

Enemies to Allies: The First Twenty Years of Public Allies Delaware

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Under the slogan, “Everyone leads,” the Public Allies program enables individuals from diverse backgrounds to serve the community. Through apprenticeship, training, and a Team Service Project, Public Allies are immersed in community development work and understand the potential challenges and rewards of a life in public service. The partnership between Public Allies Delaware and the University of Delaware serves as an example to national Public Allies programs. In this retrospective, S. Elizabeth Lockman interviewed personnel of Public Allies Delaware and outlined the history of its development in Delaware.

Power to the People*

At the University of Delaware’s Center for Community Research and Service (CCRS), within the School of Public Policy and Administration (SPPA), the vision is to “strengthen the capabilities of organizations and individuals working to enhance the economic, social, cultural and physical conditions of neighborhoods and communities in Delaware and beyond” (CCRS, n.d.) The Center, which was formally founded in 1972 under the moniker of “The Urban Agent Program” and conceived of a bit earlier, evolving out of the Division of Urban Affairs that had been established in 1961 by a Ford Foundation grant enabling the University to develop a permanent system of “education, research, and service relating to urban problems” (CCRS, n.d.).

In its campus offices in Newark, the capacity-building effort involves research, publication and technical assistance to entities that are similarly committed to that social and economic justice and urban thriving: the nonprofit sector. Associate Professor and CCRS Director Dr. Steven Peuquet elaborated on this by stating, “The nonprofit sector enriches our communities

in a variety of ways, by addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, promoting the arts and culture, and advocating for improvements in a variety of public policies and programs. The nonprofit sector benefits everyone in the community, so having effective leaders in the sector is of great importance.”

CCRS also has a Wilmington office that plays host to CCRS training programs. The longest running of these training programs is Public Allies Delaware (PADE). PADE celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2014, and it can be argued that, the program realizes the greatest ideals of “urban agency”.

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Don't Believe the Hype*

A myth within Public Allies is that the organization took its name directly in ironic homage to famed social activist hip-hop group Public Enemy. Certainly, the group was at the height of their fame in the years that the organization was evolving from the germ of an idea to reality and influenced its founders whose early mission was, in part, to dispel the popular perception of diverse young adults in America as “public enemies” who didn’t care in any deep way about their own future, let alone that of society at large (Schmitz, 2012).

What Kind of Power We Got?*

Public Allies Delaware is the local affiliate of a national nonprofit leadership development program, Public Allies. The national organization was founded in 1992 by Vanessa Kirsch and Katrina Browne in Washington, DC, as a way to tap into and mobilize the energy and idealism of young Americans and harness it as transformational power to improve struggling communities through training and apprenticeship in the nonprofit sector

What Kirsch and Browne created was quick to inspire the leadership at the very top. President George H.W. Bush recognized and funded the program through his Points of Light Foundation. After taking office, President Bill Clinton created the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) in 1993, and with it the AmeriCorps program as one of its three pillars. The federal service program - essentially a “Domestic Peace Corps” - takes citizens interested in roles of service to the nation and matches them to opportunities. This serves a dual purpose, not only in filling critically needed positions, but creating a workforce and career pathways for those struggling to find them. Public Allies was brought under this umbrella as a federally funded program of AmeriCorps.

The mission of the organization is to “...advance new leadership to strengthen communities, nonprofits and civic participation” (Public Allies, n.d.). The program varies naturally in its implementation of that mission from site to site (of which there are currently 22 across the country) and has a fundamental philosophy that “...leadership is an action many can take, not a position few can hold”. These are brought to life through its three central programmatic practices: Apprenticeship, Training and Team Service Projects. The Apprenticeship portion of the program involves each Ally being placed with a nonprofit organization in a role that enhances their capacity to deliver their services to the community. The overall full-time commitment of an Ally is split between this placement, and in Training - a weekly gathering of Allies to develop skills in all areas: professional, social and personal. Finally, Allies form teams and engage in the Team Service Project (TSP) with a specific community to support them in developing and implementing a desired project - one intended to be sustained after the Allies have graduated from their term of service.

Show ‘Em Whatcha Got*

Kirsch and Browne successfully launched the Public Allies program in 1992 with 14 members in its DC corps. In 1993, Michelle Obama took the second site of the program live in Chicago. And in 1994, 3 new locations would open - including one in Wilmington, Delaware. There, two recent college graduates, 23 year old Suzanne Sysko and 24 year old Tony Allen, met in an office downtown and commiserated over a shared vision - part of a growing national sentiment - to empower young people into a lifelong commitment to service, professionally and personally. Supported by David Sysko, Suzanne’s father, and community leader Sonia Sloan, they were able to get the organization off the ground in Delaware, with funding from President Clinton’s Corporation for National and Community Service.

Public Allies Delaware furthers the national vision, that “leadership is about taking responsibility – both personal and social – to engage others to work for common goals”, and has adopted the site-specific vision of “a more just and equitable society for all” (Public Allies Delaware, 2014). In working towards this, the set of values to which Allies are asked to ascribe during their ten-month long tenure include Collaboration, Continuous Learning, Diversity and Inclusion, Focus on Assets and Integrity. According to the Public Allies Delaware Director Tina Morrow, the rationale behind the values is that these elements together comprise the profile of successful leadership. Throughout the program’s history, Allies have been

expected to hold themselves and each other to the high standards these values imply. Morrow reflects on her experience of this philosophy in practice:

I've had the privilege of witnessing transitions of people throughout the ten month period and then that lifelong, leadership journey. Our concept of advancing new leadership is based on the idea that everyone has leadership capability...I believe that and it's very cool to be able to see that launch itself through people. [For Allies] coming in, our goal is diversity all around. We have [Allies] with master's degrees and people with a GEDs, aging out of foster care. Diversity brings perspective to the team. There's a huge learning curve for all of them. It can be a wakeup call that community development is a lot of work, and collaboration is hard, with all of the challenges of working with residents or government agencies - but they get to learn this with the support of other Allies and staff.

Coming out on the other side of the program, Morrow continues,

[PADE Alumni] have had a deep enriching experience filled with frustration and successes throughout the year, and they will be able to more effectively work with people that are very different from them. They have a better grasp of what it takes to be successful in community development work. And they walk away with training in all facets of nonprofit management and the soft skills that go with it

Assistant Professor Raheemah Jabbar-Bey, who was first inspired by PADE co-founder Sysko when she heard her give a talk at Southern New Hampshire University and has come to work closely with the program as a senior professional staff member at CCRS, praises what she describes as an "intergenerational" give-and-take represented by the apprenticeship and training model, and is enthusiastic when Jabbar-Bey reflects upon its outcomes:

Every cohort that graduates helps to build the next generation of community development, mobilization and organization, taking that knowledge base and skill set to strengthen civic engagement and democracy with them. They're active - in strengthening civil society and furthering our democracy - and that is a tremendous value to the communities in which they live and work.

At the end of their term of service, the Allies receive an education award of several thousand dollars through CNCS that can be used to pay back loans or further their education. "What we're working on right now," according to Morrow, "with the University [of Delaware] and with Delaware Technical and Community College is how do we better serve Allies that come in without any higher education, maybe even be a pipeline to higher education?" PADE is currently developing pilots to position program alumni for scholarship eligibility to encourage this transition for those that need it.

Public Allies Delaware Co-founder Tony Allen currently serves on the University of Delaware's Board of Trustees and is the director of communications for Bank of America's Consumer Banking Division. Allen reflects on the legacy of the program in Delaware:

[Public Allies Delaware represents] a constant cultivation of next generation talent that is critical to the future of the American citizenry. That is true in any industry, at any time. Rarely do you find a structure to do that for a diverse set of young people aspiring to careers in public service in their local community. In Delaware, 21 years ago, Public Allies changed that and the results are all around us: 500 graduates, the great majority of whom continue in public service today; nearly 1 million hours of service to some of the most disadvantaged communities in the state; and an endless national network that runs from San Jose to Wilmington. In 1994, Delaware wanted something special like Public Allies. And they got it.

Bring the Noise*

Delaware's incarnation of Public Allies, as one of the national network's oldest, has gained a reputation in the national network of setting trends and benchmarks to which other locales aspire. It began this trend in July 2000, when then-executive director of Public Allies Delaware Patrick Carroll formalized a partnership with the University of Delaware, in which the University would oversee aspects of the organization's back office operations and enable them a surer degree of sustainability. Dr. Daniel Rich, Professor and Director of the Urban Affairs and Public Policy Doctoral Program, was a Public Allies Delaware board member and instrumental in the move. The program thrived under the auspices of the University, and in 2006 the national Public Allies administration took notice of the success of this operating partnership. They mandated that all sites follow suit in establishing similar relations with institutions in their regions.

Peuquet says of the relationship,

CCRS and the University as a whole have been very supportive of PADE as it works to develop the next generation of nonprofit leaders. PADE was one of 15 community engagement programs at UD that was highlighted in UD's recent application to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to obtain the classification as a "Community Engaged University." It has contributed to the University's identity as being engaged in the community and has prompted several Ally alums to continue their formal education and earning bachelors' and masters' degrees at UD and other colleges and universities

Rich comments that,

The orientation of the program, which connected education and public service, fits well at the University but there are divided views about the benefits. Originally, PADE was to be an incubator project with the idea that once it was strengthened it would become independent. Another view has proposed an even closer integration.

Morrow characterizes the support services that flow through the organizational partnership as "invaluable" and credits Peuquet as a "...great director who has really embraced the function of being part of a national network and given us an appropriate level of autonomy. We feel well-supported, like our model, impact, and successes are valued." Morrow stated, "Since [...] we're in Wilmington where [UD] has less of a presence and we're able to be something of an ambassador for the university." Jabbar-Bey agrees in stating:

Having PADE through [CCRS] has been recognized as a node of engagement. It brings leaders from other sectors into contact with the university, and gets them engaged. Just look at [PADE's] advisory board, which is diverse and broad-based, drawing across all of the sectors. Once folks get connected with this UD initiative, they often come to engage with other initiatives. The boards of the partner organizations where Allies are placed come to realize that UD is a significant resource for capacity-building.

Morrow points to a fairly recent moment in PADE's history when the organizational partnership reached its most synergistic level, just five years ago as the program aligned their TSP process with the Center's Blueprint Communities Program, a process in which Jabbar-Bey has been greatly involved. There was a clear benefit in combining forces, as PADE sought communities in which their Allies could place team service projects, to bring them to communities that were being trained to sustain such community development. They decided to invent a Request for Proposal (RFP) process, soliciting desired project ideas from communities for Allies to help implement, pivoting from the traditional TSP approach which had Allies doing the brainstorming. Morrow maintains, "Linking more fully with the Blueprint initiative was a turning point in the depth of our collaborative and the strength of our partnership [with UD]. It was wildly

successful, and many organizations in those communities now host Allies and continually submit RFPs for TSP projects. It has helped us to propel our community development efforts forward, making the most of our resources.” Even as the Blueprint Communities Program reaches the end of its funding cycle, much of the work continues as a result.

So Whatcha Gone Do Now*

After twenty years of steady growth, in numbers of alumni, hours they’ve served and respect from participating agencies and communities, what could the future possibly hold for a now-veteran organization that still runs on youthful energy and idealism?

Peuquet envisions that the organization’s roots will stay fast at the University: “There is every [reason] to expect that PADE will continue as a very important public service program of UD. Because its mission and work is so important, I hope that we can expand the size of the program in the future, and also provide more professional learning and growth opportunities to its alumni.” Morrow, embodying the deep well of enterprising spirit that courses through the program, expounds:

I’m really eager to see the next phase of Public Allies. In Delaware, we’re primed for impact; we’re poised to be more of a movement. We’ve emphasized a place-based community impact strategy, where neighborhoods come to us and we’re not the drivers. West Center City, Ninth Ward, Southbridge in Wilmington are where Allies are currently working on proposals received from those communities. It’s a reframing of the team service project model where we get to step out of our organization a little bit and open our doors to the community.

We take a very strong asset-based approach rather than a needs-based approach and believe the people that have to live with the solutions should be at the table in coming up with them, rather than some entity coming from outside with their own idea of what’s best going to be best for them. We’re using an [original] model, and it’s working. Because of that, we received the National Impact Award this past year from the national office... [other Public Allies] sites are contacting us to ask for more information on it.

Jabbar-Bey appreciates this opportunity for evolution and standard-setting:

I think of Allies in terms of three tiers of work: first, the building up of the Allies themselves, then enhancing the capacity of nonprofit organizations, and more than ever, working in the community with the stakeholders there. To me, PADE, especially through the TSP, has helped to uplift, clarify and give greater importance to community development work and community engagement in that process. I believe that will become more visible and of critical importance moving forward.

Turning from their first score of years towards their second, Public Allies Delaware appears positioned to be an ever-stronger example of the trend favoring voluntary national service in the nonprofit sector. Certainly, there will continue to be a place for an organization capable of translating humble opportunities and challenges into inclusion and innovation that can be channeled upward and outward for the benefit of its institutional hosts and the nation at large.

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*Song titles taken from Public Enemy' albums "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back", "Fear of a
Black Planet" & "Muse Sick-n-Hour Mess Age" (Def Jam Recordings).