

Civity Stories

Going to the “Heart” of NIMBY Resistance to Affordable Housing

A Report By



Foreword

When we met almost 20 years ago, we started a conversation – a conversation that we are still having today.

We both started as “head” people – Malka is a public policy wonk; Palma is a lawyer. Over time and through experience working in and with communities, however, we each noticed that the ability of community members to move forward in the face of challenges depends on them being in relationship with each other. Relationships are essential whatever the issue: education, health, the environment, equity, and – yes – housing.

When people see “others,” particularly people from different social groups, as all being part of their community – then progress is possible.

In contrast, when people aren’t in relationship, when a certain level of trust isn’t present, when us-vs.-them or “those people” dynamics prevail – things get stuck.

We defined “civity” to describe the change we want to see: *a culture of deliberately engaging in relationships of respect and empathy with others who are different*. To help seed and grow this change, we founded Civity, a national nonprofit organization that supports leaders who are practicing and seeding civity in their communities.

As it turns out, research affirms what we observed. “Bridging” relationships that connect community members across various differences – race, economics, geography, religion, language, politics, and more – are the essential glue that enables communities to talk to each other, trust each other, and pull together for the benefit of everyone.

And so we became “heart” people. We set out to operationalize what we know – because differences can be bridged, and power dynamics can be mitigated. When people encounter each other one-on-one and share their stories, relationships happen.

This report describes the important contribution a civity approach brings to California communities facing the current housing crisis. As we met with people who are part of the statewide effort to address the state’s housing needs, we were inspired by their dedication and vision for the state. This report illuminates the critical role of relationships as an essential component in this work.

A heart foundation is what makes head solutions possible.

Malka Ranjana Kopell, Civity Co-Founder and CEO

Palma Joy Strand, Civity Co-Founder and Research Director

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Introduction

Civity is a national organization that envisions a society where everyone matters and everyone belongs (Strand, Kopell, & Baleria, n.d.). Civity works to bring this vision to life by supporting and encouraging people – particularly people who are more privileged – to deliberately and intentionally engage in relationships of respect and empathy with others who are different. Civity accomplishes this by inviting people into authentic conversations centered on personal stories.

Civity's personal-stories method for building cross-cutting "we're all members of this community" relationships offers a path away from "us-vs.-them" dynamics that can bring housing efforts to a standstill.

In many communities, social differences such as race, economics, geography, immigration status, religion, and/or politics create barriers to addressing important challenges. Attempts to collaborate get stuck when more-established residents do not see less-established residents as valuable and valued members of the community. When this happens, community decisions and actions fail to meet everyone's needs.

This report addresses a sticking point in California's ambitious housing plan. Fair share housing allocations determined by the state have evoked resistance in many local jurisdictions. In particular, NIMBY ("Not In My Back Yard") responses to expanding the amount and range of available housing can create significant political and legal resistance when generalized plans turn into concrete zoning changes and/or development proposals closer to home.

Civity's personal-stories method for building cross-cutting "we're all members of this community" relationships offers a path away from us-vs.-them dynamics that can bring housing efforts to a standstill. There are many stories of comfortably-housed residents who see and hear less-comfortably-housed community members. Lifting up the stories of these comfortably-housed residents offers a potent counter-story to NIMBY exclusion.

Civity, Relationships, and the Practical Power of Personal Stories

Civity employs individual sharing of personal stories as a practical strategy for creating authentic civic relationships. These relationships create cross-cutting connections that enable communities to pull together for the well-being of everyone. Personal stories offer a glimpse of the “infinite humanity” of each person. By complexifying and humanizing who people are, even people who are “different,” personal stories open up the limiting mental boxes in which people often put each other.

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How Civity Works

With support from The Whitman Institute and the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, Civity developed and honed a method for working with local leaders to:

- raise their awareness about the importance of relationships across social differences to accomplishing their community goals;
- provide these leaders with concrete, replicable – do-able – skills for practicing civity relationship-building themselves; and
- offer them strategies for creating spaces to more broadly seed civity relationship-building among community members.

The resulting combination of raising relational awareness among local leaders, experiential skill-building workshops, and follow-up coaching and support helps these leaders build relational infrastructure or “civic muscle” that serves as the necessary foundation for addressing tough community challenges.

The power of personal stories is such that even a small “dose” has a significant effect. In our Civity workshops, we place people in pairs to engage in one-on-one conversations for just 10 minutes, with each person having 3-4 minutes to share a story of their own and about the same amount of time to listen to the other’s story. Because these stories go to the *heart* rather than the *head*, a genuine, authentic, relational connection arises in even that short period of time. When people are given “permission” to share who they are, relationships happen.

Civity's personal story-sharing approach creates space for local leaders and community members to:

- be intentional in recognizing the essential role of relationships in addressing community problems;
- engage authentically with others in a fellow-member-of-the-community mode that focuses on *heart* rather than *head*; and
- reach across social differences with “I see you” respect and “I hear you” empathy to create a sense of mutual belonging.

Civity connections reveal the complexity of people, cutting across various dimensions such as race, economics, age, politics, religion, and more. Experiencing this complexity first-hand moves people away from categorizing – and too often dismissing – other people as only one aspect of who they are. Seeing other people as multi-dimensional spurs a shift from us-vs.-them mindsets toward a more expansive embrace of who *matters*, who is a member of the community, who belongs.

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Civity workshops and the Do-It-Yourself activities on our [DIYcivity webpage](#) provide language and strategies that empower people to practice civity whenever and wherever they find themselves (Strand, Kopell, & Baleria, n.d.). Though it's impossible for most of us to be relational with every person we encounter in our everyday lives, even a civity “brush” with someone we pass on the street affirms an “other’s” humanity – and our own.

Civity and the Strengthening Democracy Challenge

In 2022, Civity's work was affirmed by the [Strengthening Democracy Challenge](#), a megastudy hosted by Stanford University to test interventions for their effectiveness in reducing political polarization. The Challenge put out a call for virtual interventions of no longer than eight minutes to reduce partisan animosity and a number of other attitudes. Out of 252 submissions, 25 were selected for testing. One of these was [Civity Storytelling: Expanding the Pool of People Who Matter](#) (Baleria et al, 2022; Strand, 2023; Voelkel et al, 2024; Waldrop, 2025).

The *Civility Storytelling* intervention was designed to provide viewers with an experience similar to the real-time, person-to-person story-sharing of a Civility workshop. Because of the limitations imposed by the study, the intervention was virtual, asynchronous, and one-way. The core of *Civility Storytelling* consists of five short (45-second) videos showing a diverse assortment of people (gender, age, race, ethnicity) sharing a little about themselves and why they care about their community, making no allusion to party affiliation. As with story-sharing in Civility workshops, the goal is to complexify and humanize people beyond their initial visual identities. Short animated videos before and after the five stories introduce the concept of civility and highlight its importance to democracy.



Visual from the [Civility Storytelling intervention](#)

Even though it did not focus on the partisan political divide (which was the focus of the study), *Civility Storytelling* was the fourth most effective (#4) intervention at reducing partisan animosity (Voelkel et al, 2024). More broadly, *Civility Storytelling* was **the** most effective (#1) intervention at reducing social distrust, the second most effective (#2) at reducing social distance, and the fourth most effective (#4) intervention at reducing biased evaluation of politicized facts (Voelkel et al, 2024). Overall, the megastudy demonstrated that even small interventions can change how one person feels about another – and about the group that person represents.

The California Housing Crisis and the NIMBY Challenge

Civility connections centered on different housing experiences can provide a foundation for reducing NIMBY us-vs.-them potency and making real progress on housing availability. When all community members see each other as important contributors to everyone's well-being, attitudes and actions change. A civility culture, emerging from cross-cutting relationships, invites people to recognize the benefits of new housing to a community as a whole and to a wide range of community members rather than focusing exclusively on potential burdens to themselves.

California's Housing Crisis

California has a housing crisis. The state needs more housing overall, as well as more housing that is affordable for Californians. Homebuilding has not been and is not now keeping up with demand. With 12% of the nation's population, California has 22% of the nation's people who live unhoused (California Department of Housing and Community Development, n.d.). Young people and renters are more severely affected by housing scarcity and high housing costs than older people, especially long-time homeowners without mortgages. Scarce and expensive housing contributes to the high rate of poverty in California and has disproportionate effects on Californians of color (Kimberlin, 2019).

In 1969, the California General Assembly introduced the Regional Housing Needs Allocation process. The state's Department of Housing and Community Development first determines overall housing needs for each region of the state. Every local jurisdiction then becomes responsible for developing and adopting housing elements – plans that demonstrate how that locality will provide its fair share of housing the region needs. These plans then allow for and guide the construction of new housing throughout the state (n.d.).

Different local jurisdictions have responded to state requirements in ways that range from agreement to acquiescence to resistance. And within local jurisdictions, residents have been sometimes supportive and sometimes vocally in opposition. In many places, plans to build more and more affordable housing have evoked NIMBY responses, which can delay or otherwise inhibit local jurisdictions' ability to fulfill their housing commitments. Overall, the strong state-level policy consensus that more housing needs to be built can break down at the stage of securing local approvals to build actual construction projects that provide more, and more affordable, housing. In this context, active political engagement by "homevoters" at the local level can stymie public policies that would have "broad social benefits" (Schuetz, 2022, p. 90).

Putting NIMBY in Context

This phenomenon – of broad public support for policies to provide additional housing **generally** co-existing with resistance to localized housing project proposals **specifically** – is characteristic of NIMBY responses to affordable housing. A recent study out of Stanford University’s Civic and Environmental Engineering Department, for example, found:

While a majority of participants report supporting affordable housing at [the state, city/town, and neighborhood] levels, there is a drop in support and accompanying increase in opposition with increased proximity, especially from the city/town level to the neighborhood level (Douglas et al, 2024, p. 9).

These NIMBY responses reflect “fears about the people who might reside in affordable housing, a primary factor driving concerns about or opposition to affordable housing projects” (Tighe, 2012, p. 977). In particular, research into the underlying causes of these fears indicates that “class and racial stereotypes and prejudice are strong factors influencing attitudes opposed to affordable housing” (Tighe, 2012, p. 962). Researchers have also ascertained an emotional connotation attached to affordable housing, which may trigger responses “prior to consciously deciding one’s opinions” (Douglas et al, 2024, p. 9). This may result from people associating affordable housing with public housing (Tighe, 2010, p. 11).

It is important to note that these negative NIMBY attitudes toward **potential future** neighbors living in affordable housing are not the same as attitudes toward **actual current** neighbors living in affordable housing. One researcher noted, “Despite the strong opposition to affordable housing when it is proposed, there is significant evidence that once developed, neighbors have few complaints about their new neighbors or the new homes” (Tighe, 2010, p. 10). Further, most of the rich literature on addressing NIMBY reactions finds “that the core issue lies in changing attitudes about people who are different from them” (Tighe, 2010, p. 13).

Overall, then, there is often an us-vs.-them dynamic in local housing decisions. The “us” is comprised of comfortably-housed people in single-family neighborhoods who tend, demographically speaking, toward being older, whiter,

and more financially secure. The “them” are potential residents of proposed affordable housing developments who tend, again demographically speaking, toward being younger, more likely to be people of color, and less financially secure. This us-vs.-them frame captures a perception of social distance, a perception that “we” and “they” are not people

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who become friends or are likely to be congenial neighbors. This frame, which is associated with potential neighbors who are as yet personally unknown, is a key aspect of what animates NIMBY resistance to proposed affordable housing.

NIMBY us-vs.-them responses to affordable housing in or near where people live thus reflect a level of social distance that more-established members of a community feel vis-à-vis less-established members. Perceptions of race and class might be underlying causes, but the manifested effect is discomfort with people who would occupy affordable housing living closer than they currently do.

The history of segregated residential communities, in California as across the nation, inherently creates this kind of psychological distance (Enos, 2017). It is true that most California *regions* are racially, ethnically, and economically diverse, which means that residents of those regions already frequently encounter people who are racially, ethnically, and economically different from them. Within regions, however, racial and economic residential segregation means that these encounters are not likely to be of the neighbor-to-neighbor, living-next-door-or-down-the-street variety. Psychological distance, social distance, and geographic distance go hand in hand (Enos, 2017, p. 12).

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Civity: Looking Beyond NIMBY Responses

Over the course of a year, Civity facilitators engaged in background conversations with people in the California housing ecosystem to identify areas of possibility for forward movement, as well as potential sticking points. We talked with activists, policy consultants, government staff, and researchers (see Appendix). We also reached out to concerned community members, including comfortably-housed residents, because NIMBY resistance to affordable housing is by definition a reaction on the part of people who are already established.

From the outset, we were told that while NIMBY responses to more, and more affordable, housing proposals tend to get a lot of airtime – at public meetings and in the press – they are not universal. As we listened to community members talk about housing and housing processes, a more textured landscape began to come into focus.

Housing has become very charged in many communities, with intense “pro” and “con” folks the most visible and vocal. A YIMBY (“Yes In My Back Yard”) frame, which animates both the organization and the attitude, ardently affirms the need for more, and more affordable, housing. In contrast, NIMBY reactions opposing new housing and housing requirements are also often loud and impassioned. Public proceedings can get heated – and sometimes downright nasty.

We were told that the more visible and vocal participants in current housing debates – both “yes” and “no” – represent only a small minority of the public overall. Less visible and less vocal are the much larger group of comfortably-housed people who recognize the importance of housing availability and who are receptive to and supportive of building more, and more varied, housing in and near the single-family neighborhoods where they live. This “weary and wary majority,” however, may bow out and stay silent as the housing temperature rises. The good news is that many residents recognize that their communities cannot function without teachers and other public workers, without retail and grocery clerks, and without people in service roles. They also recognize that people who are currently priced out of housing deserve to have a roof over their heads.

Fostering Economic Connectness

We asked community members who are supportive of moving toward greater housing availability how to engage the “weary and wary majority” in conversations with people who would be helped by affordable housing developments. We were told that, while these conversations would be valuable, the atmosphere surrounding specific housing decisions was too “fraught.” For these connections to occur, there needs to be a separate space free of the shadow of current conflict.

A recent report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Commission on Reimagining our Economy recommends the “creation of bridges within and between communities to foster connections across lines of economic difference” (2023). This “economic connectedness” is important for two reasons. Most directly, these relationships are helpful to people seeking to move up the economic ladder. In addition, these bridges help people at the upper end of the economic ladder see people on the lower end as part of their community; this “we all belong” frame tends to increase receptivity to and support for programs and policies, such as affordable housing, that help economic “others” find a path toward greater security.

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Personal Stories Move Us Forward on Housing

Storyteller Pat Speight once said, “a story is the shortest distance between people” (Center for Narrative Studies, n.d.). Sharing personal stories leads to a visceral awareness that everyone is an individual of infinite complexity – much more than a particular box or label. At the same time, familiar experiences create a sense of common humanity: “Oh yes, I understand what you’re talking about!” Conversations that include story-sharing are an effective way to lay the relational foundation essential for collective action.

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Grounding Work on Stories in Housing

Civility is in good company with other housing advocates who recognize the value of personal stories in connecting more-established to less-established residents to build a more pro-housing culture overall. In 2016, Frameworks published a report on reframing housing messages: [“You Don’t Have to Live Here: Why Housing Messages are Backfiring and 10 Things We Can Do About It”](#) (Manuel & Kendall-Taylor, 2016). Several recommendations from the report highlight how personal stories call members of the public to bring their sometimes negative stories about housing “next door” into line with their positive stories about housing “out there”:

- *“Tell stories that balance people, places, and systems perspectives”* (p. 13).

Policy messages often focus on data and large-scale issues and decisions, which can feel disconnected from individual community members. Stories make real the insight that everyone in the community is a person of complexity, with a back-story, and with agency.

Personal stories of people experiencing the housing ecosystem in different ways expand community members’ perspectives. Gaining different perspectives by hearing other people’s specific housing experiences, along with who they are and how they feel, creates “we’re all members of the same community” awareness in a vivid person-to-person way.

- *“Tell a ‘Story of Us’ rather than a ‘Story of Them’”* (pp. 13-14).

The Frameworks report characterizes this as leading with values. Values include recognizing the contributions that not-comfortably-housed people make to the overall community. Housing issues require collective solutions, because they are collective problems.

Comfortably-housed community residents interact on a daily basis with not-comfortably-housed people who make essential contributions to making the community function. Hearing personal stories brings depth and complexity, creating “I see you” respect and “I hear you” empathy to build a more expansive sense of “us.”

- *“Make it clear that where you live affects you”* (p. 16).

If people cannot afford to live in the community where they work, they may commute long distances – which eats up their time and resources. If people scrape together multiple jobs to live in the community where they work, they may have little time for anything else.

Though we may not be able to literally walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, hearing their story gives us an understanding of what that journey is like. Hearing someone’s story creates a direct kind of “aha!” about different housing experiences.

- *“Widen the public’s view of who is responsible for taking action and resolving outcomes”* (p. 17).

California’s state-level Regional Housing Needs Allocation can create a sense of housing decisions being made by a distant government and imposed on local communities. Yet it’s important to remember that local housing decisions are where the rubber hits the road – and where current community residents have real influence.

Everyone who is comfortably-housed in a community contributes to local housing decisions through voting, speaking at public meetings, and/or simply voicing views to neighbors. Being vocal – or staying silent – matters.

Examples of Personal Storytelling Related to Housing

The power of personal stories to affect how people engage with housing issues is affirmed by existing storytelling work. Both of the examples below, one local to California and one national, evidence awareness that many more-secure community members may not be tuning into the stories of people who are less comfortably housed.

In 2018, the Los Altos Women's Caucus produced the video, [*Los Altos: A Place to Call Home in Silicon Valley?*](#) (2018). In less than 10 minutes (there is also an extended, 20-minute version), the personal housing stories of teachers and other public workers in Los Altos – who cannot afford to live where they work or are housing-stressed in other ways – come to life.

In 2024, *The New York Times* published [*“A life without a home: Voices from the tents, shelters, cars, motels, and couches of America”*](#) (Villarosa & Phylars-Burgess), a series of videos sharing the personal stories of people experiencing homelessness.

Personal stories are a different – and important – way in to the housing conversation and to building support for necessary housing initiatives. Stories invite people simply to listen, rather than pushing them to take a stand. Stories speak to people's humanity and awareness of lived inter-connection.

Both of these initiatives center personal housing stories and expand the “us” by creating space for stories that are less voiced and less heard. These initiatives multi-dimensionalize people who might otherwise be known only as “people who would live in affordable housing.” They also open a window through which viewers can see the lived effects of being less comfortably housed. Getting to know these community members through their personal stories creates a heightened sense of responsibility on the part of more-established residents: Personal stories highlight people rather than statistics.

Overall, personal stories are a different – and important – way in to the housing conversation and to building support for necessary housing initiatives. Stories invite people simply to listen, rather than pushing them to take a stand. Stories speak to people's humanity and awareness of lived interconnection.

Civility in Action: Going to the “Heart” of NIMBY Resistance

Civility’s strategy for defusing NIMBY us-vs.-them responses to housing proposals aligns with the Frameworks recommendations. In its most straightforward terms, *the Civility strategy is to use personal stories to reduce the social distance that animates NIMBY responses to more, and more affordable, housing.*

Expanding the Pool of People Who Matter

After completing the year of interviews with members of California’s housing ecosystem, Civility partnered with local entities, including governments and nonprofits, to organize workshops, both in person and virtually. The workshops introduced the concept of relational connection and gave people practice in engaging with others across difference through storytelling. Although the practice itself was valuable, a more important takeaway for participants was the understanding that engaging relationally – which most people know how to do with close friends and family – is an important tool in the civic, policymaking world. The stories we tell about ourselves have an effect on others; the stories for which we collectively create space define communities.

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The Strengthening Democracy Challenge megastudy established video stories as a promising vehicle for the kind of relationship-building that reaches across and reduces social distance. The *Civility Storytelling* intervention showed the effectiveness of one-way, asynchronous, and virtual personal stories, with its overarching goal being to **expand the pool of people who matter**. That aligns with the goal here, which is to diminish the vigor and potency of current NIMBY responses to more, and more affordable, housing. Specifically, our purpose is to expand, for more-established comfortably-housed community members, the pool of people who matter.

Civility Videos: Eyes Open, Ears Open, Doors Open

We decided to go a different route from the videos discussed previously. Instead of featuring the personal stories of those who might be living in affordable housing, we decided to highlight a set of personal housing stories that bring an under-heard set of perspectives to the current swirl of public conversation. These are the stories of the “weary and wary majority” identified previously – community members who are more established and comfortably housed and who are also potentially sympathetic to more, and more affordable,

housing in their neighborhoods. When NIMBY responses are the only voices that get airtime, they may appear to represent the sentiments of the entire community. Creating space for different voices has the potential to shift people's sense of the collective norm, of what "most people think" about housing.

As our background conversations with community members revealed, the voices and stories of members of the comfortably-housed "weary and wary majority" tend to be eclipsed by their louder NIMBY neighbors. This majority, we emphasize, is not a distinct and separate group of people. Some community residents may see downsides with changes in neighborhoods due to affordable housing *and* also see the people who would live there as members of the community. What will help them come forward is hearing a story that invites them to share a sense of social connection rather than social distance ... ideally, a story from one of their peers.

We found that there are indeed members of the "weary and wary majority" group who see, hear, and want to help move things in the direction of opening up their communities.

We found that there are indeed members of the "weary and wary majority" group who see, hear, and want to help move things in the direction of opening up their communities. These stories are mostly missing from the current public conversation – perhaps because they are more nuanced than other stories, perhaps because many comfortably-housed people have chosen not to confront their NIMBY neighbors, and/or perhaps simply because as comfortably-housed people they are in a position to opt out of participating in the housing discussion. Some of these folks, however, are open to sharing their stories. In particular, once they had shared their stories with Civity facilitators in a one-on-one or two-on-one context, they agreed to being recorded on video for a larger audience.

We describe the community residents in this group and the personal stories they tell more as an orientation that characterizes them rather than a position they hold:

- People in this group have their **eyes open**: They see how not-comfortably-housed people are essential community members.
- People in this group have their **ears open**: They listen to what these not-comfortably-housed members of the community are saying, to their stories; people in this group see the complexity of other people's lives and often connect those lives with their own.
- People in this group are supportive of moving toward a more **doors open** community story and culture, but they may hang back from public conversations/advocacy.

This report features five such videos with five such story-sharers, all of whom are comfortably housed, live on the San Francisco Peninsula, and care about housing for the less-comfortably-housed members of their communities. Each of these videos applies the *Civility Storytelling* approach of one-way, asynchronous, virtual story-sharing to offer a glimpse of a complex person: Duf, Freddie, Tom, Susan, and Joe. Each of these videos also centers *heart* stories rather than *head* views or opinions.

As you, the reader, watch and listen to the stories in these videos, notice how personal stories and connections draw the viewer in to offering respect and practicing empathy. We see and hear what these storytellers are sharing about themselves. And because we come to respect and empathize with them in these few short minutes, we also come to see and hear the other people with whom they have been in relationship – including less-comfortably-housed people in their communities. As Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot has observed, “Respect generates respect; a modest loaf becomes many” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000 p. 10). By modeling civility, these community members nurture its growth (Christakis & Fowler, 2009).

Civility Housing Stories link: <https://www.civility.org/civility-housing/>



[Duf](#)



[Freddie](#)



[Tom](#)



[Susan](#)



[Joe](#)

Themes from the Civity Videos



Eyes Open.

In these videos, Duf, Freddie, Tom, Susan, and Joe invite us to see the not-comfortably-housed community members that they see. Duf tells us about his project colleague who couldn't make a meeting because she had to trade off paying for gas to either drive to the meeting or pick up her child, the only housing she could afford being a long distance from where she worked. Duf also helps us get a glimpse of the complicated life of a medical worker who lives in Modesto on the weekends and in an RV on El Camino Real on the Peninsula during the week. Hers is an important, essential job, but, as Tom observes, it's a lot to ask someone to make that kind of commute for \$20/hour.

Freddie also mentions people who make the community function but who can't afford to live where they work: her own gardener and housekeeper, and also retail workers and grocery checkers she has come to know as a long-time shopper. Susan opens a window onto the life of her former mentee, now a friend, and the housing pressures her mentee lives with. Tom, who works for an organization that supports people who are unhoused and victims of domestic violence, speaks of these community members with kindness and love.

Joe recognizes his own luck in being able to "put roots down and purchase a home here in the community way back when when it was truly affordable." He also reminds us that people without a home are individuals with varied stories behind them: high medical expenses, substance abuse, domestic violence, or housing costs that are simply too high – and also that all too many people are one crisis away from becoming homeless. In these videos, Duf, Freddie, Tom, Susan, and Joe do not come across as extraordinary. Rather, they simply notice the humanity of people they encounter in the everyday course of their lives. Eyes open.



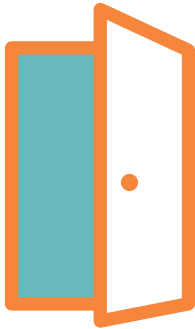
Ears Open.

At the core of empathy is allowing another person's story to strike a chord with one's own experiences. In these videos, we see empathy in operation. Freddie is explicit about the connection between how she views not-comfortably-housed people and her own experiences from when she was a young single mother: "I don't fear 'these people'... because I have *been* 'those people.'" She has vivid memories of what it takes to make ends meet when funds are scarce; she gives herself permission to remember and to see the similarity of experience.

We all have experiences of being "them" to someone else's "us."

Joe shares his story of living in public housing as a young child after his parents split up. Tom speaks to the importance of “home” – not just its location or value – and acknowledges vulnerability and potential unbelonging. Duf’s love for his developmentally-challenged brother and Susan’s friendship with her precariously-housed, undocumented former mentee also carry an awareness of the pain and perils of not belonging.

We all have experiences of being “them” to someone else’s “us.” These five stories call us to remember those experiences when we find ourselves in the “us” shoes ... and to hear about “others” experiences. Ears open.



Doors Open.

Seeing and hearing other people’s stories brings a self-awareness of one’s own situation. In the case of these five comfortably-housed people, an “eyes open” and “ears open” orientation illuminates their own privilege. But these folks aren’t holier-than-thou about it. Rather, they allude to becoming aware, to having their eyes and ears opened.

Joe, whose father was a teacher and able to afford a home in a community that now is out of reach for those in the teaching profession, recalls bumping into his father’s students and feeling part of the community because “we lived here.” Susan attributes much of her openness to messages from college about giving back and mentors from when she attended law school; they raised her awareness. Duf is candid about having originally thought that people living in RV’s “had issues” but learning that instead they are often working full-time. Freddie describes having simply enjoyed her community while she was working and then becoming more involved and aware as she started volunteering upon retirement. Tom’s “this is their community!” isn’t a truism but reflects a deep heartfelt recognition of how the community actually functions.

These stories weave together a “there but for the grace of God” humility with a keen awareness of the real, everyday challenges and difficulties that result when fellow community members grapple with housing scarcity and astronomical housing costs. Though they are very different stories, they share a frame that arises from relational openness and conveys a sense of embracing expansive community belonging. “We shouldn’t just accept this,” says Duf. Joe sees how the American Dream worked for him but worries it isn’t working for others today. These civility stories are the foundation for local actions that acknowledge everyone’s needs. Doors open.

These “eyes open, ears open, doors open” stories invite the “weary and wary majority” – people who are in a position where they can choose to sit back and stay out of things – to lean in. These stories also may provide new frames for people who are genuinely undecided or on the fence – or even people who have previously been drawn to a NIMBY stance.

Conclusion

Organizing the constituencies that will benefit from more, and more affordable, housing is essential in adding those voices to the public discussion. *And* working to mitigate or offset the force of NIMBY resistance also makes a valuable contribution to making inroads into California's housing crisis.

Sharing and highlighting personal stories is a valuable complement to direct advocacy. This story-sharing, moreover, can take place in person, virtually in real time (Baleria, 2018), or asynchronously in one-way videos, as the Strengthening Democracy Challenge affirmed (Voelkel et al, 2024).

Overall, finding existing civity stories, naming that they are civity stories, and lifting these stories up is an important contribution to successful community engagement with wicked problems such as providing adequate, safe, and affordable housing for all community members.

Too often, voices that are less strident are drowned out. Creating spaces for people to really see and hear each other is a significant contribution to building community capacity and resilience.

Overall, finding existing civity stories, naming that they are civity stories, and lifting these stories up is an important contribution to successful community engagement with wicked problems such as providing adequate, safe, and affordable housing for all community members.



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Appendix

Among others, we spoke with the following people in connection with this project. We very much appreciate the work that they do and their dedication and thoughtfulness. We thank them for sharing their time and insights. And we note that all observations and conclusions in the report are ours.

Josh Abrams, Community Planning Collaborative

Anthony Carnesecce, City of Los Altos

Elizabeth Carvajal, Southern California Association of Governments

Wayne Chen, City of Mountain View

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Stephanie Doute, League of Women Voters of California

Aaron Eckhouse, California YIMBY

Carol Galante, Galante Solutions

Kip Harkness

Patrick Heisinger, City of Redwood City

Ray Hodges, San Mateo County

Jenna Hornstock

Kirin Kumar, Strategic Growth Council

Michael Lane, SPUR

Ben Metcalf, Turner Center for Housing Innovation at UC Berkeley

Lenny Mendonca

Susan Mensinger

Tomiquia Moss

Jessica Stanfill Mullin, San Mateo County/Home for All

Tom Myers, CSA Cares

Ray Pearl, California Housing Consortium (CHC)

Denise Pinkston, TMG Partners

Alexis Podesta, Podesta Company

Gillian Pressman, YIMBY Action

Leora Tanjuatco Ross, YIMBY Action

Susan Russell

Khanh Russo, San Francisco Foundation/Partnership for the Bay's Future

Lenny Siegel

Joe Simitian, Santa Clara County Supervisor

Duf Sundheim

IdaRose Sylvester, City of Mountain View Human Relations Commission

Eric Tars, National Homelessness Law Center

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