

INTRODUCTION

BY TOM RANKIN

Local Heroes Changing America is about the work and vision of committed individuals and communities across America. Through the images of our country's finest photographers and the voices of extraordinary citizens as collected by renowned documentary fieldworkers, this book takes us to twelve distinct places, to witness what it means to live responsibly and actively in one's own community. We often hear and read the tired cliché, "think globally, act locally." Rather than ringing hollow like so many clichés or much of the rhetoric about contemporary political and social life, the stories that follow evoke most meaningfully the real potential, even the necessity, for all of us to be engaged in local life and change. In an age when cynics remark glibly that we no longer practice the principles of democratic activism for the betterment of our home places, what is said and pictured here tells another story, a story of the vitality and passion of individual people who work for change with the humble tools of their own wisdom, experience, and commitment.

This book is one part of a large national documentary initiative, Indivisible. Initiated and funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Indivisible is a firsthand examination of grassroots American democracy. Indivisible matches documentary expression – photographs and narrative voices – with the story of these twelve locales and the efforts of the people there to effect change. By giving form to the stories of these people and places, Indivisible affirms the value of collective action, the necessity of our mutual interests, and the recognition of our deep interdependence. In addition to this book, Indivisible includes a major exhibition that is traveling to museums throughout the country; postcard exhibitions that will tour nationally to public spaces and disseminate the images and text of Indivisible on free postcards; and a Web site featuring photographs, audio pieces from interviews, and information on the twelve communities and their institutions. In addition, Indivisible creates a permanent record through local archives in the twelve communities and project archives accessible at Duke University and the Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona.

Like the communities it portrays, Indivisible is the result of the work of many people. The Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and the Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, partnered on many components of this project. From the outset, project codirector Trudy Wilner Stack and I envisioned a project that would cross many of the conventional boundaries of exhibition and publication; a project that would be embraced by the art museum and be comfortable in public spaces, such as an airport, a city hall, or a community center; a project that would commission some of this country's most compelling and insightful photographers and fieldworkers to spend time documenting communities; a project that would connect two major universities in an endeavor intended for a wide public audience; and, finally, a project that in addition to bearing witness to community life through powerful words and original images would aim to create conversation and reflection about participatory democracy by citizens throughout the country. To move anywhere near those ambitious goals meant forming collaborations with a vast number of people, many of whom are represented in the

pages of this book. Trudy Wilner Stack contributed to nearly every piece of *Local Heroes Changing America*, including writing introductions to five chapters; lending her sharp photographic eye to the editing of the images; listening to, selecting, and editing oral history interviews; and providing endless editorial counsel. Her extensive and thoughtful contributions help make this book what it is. Likewise, the entire staff of Indivisible contributed to the creation of this book, which could not have been moved from idea to form without their collective contributions.

How does one go about looking at community-based democratic action in this country? Where does one go? What constitutes community? How does one choose communities, and on what grounds? The questions go on and on. Beginning this project under the aegis of and with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the two of us – with much help – set out not to locate the “best” examples of local democracy in action, but rather to assemble a group of geographically diverse places where people are joining together to shape the future at the local level. We consciously looked for communities in different parts of the country, hoping to reflect regional differences. We looked for communities where activism is rooted in citizen initiatives, rather than cases where the impetus is institutionally driven or comes from the “top down.” We looked for racial, ethnic, and gender diversity; for class differences; for youth communities; and for communities dealing with a range of issues such as housing, health, labor, and the environment. We talked to hundreds of people, visiting them to talk in person about our project, its goals, and the potential collaboration, to assess just how well a community’s story could be told through our primary mediums of photographs and oral history. Our selection process was not based on any quantitative data or scientific indicators, but was the result of careful canvassing of the country. Our hope is that Indivisible – with its local initiatives and thousands of people – presents a cumulative portrait of this country, of people working to have a positive impact on contemporary society, to shape their own destinies, and succeeding.

The photographers and fieldworkers spent up to thirty days in their respective locales, informed by our interest in and knowledge of each place, but also with the freedom to follow their own cultural and artistic interests, developing independent points of view on the story. This method – directing documentarians toward the goals and principles of Indivisible and also encouraging artistic and documentary freedom – was intentional, blending the approaches of a structured ethnographic project with that of a more flexible art commission. During the fieldwork phase of the project, we relied heavily on local contacts, cultivating relationships between documentarians and people in the communities. While not all photographers and fieldworkers worked together “in the field” at the same time, we encouraged close communication between the two, knowing that the interview material and the images would ultimately need to form a coherent whole. There was great variety in how the various photographer/fieldworker “teams” chose to meet this need for their own collaboration. For us, the codirectors, how images and texts were to relate to each other in the book was a crucial decision. We decided to vary that relationship from chapter to chapter, and we invite the reader to approach these pages as though entering a conversation between images and words, a conversation that we hope the reader will fully join.

“Local” and “community” are two words that have resonated throughout this project and appear often in this book. While each term has its own distinct meaning, people often used them here interchangeably to evoke a common spirit or shared concept. We, too, have used them similarly at times. “If the word community is to mean or amount to anything,” argues Wendell Berry in his essay “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community,” “it must refer to a place (in its natural integrity) and its people. It must refer to a placed people. Since there obviously can be no cultural relationship that is uniform between a nation and continent, community must mean a people locally placed and a people, moreover, not too numerous to have a common knowledge of themselves and their place.” For Berry, as for Indivisible, our nation is made up of a constellation of many local communities, different in their place and all that place defines, but with a commonality made possible by a shared interest, a simultaneous respect for differences, and a recognition of our ultimate interdependence. Local communities here stretch geographically from the town of Delray Beach on Florida’s Atlantic coast to an assemblage of coastal residents throughout Alaska, from birth supporters and expectant mothers in Stony Brook, New York, to housing activists in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Diverse as the geography they represent, these communities are made and live through the heroic, often gritty, work – efforts small and large – of local people who have in common the vision that the present and the future require our personal commitment and participation; and that to reach toward that envisioned better future demands that we locate what we share even while we acknowledge our differences.

How can these people be called heroes, you might ask? Just what is a “local hero”? Hero is used here not to put certain folks on a pedestal above others or to shine some kind of divine recognition down on particular individuals, by definition excluding others. Rather, I have in mind the countless parables in almost all cultures of the lone, ordinary soul whose modest act reverberates throughout a group as heroic, as an act that brings about a positive change. Such an act can work to unite others in a common goal, igniting the fuse of grassroots action. Way down the list of definitions for a hero in the *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* is this: “the central figure in an event, period, or movement.” The heroes here are not larger than life, nor are they lone actors in a predictable drama. They may not even be “central” figures, but they somehow figure prominently in the day-to-day work of changing and improving their places. They are common folks of uncommon decency with a concern for justice and the common good. Part of any heroic act is a large dose of strength and persistence, and we see throughout the twelve communities portrayed here the collective courage, confidence, and commitment necessary to inspire and cause change.

The narratives that appear in this book were all recorded by our documentary fieldworkers and carefully transcribed and then edited from those recordings. They represent only a small fraction of the material recorded in each community, and in the selection and editing of narratives we had to leave out far more than we included. Such is the nature of a project of this magnitude. We transcribed these interviews for presentation in print, often deleting interviewers’ questions and editing with the reader in mind. We also recognize that while many stories that are told in interviews make for good stories in print, nothing replaces hearing the

original speaker. For that reason, this book includes an audio compact disc, highlighting sounds and sentiments, and giving voice to each community. This audio component is not meant to literally follow the book text or necessarily to provide audio versions of all narratives found in the book. Instead, the five-minute audio “portrait” of each community compiled by project coordinator Elana Hadler evokes the spirit and local context, introducing listeners to particular individuals and events, and providing an additional dimension to the photographs and transcribed texts.

We begin at the beginning with “Birth Stories,” the story of a group of wise and engaged women and their medical community who are changing and personalizing the birth experience of Long Island, New York, mothers. What more powerful metaphor for heroic change within community than to begin this book – and any life – with efforts to enhance the birth experience of mothers and their families. From New York we trek to the Navajo Nation – home of some of our oldest American citizens, representing another kind of beginning – where the agricultural and traditional weaving ways of the past are helping to forge a meaningful and vital future. Seeing sheep as a key ingredient in everyday Navajo life, a group of Navajo activists are working to ensure the future of the traditional Churro sheep breed, the source of wool that Navajo weaving depends on, and to rediscover the rich history of the Navajo way of life.

“Faith, Race, and Renewal” lands us in Columbia, South Carolina. Most recently, Columbia has been in the spotlight as the center of the important debate to remove the Confederate battle flag from official display on state property (what historian Charles Reagan Wilson has called “the effort to desegregate Southern symbols”). Alongside these efforts stand the less known attempts of a biracial, ecumenical group of residents in the community of Eau Claire–North Columbia, who are working to improve their part of Columbia through cooperation. Anchored in the United Methodist Church, but extending into a variety of interested groups, the Eau Claire example provides a vivid window on how communities can foster change on their own terms, improving race relations, education, real estate development, and housing. Housing is the center of a different vision in “Building on the Border,” where we witness the work of Proyecto Azteca, a farmworker-founded organization that helps move Mexican American workers from marginal housing to quality homes in San Juan, Texas. In the heart of the Rio Grande Valley, Proyecto Azteca is focused on the principles of self-help and hard work, where families receive low-interest loans in exchange for helping to build their own houses.

With “Growing Up, Coming Together” we move from the agricultural landscape of Texas to the city streets of southwest Chicago where an ethnically diverse community is coming together around the needs of youth. The Southwest Youth Collaborative also is run partly by young people. A persistent theme running through this chapter, however, is the need to bring all kinds of people together, to foster a language and tradition for communicating across societal and generational differences, and to begin this work with local residents in their early, formative years. The search for ways to communicate across conflicting opinions toward a common goal extends to the next chapter, “A Forest Home.” In the Yaak Valley of Montana we witness local efforts to maintain a livelihood in a rural, land-based economy while managing forest resources.

Though the opinions of just what constitutes “proper” forest management are varied, residents of the Yaak Valley rely on their love of place to build democratic consensus for the preservation of both environment and ways of life

“Citizens on Watch” takes us to Palm Beach County, Florida, to the city of Delray Beach, a place completely transformed by Haitian immigration during the 1980s and 1990s. As is often the case, the great numbers of immigrants that arrived unexpectedly shook loose the hinges of community stability. A collateral effort, largely led by law-enforcement officers, social-service workers, and citizen volunteers, has brought confidence, understanding, and safety to neighborhood streets. We move from this Florida coastal city of complex racial and class divisions to the coastal communities of Alaska, rich in marine resources, where a coalition of fishermen, environmentalists, and coastal residents has formed the Alaska Marine Conservation Council to restore and protect marine life. Working on many fronts – public education, legislative advocacy, and marine ecosystem research – this group seeks solutions that consider both the needs of the ecosystem and the cultural and economic needs of fishing families and their communities.

In San Francisco, depicted in “Youthline,” young people are helping other young people through a powerful community of support and connection. A project of CHALK (Communities in Harmony Advocating for Learning and Kids), Youthline uses the telephone to offer noon-to-midnight access to “listeners,” young people who help their peers by directing them to information and resources in their times of need. A youth-employment opportunity formed around shared concerns and the ease of communication through technology, Youthline provides a glimpse of the care and commitment of American youth in this West Coast city. Nothing is more needed in many American places than access to capital, and in “Local Money” we get acquainted with the work of the Alternatives Federal Credit Union – locally referred to by some as the “hippie bank” – in Ithaca, New York. While banking can seem a mundane or even invisible necessity, the impact of Alternatives, whose policies are based on a not-for-profit community development principle, is significant and is clearly seen and heard.

American cities small and large grapple with how best to ensure a viable, healthy future. The final two chapters look at two distinct examples of civic renewal: the attempts to revive and enrich small towns in western North Carolina and the Village of Arts and Humanities’ catalytic work to reimagine and reinvent a section of North Philadelphia. While the small town of Marshall, North Carolina, and the city of Philadelphia have little in common at first glance, their portrayal in both of these chapters attests to the universal need to protect and improve local places in ways appropriate to the needs, dreams, and hopes of residents. We close our journey to these American places and the people and forces that are reshaping them with a reimagined inner city, created through collaborations between artists and local people, educators and youth, volunteers and staff, interns and residents. We can see in the Village of Arts and Humanities the glow that emanates from individual and community hands, brought together through leadership, the shared desire for a better future, and the spirit and vision of possibility. This impulse – to move from notion to action, from hope to committed struggle, from alienation and indifference to connection and common trust, from abstract idea to visible change – is the essence of Indivisible.