



Local Self-Reliance

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By the Mother Earth News editors

For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self Reliance in Washington, D.C. have worked to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk alike) should be exposed to the Institute's efforts ... which is why we're now making this "what's happening where" report by ILSR staffers one of MOTHER's regular features.

To many people Newark, New Jersey seems to be the epitome of the decaying, depressed, Eastern urban center. The city's population has declined 20% in the last decade. Whole blocks of homes, factories, and warehouses lie vacant. One Newark neighborhood—with a population of 40,000 people—has only one supermarket. At the same time, unemployment has reached incredible levels and high blood pressure affects one out of every ten residents. It's little wonder that great numbers of people—who remember the 1967 riots which ripped through vast areas of this town—shake their heads in resignation and consider Newark a wasteland . . . an unsalvageable city.

The Tri-City Citizens' Union for Progress—a multi-purpose non-profit community corporation based on Newark's western edge—however, thinks differently. Since its founding in 1967, Tri-City has worked in its twelve-square-block neighborhood to maintain and improve the quality of life for area residents. For eleven years, then, Tri-City has focused on providing essential services: housing, health care, and education. Its underlying goal has always been the same ... to foster local economic development and to provide local leadership.

After the 1967 race riots, for instance, when much of the city's housing was abandoned because nobody wanted to invest in Newark . . . the people at Tri-City didn't abandon their neighbors. Instead, they sponsored the purchase and rehabilitation of Amity Village I, 96 units of housing which were designed to be owned collectively.

Amity Village—which was funded by the New Jersey Housing Finance Agency—was the first housing rehabilitation project in postriot Newark. Furthermore, the cooperative has played a continuing and important role in the development of Tri-City's program and—at the same time—has contributed to the stability of the area. (In contrast to the rest of the neighborhood—where only 19% of the residents have lived in the same

house since 1965—three out of every four residents of Amity Village have been there since the cooperative's inception.)

Tri-City manages the co-op. Thus, rents are kept low and—in cases where it is needed the community group helps residents secure rent subsidies. As evidence of the success of this project, Tri-City has purchased another 200 housing units in the neighborhood. These units, now called Amity Village II, are scheduled for co-op conversion next year.

And there's more. In April of 1972 the Tri-City group opened a community education center—the People's Center—which has since become the focus for a number of community projects. The Center, for example, houses a day-care program for 30 children aged two to four, and an after-school program for 65 children between the ages of five and nine.

At the same time, the Tri-City Women's and Children's Health Action Project provides VD screening for women, cancer and high blood pressure tests, and help with gynecological problems ... all for free. Children are given no-cost physical examinations, plus tests and (where applicable) immunizations for tuberculosis, lead poisoning, hearing impairment, and vision problems. And—to make a good thing even better—all of these programs are open to residents of the whole neighborhood, whether they are Amity Village people or not.

Dolores Anderson—manager of Tri-City's maintenance crew—explains that all these programs are "growing by leaps and bounds", that economic development is Tri-City's byword, and that the group realizes that the real keys to revitalization are jobs and skills. The management contract with Amity Village, for instance, has enabled the organization to hire a black contractor—on staff—and to provide training opportunities for local residents.

The city of Newark has recently granted Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) funds to Tri-City, and these will enable the group to run six or eight maintenance-trainee programs. The nonprofit corporation hopes to expand this (and other) services beyond the cooperative and into the rest of the neighborhood.

At this time, of course, many contractors still refuse to work in Newark. Tri-City hopes to fill that gap, to provide essential services, and—at the same time—to generate jobs, income, and security within its target community.

The citizens' group is also looking past the basic rehabilitation work that occupies them now. Since the cost of energy has become a significant part of the cost of housing, Tri-City has extended its concerns to cover improved insulation and alternate energy sources. Three buildings in Amity Village I have been insulated to date . . . and the crew has purchased a portable insulation blower to help it do future jobs faster, easier, and more efficiently. In addition to that, Tri-City has installed its first domestic solar-powered hot-water system on top of the cooperative units on 18th Avenue. That initial system (which should be in operation by the time you read this column) is meant to demonstrate what might be done more extensively in the future.

The only obstacles standing in Tri-City's way at this time are the twin constraints of funding and time. The group has great ideas for the future ... plans which could stimulate the economic growth of its neighborhood, improve the health of area residents, provide jobs, and teach the people that they can work together to change their situations. But these plans take time, and the staff is already overworked. The maintenance crew—for example—cannot install more new insulation right now because it is too busy making necessary repairs on

old buildings and other property. Projects which might generate income are in limbo because no one has the time to pursue them.

This situation, however, may be about to change. For one thing, part of the neighborhood has been declared a Neighborhood Preservation Area by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This means that federal money will be available to homeowners in the area for rehabilitation work, and Tri-City hopes to arrange a contract for organizational and orientation work with neighborhood property owners. The provision of municipal CETA funds to Tri-City is also a good sign. If the group is able to secure the level of funding that it needs, TriCity will be an exciting example of true grassroots neighborhood preservation.

For more information contact: Tri-City Citizens' Union for Progress, 675-81 S. 19th St., Newark, New Jersey 07103.

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