

Dear Neighborhood Councils,

A long time ago, in 1956 to be exact, I (then a newcomer to Richmond) had the joy and excitement of being involved in the formation of the first Neighborhood Council in our city. This made quite an impression upon me, and I have followed the waxing, and waning, and waxing again of this concept in Richmond ever since. It seems to me that this manifestation of democracy has great merit, in that it is a simple and pleasant method of bringing people together and getting things done, in which everyone can join according to his or her inclination and ability.

Appreciation of this form of participatory democracy has grown in my mind during the recent cynicism and deterioration of the political process, and I am grateful to have had in my life a mechanism which provides both hope and inspiration. Though not all the people in our city believe in or avail themselves of Neighborhood Councils, it occurs to me that we are fortunate in our city to have this process in place. Which brought me to the realization that many people take Neighborhood Councils for granted, since they do not know much about the origin of the idea. This exceedingly brief digest of the Neighborhood Councils initiation and progress is an effort to correct this lack of knowledge (or absence of memory), in the hope that it will provide recognition and appreciation of a positive asset which is happily available to us.

Lacretia Edwards

## **A Short History of How the Neighborhood Councils Started in the City Of Richmond, California**

The development of Neighborhood Councils in the City of Richmond came about because of the upheaval of the city, occasioned by the Kaiser shipyards that were located in Richmond during World War II.

In 1940, just prior to World War II, Richmond was a tidy industrial town of 23,000, centered around the western terminus of operations of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad, the deep-water port, and the Standard Oil Company (later Chevron).

The African American population of the city at this time was 270 persons, almost all of who lived in a 4 block area in the northern part of the city.

Then World War II brought the Kaiser shipyards to Richmond, and in 1942 the population jumped to 50,000, in 1943 to 93,776, and by 1946 it hit its peak of 110,000. To house these workers, 17,000 units of Lanham Act War Housing units were built on the empty land on the south side of town. The shipyard workers were recruited throughout the United States, and a great number came from the southeastern part of the country. A high proportion was African-American, primarily from the rural agricultural areas of Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and Mississippi. From the same states and at the same time, Caucasian workers were recruited; and southern blacks and southern whites carried their historical and cultural frustrations and hostilities with them.

When World War II ended, it was assumed by the pre-war, original "core community," that the shipyard workers would return to the far-flung states and towns from which they had come. But this, of course, did not happen, since Richmond, California, was preferable in many ways to the circumstances from which many of the shipyard workers had come. While some of the in-migrants did leave, and some of the housing units were cleared, many people remained. The chaos of the life in a town with a quadrupled population was compounded, post-war, by unemployment of the shipyard workers, to the extent that the city was given the doubtful distinction of an article in **LOOK MAGAZINE** entitled ***Richmond, California, a City Earns a Purple Heart***.

One of the factors that perpetuated the confusion of life in Richmond at this period was the fact that most of the people who came during the war years did not have any feelings of belonging to the city. It was not possible when they came pouring in to give them this feeling, since the City was hard put to simply house them. Also, there was the opinion that the newcomers were only in Richmond as temporary workers. Subsequently, many of the residents who came as shipyard workers had no feeling of participation in the life of the City, and no sense of responsibility for the welfare and future of the City. They might experience strong emotional feelings of pride and commitment to the neighborhood in which they lived, but for the city of Richmond, their feelings ranged from indifference to annoyance.

In 1954, because it was recognized that this was an atmosphere with a potential

for unrest and trouble, the United Community Defense Service was requested to make a survey of social services in the City. This organization served the same function for cities that during World War the United Service Organization, or USO, served for individual servicemen, in evaluating problem situations and providing wise counsel to alleviate them.

The survey recommendation was that a Community Welfare Council be formed and that a director be found to work with budgeting and to coordinate planning on community problems. And so it was that in 1955 the West Contra Costa Community Welfare Council was reactivated, and Dr. Ralph Kramer (later with the University of California at Berkeley) was hired as director.

In 1956, the Group Work and Recreation Section of the Contra Costa Community Welfare Council inaugurated a pilot demonstration project in the North Richmond area, to determine how best to provide for the needs of the neighborhood through more effective health, welfare and recreation services.

The neighborhood people originally felt that what they most needed to bring them together and provide a centering of the community, was a building, a community center. But after a year of hard work in small groups and large groups, in surveys and discussions and study, the people came to feel that what they really needed was a more effective means of communication with the world outside their somewhat isolated and segregated boundaries.

Neighborhood Councils, a new concept brought from the east coast (where it had been borrowed from early colonial history and Town Hall meetings) were described and the neighborhoods decided that they liked the idea. So, in 1956, the North Richmond Neighborhood Council was formed, the first neighborhood council in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Funds (\$19,566) were secured from a small family foundation in San Francisco, the Columbia Foundation, to finance this program for three years. There was an assumption that the city would accept financial responsibility for the project if the validity of the concept was demonstrated and proven to be successful. Funding was primarily needed for the cost of staffing. Also for materials needed for Councils, such as research, minutes, agendas and reports.

**1958** Four neighborhoods were active. The program was financed by the Columbia Foundation, the City of Richmond (under contract) and the Redevelopment Agency.

**1959** Six neighborhood councils were active. The Program was financed by the Columbia Foundation and the contract with the City of Richmond. The Columbia Foundation funds were running out. An exploration of other funding sources, including a request to the United Crusade, for financial support was unavailing. The Columbia Foundation gave an additional \$1,500 as a "rescue" grant.

**1960** Eight councils. Program financed by the Columbia Foundation and the contract with the City of Richmond. (The Redevelopment contract was not renewed) There was a request in the 1960-61 Budget for the two staff jobs for this program, which was turned down due to an austerity budget.

**1961** Fourteen neighborhood groups were clamoring for staff services. Financial support under contract with the City of Richmond now provided twenty hours per week to the program, or half of one job. The Columbia Foundation funds were exhausted (staff member, Gertrude Hall, replaced by Arnie Leonard).

**1962** The Neighborhood Council program to continue on a half-time basis until July 1st, at which time the City would once again consider its contract with the West Contra Costa Community Welfare Council (staff member Arnie Leonard replaced by Ed Grosselfinger).

The problem faced by the Neighborhood Council movement was not failure, but success. The idea, once launched, was instantly popular, and with good staff work and training, the neighborhood councils were speedily organized. They made many requests of the administration and City Council of the city of Richmond through the Coordinating Committee of Neighborhood Councils, requests that were reasonable and usually granted.

But the City Council was increasingly alarmed at the growing power of the citizen groups, and refused to budget funds for staff that would accelerate the progress already made.

Gradually funds were squeezed down, and when the proposal was made to have a Human Relations Commission in the City of Richmond, it seemed a natural development and a comfortable solution that funding for staff should be diverted to the new Commission.

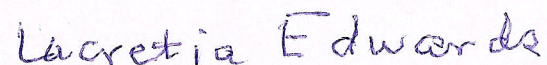
So for a time the Neighborhood Councils, as a viable element in the life of the City, went into a decline through lack of the nourishment of robust funding. But an interesting thing had happened. During the few stimulating, triumphant years of the Neighborhood Councils' early development (1956-1963), a network had been established throughout the City. Black and white people worked together on projects for their neighborhoods, and then for larger projects that affected all the neighborhoods. Friendships were made, trust was created, and success was experienced. People realized that what they did, working together, made a difference. That they could be responsible for change. Citizens had experienced democracy in action, and it was exhilarating!

During President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, Richmond, because of its history of problems, was eligible for, and the recipient of, federal funds for many different projects. One of them was the Model Cities Program, and it was because of it

that the Neighborhood Councils experienced a renaissance. One of the stipulations for acceptance of a Model Cities Program was a Citizen Participation element. Remembering the success of the Neighborhood Councils, the City reactivated the Councils in order to meet this criterion.

The original Councils had been a grass-roots movement, and had drawn their strength and vitality from the needs of the chaotically disorganized neighborhoods after World War II. The second wave of Neighborhood Councils was opportunistically superimposed from above, to serve a bureaucratic requirement, and to some extent lacked the spontaneity and enthusiasm that had marked the first, very successful program. However, under capable staff guidance, the concept flourished, and the 30 Neighborhood Councils (and their attendant Coordinating Committee of Neighborhood Councils) today are a significant and positive element in the framework of the city's life.

The Neighborhood Council provides the machinery for citizens to function directly in shaping their own community life. When people help to plan programs and shape policies, as they do in a Council and in the Coordinating Committee of Councils, they understand and believe in what they are doing far better than when this work is done for them and presented as an accomplished fact. For along with the long hours, hard work and responsibility needed, goes a sense of pride and involvement. The Neighborhood Council idea can restore the old-fashioned meaningfulness and friendliness of cooperative community living, and can enrich the lives of those willing to undertake the creative hard work necessitated by this form of group dynamics.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lucretia Edwards". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered on the page.

Lucretia Edwards