



After the Fact | Restoring Community: Showing Up

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TRANSCRIPT

Frederick Riley, executive director, Weave: The Social Fabric Project: It's the place where people live. It's the place where they buy groceries. It's the place where they send their kids to school, and it's where you come home to sleep every night. It is the idea of all these people residing in the same place together, living in close proximity, building trust and connecting relationships to make one big thing. And that's what communities look like to me.

Dan LeDuc, host: The headlines these days seem to be all about disagreement and divisiveness, and those feelings are surely real for many people. When the Pew Research Center asked Americans if our trust in each other was shrinking, 64% said yes. But in that same survey, an even bigger percentage of people—86%—say it's possible to improve trust in one another. And they said that local communities can be laboratories for trust-building.

Welcome to "After the Fact." I'm Dan LeDuc. This year marks the 75th anniversary of The Pew Charitable Trusts and for that three-quarters of a century, Pew has sought to help communities and people thrive. So, for our new season, we decided to visit some American cities where local organizations are weaving stronger bonds among the people who live there. As you'll hear, the reasons for their success aren't so secret—they're the things many of us learned growing up that maybe we need reminding about sometimes: showing up for one another, treating each other with respect, recognizing the inherent dignity of every person—even if we don't see eye to eye.

At the opening, you heard from Frederick Riley, who directs Weave: The Social Fabric project at the Aspen Institute, which is all about celebrating and replicating local efforts around the nation to build the social fabric. He joined us on a visit to the Cherry Hill section of Baltimore and you'll hear more from him in a moment. But first, meet some of the people who live in Cherry Hill, like Michael Battle.

Michael Battle, co-founder, Restoring Inner City Hope (RICH): Cherry Hill is a small, tight-knit community. We're located in South Baltimore, you have to come over the bridge, so we're separated by bodies of water. People refer to Cherry Hill as "out on the island."



Dan LeDuc: Founded as a neighborhood for Black veterans, Cherry Hill evolved over time and has been known as a tough place. Urban ills like crime and drugs took root. But they don't define Cherry Hill. Here's Michael's wife, Dani.

Danielle Battle, co-founder, RICH: You can only be uncomfortable in Cherry Hill with us for about a minute, and then I'm gonna work you, we're gonna laugh with you. You know, we're going to eat some good food and you're gonna all of a sudden fall in love with somebody real quick in this community.

Mama Cleo: You could go to bed at night and you could leave the doors in your house open.

Dan LeDuc: Mama Cleo has lived in the neighborhood for over 70 years.

Mama Cleo: It's always been a community that cared about one another. If you did something and your neighbor saw that it was not something that your parents taught you to do, they would chastise you, and you would go home, you get chastised again. Everybody looked out for each other.

Dan LeDuc: We learned about Cherry Hill and Michael and Dani Battle through the Aspen Weave project. Before we join them for a longer conversation, Frederick Riley tells us about the state of community in America today.

Frederick Riley: When Weave was founded, in 2018, *New York Times* author David Brooks came to the institute and said, "Frankly, I'm writing about a lot of doom and gloom and I'd like to do something about it. Everything I'm writing about has to do with loneliness, suicide, the real polarization of our communities all around the country."

Dan LeDuc: The project hopes to weave and restore the country's tattered social fabric. It seeks out people like Michael and Dani Battle—and calls them weavers—and tries to connect them with each other and to resources and training. Aspen also spreads their stories, hoping to inspire more people to become weavers.

Frederick Riley: What we find "weavers" are doing all around the country is they are knitting together their particular community. Where we are right now, our country has been in this place before. We were here after World War II, when small groups like the YMCA taught English to new Americans, and the Red Cross helped soldiers coming home and families navigating the grief journey. And then between 1960 and 1970, where the birth of the nonprofit industry, those at the time were really small community groups that were helping to navigate some really tough issues. I believe that the group to help us navigate this time are people who live in communities, who are working in communities.



This is human work. This is heart work. And so real humans, with a real heart for people, have to do this work. And I think what “weavers” and what people are doing in communities is showing that we all need each other. Our problems that we have can exist alone, but they won’t be solved alone. Everybody has to be a part of it.

Dan LeDuc: Michael has lived his whole life in Cherry Hill. Dani came here while going to college nearby. They met and married and founded Restoring Inner City Hope, RICH for short, a nonprofit based in an old school that offers community programs, after-school activities, work and employment advice—they’re even renovating a storefront to open a juice bar and a plant-based food restaurant that will be staffed by Cherry Hill’s young people, with profits going to the kids’ college funds.

Michael Battle: We are actually right here in the Cherry Hill Town Center. This is the heartbeat of Cherry Hill. This is a small community. So all the stores, all the shopping, happens right here.

Dan LeDuc: We spoke in a big open room in the shopping center, with light flooding in through tall clear windows. Just a few days earlier, they had a fundraiser in this space that brought in \$75,000.

Danielle Battle: We are at a time when people are very siloed. I go home, I don’t know my neighbor’s name. The idea was bringing people together with a common understanding that this city needed more love.

Dan LeDuc: You decided you wanted to do something. What did you want to do?

Danielle Battle: We were dating, and Mike said, “I wanna do a prayer walk in Cherry Hill.” And I was just like, “Let’s do it, you know, whatever.” People always have ideas, right? And then like the next week he was like, “So I got all these hot dogs and we’re gonna have like a march.” I said, “Oh, we’re, we’re really gonna do a prayer walk.”

We quickly learned in dating that he was like an ideas person. And I was very much the No. 2 person that’s like, “No, we’re not doing it like that. We need to do it like this. Let’s make it feasible and let’s build it.” And within a couple months, we put on a prayer walk and there was 32 people there at the first one.

It was just like a mile long and then we stopped and had, I think that year we tried to cook hot dogs and a little cooker, it broke, but there’s a dollar store. We got, you know, a little tiny grill and just did the best that we could. But we knew that it had to be more than just the walk.



And this past fall, we served 647 kids with backpacks, resources, haircuts, entertainment, hot dogs.

Dan LeDuc: Was that the grand intention, what you had in mind when you started cooking hot dogs 10 years ago?

Danielle Battle: No, no. We just wanted to shine a little light, give a little love. That's how it started. He just really wanted to give back to this community. I had recently learned about it and started to fall in love with it, so I was game for it, and we just never left.

Dan LeDuc: The longer Michael and Dani have been at work here, the more they've learned about what Cherry Hill needs.

Michael Battle: The cash register and things will be right here on the counter and behind the wall, it'll be a wall right here separating the space. We have a station back here where we'll do the cold pressed juice.

Dan LeDuc: Michael is showing us around what will soon be the juice bar.

Michael Battle: Everything comes from a real place. So, just myself, been on high blood pressure since I was 20 years old, eating from this very restaurant. I used to stand right there, order five wings, fried rice, extra gravy. I know exactly what I used to order from this place. Because of the foods that they're putting in their bodies people are suffering, including myself, until I changed my lifestyle.

Mama Cleo: The police walk with us, and pastors walk with us, schoolchildren walk with us, adults, people in wheelchairs or walkers, and canes.

Dan LeDuc: That's Mama Cleo. She was there at that first prayer walk. But her real impact on Cherry Hill started a long time ago. Michael told us how he first met her.

Michael Battle: So, I was born to an addicted mother and father. So, my house is what you call a shooting gallery where people would pay my mother in drugs to use the space to get high.

Michael Battle: So, growing up in that environment as a child, you're exposed to a lot of things that no child should ever be exposed to. So, when you talk about child protective services coming, you talking about police in your house, I experienced all that. And when I was 14, my mother passed in her bedroom from a drug overdose.



So, I turned to the street—lost, hurting, and looking for love. I felt alone. My mother was gone. Where I used to be was in Cherry Hill Apartments, and that’s where Mama Cleo lived.

Mama Cleo: When you’re involved in drugs and things of that nature, I mean, you can make the money, but you also messing with somebody else’s lives.

Michael Battle: The big thing was don’t play with Mama Cleo, right? Don’t let her catch you breaking the law. So, we used to sit actually on her apartment building steps, breaking the law, right?

Mama Cleo: I always say it’s two things: You either going to jail or you going to the graveyard. So, you have a choice to make.

Michael Battle: So, she sent the message saying, don’t sit on our steps. Stop selling drugs around here, you know, so we didn’t pay her no mind. About two weeks later, she had a sub police station put in the building at the top of Cherry Hill.

Dan LeDuc: How did you pull that off?

Mama Cleo: I’ve been involved with the police department for a while. I used to be the chairperson at the Police Community Relations Council.

Michael Battle: So I stopped and packed my bags and I moved. Yeah. So that was the end of that. Fast forward, I changed my life, and come back to the community and started doing this community work, lo and behold right back into Mama Cleo.

Mama Cleo: I just saw something in him. He was someone that God had said this man right here has something special about him and I’m gonna pray about him and I’m gonna talk to him. And that’s what happens. He listened. And look at him today.

Michael Battle: Yep. And she’s been mentoring me. She’s been loving me, she’s been nurturing me, she’s been guiding me the entire time. Once the scales was removed from my eyes, I saw that there’s little Michaels walking around. Carrying that same pain, trauma and hurt that I was. So that’s when I decided to dedicate the rest of my life to this work.

Dan LeDuc: We stuck around for RICH’s after-school program. Kids were playing video games and board games, eating snacks, and—importantly—doing their homework. One of the first students in the program is now a mentor. His name is Kevin.



Kevin: It was pretty fun. We just hanged out, just talked and that was nice. My family was going through some things, so I wasn't feeling the best myself. But the RICH program made me feel better. I had another family I can build with. When I was younger, I used to be a shy guy. And we have this teacher, Big Fred, so he would help us get out of our shell. He's an actor, he's a comedian. So, he helped us with staging a lot of good stuff. So I'm more outgoing and talkative now. I can talk to a group of people, public speaking. I couldn't do that before. The program helped me build my confidence back up with my family and now I'm more open about my feelings. I can talk with pride.

Dan LeDuc: City Hall is noticing. Here's city council member Phylcia Porter.

Phylcia Porter, councilwoman, Baltimore City Council: I have literally seen children change in a matter of months from their program. So having conflict mediation, coping mechanisms, that have been instilled within them, from Restoring Inner City Hope and what Dani and Michael are doing.

Dan LeDuc: For all the attention Dani and Michael are receiving for RICH, they didn't start out with a grand plan.

Danielle Battle: We had no idea what we were doing. We didn't wanna be a nonprofit. That wasn't our goal. We just wanted to do a little prayer walk once a year and love on people and be done with it. But there was such a need. And after I think three years, there was so much trust built that people wanted us to do more, and so we did more.

When we finished our first prayer walk, we were downloading it, and Mike said, "You know, next year, like, what are we gonna do?" And I was like, "I don't know what we're gonna do, but we just have to do it." So we just listened and that was always our thing. We show up. We listen. We listened to the principal at the school who said, "We really need a boys' program for middle school aged boys." And my husband wasn't in education, so I was like, mm-hmm. There's a reason. There's a reason middle school aged boys don't have a program, you know? But jokes aside, like, so we said, "OK." And I was like, "I'm still working. You're gonna have to run this program with these little boys. I'll come when I can."

But we just listened, you know, I remember we were in the grocery store and a woman came up to us. She was like, "Hey, I need to get a job. How come we don't have like a place for jobs?" And I was like, "Oh no. Now we're gonna have a workforce development. I can feel it." And then we did, and the way that we thought it should be structured didn't totally work. So then instead we just said, "well, OK, let's restructure it. Let's find a way." Because the typical way wasn't working for this community. So, we invited some of our people who have job openings to come during



our Thanksgiving giveaway. And so then that allowed people to get a turkey, have fun, we're laughing, dancing, just having a good time.

And then as you finish, "hey, here's some tables if you're interested." But at the same time, those people are smiling, they're involved, they're all in and so that allowed us to get over 60 people signed up to go to this job fair, because we took a divide away and we realized we're good at that. But all of that just came after 10 years of just wanting to love on this community however they needed it.

Dan LeDuc: Councilmember Porter says Dani and Michael Battle understand what the community in Cherry Hill needs, and that they know how to bring people together.

Phylicia Porter: When people think of Baltimore, they're always thinking of something negative, or something that is not going to thrive. Dani and Michael have proven that wrong time and time again, and they're just a testament, when you have the proper opportunity, what you can accomplish. They can connect with people. It's not just, you come in, you fill out a piece of paper, you talk with a therapist, you talk with a social worker. This is really a family-style environment where we are addressing the needs of individuals that are unseen in any type of social services application.

We're talking about bridging the gap and directly addressing the need of the community. Being a nexus for government leaders, for the business community, the philanthropic community, and also residents who need to be at the center of that conversation.

That is what the Battles are doing. And that not only builds trust, that builds community rapport, but that also builds a consistency and an example about how you should be existing in your communities as well.

Frederick Riley: Local communities have always meant so much to me.

Dan LeDuc: Here's Frederick Riley.

Frederick Riley: Because of how I grew up. I grew up in a place where we didn't have a lot, but I did have a community, a network of people who helped to knit together a pathway for me. Folks like my childhood pastor who passed away this past summer, who was the first person to tell me I could be somebody. Or my fifth-grade teacher, Sharon Smith, who um, made sure I got enrolled in the gifted and talented program, paid the fees and waited in the parking lot for me. Or my high school English teacher who would send me 50 bucks while I was away in college because she knew for me, college was not a rite of passage, but it was gonna be a pathway for me to knit together my life.



And so community includes all these different actors knitting your life, or places or people together in a way to help them succeed. And I've benefited heavily from community, and so I'm gonna always work for communities because I know the beauty of what happens when a community rallies around you.

Kevin: It's really nice because all the students look up to me as a good leader. So, I strive to be the best I can just for them and me.

Danielle Battle: I think a lot of what we do on paper looks similar to what other people are doing. We do turkey giveaways, and we do bike and Christmas gift giveaways, but we also always have a DJ. It's not just, "oh, take a turkey." There's a feeling. People are singing and dancing, it just takes like one more step. "We gotta get rid of these turkeys. You gotta take one."

Michael Battle: One instance during COVID, one guy told me, I give him the food and he said, "Thanks, Mike. Can you come closer so I can whisper something in your ear?" He said, "I was going to rob someone tonight because we didn't have any food, so thank you so much."

Danielle Battle: We are very mindful to make a person feel welcome in our space and don't highlight the need, but instead highlight we just want you here.

Mama Cleo: It's been a blessing to the community. I was looking at the children here at the fundraiser; I was saying to myself, you know what? Light shines in darkness because those children can be a sparkle of light to go out to another child that's been through what Michael has been through, you know, to show love and compassion and, and you gotta have a compassionate heart to do this kind of work.

Dan LeDuc: We hope you'll join us next time when we travel to Milwaukee to see how food can bring people together.

Vincent Noth, executive director, Kinship Community Food Center: It's not that there's anything wrong with distributing food, it's just the moment you open the door we're connected. We're all part of the same human family in the neighborhood. The same kinship family.

Dan LeDuc: You can learn more about the Aspen Institute's Weave project and how to get involved in "weaving" in your community at [Weavers.org](https://weavers.org). And to listen to other episodes of this podcast or find out more about what you heard today, visit pewtrusts.org/afterthefact.