

After a Long Impasse, A Win for Dudley Street?

Posted by [Miriam Axel-Lute](#) on November 10, 2014

In the film [Gaining Ground](#), about the [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative](#), a powerful community planning and organizing group in Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, one of the major story lines involves the [Kroc Community Center](#).

In a nutshell, the Salvation Army got a huge amount of money to build community centers around the country, and wanted to put one in Boston, on a vacant lot in DSNI's footprint. Despite the fact that a community center had been part of the community vision since the early 1990s, DSNI was characteristically cautious, taking some time to make sure the Salvation Army was aligned with their values and vision.

Once they were satisfied that they were, construction began, and with DSNI's close participation (detailed in [this article](#) in the latest issue of *Shelterforce*), the contractor hit ambitious and unprecedented targets for employing local, people of color, and women hires and subcontractors.

However, once the building neared completion, the partnership threatened to go sour. The problem was the membership rates.

Somewhere along the way, the Salvation Army's decisions about what membership rates they needed to set to meet their budget rose well out of reach of the average neighborhood resident—\$75-85/month for a family.

DSNI and its members were shocked and upset, and DSNI was feeling pressure from community members who felt sold out, since it had put its name to the project. In the film, we see them discussing the problem, reluctantly and uncomfortably attending the opening ceremonies, and talking about how they were going to stay in partnership with the Salvation Army and find out if they could provide whatever support the Army needed to work toward making the Community Center accessible.

It was clearly a difficult dance to do. It would have been very easy to either pull out and denounce the Army or to throw up their hands and say, "Well, that's their budget, they did their best, oh well."

DSNI did neither, but stayed in the conversation.

The unresolvedness was uncomfortable, even for observers. As the film, released in 2013, began to screen, the filmmakers have said that the most common question, almost invariably the first one audiences ask, is, "What happened with the Kroc Center prices?"

Last Friday night, it was screened as part of [DSNI's 30th anniversary celebrations](#) at The Strand theater in Dorchester. It played to a packed and appreciative house, who collectively chuckled at the shots of a young [John Barros](#), who went on to lead DSNI, run for mayor, and is now the city's chief of economic development.

Following the screening, there was a panel discussion. And on that panel was one Major Lopes, the new Salvation Army major for the region as of slightly more than a year ago. The first question to the panel was, "How did you get involved with DSNI?" and when it came to his turn, Major Lopes quipped, "I had a different answer prepared, but after seeing the film, I think it was in payment for sins of my childhood."

But he was cheerful, despite feeling like his organization had come off in a questionable light in the film, because he had news to deliver. Major Lopes reported that he had just submitted a proposal to his higher

ups that was expected to be approved, to introduce a sliding scale membership starting in January, the bottom tier of which would be \$2/month.

He was getting some push back he said, about the building's debt service. "We were in debt this year," he said. "So we'll be in debt next year, but the building will be full." He did caution that the plan would require stakeholders to step up, presumably for some kind of fundraising, but nonetheless, this was a huge announcement.

It is also possibly a testimony to the power of having leaders who intimately understand the communities where they work. Major Lopes noted that he was possibly the only Cape Verdean of his rank in the Salvation Army, and he has ties to the Roxbury neighborhood, which has a very high Cape Verdean population. Before he took this post, earlier in the process he had been asked about the previous plan and had told his colleagues, "I don't think that will work for my community." They didn't listen then, but it seems perhaps they remembered and turned to him to seek a solution.

Though there are many steps left to go, Major Lopes' announcement was a significant breakthrough in this particular saga, and a testament to the power of staying present in difficult conversations. (Also likely a testament to the power of documentary films that don't shy away from unresolved conflict!) Congratulations to DSNI for sticking it out.