

Case Study 2022

HOW CREATE A HEALTHIER NIAGARA FALLS COLLABORATIVE EMBRACED THE POWER OF NARRATIVE



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HEALTH JUSTICE
COMMUNITY

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This case study is part of a series developed by [People Power Health](#) in collaboration with the [Leading Change Network's](#) Health Justice Community.

You can learn more about community organizing for health in our Health Justice Guide.

Our special thanks to the LCN Health Justice Community team members for their generosity in sharing their experiences creating meaningful impact to stop health inequities and bring health justice.

If you are a health activist interested in embracing community organizing in your work, get connected to [People Power Health](#).

Visit the [LCN Resource Center](#) to learn more about Community Organizing and find more organizing resources and case studies.



Brian Archie

Team Integrator/Change Agent
Create a Healthier Niagara Falls
Collaborative

“We had to evolve from a bureaucratic task force to focus on community organizing built around our shared narratives. Because in this community, even if you’re not directly affected by a particular healthcare inequity, you probably know a family member who is.”

OVERVIEW

As team integrator and change agent for the Create a Healthier Niagara Falls Collaborative, Brian Archie understands the power of narrative in community organizing. He and his colleagues rely on narrative to organize residents and institutional partners around the social determinants of health for the Niagara Falls community.



CREATE A HEALTHIER
NIAGARA FALLS
COLLABORATIVE
Be the Change

A Case Study in the Power of Community Narrative

Around 2018, Brian Archie and the Niagara Falls Collaborative leadership team were ready to bring more structure to their community engagement programs. Archie describes it as a turning point, in which the collaborative fully embraced the principles of community organizing.

“We needed to find new ways to build capacity in Niagara,” says Archie, “and to engage residents with resident-driven projects and campaigns. So our relationship with People Power Health started with a leadership training that took place here in our city with the core team,” he says, “which at the time was myself, Sarah Obot, Keyona Dunn, Krista Ehasz and Evelyn Harris, alongside our mentor-coach Shelley Hirshberg.” Archie and the Niagara Falls Collaborative leadership team worked closely with People Power Health to learn the formal processes behind community engagement. Specifically, Archie and his team paid special attention to the power of public narrative, which would significantly factor into collaborative’s subsequent campaigns.

“At the time, there was interest around parks, health equity, physical activity, and healthy eating,” says Archie. “But to build people power in this small but dissected space of Niagara Falls, New York—to start the city gardens, run the workshops, and do the outreach—we needed to embody the stories of ourselves and our community members.”

“We share with each other to motivate folks to do something for themselves. And even if residents aren’t immediately taking action, the talking and building of the relationship and sharing stories allows us to connect on those values.”



Community Organizing Powered By the Stories of its Residents

To help the collaborative and the Niagara Falls community uncover and articulate those stories, Archie began with his own. With regard to healthcare, one of the more pressing issues facing the Niagara Falls community, Archie recalls his early involvement as a peer educator for prostate cancer services.

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“I’m a prostate cancer survivor, so it was fluid to do that work. This is my ‘story of self,’ so to speak, which gave me the opportunity to connect with people and raise awareness about things I’d experienced directly—the importance of having a physician, for example, or person-centered care—and that were a core part of my life’s narrative.”



Not only did telling stories of self become part of the collaborative’s efforts around community organizing, but the team made a common practice of seeking the deeper connections between these stories of self and so-called stories of us—the shared values, experiences, and aspirations of their community.

“How do we find that shared value?”

asks Archie.

“I think back to when I first started working with the collaborative. We visited a farm and planted seeds while on a field trip with Cornell Cooperative Extension and it took me right back to my grandparents’ family garden.”

A few weeks later, Archie built a small garden box behind his home in Niagara Falls. Soon, a neighbor asked what he’s growing, listened to Archie’s story, and decided to build a box of his own. The following year, two more neighbors followed suit. “Just that little planter box started conversations with my neighbors where there really wasn’t one before. People started sharing their own stories about food and family gardens.”

Indeed, this frequent and intentional deployment of narrative—of stories of self and us—has been integral in the Niagara Falls Collaborative transformation into a truly resident-led organization. Today, the collaborative is focused on addressing the community’s shared stories of now—those urgent challenges all members of Archie’s communities face.

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What are those stories? Certainly, issues of public health and food access still face the Niagara Falls community. Through a variety of leadership training, community forums, and events—as well as programs like Niagara Falls Local Food Action Plan, Community Conversations, and Walk the Falls—the collaborative works in earnest to address these urgent challenges.

Yet new stories of self, us, and now emerge every day, and they often go beyond what's happening just in Niagara Falls. The collaborative is now engaged with helping its neighbors in Buffalo heal from the tragic hate crimes at Tops Market, for example. And Brian Archie was recently appointed to the New York State Racial Equity Working Group, a distinguished opportunity to elevate the public narrative around racial inequities that Archie has encountered in his own community.

Whatever the urgent issues facing Niagara Falls and surrounding communities might be, Archie and the Niagara Falls Collaborative remain engaged with its community members. As Archie notes, it is the narratives of these very residents that enable and empower the collaborative's important work.

