Store reflects community’s resilience

Book by UR professor, community organizer highlights Beechwood’s Freedom Market

By DIANA LOUISE CARTER

In a neighborhood that is 63 percent African-American, none of the 94 corner stores were owned or operated by an African-American living in the northeast Rochester neighborhood. Until the Freedom Market arrived in 2013, that is. The store on Webster Avenue, supported by both owner North East Area Development Inc. (NEAD) and foundation grants, is part community hub, part community kitchen, and a place where neighborhood people can access more nutritional food than is typically sold at the chips-and-sodas type of corner stores.

How it happened and continues to contribute to economic life of Beechwood is the subject of a new scholarly book co-edited by a University of Rochester professor, Joanne Larson, and a community organizer, George H. Moses. The book, “Community Literacies as Shared Resources for Transformation,” was published earlier this year. The literacy in the title doesn’t mean books: it means the ability to read and understand a community.

While the effort started with food—the work was supported in part by a grant from the Greater Rochester Health Foundation—it became clear as time went on that the store’s creation and other economic redevelopment efforts in Beechwood tell a much larger story about resilience and adaptation.

“We thought we were studying food,” said Larson, on the faculty at UR’s Warner School of Education. “Instead we were studying how the community interacts with each other.”

To hear Moses and Larson describe it, the Freedom Market has become a place where strangers are not allowed to leave without having a conversation. And a child might run in with a report card that needs showing off, only to have it praised by one of the remaining organizers of a key 1960s civil rights organization in Rochester, now an elder and a daily visitor.

Moses can look out the window of his office—he’s the executive director of NEAD—and see what goes on at the Freedom Store across the street. One thing he’s sure of, having lived and worked in the poverty-stricken neighborhood for years, is that becoming the subjects of yet another study where the researchers would leave after completing their research was not what the neighborhood needed.

“If you add inconsistency to people whose lives are already in crisis, it’s a crime,” Moses said. “Let’s not sell them false hope.”

Moses and Larson met more than a decade ago when both were pulled into a now-defunct anti-poverty effort. By that point in their careers, the literacy in their titles didn’t mean books. It meant speaking the language of the neighborhood they wanted to help and a daily visitor.

“Instead we were studying economic development, Mo- ses said, differing from what’s available on most corners.

The idea was to bring back the mom-and-pop store to replace the opportunistic enterprises that have popped up in low-income urban areas chiefly as a front for illegal activity. Those stores typically aren’t owned by people in the neighborhood, Moses said, so the profits also leave the neighborhood at the end of the day.

“The current corner store model doesn’t work unless you operate a shadow market,” Moses said. Instead of illegal activity, the Freedom Market gains additional financial support from grants and donations.

Moses defined the neighborhood as a “food swamp,” which is like a food desert, but different because it includes food options but largely unhealthy ones.

Exchanging an emphasis on high-profit sugary drinks sold in many corner stores, Freedom Market installed two coolers just for bottled water, which have been well received by neighborhood residents.

“If they have a choice, they’ll choose water,” Moses said. You can buy beer, cigarettes and lottery tickets at the Freedom Market, but there’s little sign that those products are sold. Moses said cigarette manufacturers are willing to pay stores so they can promote their products or marketing materials in highly visible places within the store.

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“We made a conscious decision not to have space dedicated to cigarette advertising,” he said.

The co-authors also decided to work in collaborative style rather than the university experts coming in to study the neighborhood subjects. That presented challenges, not the least of which is vocabulary that wasn’t common to both residents and scholars. But by committing to an ongoing relationship, both sides began to understand each other. The university’s “rhym- atic” translates to the neighborhood’s “grassroots.” The neighborhood’s “are we in tune?” translates to the universi- ty’s “does that make sense?” they said.

The book incorporates both ways of communicating, Larson said, so that it would be accessible to future neighbor- hood organizers and acceptable to the academic world.

UR researchers learned, Larson said, that community residents might visit the store up to seven or eight times a day. They were, she realized, using the store like one would a refrigerator at home, popping open the door to idly review the contents.

Publication is just one step in the ongoing relationship between university and neighborhood. “It’s a lifelong commitment from our group,” Larson said, pointing out some volunteer work that graduate students have continued to do once their school assignments with the Freedom Market were over. The market, likewise, is not the end of economic developments in Beechwood. A “Speedy Slice” store—a quick-serve, lower-cost model of pizzeria developed by Salvatore’s, is now down the street from the market, providing another six jobs. And the market is in discussion with the nearby Freedom School, with its commer- cial kitchen, about providing the pre- pared foods that customers have been requesting.

Some graduates of the Freedom Market’s workforce have gone on to manage the Speedy Slice, Moses said, and others are working in Wegmans, Walmart and other retail outlets in the city.

“You can be the creator of jobs,” he said.

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