

THE VILLAGE CONNECTOR STORY

AN INSPIRING APPROACH TO COMMUNITY PROSPERITY



GLENN K. GARNES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn K. Garnes is a retired attorney and entrepreneur. Glenn built a successful law firm by focusing his attention on building a people network that was responsive and productive. The things Glenn learned along the way required some trial and error to refine into an approach that yielded consistent results. Glenn now shares those lessons with business professionals everywhere in an effort to shorten their learning curves and to create a legacy of success stories in relationship marketing.

Glenn is the founder of the Village Connector Community News, Inc., which operates an online community newspaper among other things. Glenn likes to describe Village Connector as a “community building system disguised as an online newspaper,” because the program does so much more than produce local news. Glenn teaches business professionals how to use the resources of the Village Connector Community News and the teachings he shares through his lectures and publications to establish themselves of powerful centers of influence in their communities.

Glenn is a highly sought after speaker on a variety of business topics related to business networking, relationship marketing, social media marketing, collaborative marketing, referral marketing, and business partnerships.

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This book is dedicated all of the merchants who have been early adopters and visionaries with the Village Connector. They stepped up and contributed their economic resources at a time when many of us have given up on being able to effect positive change in our communities. Their support and inspiration has made Village Connector more than a vision, or a possibility, but definite reality.

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to acknowledge our dear friend, Lisa Shah, from Queensland, Australia, for her excellent effort in putting together The Family Song, which is the Village Connector theme song. Lisa is a multi-talented neighbor who is an accomplished singer and composer, a portrait artist, and a personal development coach.

Be sure to connect with Lisa at:

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The Family Song, by Lisa Shah

INTRODUCTION

Who will solve the challenges our local communities face? Are you happy to leave your future in the hands of elected officials? I abandoned that plan about 10 years ago when I finally accepted a reality I have actually known all my life, which is that government cannot be the solution to every challenge we face in our lives. At some point, it's up to individual community members to participate in solutions we create outside of the traditional governmental infrastructure.

The challenges our communities face are not insignificant and certainly do not lend themselves to overnight solutions. They also cannot be resolved with the same level of thought that created them in the first place. We must be prepared to consider new and unique approaches to problem solving, approaches that do not polarize us into competing camps, but rather unite us in a common goal.

I believe the main reason more people don't become part of the solution is that many of us have thrown up our hands and allowed a sense of hopelessness to dominate our thoughts. We feel helpless in our ability to impact our futures, and to make a difference, instead believing that any solution must come from someone or something bigger than our individual selves. This is a mistaken belief and that kind of thought must be reversed if we are ever going to bring these challenges into focus and solve them.

I'm putting my money on the awakening in local community members that they have been the key to re-creating prosperity in their communities this whole time. We must open ourselves up to the reality that there are things we can do to make a difference, and with relatively little effort at that. Working with other important community stakeholders, we can create opportunities and momentum that, to this point, have been only unrealized potential. What it takes to get the job done is a community partnership that distributes responsibility for creating prosperity across the entire community and does not allow that responsibility to concentrate in the hands of a few.

Past efforts to revitalize our communities have failed or underachieved in part because they utilized a structure where there were "winners and losers." Those winners and losers were typically selected by governmental officials for partisan reasons having nothing to do with what was truly in the interest

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of communities. Unfortunately, it is the nature of concentrated power that results in the interest of the community taking a back seat to the interest of elected officials in perpetuating themselves in power. As long as this system of concentrated power exists we will rarely see effective solutions come from governmental sources.

The solutions we need don't require us to continually spend more money, especially through government initiatives. We believe a true solution lies in looking at how the money we spend as individuals and as a community collectively can be the source of new financial and other resources. Small adjustments in our spending habits has the power to stimulate economic activity without radical changes to our way of life, if we understand those adjustments and embrace them.

In The Village Connector Story I propose a plan of action that every citizen of every community can play a role in making reality, all without anyone having to give something up in order that others may benefit. In fact, it is the voluntary participation in the process that makes it most attractive. With everyone in a position to have an impact the power returns to the people, as long as we stick together in our common goal of improving quality of life for ourselves and our neighbors, through solutions that create no enemies.

CHAPTER 1

A LONGING

FOR BELONGING

“Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person.”

Mother Teresa

If you have ever stopped to watch young children at play you have witnessed a human characteristic that I believe is the key to the future of our local communities. That characteristic is the desire to be connected with others. When children are very young, they have a natural inclination to associate with other children. It is actually an inspiring sight to see, because it is pure, innocent, and unaffected by societal conditioning. This willingness to associate with others is fed in part by a desire for companionship that is inherently part of who we are as humans.

However, as children grow older, they become exposed to subtle and mostly artificial differences between them and the children with whom they play. These differences are learned typically from society through the relationships with their parents, older children, coaches, teachers, media, and society generally.

These subtle differences include race and religious background, class and economic background, political and social beliefs, and, of course, differences associated with culture and gender. While young children become aware of these differences at different stages in their lives, they begin to attribute increasing significance to them as they are exposed to other people's opinions and perceptions.

In other words, young children start off being naturally connected to each other, and it is only after learning through the acculturation process about the differences amongst people, that they soon find

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themselves divided into smaller groups, typically of people who only associate with certain types of people. It is these divisions, as artificial as they may be, that deprive many of us of the opportunity to reach our full potential individually and as communities, because they limit the pool of people from whom we can draw resources and who look to us as a resource.

It also seems to be a natural trait for individuals to belong to organizations or special interest groups. Think about how many people you know who join fraternities or sororities, country clubs, social clubs, churches, and support groups. There seems to be an organization or group themed around virtually anything people take an interest in.

There is no denying that the craving to belong is a strong one in all of us. It makes us comfortable to be around people that share a common interest, people who accept us because of our interests, and people who help to nurture our interests.

Unfortunately, the awareness that comes along with maturity, of the ethnic, cultural and societal differences between us and our neighbors, many times serves to restrict with whom we are open to collaboration and pursuit of common interests. When we encounter people of different ethnic backgrounds, society has conditioned us to keep them at a distance or disassociate ourselves completely. Obviously, this is contrary to our natural inclination to connect with people.

Limiting the pool of people with whom we will engage in relationship building is perhaps the biggest area where we are missing opportunities in our local communities. Fortunately, it is an area that can be quickly corrected.

Another good reason to overcome our resistance to embracing others as we become more self-aware is that many people around us are aware of the importance we place on the differences we perceive in others, and actually use this learned trait to manipulate and control us. We see this frequently in politics as elected officials play the “divide and conquer” trump card by pitting people of different interests against each other. This is done by catering to certain interests groups with political patronage, knowing that others will soon seek to compete for that patronage themselves.

The use of manipulative strategies like this, in the sinister effort to control others, is truly unfortunate, but it is our fault when it happens. Fault may be a strong term here, especially for those that are unaware of this manipulation technique. It is perhaps better to say that it is our responsibility not to allow it to happen, especially once we are aware that it is happening.

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If the true power of our communities is to be realized, it must start with a return to the most basic human characteristic of all: that pure, innocent, and seminal desire to be connected with others. You will find that the Village Connector is designed to create an environment that reestablishes our ability to connect with each other and unlock the power within every community that comes with awakening to the power of connections.

The remainder of this book will focus on what we can achieve together if we can overcome societal conditioning to separate ourselves from our neighbors and instead find reasons to embrace them, at least around issues we have in common.

CHAPTER 2

THE HIDDEN TREASURES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

“A successful team is a group of many hands but of one mind.”

Bill Bethel

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

Community means many things to many people, but when we use the term here, we are referring to the area where you live, and the area where you do business. Those areas are sometimes the same, but not always.

You may belong to multiple communities, which means you may have a different type of relationship with people in those communities, relative to your status there. If you live in one community and work in another, the type of connections that you have within the community you live in may be very different than the ones you have where you work. For example, you may coach a little league team, or volunteer at the local soup kitchen in the community where you live, whereas you may only attend business functions and networking events in the community where you do business. Those activities necessarily affect how people perceive you and your contribution to each of those communities.

Being part of different communities doesn't negatively affect your ability to connect with people within them. It does however affect how you go about doing so, since you will have different reasons

for making connections and those reasons may define how other community members view your membership in their community.

THE COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT – UNLOCKING THE HIDDEN TREASURES

Most of us have a sense of pride in where we live. That pride may relate to the cohesiveness of our community, something that is unique about our community, or even a sense of competition we have with other communities around ours.

I attended the University of Pittsburgh for college and one of the most stark examples of community pride is known in Pittsburgh as the “backyard brawl,” an interstate football rivalry between the University of Pittsburgh and neighboring West Virginia University. This rivalry is both storied and intense. It grows out of a sense of community that unites the athletes, the students, and the alumni from each of these schools in the support of their alma mater as they battle on the football field.

Despite that sense of pride of belonging to a particular community, very few of us take the time to consider all the reasons we are proud of where we live. After all, the more reasons we have, the more likely we are to take inspired action to make the most of and to invest in our communities.

I’ve come up with a useful “community assessment” process which begins with quantifying the resources within your community. The purpose of the community assessment is to allow you and other community members to inventory resources of all types that exist in your community. The exercise then positions you to determine how you and your neighbors can voluntarily deploy these resources in an interdependent community partnership to achieve more for individuals and the community as a whole.

There are many types of resources including people, financial, natural, geographic, and others. Assessing the resources in your community positions you and your neighbors to better leverage those resources in a way that creates opportunity for community growth and prosperity that benefits everyone.

My assessment tool starts with the word “Community” and more particularly a portion of that word, namely “unity.” It is no accident that unity is a focal point of the word and the actual concept the word describes. They are inseparable.

So let's take a look at how I use this acronym to formulate the assessment, one letter at a time.

“U” – The “U” in unity reminds us that there are unlimited resources, and therefore, unlimited potential in our local communities. That's an exciting concept to contemplate, because so many times we have been conditioned to think in terms of our limitations as opposed to our potential. Think about how many times you have someone refer to the lack of grant money or funding for a particular program. People are laid off every day because grants and funding are no longer available. There never seems to be enough money available to renovate a playground, or start a youth sports program. Is this a problem in our community?

The government always delays public interest projects like pools and playgrounds when governmental budgeting constraints require belt tightening. The truth is that the only thing that was truly in short supply was creative thought on how to get the job done.

Accepting the notion that your community offers unlimited opportunity is what we call an “abundance mentality” concept. Do not be tempted to equate abundance mentality with wishful thinking. This actually brings into play the antithesis to abundance mentality, which is scarcity mentality.

Scarcity mentality is what we have been conditioned by society to embrace. We believe that we as individuals do not have the ability to affect the outcomes we desire, unless we go to someone we perceive as being more knowledgeable or more powerful than we are. The truth is the power always has and always will reside with the individual, especially when the individual combines that power with the efforts of others with whom they connect.

It takes a little time to get used to thinking through the lens of abundance mentality, but it's the kind of thought process that results in your being able to participate in solving the challenges that your community faces, instead of feeling helpless and unable to do anything.

“N” – The “N” in unity stands for neighbors. Our neighbors are a resource on many levels. Some of our neighbors have special talents and skills. For example, our neighbors are doctors and lawyers, athletes and theatrical performers, authors and coaches, business owners and teachers.

But here's an important fact to remember. And, you must remember this if you want your community to reach its full potential. Some of our neighbors do not occupy high profile or glamorous positions. Some of our neighbors do not own multi-million dollar businesses or perform extraordinary athletic feats. But, what they have to contribute to the community is every bit as important as folks who have

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special or exceptional talents. Do not make the mistake of undervaluing the contribution that is made by anyone in your community. Everyone plays a role on the team even if they are not the quarterback.

So our assessment starts with doing an inventory of the people who are our neighbors and the talents, skills and resources they possess. Keep in mind that most of your neighbors are happy to contribute their talents, skills and resources, especially when they are not being compelled by the government to do so. All it takes to get them involved is an invitation and a thank you, in most cases.

“I” – The “I” in unity stands for inspiration. When we develop an appreciation for the talents and skills and resources that exist within our community, through our neighbors and otherwise, it causes us to be inspired and that creates an energy that allows for progress to be made. When we see the tools before us that would allow us to build our future, it becomes much easier to roll up the sleeves with our neighbors to get it done. When we know that there are others who have been inspired as well, it becomes easier to contribute our own time to the effort to making life not only better, but spectacular!

I am fond of saying that “many hands make light work,” or “if everyone does a little no one will have to do a lot.” These clichés are very true, and they add to the inspiration that comes from realizing that you are not alone in the effort to improve quality of life for yourself and your neighbors. Everyone can play a role and everyone should be invited to assume that role. Community pride is best fertilized when the seeds are planted with as many community members as possible.

“T” – The “T” in unity stands for team. Once you have assessed the resources that are available within your community, and allow that exercise to inspire you to take action, the next step is to assemble your team. That means your neighbors. When we work together as a team where everyone plays a role, there is virtually nothing that we cannot accomplish together. You have probably heard that “team” is an acronym that stands for “together everyone achieves more.” Again, a cliché, but one that speaks a truth that is self-evident to those who embrace abundance mentality.

Working together as a team allows for progress to take place more quickly, which in and of itself inspires people to get involved. Working in a team environment takes us back to a previous principle we discussed earlier, which is the concept of connecting and belonging. A team is another environment that gives people the opportunity to belong to something bigger than themselves. Imagine the power that exists within your community when you can inspire your neighbors to work together as a team. I hope you now see why I say that there is unlimited potential within your community, and why we are so inspired here at Village Connector to bring the message and the infrastructure for you to realize on that power.

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“Y” – The “Y” in unity stands for you! How appropriate that the assessment of your community’s resources should end with you. Before you can inspire others to take action you must be willing to have some skin in the game yourself. In fact, many of your neighbors are not yet aware of what you have just learned from reading these few pages of The Village Connector Story. It is, therefore, up to you to get the ball rolling both by sharing the story with them, and coming up with a plan of action to do something to advance the ball in your community. Remember, the challenges that our communities face are significant, but not insurmountable. When we work together as a team anything can be accomplished.

CHAPTER 3

HOW VILLAGE CONNECTOR CAN HELP YOUR COMMUNITY

*“Companies that solely focus on competition will ultimately die.
Those that focus on value creation will thrive.”*

Edward de Bono

Village Connector was created to provide you with the resources to improve quality of life where you live. Combined with the resources that exist within your community, our system is somewhat of a backbone to empower you and your neighbors to take responsibility for your own collective prosperity.

Village Connector actually has three primary systems. Those three systems are centered around putting you in control of the following important capacities in your community:

- Economics
- Communication
- Education

Each of these components will be discussed in the following chapters in greater detail. In each instance we will relate the functionality we have created in terms of how it can be deployed in your community

for maximum impact. We will also discuss our rationale for including it within the program so that you can better understand how you can benefit from it.

ECONOMICS

Our exploration of Village Connector starts with local economics. While all the elements of our system are equally important, the economics of your community can often accelerate the progress you can make towards improving quality of life, because it provides you with the fuel by which the other two areas are powered.

Understanding the effect of how we spend our money is an important starting point with respect to taking responsibility for prosperity in our own communities. We all need to better understand the impact our spending habits have on our efforts to improve quality of life where we live. Gaining an understanding of your role in local economics is not complicated, but it is important to any grassroots effort to revitalize local communities.

The power of harnessing the economic engine that exists within your community starts with recognizing three important stakeholders that exist in each community. Those stakeholders are merchants, consumers, and nonprofit and charitable organizations. Achieving abundance in your community requires us to focus on positioning these three stakeholders to engage in what we call a “community partnership.”

The key to any partnership is that the partners must each receive a value from their participation in the partnership, and what they receive must not be at the expense of another partner. In other words, the best partnerships result in everyone getting what they need without anyone having to sacrifice, or feel they gave something up so that others may gain. The truth is any well thought out plan will result in a complete, mutually beneficial outcome for everyone involved, if creative thought is put to good use in formulating the plan.

In the context of Village Connector, we have created such a plan. Our plan allows the three previously identified stakeholders to each get what they need, and then some, without anyone feeling that they have contributed more than is reasonable for them. Let’s take a look at how this works within the Village Connector framework.

STAKEHOLDER INTERESTS IN THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

MERCHANTS

We start with local merchants, whose goal it is to make a profit in their businesses. An important component of generating profit is to maximize income and to minimize expense. That usually involves a combination of growing your customer base and the volume of sales in the process, and controlling the costs you incur in delivering the products and services you offer. In other words, the goal of most merchants is to increase their sales while decreasing what it costs to make them.

Village Connector helps merchants maximize profitability by saving them money on advertising, and offering them more effective ways to attract customers. By way of example, advertising budgets often limit the frequency with which merchants are able to communicate the availability of their products and services to the community. Advertising costs also affect the price at which those products and services must be delivered in order to make a profit. By allowing merchants to reduce their cost of advertising, Village Connector positions them to offer better and more frequent deals to consumers in their local community, resulting in increased sales, decreased costs, and higher profitability. But, that is just the beginning of the story, because the consumer, our next stakeholder, also plays a vital role in this community partnership.

CONSUMERS

The goal of every consumer is to get the maximum value possible for the dollars they spend. No one likes to leave a store with less value today than they received the week before. So, consumers are always on the lookout for special deals, and a way to save consistently. Consumers are also conscious of convenience.

All things being equal, most consumers would prefer to shop for the products and services they need in their local communities, rather than traveling great distances or having to rely on mail order. When things are not equal, like price, consumers will consider other options including mail-order.

Village Connector merchants are empowered to compete with businesses whose primary attraction is low-price, because we make it possible for them to minimize price differentials and emphasize the convenience of shopping locally. So if our first goal is to save merchants money on advertising, our next goal is to save consumers money when they shop with participating merchants.

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There are several tangible and intangible results from positioning these two stakeholders to work together. The first is that keeping shopping local generates more economic activity in the local community. It increases tax revenue, increases job creation, increases the likelihood that people who get jobs in the community will spend more money there themselves, thus creating a ripple effect that grows the entire local economy. The more times we can make a dollar circulate within a local community the more prosperity we can create in that community.

When, on the other hand, we choose to make purchases outside of our local communities, as with the case of Internet shopping, we allow those dollars to leave our local communities, and allow the opportunity to control our local economics to leave with it. Big Internet retailers like Amazon do not reinvest in our communities, because they have no presence here and no incentive to. They know that you shop with them to save money, not because they give back to your community. This is where our spending habits most affect the resources available in our local communities.

One of the other intangible benefits to consumers of having commerce take place locally is that there is a higher level of convenience in being able to find the products and services you need in your local community. Shopping with a local store allows for immediate gratification rather than waiting for something to be delivered from out of the area. In the event that the product turns out to be defective or requires return for some other reason, the ability to make that return at a local store is much more appealing than having to package it up and ship it back to an Internet retailer.

So as you can see, “consumers win” as we like to say at Village Connector, and their communities win with them when they understand the impact their spending habits have on local economics.

CHARITIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

Keeping commerce local makes it possible to generate resources that give back to the community in another way. This is where our third stakeholder comes into the community partnership. Nonprofit and charitable organizations that serve our local communities require revenue and other resources to deliver the services they offer. Much of those revenues come in the form of cash donations, in kind donations, and of course, volunteer time. But all things being equal, most nonprofits and charities would prefer the donation of cash and economic resources. Such donations allow them the flexibility of determining their needs and acquiring exactly what it is that would advance the cause for which they were created.

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The Village Connector model provides an attractive way for nonprofits and charities to generate cash for their operations without being overly dependent on who can afford to donate just for philanthropic reasons. At Village Connector, we accomplish this by empowering local charities to sell the Consumers Win! Savings Club membership to local consumers as a fundraiser. When local merchants join our program in the effort to promote their businesses, each new merchant member is then able to donate Consumers Win! Savings Club memberships to their favorite charity. The charity then sells the memberships to local consumers, who pay \$19.95 to join the club. The membership saves consumers an average of 10% when they shop with participating merchants. The charity keeps 100% of the sales proceeds as a gift from the participating merchant.

Notice how by conducting a fundraiser through the Village Connector program, the nonprofit or charity also increases the value it offers the community by stimulating local commerce and the local economy in the process. This is an important by-product of its efforts to raise revenue for its primary cause.

Consumers are happy to purchase a membership that will save them an average of \$300-\$500 per year when they shop for things they're going to buy anyway. Merchants are happy to join the program and to participate in the Consumers Win! Savings Club, because it reduces their overall cost of advertising and allows them to attract loyal customers consistently. Now, charities and nonprofits have something they can sell that has a high perceived value for consumers, making it a simple and easy sale, and a simple and easy decision to support the selling organization.

The above model creates the perfect economic partnership among local merchants, consumers, and nonprofit and charitable organizations. Each of these stakeholders is rewarded with resources that accomplish their objectives without having to make an unreasonable sacrifice in order that someone else might gain.

This is just one of many creative solutions that become possible when communities work together. We will discuss several others throughout the rest of this book.

CHAPTER 4

THE VILLAGE CONNECTOR CONSUMER TOOLKIT

“It’s not how much you make, but how much you keep that matters.”

The role of the consumer in the community partnership is important enough to revisit here by detailing the tools we have available for consumers to do their part. Village Connector makes it easy for consumers to find savings using three important tools. Those tools are:

- Red Hot Deals (virtual coupon system)
- Village Connector Daily Deals
- Consumers Win! Savings Club (with smart phone application)

We will discuss each of these tools below.

RED HOT DEALS

Our Red Hot Deal system resembles a direct-mail coupon circular with the exception that all the coupons are available online through the front page of the Village Connector Community News for your community. The coupons are organized categorically by subject matter to make it easy for you to quickly and easily find what you are looking for. This replaces the need for you to sift through a

package of coupons, or even to thumb through a coupon circular.

Merchants are able to post deals anytime which means you can more quickly find opportunities to save. Obviously, as a consumer this puts you in a superior position to stretch your dollars.

VILLAGE CONNECTOR DAILY DEAL

The Village Connector Daily Deal is similar in some respects to Red Hot Deals, except that deals in this category are required to save the consumer at least 50% off regular pricing. We feature the Daily Deal on the front page of the newspaper for your community and the deals are also archived on the site. Merchants can extend the deals for as long as they like, but most of them have a limited availability either based on quantity or time. Checking the Village Connector Community News for your community every day allows you to take full advantage of the deals as they are posted.

THE CONSUMERS WIN! SAVINGS CLUB

The Consumers Win Savings Club is similar in some respects to the membership programs offered by larger retailers. The main difference is that your membership is good with all participating merchants instead of just one. You can shop for groceries, get an oil change, get a haircut, and eat at a restaurant all on the same day. Merchants offer an average of 10% off, regardless of any other special promotions they may be advertising. Some merchants offer additional discounts to savings club members that can be combined with their coupon deals that are active. For example, if a merchant has a 20% discount coupon that is available to the general public, they may offer an extra 5% off to Consumers Win! Savings Club Members.

Your membership in the Consumers Win! Savings Club is available for an annual fee of just \$19.95 and should save you an average of \$300-\$500 per year. The savings club membership is available through local charities in your community and from local citizens who participate in the Consumers Win! Savings Club business opportunity. Even citizens participating in the savings club business opportunity are required to donate 20% of sales proceeds to charity. So regardless of where you obtain your membership, your local charities win along with you.

If you are a smart phone user on either the iPhone or Android platforms you can also access a list of participating merchants on our activity map, which displays them relative to where you are at the time.

That way, one click of a button shows you exactly where you can use your membership anywhere you go.

These three important tools are designed to make it easy for you as a consumer to experience savings and to reinvest in your local community at the same time. It is that reinvestment in your local community, through Village Connector, that makes us a greater value for your community than other discount and loyalty programs.

CHARITABLE GIVING AND FUND RAISING

Most of us perceive the current economy as being down, with millions of Americans out of work, and with local communities struggling with all aspects of local economics. These conditions put our citizens in a tough position with respect to charitable giving. People who had been loyal donors in the past are simply unable to contribute at the levels they previously did. Struggling government programs currently have limited grant money and aid available, and there simply seems to be nowhere to turn for support for our local causes.

While the picture appears bleak to many, here at Village Connector we actually see an opportunity to explore new approaches to these challenges. As we previously described, our charitable and community organizations do not have to be at risk of losing support if we as a community can be creative in how they get that support. The Village Connector charitable giving and fund raising program is an example of how creative solutions can be employed to solve challenges, if we can involve the entire community in the solution.

Our charitable giving program is made possible by merchants who support Village Connector by paying a membership fee to participate. It is also made possible by local consumers who make the conscious choice to reinvest in their communities by shopping locally. Even though consumers and merchants are saving money by participating in the program they are also making it possible for local charities and causes to raise badly needed revenue that continues to support the local community.

Perhaps the tough economic times have helped to reveal a better way to go about supporting our local organizations than by depending on taxpayer generated funding and donations. Our program of charitable giving and fund raising works in any economic environment, because local consumers will always want to get the greatest value for their dollars, local merchants will always want to save money on advertising, and local charities and causes can always be the beneficiary of connecting consumers to merchants through a program like ours.

All it takes is for consumers to understand the power they wield in making a conscious decision to support local businesses who are giving back to the local community. At Village Connector, we make it easy for you to identify those businesses and partner with them to create prosperity in your community.

BARTER AND TRADE, A FRESH APPROACH TO LOCAL ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Most of us are familiar with the concept of barter and trade even if we don't use that term to describe the process. Have you ever offered to give an item of value to someone else in exchange for something that you wanted? Have you ever agreed to accept payment for services you rendered by accepting something other than money? If so, you have engaged in barter and trade.

Barter and trade is actually the oldest form of commerce. It predates the use of currency. And even though it is the oldest form of economic activity, it is still viable and, indeed, vital to achieving full potential in the growth of our local communities.

One of the reasons that barter and trade is an important component in our efforts to revitalize local communities is that it is an economic element over which local citizens have control, much like the decision to shop locally.

At its core, barter and trade is simply a system by which products and services are paid for with something other than currency. When people who participate in a trade exchange agree to accept a different payment type, namely "trade dollars," they are creating a new form of payment, which brings more consumers into the marketplace for their products and services. Accepting this new form of payment also expands the options available to barter participants and allows for an increased volume of commerce to take place, especially when economies are struggling.

A local merchant may have plenty of inventory, but be low on cash. Other businesses around her may also be low on cash, but have the ability to provide services that the inventory rich merchant may need. By participating in a system that allows for the exchange of the inventory for the services needed, neither party needs to wait until the other has cash to pay for those products or services. This is the essence of barter and trade.

Barter transactions are treated as cash transactions for tax purposes. When a merchant accepts payment of trade dollars it is taxable to the same extent as currency would be. When that same

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merchant spends those trade dollars on things for her business, it creates a tax deduction that offsets income earned, just as it would if it was paid for in cash.

Any time we increase local economic activity, whether it's done in the form of cash or barter and trade, it creates additional opportunity for growth within local communities. Merchants who accumulate trade dollars can actually pay employees bonuses that otherwise would not be paid, if available cash on hand was a consideration. By accepting trade dollars, local merchants can move slow moving inventory more quickly, and bring better and newer products into the marketplace.

Since barter dollars are treated as cash for purposes of taxation, local businesses can actually make charitable donations to local community causes in the form of trade dollars. Those charities and causes can then acquire products and services they would have paid for in cash through the trade exchange.

Likewise, a struggling business might not have been in a position to donate cash. Inventory they possessed may not have been of value to the charity to which they wish to donate. But, by converting that inventory to trade dollars, and then donating those dollars to a charity, the charity is in a position to acquire exactly what it needs, instead of accepting an in-kind contribution that offers them no value.

Village Connector operates a trade exchange that offers yet another way for local economies to grow and prosper. While the trade exchange is primarily available to the local merchants in your community, there are ways for local consumers and organizations to participate in the exchange as well. The overall effect is to provide the entire community with options and resources that would not exist in the absence of a trade exchange.

I do not intend to cover the entire concept of trade exchanges in this book, but if you would like to learn more about the Village Connector trade exchange please feel free to visit our website to watch a short presentation devoted exclusively to the exchange.

CHAPTER 5

OUR

COMMUNICATIONS

SYSTEM

*“Communication – the human connection –
is the key to personal and career success.”*

Paul J. Meyer

Any competent community building system must include a vehicle by which the community can communicate with other community members. Communication with your neighbors is key to accomplishing the work of the community and to seizing opportunity in a timely fashion.

Village Connector offers several ways for communities to communicate. We will discuss our integrated communication system below.

THE VILLAGE CONNECTOR COMMUNITY NEWS

To the outside world Village Connector actually appears simply to be an online newspaper. As I have stated previously, and as you have seen by reading this book, my original premise that we are a community building system disguised as an online newspaper is validated. We have actually created the community building system around the newspaper front end, because it was a platform that is familiar to people. We find, however, that as neighbors become more involved with the program, they

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begin to develop a deeper appreciation for the total opportunity available to their community by joining and participating in the Village Connector community.

The Village Connector Community News, as a newspaper, is unique in two respects. First, the newspaper does not cover politics, crime, or controversial topics. The reason for that is, as a community building system, our goal is to unite communities by focusing on the things we have in common, rather than allowing perceived differences to divide us. Most newspapers, including community newspapers, have a particular political leaning which immediately determines the composition of its readership. We are all aware of newspapers that tend to present the news from a more liberal perspective, and newspapers that tend to present the news from a more conservative perspective. If we chose to allow the Village Connector Community News to develop a political leaning, we would lose community members who would otherwise be important contributors to our ultimate goal of improving quality of life in local communities.

The second reason that the Village Connector Community News is unique is that we have no paid reporters. Our newspaper is your newspaper and you are the reporter. All of our articles are written by volunteers in the community who are simply reporting what's going on where they live in the form of news articles. Those articles can be traditional text or multimedia, meaning video and audio. In essence, we are here to empower neighbors to talk to each other, in the form of news, and to encourage them to focus on topics that we can all be proud of and agree on.

I want to be clear that we are not ignoring issues that have a tendency to divide us as neighbors. We are simply suggesting that we begin relationship building by focusing on the things that we can agree on. By doing so, we make it possible for us to come together immediately, begin working together towards a greater cause, and to hopefully develop a level of respect and trust that allows us to more effectively deal with those issues that may be more divisive in our minds. When we choose to start with the divisive issues, we immediately stifle the ability to begin the process of working together and that limits options available to our communities.

Think about how quickly Americans came together after the 9/11 attacks. Prior to that tragedy, the country had been polarized by the standard political debates between conservatives and liberals. It took a tragedy like 9/11 to get us to stop bickering over divisive issues and to come together, even briefly, to create a united front. Village Connector employs the lessons from the unity that was created in the tragedy of 9/11 without waiting for another tragedy to occur.

Your community newspaper, the Village Connector Community News, creates some other opportunities beyond the communication capabilities. These will be discussed later.

THE VILLAGE CONNECTOR COMMUNITY

The Village Connector Community is a social network that was designed to create a more wholesome environment for our local community members to interact with each other. I am a big advocate of social networks, including Facebook. But let's face it, there are some things that take place on Facebook that none of us want our children exposed to. At the same time, we don't want to lose the opportunity to interact with our neighbors just because some of what goes on there is not to our liking.

I believe the best way to create the best of both worlds, namely the ability to interact with your neighbors and an environment you could be proud of, is to control the environment. The Village Connector Community was created with that in mind. We do not wish to create a "virtual free for all" in our Community, but rather, a sanctuary for relationship building among neighbors.

Like most social networks we offer a large number of attractive features, including the ability to set up your own profile, the ability create your own blog, the ability to use our classifieds section, the ability to use our events calendar, and the ability to use our community forums to communicate with your neighbors.

Most of our participating merchants also belong to the Village Connector Community and maintain a profile there that allows them to communicate with you, answer your questions, and otherwise find ways to be of service. Many of the merchants have set up business pages that allow you to find out more information about the products and services they have available, and special offers of which you can take advantage. You can even leave feedback in the form of a testimonial or review of the merchants who participate in our program with whom you have done business. All of these resources are free to our community, so be sure to take advantage them.

The Village Connector Community also includes an exclusive learning center that includes a variety of educational resources for people of all ages. We cover topics including personal development, financial literacy, business and marketing, health and wellness, and we add new topics regularly. In fact, if there is a topic about which you would like to know more, we will research experts on the topic and add their content to the learning center.

The Village Connector Community social network also includes a special profile type specifically for children. On that profile, children are unable to provide contact information that identifies where they live or how to contact them by telephone. They are required to list their parent's name and e-mail address to the extent that someone needs to reach them. We believe this will allow children to safely

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participate in online activities, while minimizing the potential for predators to take advantage of them. Since our community tends to attract people who have good intentions, we are also able to monitor the activities of our younger members and contact parents if there is something going on that needs their attention. This approach takes us back to the concept of “it takes a village to raise a child.”

CHAPTER 6

THE VILLAGE CONNECTOR EDUCATION SYSTEM

*“Education is the ability to listen to almost anything
without losing your temper or your self-confidence.”*

Robert Frost

The education component of the Village Connector was designed to provide our communities with additional ways to access resources that enhance the ability of our neighbors to experience personal growth. There is no denying that our communities thrive when the talents and skills possessed by our neighbors increase. Your value to yourself and to your community grows in direct proportion to your own growth. Through the learning center, we seek to provide opportunities for neighbors to grow together and become a better resource to each other in the process.

Our education system places a specific focus on youth. We seek to provide opportunities for youngsters to learn quality lessons and make quality contacts within their community, all of which will benefit them regardless of what academic or career paths they may choose. Below we will discuss the various elements of the learning center and other educational components.

LEARNING CENTER

We've already spoken in some level of detail about the Learning Center. One further point I would like to raise here is that our Learning Center is designed to complement academic learning that takes place in our local school systems. We specifically focus on topics that sometimes did not get full coverage in a school environment. Lessons on leadership, what it means to be a citizen, entrepreneurship, journalism, personal development generally, financial literacy, relationship building, and many others will all be part of the Learning Center environment.

The Learning Center contains a multimedia learning environment which includes both video and audio, as well as text articles and resources, including downloadable e-books on a variety of topics. These resources are all available to the community as a service made possible by the participation of the entire community, but especially our participating merchants.

LEADERS CLUB

When I was a youngster growing up in my hometown of Montclair, New Jersey, I was very actively involved in the local YMCA. I belonged to a youth group called the "Leaders Club." Our YMCA youth group was a great environment to work together with other young people in learning values and skills that would become important to everything else that we did.

In addition to participating in structured weekly meetings, we learned valuable lessons from written educational materials provided by the YMCA. We also served as assistants to instructors who taught classes on swimming, gymnastics, health and fitness, and every other aspect of the YMCA programming. We volunteered our time as leaders-in-training and counselors-in-training at the YMCA day camp. We also collaborated with other Leaders Clubs at other YMCAs in the area to further expand our learning and our ability to build relationships.

Today's YMCA has moved away from the focus on leadership development. While there is a movement afoot to reestablish programs like the Leaders Club, we have chosen to make it a focus of our attention, especially for those communities that do not have a similar program in place.

The Village Connector Leaders Club will utilize the Learning Center as the place from which training content is delivered to leaders club members. We encourage adults in the local communities that we serve to assemble their own smaller focus groups of youngsters whom they can mentor using the

material in the learning Center and their own life's experiences. Our goal is to pair any child who wishes to participate with one of our community merchants in the form of a mentor-protégé relationship. We see this as a great opportunity for young adults to begin appreciating the value of establishing a strong people network that will be valuable to them as they enter into the business world and begin pursuing career paths. It's also a great way for them to develop skills that will be valuable in both academic and career pursuits.

INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

In addition to the Leaders Club, we have other ways for young people to participate in our programming. We have developed an internship program that allows middle and high school students, who have been approved by their school administrators, to participate in a variety of different positions with Village Connector for either academic credit or community service credit. Students can serve as journalists or community reporters, social media specialists, or sales and marketing specialists. Each of those positions provides them with a unique opportunity to gain skills that would be useful to them regardless of what their ultimate career path may be.

The internship program is available to both public and private schools, as well as homeschool participants.

CHAPTER 7

THE COMMUNITY AMBASSADOR

“How can I help?” is a great question to ask more than once.”

Now we return to a principle we discussed earlier which is the concept of YOU! We have shared a completely new set of resources that have the potential to revitalize your community and to restore the quality of life that you and your neighbors deserve. It is up to someone in your community to get the ball rolling. Otherwise, these resources will be wasted and you and your neighbors will miss out. We certainly don't want to see that happen. Now that you know what is available to keep it from happening, we are leaving it up to you to take the first step.

We invite you to become a Village Connector Community Ambassador. Despite the formal nature of the title, being a community ambassador requires very little effort but offers unlimited rewards. Think about how much you could be contributing to your community by making a commitment to be one of the people who introduces the program we put together to the people where you live. Think about the impact that you can have on youngsters in your community, on business growth, on the support of charitable and other causes, and ultimately on the opportunity for growth in your own backyard. All it takes is a simple commitment from you to do a few simple things. Remember, if everyone does a little no one has to do a lot!

Being a community ambassador helps to establish you as a center of influence in your community. That means that you will have opportunities to meet people who will become a valuable part of your people network, and who will take you seriously because of the commitment that you are making to make life better where you live. Being a community ambassador attracts the right people into your life, people with whom you will have credibility and opportunities to collaborate.

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Below is a list of action items for you to take right now that will make a difference in the quality of life you and your neighbors enjoy. The wonderful thing about participating in this process is that you too will grow. Please take action immediately to adopt these simple action items as part of your daily routine. Your community needs you as much as you need your community.

These action items are listed in the order of importance, so consider them to be a step-by-step approach to transforming your community:

1 Village Connector Community – Set up a Personal Profile for yourself over at the Village Connector Community. You can get there by going to the front page of our main website at <http://www.Villageconnector.com>, and clicking the menu bar item called “join/login.” Or you can go directly to www.villageconnectorcommunity.com. Once you set up your personal profile you will be connected to our existing community members, and you will have access to resources that you will need in your role as community ambassador. We will even place a little badge on your profile to identify you as a community ambassador.

Once you set up your Village Connector Community profile, be sure to click the “Like” button from your profile to push it out to your Facebook page. That will make it easier for you to extend an invitation to your colleagues to join you at Village Connector Community.

2 Status Message – Post a status message on your Facebook page and on other social networking communities where you maintain a profile and alert your friends to the fact that you have become a community ambassador with Village Connector. Doing so will help to create awareness of our program and encourage others to join you. Be sure to extend that invitation to them.

3 Invite – Invite others to join the Village Connector Community. Even if they choose not to become community ambassadors, extend an invitation to them to join the community to take advantage of the other benefits that are part of our program. You will be doing your friends, neighbors, and family members a favor by making sure they are aware of the resources we have assembled here. Make sure that as you extend the invitation to join the community you make clear that this is not just another social network. People these days are inundated with requests to join social networks. Your friends and followers need to understand that this invitation is special. Take the time to make sure the message is clear.

Make it part of your daily routine to invite at least two people every day to become part of the Village Connector Community. You will find it easy to do as you talk with your friends and family members in

your normal routine. Remember, they benefit when you share the message.

4 Consumers Win! Savings Club – Join the Consumers Win! Savings Club by purchasing a membership card from a local charity in your community. If you need help identifying a local charity where you live, please feel free to give us a call. You can also check the Consumers Win! Savings Club directory under the category nonprofits.

Your membership card will not only save you money every time you shop, but it will begin the process of supporting your local community through our economic empowerment system. You may want to purchase additional cards as gifts to friends and family members. Be sure that they set up Village Connector Community profiles, because their membership cards will be accessible through their profiles.

5 Shop with Participating Merchants – Make a commitment to purchase the things that you need from merchants who participate in our program. Remember, it is their participation that makes it possible for us to make available all the resources that are part of the Village Connector Community Building System. Supporting participating merchants is a simple way for you to invest in your community. Be sure to identify yourself as a community ambassador with Village Connector when you do shop. The participating merchants will be pleased to know that people like you are benefiting from the program and that they are getting an opportunity to meet you as a result.

6 Write an Article – Write an article for the newspaper on a topic that interests you. We have plenty of topics on which you can offer an article, including one introducing yourself to the community. If you have a pet, consider writing an article about your pet. We will post that in the “Pet Corner.” You can also write an article about one of your neighbors, maybe someone you consider to be a community treasure. If you are attending a community event or participating with a community organization consider writing an article about it.

Articles can be both useful and fun. They are a great way to let your community know what’s going on that they can be proud of, and it’s a great way to introduce yourself to your neighbors. At the end of your article you can include your photograph and your byline which can have a little bit of information about you and a way to contact you, so that your neighbors can reach out and connect. You can even include a link to your personal profile in the Village Connector Community.

Remember, your articles are not limited to text. You may submit a video article or even an audio article. The main thing is to share your activities and other relevant news with your community.

7 Leave a Review – Be sure to leave a review for the merchants in the program with whom you do business. They will appreciate hearing your feedback and it will benefit others who may be considering using the merchant themselves.

As time goes on, you will find hundreds of ways to use the tools at Village Connector to make a difference in your community. By starting with these simple seven steps you will multiply the positive effect of your efforts in a way that will make you and your neighbors proud.

We have some wonderful things planned for our community ambassadors, including access to special resources and special privileges that are based on the commitment you make to help us bring the program to your community. Don't miss out on the opportunity to receive special recognition as a community ambassador.

There is no age limit for community ambassadors, so virtually anyone can participate. In fact, our program works best the more people we have involved. So, be sure to join the effort to bring the Village Connector Community Building System to your neighborhood.

CHAPTER 8

YOU HAVE THE POWER!

*“Nurture your mind with great thoughts,
for you will never go any higher than you think.”*

Benjamin Disraeli

Who would've thought that all the resources we have discussed here could be made available in your community just by focusing on how you spend your consumer dollars? Who would've thought that so much opportunity could be created by simply embracing and collaborating with your neighbors? Who would've thought that we as individuals and collectively as neighbors could provide the solutions to the challenges faced by our communities without relying on government to get it right? We at Village Connector have been pondering these thoughts for some time now and we are pleased to offer you the opportunity to participate in making our vision a reality in your community.

The thing I enjoyed most about Village Connector is that it affords an opportunity for each community, with some very simple guidelines, to make the program its own by tailoring it to the individual needs of that community. We invite you to reach out to us and make that happen for your community.

APPENDIX

THE FAMILY SONG, by Lisa Shah

I found out what
I've been missing
All this time thinking I had to
Go it alone

Then I saw you and a
Kind of reminiscing
Filled my heart with knowing that I
had you here all along

Chorus:

That's when I saw you as my family
Found you as my friends
Strength through our community never ends
We are connected, your win is my gain
I'll never feel this loneliness again

Verse 2

Time after time, after
Being last in line
I thought I had to find, how to
Rely on myself

But I reached out and found
There's oh so many around
And to my heart they bound, to be there
Whenever I call.....for Help

Bridge
One tribe, one in unity
What could ever break these bonds we know?
One heart, a heart that can't be broken

Coz we are family
We are true friends
Strength through our community never ends....
Never ends. (key change)

One tribe, one in unity
What could ever break these bonds we know?
One heart, a heart that can't be broken
Coz we are family
And we are true friends
Strength through our community never ends

We are connected, your win is my gain
I'll never feel that loneliness again.

Chorus:

That's when I found you as family
Found you as my friends
Strength in our community never ends
We are connected, your win is my gain
I'll never feel this loneliness again

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