

Intentional Integration in Pennsauken, N.J.

by M. Paloma Pavel
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Harold Adams, a Pennsauken real estate appraiser talks with Lynn Cummings at a Neighbors Empowering Pennsauken potluck. Both are co-founders of Neighbors Empowering Pennsauken.

In the mid-1990s, Lynn Cummings stepped out to water her lawn and noticed five “For Sale” signs surrounding the home an African American family had recently moved into. White flight, she realized, had begun in Pennsauken, a suburb of Camden, N.J.

“Racism was happening in my neighborhood,” she said. “I didn’t know what to do: I didn’t know how to do it. I just knew that I wanted to live in a town that reflected all the people.”

That transformative moment launched Lynn on a journey from isolation and despair to hope and action. She started canvassing her neighbors, a simple act that grew into organized groups and town-hall meetings as residents developed a vision for Pennsauken, pop. 36,000.

The story of how residents achieved intentional integration is featured in the documentary *The New Neighbors*, part of the PBS series *The New Metropolis*, directed by filmmaker Andrea Torrice, and it’s one of a dozen stories of regional equity featured in the book *Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis* (MIT Press, 2009).

The five stages that led to success in Pennsauken can be adapted for use by any community:

1. **Waking up:** Ordinary citizens observed white flight occurring, a shock to community members who had not noticed that individual property sales showed a distinct racialized pattern. Cummings began talking

with new and old neighbors, and in a subsequent round of kitchen-table discussions, residents discovered common ground and the shattering realization that their community was on a downhill slide.

2. **Saying no:** The neighborhood meetings galvanized a collective resolve, resulting in a series of larger meetings around town. Citizens and leaders alike refused to abandon their community and took a stand to reverse the threatening trend.
3. **Getting organized:** Residents formed Neighbors Empowering Pennsauken (NEP), drawing representatives from other community groups. Consistent outreach, through workshops and study circles, led to the pursuit of “stable integration” strategies. NEP sought institutional support and consulting resources, through the Fund for an Open Society and involved government in the process.
4. **Exploring new horizons:** The community group established a Stable Integration Board, working with real-estate agents, local officials and community members to emphasize diversity and market Pennsauken to all newcomers. But citizens also recognized that setting targets, achieving quotas and merely co-existing were not sufficient. To shift the quality of life in Pennsauken, all residents had to expand their capacity to lead in a new multicultural context of self-governance and volunteerism.
5. **Saying yes:** A new vision and identity of a healthy, multiracial community emerged, along with a sense of intergenerational, multiracial celebration and ownership. Additional grassroots organizing, with the help of churches, and marketing and leadership outreach helped spread interest and hope to parts of town that had been less involved in the integration effort. Community members recognized the larger goal: For Pennsauken to remain resilient, citizens had to keep working to keep the town vibrant and integrated.

Pennsauken is not alone. *The New Metropolis* has spawned watch parties, and large civic-engagement events like the “Rethinking Our Region” collaboration of government, community and church leaders at WHY? TV in Philadelphia. Such activities allow citizens to engage one another in far-reaching conversations about their desired future.

Today, communities throughout the United States face challenges that pose a threat to sustainability and social justice. Building a civically engaged, interconnected network of communities provides a crucial opportunity for developing strategies and solutions which bring people together.



M. Paloma Pavel wrote this piece for the **America: The Remix** issue of YES! Magazine. Paloma is founder of Breakthrough Communities and president of Earth House Center. She is the editor of *Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis* (MIT Press, 2009).
www.breakthroughcommunities.info

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- Watch the movie: www.TheNewMetropolis.com
- For more information, visit www.earthhousecenter.org and www.breakthroughcommunities.info, or call 510-652-2425.

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