

*Two Listening Projects<sup>SM</sup> in Winchester, Virginia, were begun in late winter of 1995 and were completed later that year. [See Voices, Fall 1995.] One was done in a largely African American neighborhood where drug sales and associated problems were at issue. The second was in a largely Hispanic neighborhood that suffered from prejudice and landlord issues. These projects have resulted in active community organizations that have fostered an optimistic outlook in both neighborhoods and a more positive attitude on the part of the wider community towards them.*

## Lessons from Two Virginia Listening Projects<sup>SM</sup>: *Some Outcomes*

by Geoffrey Huggins

### Survey Results:

#### Hispanic Neighborhood

Two types of interviews were conducted in the Hispanic community. We began with a brief, factual survey of every household. This was done to provide city officials with timely demographic data about recent Hispanic immigrants and to counter the common misperception that they were unemployed and a drain on city resources. The results showed our Hispanic neighbors to be mostly employed, living in close-knit and often extended families, and very minimally drawing upon social services and welfare agencies.

A second series of interviews in the Hispanic community followed the typical in-depth Listening Project<sup>SM</sup> process. These interviews showed that the majority of people had been happy in their homelands (mostly Mexico and El Salvador). What caused them to come to the US was either economic problems (predominantly Mexicans) or violence (predominantly Salvadoran). It is noteworthy that US policies in Central America (economic exploitation or arms shipments to repressive regimes) have directly contributed to the migration of Hispanics to this country—literally forcing them to leave a homeland where they'd prefer to stay. Clearly, we in Winchester and elsewhere in this country have a responsibility to welcome those who are often forced from their countries by actions of our government.

Most of the Hispanic immigrants described being very fearful of their migration to the US. They spoke of often having to accept a lower level of

employment and feeling stupid and incompetent, not speaking English or understanding local customs. Despite a few problems in becoming accepted, most spoke of feeling welcomed in our town and had experienced minimal discrimination. They talked of working long hours to achieve financial security for themselves and their families, of their hopes for a brighter future for their children.

The two major current concerns of the Hispanics interviewed were safety issues in their neighborhood and landlord negligence. Most Hispanics in Winchester live in an apartment complex owned by a landlord for whom timely repair and cockroach eradication seem to be a low priority. Public drinking in the parking lots has often led to fights and speeding cars. Relations with the police have not been good. When police have responded to calls, the language barrier has created misunderstandings. In addition, Hispanics who had experienced repression from police and the army in their homelands were leery of anyone in uniform.

#### *A Year Later:*

It's now a year after the Listening Projects<sup>SM</sup> were begun. Much has happened; we've had a few stumbles and some gratifying successes. The struggle goes on. The Hispanic community has created a citizens group which they call *El Bien Para la Comunidad* (For the Good of the Community). A degree of momentum has been built by a few solid achievements.

The relationship between the police and other city authorities and the Hispanic citizens has been greatly improved. Police, fire, and rescue personnel came to a meeting with Hispanics to demonstrate equipment and describe their services. The city subscribed to a language translation service for 911 emergency calls. The Police Chief issued an order that prohibits patrol officers from asking Hispanics for immigration papers—an event that had been intimidating to citizens, as well as legally beyond the purview of local police.

Much of the improvement in interactions with the police was brought about by the initiation of a Community Policing program in Winchester. Through this program, the police are effectively reaching out to the Hispanic community and trying hard to set a positive tone. They are very appreciative of a viable citizens group to interact with. At Christmas, the community police department also began Spanish language classes! This closer association between the police and Hispanic residents is bringing an increased feeling of safety to the citizens. It has also given residents evidence that they can interact successfully with authorities.

A current effort of *El Bien Para la Comunidad* is opening negotiations with the local office of Virginia's Department of Motor Vehicles. Getting a driver's license has been a particularly difficult and stressful process for Hispanics, as they are subjected to intense scrutiny and often suspicion that their credentials are not genuine.

Coverage in the local newspaper has helped to spread the word of accomplishments throughout the community. The local radio station has even had a few spot coverages. This media reportage has brought inquiries from outside Winchester. Requests for information from other citizen groups trying to accomplish similar improvements have come in. Governmental and civic organizations have called for information and presentations. A college professor has shown interest in writing an article on the group and its accomplishments for an academic journal.

Finally, headway is being made with the landlord. *El Bien Para la Comunidad* has contacted the landlord in a nonviolent but insistent manner. By first doing some homework and learning about local regulations, the group has put itself in a knowledgeable position that has brought forth agreements from the landlord to clean up the exterior of the apartments, put up night lights, and begin a cockroach eradication program.

#### *Survey Results:*

***African American Neighborhood***  
Winchester's North End neighborhood is a relatively poor, mostly black community that historically has been neglected by city officials. As is common in other cities, this type of neigh-

borhood is very vulnerable to a drug market and its attendant crime and nuisance problems. Residents cited as major problems drug sales, loitering, trashing, noise, and public drinking (in decreasing order). Despite this situation, there is a remarkable lack of the violence and vandalism that usually happens in other cities experiencing these problems. For example, 84% of those interviewed said they feel safe, and 80% say they've never directly suffered from the problems.

The cause of this striking situation can be seen by a deeper look at the survey results. The North End is a stable community of long-term residents. Of 45 people interviewed (from 13 to 72 years old), the average length of residence in the neighborhood was 31 years! Most feel closely connected to their community, citing the family-like, secure feelings they have. They feel invaded by the drug problems—knowing their neighborhood as well as they do, they describe the drug market as run largely by outsiders. Residents express frustration at feeling powerless to stop the drugs, to change the bad reputation of their neighborhood in the rest of the city, or get city officials to care.

Residents are concerned about changes they see in the last few years:

newer and less connected neighbors, the faster pace of life, kids increasingly neglected and on their own. The handwriting is on the wall and clearly threatens a worse future. Winchester is making the transition from a small town to a small city, and a city's impersonal problems are arriving.

Those who live in the North End tend to be rather critical of past efforts of city officials to deal with these problems. City council members are given especially low marks—for showing minimal concern and being seen only during election campaigns. The police, however, rank surprisingly well. Some 40% of residents say police respond well, but their techniques don't do much to stop drug sales. The newspaper is regarded as sensationalizing crime in their neighborhood and not very concerned about positive news coverage. The churches are considered to be trying, but with little lasting success. Recommendations residents had for these organizations called for more involvement and understanding on the part of city council, for the newspaper not to add to misperceptions about their neighborhood, and for churches to cooperate more and to reach out to families.

Finally, evaluating themselves, residents describe a lack of involvement and an attitude of defeatism as factors needing change. They spoke of the need to find ways to encourage commitment and responsibility and to create leaders. The need to reach out to kids was repeatedly spoken about. Specific recommendations residents made for themselves were citizen street patrols, trash pickups, neighborhood beautification, interaction with police, pressuring city council, holding regular meetings, urging landlord reform, supporting children (by leisure activities, tutoring, mentoring, gospel music choirs), and holding parenting classes. In addition, there was much sentiment expressed for keeping an old school open in the neighborhood and using it as a community center.

*(continued on next page)*



*Community Police take neighborhood kids out for an evening of fun—  
police action at its best!*

*Photo courtesy of Geoffrey Huggins*

## TWO COMMUNITIES

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### *A Year Later: The North End*

As in the Hispanic community, much has happened in Winchester's North End this last year. They have also formed a citizens group—The North End Citizens. The group has been meeting for several months in the old neighborhood school. The North End Citizens is a coalition organization in that outsiders regularly attend, but residents are fully in charge. Several committees are addressing trash pickup, beautification, a telephone tree, a newsletter, landlords, and keeping the school open as a community center.

Two to four bicycle-riding officers of the Community Policing program regularly attend meetings, as do their supervisors. The Chief of Police has been present for at least half of the meetings! One or two city council members usually attend. Clearly, those city officials who *do* care about the North End regard the North End Citizens as a valuable, vital organization to meet with and encourage.

A report was written that summarized the results of the Listening Project<sup>SM</sup> in the North End. Some 130 copies of the report were distributed throughout the city, specifically targeting all kinds of public officials.

Some projects accomplished by the North End Citizens are quarterly street cleanups (Adopt-A-Street signs in the community announce the group's efforts); a quarterly

newsletter that is helping to link people more closely; some actions to improve the appearance of rental property, including a current interaction with city council to bring ordinance changes; improved street lighting that was pushed jointly by the North End Citizens and the Community Police. The group is serving as a communication link between the school board and a coalition of community organizations who are making plans for using the neighborhood school as a multipurpose center.

The Community Police have also been active in the North End. Drug sales are way down. Food and toys were distributed at Christmas as an outreach to the community. The police have instituted a parental notification program, whereby they issue a notice to teenagers whose activities may not be unlawful, but who need adult corrective attention. The youngster is told to go home and relate the incident to their parent or caregiver and that the officer will be calling the next day to follow up. Parents have uniformly welcomed this kind of concerned, involved police action.

Finally, a few spin-offs of the North End Listening Project<sup>SM</sup> should be listed. Some of these events can be directly attributed to our project; some of them are simply events that I like to consider having been encouraged by the more positive and optimistic atmosphere that now exists in the North End. As in the Hispanic community, coverage in the local newspaper and on radio of the efforts

of citizens to improve their community has helped raise awareness in the rest of the city about the constructive work going on. Presentations about the Listening Project<sup>SM</sup> are spreading the word about the power of the technique.

A group of young parents in the North End has recently formed Care Takers, an organization dedicated to reaching out to the children. Once a week they gather kids from 5 to 17 years old and help them with homework, social activities, and games. Care Takers raises funds to take the kids on field trips and to cultural events. It is a dynamic group that is warmly supported by the North End Citizens.

All of these accomplishments have not come without a lot of hard work and dedication. We have had minor failures and misunderstandings—things no successful group ever avoids. We are all aware that continued progress will only come from continued struggle. Throughout it all, I maintain an unshakable faith in the Listening Project<sup>SM</sup> process. It is solidly grounded in nonviolence concepts, which means integrity and truth are threads that tie it all together. When disagreements and egos are encountered, these strengths are very effective in preventing the problems from becoming crises. I've seen it work—several times. Our town has seen many positive changes because of these Listening Projects.<sup>SM</sup> I'm already thinking about the next one!

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Photos courtesy of Geoffrey Huggins

*Children enjoying a magic show provided by Highland Memorial Presbyterian Church in Winchester's North End.*