



Case Study

Forging trust by building a community organization



The accidental death of Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old Black boy, by a Hasidic Jewish driver in 1991, ignited three days of riots in Crown Heights Brooklyn. Rumors around the accident fueled existing tensions between Blacks and Jews in the area. In violent protests that followed, a group of young black men murdered Yankel Rosenbaum, a 29-year-old student from Australia.

Following this unrest, the Brooklyn Borough President sought to create a mediation center that would reduce conflict and improve connections between neighbors in the predominantly Caribbean African American and Hassidic Jewish community. He approached the Crown Heights Coalition, which consisted of the leaders of the different ethnic communities, and the Center for Court Innovation.

Process & Outcome

Sheryl moved to Brooklyn in February 1998 to work for the Center for Court Innovation and lead this project. After reading the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center concept paper, she began meeting with members of the Crown Heights Coalition and other community leaders to understand their vision for the project and learn about the neighborhood. The Mediation Center opened six months later, with Sheryl developing the plan and overseeing the majority of the implementation.

Shortly after starting, Sheryl was approached by [Henry Goldschmidt](#), a cultural anthropologist who had been studying Crown Heights and ultimately wrote a book about race, religion and the Crown Heights Hassidic community. As it can be difficult as a woman to connect with the Hassidic community, he became an objective resource, introducing Sheryl to Hassidic women respected in the neighborhood, who helped her build trust and acceptance, with some even becoming volunteer mediators.

Finding the right location

The Center's location was critically important and difficult to find; it needed to be somewhere both groups would feel comfortable visiting, feel safe in and view as a neutral location. With input from the Caribbean African American and Hassidic communities, she chose a space on the corner of Nostrand



Avenue and Eastern Parkway. The Center for Court Innovation hired an architect and contractor, and Sheryl oversaw the renovation.

Creating Support with a Play Streets summer program

As outsiders trying to drive change, it was important to show how committed those involved were to the neighborhood. Sheryl conducted an informal community needs assessment, asking community leaders and residents a standard set of questions around the needs of the community. Safe summer opportunities for their youth was always at the top of the list.

Outdoor play is essential for healthy childhood development and the lack of safe spaces in Crown Heights was a barrier to children participating in outdoor activities. While the Center was getting ready to open, Sheryl and her small team, a fulltime employee and an intern, launched and ran Play Streets, increasing outdoor play by neighborhood children through temporary street closures that created safe spaces for active, supervised play. Coordinating with local police and residents, they closed a different street each week that summer and provided safe, summer activities and meals for children.

Opening the Center

The Crown Heights Community Mediation Center opened in fall 1998. To improve relations and increase the capacity of residents to solve problems on their own, Sheryl organized a three-day mediation training for residents.

The training was oversubscribed, diverse and successful. Seeing exceptional talent in one of the participants, Sheryl hired her to work at the Center; [Sharon “Ife” Charles](#) went on become the Center’s Deputy Director and subsequently run other violence reduction programs throughout New York City.

In addition to mediation services and training, Sheryl brought in legal aid lawyers to hold clinics and provide free neighborhood-based legal assistance to residents on topics including immigration status, family law and housing.



Sheryl turned her focus to building a strong team of staff and volunteers to work at the Center, cultivating a team that would run the Center once she moved to other projects at the Center for Court Innovation. Sheryl helped identify and hire the two Center directors who followed her – one of whom, in 2020, continues to run the Center. As of late 2020, all the original Mediation Center staff were serving in executive positions at large non-profits.

A Solution for the Long-Term

Since opening, Center staff and volunteers have helped build countless bridges and mediate numerous disputes, and the Center continues to evolve. Its legacy is its ability to continue to change with the neighborhood and endure as a trusted entity. The Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, renamed to Neighbors In Action, [has expanded to](#) multiple sites in central Brooklyn and provides a variety of youth development, violence prevention and community-building programs.