Having heard Ted Shaw ’76 speak at the WLA’s kickoff event last November, I knew that Laurel Dumont ’00, Founder and Executive Director of the Center for Collaborative Change in Newark, New Jersey, would be perfect to spotlight on the WLA’s website as an example of attorneys in the Wesleyan community who embrace the Wesleyan spirit in their daily practice.

After graduating from Wesleyan, Laurel taught fifth grade in Newark through Teach for America. She also worked on several community-based projects, including creating a school-based health clinic, and creating and overseeing the Newark Reentry Legal Services program, which has aided more than 1,200 clients with civil legal barriers to reintegrate into society post-incarceration.

In 2005, Laurel received a Law Degree and a Masters Degree in Social Work from the University of Michigan. She then returned to Newark where she worked on Mayor Cory Booker’s election campaign. Later, she became a staff attorney for Essex-Newark Legal Services, representing tenants in eviction proceedings and hearings, and working as Legal & Policy Counsel at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, where she focused on community-based approaches to court reform and driver’s license restoration.

From these experiences, Laurel built a network across professional and demographic lines, and realized her unique qualification to: (1) help the community to best assess its needs; (2) identify best practices for meeting those needs; and (3) be a voice of the community to the government to get those needs met, and to achieve change. The Center for Collaborative Change, a non-profit organization, was born from Laurel’s ability to generate trust from both community and government and to inspire momentum around change.

The Center will be celebrating its one year anniversary at a gala event on July 21, 2010. The Center plays a much-needed role in Newark’s revitalization by consulting community members to identify pressing issues insufficiently addressed by present policy efforts, and by helping them to collaborate with law enforcement, legislators, and local professionals. Critically, The Center recognizes that urban development can only occur when residents participate and lead these transformative efforts, fostering a deep sense of inclusion and community ownership.

According to Newark Mayor Cory Booker, “Laurel has succeeded at eliciting the often-neglected views of local residents beyond the typical community leader level—including voices of youth, elders; English, Spanish and Portuguese speakers; residents of each ward of the City and of public housing as well as university campuses . . . . By connecting people and ideas from within
and outside of our City, The Center for Collaborative Change will create strength, unity, and partnership, energizing all of Newark.”

Current initiatives of The Center include the Newark Immigrant Civic Education (NICE) program, which teaches immigrant communities in Newark about local government and to effect change, and the Center’s Youth-to-Youth “Know Your Rights” Training program, which offers Newark High School students the opportunity to learn about civil rights and community-police relations, and to use this knowledge to teach other students. These students are also part of the “What to do When Stopped by the Police Campaign,” spearheaded by the Community Relations Division of the Newark Police Department, which focuses on the importance of knowing one’s rights and the most constructive way to communicate with police.

Additionally, in great part due to the efforts of The Center, the Living Cities Foundation, a philanthropic collaborative of 22 of the world’s largest foundations and financial institutions, recently selected Newark as a finalist city to vie for funding to create a novel, integrated, multi-sector initiative of collective design. The Center is co-lead coordinator of Newark’s “Healthy hubs” concept, under which Newark would use the Foundation’s funds to develop new school-based health clinics and ongoing initiatives focused on accessing fresh and healthy foods and affordable housing in several Newark neighborhoods.

Laurel’s challenges are great, both in the initiatives The Center undertakes, and in raising funds to enable The Center’s continued success – particularly in this economy. To support the Center or to learn more, please go to: www.newarkchange.org.

I am so proud of Laurel and wish her organization continued success in its critical revitalization efforts for the City of Newark.

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