

Camden's young community leaders fight tenaciously for the city's future

Tara Nurin | Tuesday, February 12, 2013

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"Where others see disrepair, some see vision."

If it weren't for this spirit of optimism -- articulated here by Camden, New Jersey activist Andrew Adams -- Philadelphia's neighbor to the east might have been abandoned by leadership not long after industry did the same in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Yet despite Camden's status as one of the nation's poorest and most violent cities per capita, there are those who stay and fight for safer streets, better schools, an expanded tax base, equal access to healthcare and increased diversity.

These four young, passionate crusaders have chosen Camden. With their talent, education and experience, opportunities are available far beyond the shadow of the Ben Franklin Bridge. They can envision a bright future for this city, with its spectacular views, charming architecture and rich history. By tackling the structural underpinnings of a modern city -- development, education, healthcare and community organization -- they are pointing the way forward.

Neighborhood Maven

For former urban studies major Andrew Adams, Camden is one comprehensive urban study. In his day job as a community relations consultant for the Camden Area Health Education Center, Adams works with the Keeping it Safe Program, conducting outreach to break down the stigma gay men face in the majority African-American and Latino city.

In his free time, the 21-year-old suburbanite volunteers for the non-profit Camden District Council Collaborative Board. As a district chairman for North Camden, downtown, the waterfront and the Cooper Hospital and Rutgers areas, he helps implement and steer crime reporting, lighting analyses, quality of life improvement projects, park activities and recreation in the city's most economically strategic and viable districts.

Adams believes the city should cultivate a fresh strategy for attracting investment in those neighborhoods, some of which house and entertain successful white-collar professionals and their families.

While waterfront attractions such as the Adventure Aquarium, the Susquehanna Bank Center and Cirque du Soleil draw short-term visitors, they contribute little economically to the surrounding businesses, tax base or city as a whole.

"This idea that we're going to redevelop into Disneyland doesn't work," says Adams. "The whole

'build it and they will come' premise doesn't work."

Instead, Adams tries to persuade civic leaders to favor revitalization over gentrification, renewal over recreation. He'd rather foster a vibrant arts community, gay community and senior community -- populations that don't typically burden the school district but do appreciate the city's medical and educational facilities, and easy access to a major metropolis.

For example, outside his district in impoverished and heavily Hispanic East Camden, he imagines a bustling Latin Quarter full of bright murals, restaurants and galleries, where he hopes city planners would honor historic architectural styles and resist any urge to relocate existing homes and businesses.

"The city has to reinvent itself but keep ties to its past," he says.

Adams chooses to advocate and build consensus through meetings and drop-in visits with stakeholders, who he encourages to work around the bureaucracy to get what they want. He preaches a "people first" approach that emphasizes the importance of taking action instead of waiting for municipal employees to fix problems.

"You don't have to depend on the city to do everything," says the aspiring Camden homeowner. "If the abandoned lot next to you is full of trash, don't go to a council meeting or call a city department all day. No, take the initiative and clean it up yourself."

School Support

Nyeema Watson grew up as one of 11 children in East Camden. Her father was a custodian and her mom stayed at home, ceaselessly supplementing her brood by fostering handfuls of other kids. Out of all of these children, Watson was one of two to attend post-secondary school, thanks to a teacher who mentored her through her pre-college years.

After graduating from Rutgers-Camden (RUC), Watson obtained a master's degree in education from the University of Pennsylvania. Then she returned to Camden, where she's pursuing a PhD in Childhood Studies and leading two of RUC's most transformative community programs as Director of Public School Partnerships.

One program involves establishing after-school offerings in North Camden, but it's the Rutgers Future Scholars Program, established in 2007, that really grips Watson's heart.

The program provides full scholarships and fees to students from Camden high schools who graduate and get accepted to Rutgers. To qualify, they also have to participate in a five-year mentorship in which university students and faculty offer tutoring and life guidance. The first cohort is set to graduate from high school this year.

"You wait for the acceptances and it's very stressful," she says. "You're like a second mom."

Over the years, Watson truly has become like a parent to some of these teens, going so far as to

spend weekends taking them to the movies, bringing them to cultural and historical institutions in Philadelphia, and opening a personal bank account to pay for their trips and other expenses. She says keeping connected and becoming part of students' non-academic lives is part of the job for her and the seven employees she supervises.

"I can tell you their birthdays, parents' jobs, hopes and dreams, heartbreaks," she says. "In order to be successful ... we have to steer them toward resources and advocate for students who are failing a class, whose houses have caught on fire, whose relatives have passed away."

Her dedication has not gone unnoticed. Then-acting Gov. Richard Codey named her as the first representative from RUC to sit on Camden's school board. Then, a year ago, she was appointed to the board of Camden's non-profit Center for Family Services. In 2012, she was one of 15 national recipients of the inaugural White-Riley-Peterson Policy Fellowship to study and implement best practices in after-school and expanded learning programs.

"The hope with the work I'm doing is that it's going to provide children and youth the opportunities I've had," she says. "I certainly wouldn't have imagined I'd be sitting in this seat."

The Road to Better Health

Anthony Mazzarelli has an impressive resume: graduated summa cum laude from Washington and Lee, received a law and bioethics degree from Penn and a medical degree from Robert Wood Johnson, held the position of chief resident at Camden's Cooper University Hospital (he currently holds three positions at said hospital, including Vice President of Operations), earned more national awards than he can probably remember, and hosted an internationally broadcast radio show. And the man hasn't even turned 39.

Overachiever that he is, the Camden County native makes his livelihood in Camden City, where his Italian-American grandfather grew up and where he and his wife signed the first lease at the rehabbed Victor luxury lofts before buying a house nearby.

"If you want to make a difference in the world, you don't have to go to D.C. or New York or Botswana," he says. "You can move the needle here. For people who say they want to do public service, there's no metric you can show me to make me think you can't do it in Camden."

Early on, Mazzarelli decided to tackle systemic legal and urban issues through a medical context. "There's a connection between healthcare and what else happens in people's lives," he says. "Healthcare doesn't exist in a vacuum."

As a med student, Mazzarelli co-founded the Healthcare Outreach Project, a free student-run clinic that provides medical care and prescriptions to the city's uninsured patients. The Association of American Medical Colleges, together with Pfizer, Inc., recognized the clinic as one of six distinguished programs in the country. Students at the new Cooper Medical School of Rowan University are required to perform work in a clinic based on the program Mazzarelli founded.

In his current job as VP of Operations, Mazzarelli connects Cooper physicians to community volunteer opportunities. He also turned the Cooper-affiliated, federally qualified CAMCare Health Corporation clinic into a national model by strengthening its ties to the hospital and creating a nearly unprecedented consortium to streamline patients' appointment-making and the financial screening process.

As an expert in health outreach and policy, Mazzarelli has sat on several city boards and was one of three original team members to work on integrating Cooper and Rowan in preparation for their joint medical school. He helped establish a relationship with Washington and Lee -- the Virginia college sends five poverty studies interns to work in the city each summer in the hopes that they'll return post-graduation. His enthusiasm for Camden lured two of his law school friends here permanently. Those friends have become two of the city's most prominent public-sector redevelopment and investment agents.

Somehow, through it all, Mazzarelli still leads the busy emergency department at Cooper, holds professor status at two medical schools and raises a toddler with his wife.

Speaking up for Camden

When Kate Epstein stood up in front of the governing boards of Rutgers University last spring and pointedly warned them that the proposed severance of RUC from Rutgers would catastrophically impact Camden -- then did it again at a legislative committee hearing in Trenton -- she became, in the words of one co-worker, "the bravest woman in New Jersey."

The legislation would have dismantled Rutgers and reattached its Camden campus to Rowan and Cooper, whose chairman is South Jersey political kingmaker George Norcross. Epstein, then a 29-year-old first-year RUC military history professor, spoke out about the controversial bill.

"You may lie to your constituents, but at least have the decency not to lie to yourselves," she said. "You are selling out my campus and more importantly the ideals that my campus represents in the current struggle, to bail out George Norcross' hospital."

Epstein's testimony, coupled with intense lobbying by the aforementioned governing boards, the Committee to Save Rutgers-Camden and dozens of additional stakeholder organizations, succeeded in getting a law passed that ensured RUC would remain part of Rutgers.

Rutgers' impact on Camden cannot be understated. If Rutgers had cut loose its southernmost campus and left it to be absorbed by Rowan, the city stood to lose about 1200 jobs (ten percent of which are filled by Camden residents), hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of capital investments, 40,000 annual hours of pro-bono legal work from law students, training and free consultation to more than 50 small businesses and organizations annually, along with countless additional community programs and contributions.

Epstein, a summa cum laude graduate from Yale who earned her master's at Cambridge and whose first book, a tome about the history of torpedoes, will be published by Harvard University Press, risked her job by taking such a strong stance on this issue. But she did it anyway.

"I was just so outraged by what I saw as a craven attempt to take over the campus, then cloak it in educational motives," says Epstein. "It was terrible for the school, terrible for Camden, terrible for the region and it pretty much appalled me on every level. Students weren't going to bring their money to Camden to attend Rowan. I thought it was going to lead to a suck of resources."

"As John Wayne said," she repeated, "Courage is being afraid and saddling up anyway."

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