

# **CONNECTED CITIZENS DETROIT: A SNAPSHOT OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

 **Knight Foundation**



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# INTRODUCTION



**D**etroit's annual Marche du Nain Rouge wasn't spawned by a chamber of commerce or a visitor's bureau. Rather, the Mardi Gras-type celebration marking the coming of spring and the temporary displacement of the "red dwarf of Detroit" said to have cursed the city – the Nain Rouge – bubbled up from below. Held on the Saturday closest to the vernal equinox, this ragtag parade through the city's Midtown neighborhood draws adults, children, city dwellers and suburbanites alike for an hour or so of silliness and costumes to welcome the coming of spring.

As such, it stands as a proof that while the goals of civic engagement may be high-minded and serious, leading to better democracy and stronger communities, the road there may lead through, and be motivated by joyfulness and fun.

This is an exciting time for those whose mission, or calling, is civic engagement. In the midst of this, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) invited a number of active engagers and community leaders in Metro Detroit for a half-day program in September 2012.

The Detroit Civic Engagement Showcase & Learning Conference was designed to spread knowledge and ignite thinking among participants, who included business and nonprofit leaders, community activists and others from across the city and suburban communities.

Eleven speakers, some local and some from around the country, shared their own experiences running organizations and engagement efforts, exploring what worked for them to connect people – to causes, to philanthropy, to one another.

They told the roughly 150 attendees how they've been able to empower, to inspire, to prod and to entertain those they reach, crafting strategies that are shaping the new model of engagement that is two-way, participatory and mobile. Recognize people, meet them where they, ask for their involvement, use all the tools at hand, have fun – this was only some of the advice they offered.

As Jeffrey Abramson wrote in coverage of the 2011 Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society, the ideal model of democratic citizenship requires individuals be informed, participatory, empowered, educated and mobilized, so as to effect change on both a local and global scale.

How that happens is still evolving. As these speakers demonstrated through their stories, public meetings and face-to-face encounters are melding with digital technology to create hybrid models. Where once a church, extended family, service club or other entity was at the center of "social networks," today the very term describes digital communities that can grow around social media and be mobilized by it.

A 2011 Knight Foundation report on "Connected Citizens: The Power, Peril and Potential of Networks" makes this observation: "For grantmakers, the question is not whether we live in a networked world. We do. The question is how to ignite the good that can come from a networked citizenry and mitigate the bad, for there's ample evidence that the complex social problems of the 21st century can be addressed only through networked solutions that bring together the input and action of many citizens."

Why have this meeting in Detroit? As a city where Knight Foundation is active, it's been the focus, and the workshop, for many of its projects, large and small. A growing community of young people and entrepreneurs are also joining Detroiters of long standing, partnering with established corporations, small businesses, nonprofits and others in reshaping the city's dynamic relationships. While the city is still burdened by long held problems, these new connections are taking aim at many of them, and starting to show real progress. From housing and political issues to arts and culture, fresh ideas and new energy are insuring making a difference in the quality of life in the city and its neighboring communities.

"We're seeing a long tail of engagement emerging," said Rishi Jaitly, former program director for Knight Foundation in Detroit.

And like the Marche du Nain Rouge, they're frequently rising from the grassroots, showing that with help and guidance, new ideas can make for healthier, more prosperous communities.

What follows are some highlights of the day.

## THE BIG PICTURE



“From my perspective we actually do have the greatest democracy on earth, not because we always get it right, because we don’t, but because we’re always willing to change and adapt with the times.”

Christopher Gates

**C**hristopher Gates, executive director of PACE, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, offered an energetic and thought-provoking keynote that helped put the day’s conversation into context. PACE is an affinity group of the Council on Foundations and serves as a learning collaborative for funders doing work in the fields of civic engagement, service and democratic practice. Many foundations active in Michigan, including Knight, Kellogg, Mott and others are active in the PACE collaborative. Gates is the former president of the National Civic League and has spent his career studying democratic theory and practice.

Gates made the observation that America was in the midst of a “civic moment” when citizens and leaders alike are involved in a conversation about how we make collective decisions, how we allocate resources and how we set shared priorities. He pointed to both the Occupy Movement and the Tea Party as examples of the sorts of vibrant civic conversations taking place across the country.

“In very authentic ways, these groups created conversations that became movements as they talked about the appropriate roles of government, business, non-profits and citizens and how society should protect and enhance the common good,” he said.

“Americans are a prideful people and like to think of their democracy as the greatest democracy on earth,” he said. “From my perspective we actually do have the greatest democracy on earth, not because we always get it right, because we don’t, but because we’re always willing to change and adapt with the times. The good government movement at the turn of the previous century, the suffrage movement in the early 1900’s, the civil rights movement in the 1960’s and the 18-year-old vote effort in the 1970’s are all examples of how America has been flexible and responsive to changing realities.”

Gates believes the country is moving through a 100-year cycle that in some ways mirrors the shift from the 19th century to the 20th, when America became in essence a different country and “hit the reset button” and literally reinvented politics, campaigns, government and public life. As the United States moves from the 20th to the 21st centuries the scale and scope of the changes in American society are no less dramatic, which is leading to a big conversation about “how we lead, how we listen and how we live.”

“Leaders have become those who ask the best questions, not those who talk the most,” he said. “We now understand that it doesn’t cut it to simply have a public hearing, we need to use new tools to ensure that we hear authentic voice. And we now understand that citizens are willing to roll up their sleeves and be a part of helping our communities, and the country, reach its potential.”



# THE TEACHING

## Presume people want to be engaged

**M**artha McCoy of Everyday Democracy poses a deceptively simple question: What does good community engagement look like? At Everyday Democracy, a national organization based in Hartford, Conn., it looks like what they specialize in – creating communities that work for all, because all are included in public problem-solving.

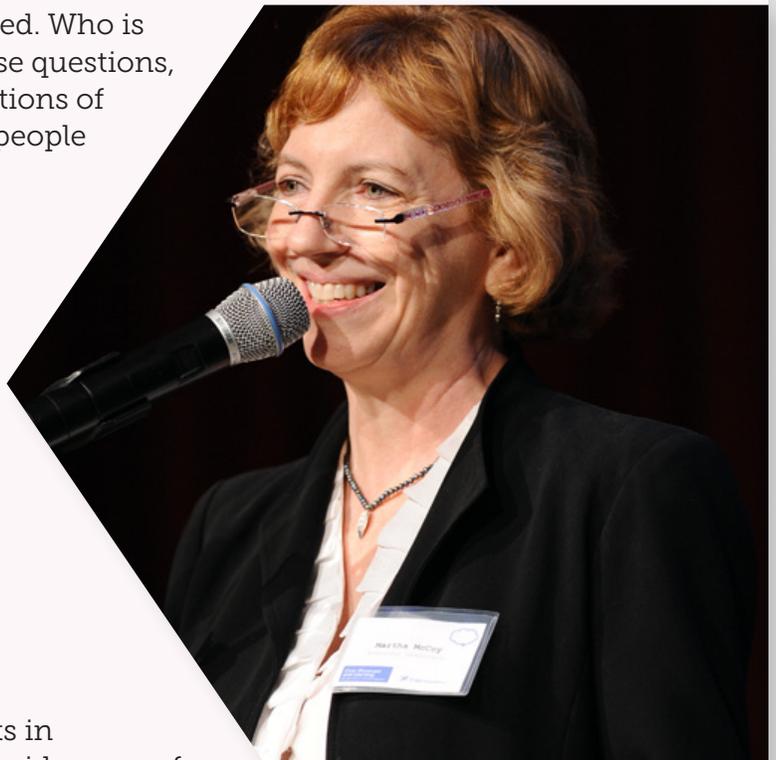
“Who is engaging in conversations about the issues most important to residents?” McCoy asked. Who is listening? In most places where I ask those questions, what I hear is that despite the good intentions of many institutions, people feel sidelined, people are talking past each other.”

Everyday Democracy provides advice, resources and training – at little or no cost – for getting people talking to one another again.

“Community engagement is essential for communities to work for all people,” she said. “But at the same time, most communities fail to invest the time and resources it takes to do it well. When community engagement is done as an afterthought, it is usually done poorly.”

McCoy held up the experience of students in Montgomery County, Md., where, with a wide array of ethnicities and native languages, children of color were performing well behind their white peers. Everyday Democracy facilitated a series of meetings between the SCHOOL district and the local business roundtable to discuss specific issues that could be holding some students back. The meetings led to specific improvements.

“One of the most fundamental lessons we’ve learned from communities is this: It is important to presume that people want to be engaged,” McCoy said. “That is part of what it means to be human. We care about the things that affect our lives.”



## Recognition is key

**D**arryl Redmond is project coordinator for BMe, a growing network of black men committed to strengthening communities.

Launched in 2011 in Detroit and Philadelphia, BMe recognizes black men and boys engaging neighborhoods, starting businesses, mentoring kids and more.



To participate, men submit a video, telling their personal story. Then, through events and other activities, participants can connect with fellow brothers and exchange ideas to advance their work. BMe also offers resources for some projects.

**Brook Ellis** is one of the Detroit participants.

He used support from BMe to start the Reginald Francis Lewis Reading Academy at the Martin Luther King Jr. High School to improve students' reading skills.

Ellis was serving a 13-year federal prison sentence for bank robbery when he was inspired to start the academy after reading Lewis's autobiography, "Why Should White Guys Have all the Fun?" Lewis, who died in 1993, built Beatrice Foods into a billion-dollar company.

Earlier this year, Ellis and other BMe participants were invited to a meeting with Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder and Detroit city officials, for a group discussion on how to identify and help solve some of Detroit residents' biggest challenges.

Redmond said that a key part of engaging more people in strengthening communities is to recognize their work.

"Many people may not be starting on the path, but we get them out and put them on the right path," Redmond said. "Everyone has a personal story. When you see what they're passionate about, you can engage them. If there is no passion, there is not engagement."

## Meet people where they are

**I**n a joint presentation, **Elizabeth Garlow**, of Michigan Corps, **Trish Dewald** of the Coalition on Temporary Shelter (COTS) and **Delphia Simmons**, of Thrive Detroit spoke of putting “Web-based tools at the service of civic engagement.” Michigan Corps, co-founded by Rishi Jaitly, former Knight Foundation program director in Detroit, offers a platform to empower the state’s residents to effect real social change.

In the Michigan Corps initiative Detroit4Detroit, for example, citizen philanthropists find projects they find compelling, such as music programs for homeless children, or tools to help young adults start careers in construction, then fund-raise through their own networks. Since the program was initiated in June 2012, 150 citizen philanthropists have contributed \$67,000 to 85 Detroit4Detroit projects.



Kiva Detroit offers microlending to local entrepreneurs in need of startup seed money, on much the same model; crowdfunding supports loans of up to \$5,000 interest-free for one year (or \$50,000 for five years). Clothing makers, food-service providers, a bike-trailer manufacturer and others have taken advantage.



COTS accepted a request by Detroit4Detroit to fundraise in small pieces, and offered an array of bite-size opportunities for their citizen philanthropists to tackle. They’ve raised about \$20,000 so far.

Keeping the projects manageable helps people feel a sense of accomplishment when they go head-to-head against such seemingly intractable social problems as homelessness. The COTS program is never going to “solve” the problem of homelessness, Dewald said. But by breaking their programs into small pieces, like funding a “boutique” where the homeless can shop for clothes or funding a few new beds, funders can feel a sense of ownership.



## Use digital tools for connection

**A**ndrew Rasiej recalled when his 85-year-old father called him and asked for help emailing a YouTube link to a large number of recipients. It was a political video, which made Rasiej reflect that his father had become “a 21st-century political pamphleteer,” using different technology than earlier generations, but with the same aim.

Rasiej runs the Personal Democracy Forum, self-described as a “hub for the conversation already under way between political practitioners and technologists.”



Pointing to a photo of Cairo’s Tahrir Square during anti-government demonstrations there earlier in 2012, Rasiej pointed out that in an effort to quell the uprisings, President Hosni Mubarak had the Internet shut down in Egypt, which only sent those seeking information into the street, effectively enlarging demonstrations.

“You can shut down the public Internet, but can’t shut down the Internet public,” he said.

But, in a world where the Internet public can look at millions of websites, how can their eyes be captured in the first place?

Start by concentrating on social media. The individual networks of Facebook and Twitter connect not only users with their friends, but those groups to one another.

Ideas, events and causes can easily go viral within each, spreading to more.

Rasiej offered the observation that when Facebook made organ donation a priority, asking users to state their donor status on their Facebook profiles, the response was overwhelmingly positive. What would happen, he asked, if we all registered our blood types as well? If there were a shortage of a particular type, potential donors could be asked to consider making an appointment, or do so online.

## Game-playing to re-imagine Detroit

@wello travels #Detroit at bike lev  
& specializes in grabbing dra  
tails & making awesome tec  
of participation #DetroitShowcas



**D**an Pitera and Priya Iyer used an online game to draw Detroiters into a conversation about their city's future. Funded by Knight Foundation and designed by Boston-based Community PlanIt, the game uses social media to lure players into tackling "missions" through completing challenges – questions and activities that put them in an urban planner's shoes as THEY consider a particular city's problems.

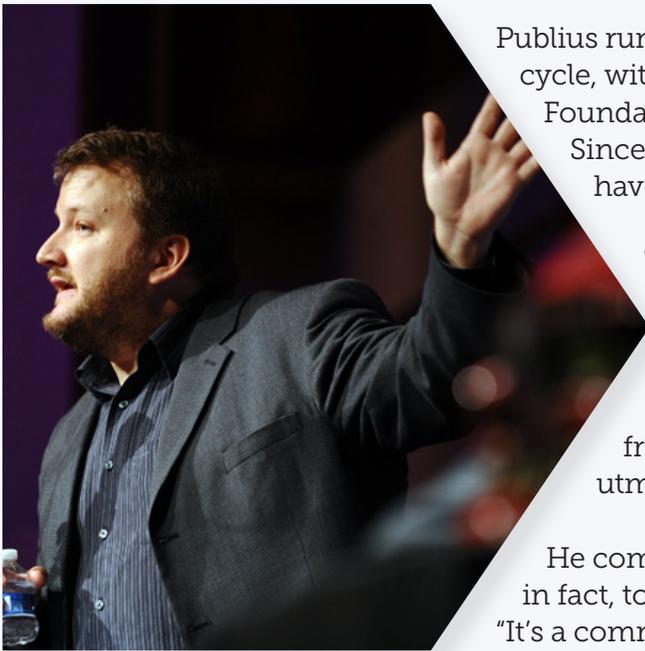
The game's online aspect is a particular lure to younger people, a crucial demographic for a city struggling to reshape itself after decades of decline. Pitera and Iyer see themselves as "inspiring citizens to shape Detroit's future." More than 1,000 registered players gave the game a try, and left 8,400 comments on the experience.



## Make sure it works

**W**hen **Vince Keenan** was younger, he didn't even know that you had to vote at a certain polling place. "I went to the wrong polling place," he said. "The sign said 'vote here,' but I couldn't."

Keenan started Publius.org in 1996 as a simple website that allowed people to find their polling locations and see sample ballots. Six years later, it was rolled into the Michigan Secretary of State website and named a model template for voting information by the Federal Election Commission. Along the way, Keenan, the son of a constitutional lawyer, became a "zealot about democracy."



Publius runs on a budget of about \$25,000 per election cycle, with help and in-kind contributions from Knight Foundation, Wayne State University and media partners. Since its founding, about three million sample ballots have been downloaded by voters.

Through his work on Publius, he has come to believe that "civic stuff" is only a small part of the average person's list of concerns, and the best way to approach the task of building engagement is to make it as user-friendly as possible, but not to expect it to be of utmost importance to all.

He compared good government engagement systems, in fact, to a toilet. As the crowd chuckled, he explained: "It's a community good. We don't really know how it works. We're trained to use it. We're responsible for its proper function. It becomes a problem when it doesn't work. When it doesn't work, we have to deal with people who want to tell you more than you want to know."

The real underutilized tool is joy, which he called "one of the oppositional tools to apathy."

Keenan brought up the Marche du Nain Rouge, the lighthearted springtime celebration that banishes the "red dwarf" that urban legend says curses the city.

"We need to use all the tools we have available online and offline to feel the joy a little more."

## Don't forget the fun

**J**erry Paffendorf brings a distinctly playful edge to both his life in Detroit and his own brand of community engagement. His presentation – in shorts and mismatched socks – was cut from the same cloth. After gaining local buzz with such early projects as selling vacant lots by the square inch, his Loveland Technologies recently has taken a more serious turn, such as city mapping with data sets, to “show people what’s going on, and give them ways to fund and take action.”



WhyDontWeOwnThis.com, for example, displays the 22,506 parcels in the 2012 Wayne County tax foreclosure auction, each one clickable, taking users to a page displaying each parcel’s statistical profile. Another site, TalktotheStation.com allows visitors to submit ideas for the preservation and redevelopment of Michigan Central Station, Detroit’s most visible abandoned building and the icon of its current state of decay.

But perhaps Loveland’s most famous, or infamous, splash came after it noticed a solitary tweet to Mayor Dave Bing, suggesting the city should erect a statue of Robocop, Detroit’s fictional cinematic crime fighter, modeled after the statue of Rocky Balboa in Philadelphia. Bing’s staff’s polite, but not-completely-tech-savvy, response (“There are not any plans to erect a statue to Robocop. Thank you for the suggestion.”) prompted Paffendorf to look into it what it would take to do it privately. The answer: \$50,000. A Kickstarter campaign raised the money in three days.

“All hell broke loose, in good ways and bad ways,” Paffendorf said, in a clash of “high-pressure and low-pressure fronts of lovers and haters.”

The statue is still under construction and hasn’t been erected, but the lesson was learned: Don’t underestimate the Internet public.

# THE CONNECTIONS

In three breakout sessions, participants discussed what they'd heard and how it might apply to their individual situations.

One group discussed the crisis of literacy, including digital literacy.

"Not everyone is on Twitter. People need to see you working in their neighborhood. When they see that commitment, it builds credibility," said Luther Keith, executive director of ARISE Detroit!, a coalition of community groups.

"For me, the most incredible thing about the city is that thousands of people are stepping up in hundreds of ways to participate in community engagement," Keith said.

**Jerry Paffendorf**, of Loveland Technologies, said successful community engagement involves online tools and boots on the ground.

"If it doesn't touch the real world, we're not doing our job right."

**Vince Keenan**, of Publius.org, noted something remarkable when voters in southeast Michigan were faced in August 2012 with a ballot choice to raise their property taxes to provide stable funding for one of the region's most prominent cultural icons, the Detroit Institute of Arts. The DIA tax request was on the bottom of the ballot. Yet it garnered more total votes than the races at the top of the ballot. That almost never happens, and shows people were showing up to vote specifically for or against the DIA – a sign of enormous community engagement. The measure passed.

"Social media has really changed the game," said Kathryn Dimond, community relations manager at the DIA.





**Maud Lyon**, executive director of the Cultural Alliance of Southeastern Michigan, an umbrella organization for about two dozen arts groups, said community organizations have to find new ways to engage the public because the old ways are fading in effectiveness. “There are half as many arts reporters as there used to be,” Lyon said. “The traditional ways of getting our message out just aren’t working.”

Once the public is engaged, however – as it was by the DIA election – organizations need to use their combined resources as a “multiplier effect, to aggregate what we’re doing,” said Keenan, who suggested the DIA find a way to continue to capitalize on the massive community goodwill created during the millage campaign by sharing that network of supporters with other cultural groups.

## CONCLUSIONS

**“At Knight Foundation, we see a new kind of civic energy in Detroit, one that is supporting entrepreneurs and social change, online and offline. It’s important that we all partner, co-produce and co-create with that energy.”**

**– Knight Foundation**

Not every problem can be solved with savvy social networking, all agreed. But leveraging connections is essential for building better communities, populated by informed, engaged citizens who feel a sense of ownership and all that implies – responsibility, motivation and pride.

Detroit still faces significant challenges, but as the region emerges from a lengthy recession, new opportunities to remake the landscape and address social problems are emerging with it. Whether it’s philanthropic goals reached through many small contributions or new neighborhood alliances crafted through smart mapping tools, small businesses rising on microloans or leaders sharing their successful projects with one another, it all leads to stronger, smarter, better-working communities.

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report was commissioned by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, to share insights from the “Detroit Civic Engagement Showcase & Learning Conference,” which took place in September 2012. It is written by staff writers from the Center for Michigan’s Bridge Magazine.

## About the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Knight Foundation supports transformational ideas that promote quality journalism, advance media innovation, engage communities and foster the arts. The foundation believes that democracy thrives when people and communities are informed and engaged. For more, visit [knightfoundation.org](http://knightfoundation.org).

## Knight Foundation’s Tech for Engagement

Initiative seeks to foster tools, ideas and projects that increase people’s involvement in their communities and help them shape their own futures. More at [techforengagement.org](http://techforengagement.org).

## About Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement

PACE is a learning community of grantmakers and donors committed to strengthening democracy by using the power, influence and resources of philanthropy to open pathways to civic and community participation. More at [pacefunders.org](http://pacefunders.org).

## About the Center for Michigan

The Center for Michigan is a “think-and-do” tank founded by Phil Power in early 2006. A 501(c)3 tax exempt nonprofit organization, The Center’s objective is to cure our unhealthy hyper-partisan political culture and reinvigorate our broken policy apparatus by calling forth a bottom-up, common ground citizens’ agenda for Michigan’s transformation. The center’s Bridge Magazine provides indepth coverage of statewide policy issues. More at [bridgemi.com](http://bridgemi.com).



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