders of Houston are going to come out of it, you're going to be amazed. And I'm right outside the door of the first big funder that we really, really need and I suddenly think, God I hope this works.

[Laughter]

You know, it's not quite like replacing a neuroscientist but it was a tough moment because I was excited -- I didn't know what he was going to say. Because you know, he's only heard one story for decades. So I went in and I told him and I said, "Here's what we found, here's the story of this neighborhood that everybody's written off -- the lacks, gaps, needs, want, the crime, the graffiti, all -- here's something we -- this is a whole new story, this is our future." And when I was done he had tears in his eyes and he said, "I've been waiting for one like this." Because you see, when we help we truly want to be a part of the story. We don't just want to write a check. We don't want to just hand out a meal. We want to be side-by-side. We want to be a part of the story.

What I love about this city is it's possible to stand side-by-side with so many different people who come here -- 70 percent of us weren't born here. We don't share a past. We share a future. And this city delivers again and again the opportunity for that imagined future. The chance to create a life out of your own imagination, work for it every day and if you do that here you belong. That's our story. It's a powerful one. And if we can move a neighborhood, we can change a city. If we can change a city we can inspire a country, we can change the world. Be a part of the story. Thank you.

[Applause]

[Music]