

The Critical Need To Build Community

By: Pamela J. Atkinson

LDS Business College Forum
March 7, 2007

Thank you very much. I appreciate that warm introduction. I appreciate everybody being here today, and inviting me to speak, and I'm trying to make sure—I was given correct instructions on where exactly to place this microphone, just below my chin—so my s's and p's don't pop. Is that correct? See how good I am at following instructions? I'd fit right in here, right?

When I first came to this country from England, I thought that America was a very odd community indeed. It was different. How many of you are from other countries? Didn't you find it a little odd when you came, as compared to your own country? And then it begins to grow on you. I remember when I first arrived and somebody yelling out, "Welcome to God's own country!"

And I thought, "What an odd thing to say. I thought I'd just left God's own country in England."

But as I traveled around I noticed vast differences from state to state. We actually first arrived in New York, and I had great difficulty understanding people. And they had difficulty understanding me, too. One day a friend and I were talking and we decided maybe all of America wasn't quite like New York. So we decided to get on a bus and we went down to New Orleans. And that was different.

The next morning I got up and my friend, Dorothy, was still sleeping in her bed, so I crept out and went to the restaurant next door for breakfast. And I looked at a menu and thought, "I can do all right here on my own." And so when the waitress came over, I asked her, I said, "I think I'll have some bacon and eggs."

And she said, "How do you want your eggs?"

I said, "Fried."

And then she said, "How do you want your eggs?"

And I thought, "I thought I just said fried." So I said it very slowly, "Fried."

And then she said, "Well, how do you want them?"

And I thought, let's try something else, so I said, "Cooked."

And then she explained to me about sunny-side up and over easy, and I'd never heard those expressions before. And I thought, here's another odd community down here. And then she asked me if I wanted some grits. And I thought, "I haven't a clue what you're talking about, but you're not catching me twice." And I said, "Yes, I'll have three of those, please."

So she explained to me about the grits. But when I left and paid the bill, I got to the door and the cashier said, "Now you all come back again." So I turned around and went

back again. And that's how I learned the meaning of that expression. It took a while to realize the uniqueness of this community that we call America.

A phrase used quite frequently is the following: "The community is split on that issue." Well, I found in New York that it was split on many issues. And of course I'm finding out that this whole country is split on issues. We're not the close-knit community that we used to be. And we ask ourselves, "All right. What is a community?"

As I look around, this College is a community. But we seem to divide and also split communities according to religion, according to culture, according to customs. We talk about the LDS community, we talk about the Catholic community, we talk about the Somalian community and the Sudanese community because of the refugees that are here.

Last week, I finished up a six-week stint up at the Legislature. Now that's a community that's different. Have any of you been up to the Legislature? Good, a few. It is different, isn't it? And I spent six weeks up there, anywhere from 8 to 14 hours a day. I was doing two things—one, helping to get the governor's project through. But the other was advocating with a lot of other advocates.

The goal of the majority of people on the Hill each day is to make Utah a better community in which to live—to increase the quality of life, the quality of health and the quality of education, amongst other areas. And did we all succeed? Well, yes, to a certain extent. Because of the surplus, the budget looked good, and we got a great deal of money for many areas, including public education.

When you get so much as we did up at the Legislature, it's supposed to bring the community together. But the school voucher bill that passed split the community. As you talk to public education teachers, they're very upset about it. And you're left wondering, how could we have avoided that? We're supposed to build community, not split it up.

There are other issues, too, which were quite divisive. And how do we avoid that divisiveness? How do we build up community and not tear it down? One of the things I did a great deal of up at the Legislature, and do every day of my life, is to listen, listen and listen. And it's to listen with eye contact, because we tear down communities when we disagree with people but [don't] bother to understand where they are coming from. What is the rationale for their belief? What is the rationale for their opinion? Trying to understand by looking a person in the eye, and shutting off one's own defensive thoughts and thinking, "Where are you coming from? Why are you saying something different from me?"—that's how we build a community, because we're listening to each other.

There are people up at the Legislature who get angry with legislators when they don't do what the person expects. One of the most valuable lessons I've learned in life is to never, ever let issues interfere with relationships. If people have different opinions, it doesn't mean to say one is wrong and one is right. They're different opinions. If a senator or representative says to me, "Pamela, I'm sorry. I just cannot vote for that bill. I just cannot vote for appropriating the money for your particular project here," I'm not going to be angry with him or her. I want to understand why they have a different opinion. Have I failed in my education of it? Have I failed to inform them of the great need?

Never, ever let issues interfere with relationships. And the next time you go around, people remember that. Legislators remember that. "Ah, here's Pamela, and she was very nice to me when I told her No last year. Perhaps we can say Yes this year."

Did the advocates make a difference on the Hill? Did we make a difference in terms of money needed for the communities of people living in poverty, for the refugees, for the homeless people on the streets and in the shelters? You bet we made a difference, because we were there. We have a motto, by the way, up there: You leave, you lose. There were various amounts of moneys that were put in the budgets and were line items, and 24 hours later, they were gone. So we kept track of them, and we chased that money down. And in fact, at 11:35 p.m. on the last night of the session, 25 minutes before it ended, we were able to get another \$100,000 into a project that helps the low-income. So can one, two or three, or a group of people make a difference? You bet we can. We had fact sheets. We educated. We were persistent, hopefully without being annoying.

Do you remember, almost a year and a half ago now, when the Katrina evacuees arrived? The governor asked me to help coordinate that effort, and we did a lot of planning, and we went out to the National Guard airport. One of the things we made very sure was to involve our African-American friends so that when our guests arrived from New Orleans, we didn't want them looking out of the plane and seeing a sea of white faces. We wanted white and black. So we had a number of people from Calvary Baptist Church and other churches there. We were a real mixture, and hoped that we could represent Utah well.

When people arrived, they were very, very tired. Some of them were very angry at coming to Salt Lake City. Some of them didn't know where they were going until the plane was in the air. One plane, when they were told before they took off where they were going, thirteen people got off the plane, and said they'd rather stay in New Orleans than come to Salt Lake City. Our job was to make people feel welcome. We greeted them at the bottom of the steps, welcomed them to Salt Lake City. But we also gave them hugs and escorted them over to where they could get some food and pick up some little gift packs and a blanket. As they got off the plane, they were cold; we put blankets around them. And we listened. And we listened. And we heard of the terrors that they had gone through, of wading through the water.

At one point, a planeload arrived, and as the people—a preponderance of males—came down the steps, I thought, “Aha! I recognize you. You are some of our homeless guests.” And sure enough, many of them were. Many of them had come in off the streets and right onto the plane, to come here to Salt Lake. We took them out to Camp Williams, and we tried to build this community, offering love, offering care, offering food, offering sustenance.

We also tried to build this community that was not quite New Orleans, but was partly Utah as well. But we listened to them about their culture. We listened to the homeless people who said, “This is a second chance for me. Maybe we can get a job here. Can you help us?”

We did get some criticism, by the way, from the NAACP. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People actually called FEMA and said, “Don't you dare send any more black people to that white Utah.” We were seen as absolutely pure white with not a black person among us, according to the NAACP. At this point I was involved in education and getting that ready for the children, and I got several calls from news media—the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the NPR radio in Boston. And it was interesting trying to educate them. They said, “What are doing with all those black people, black children, in your white Mormon Utah?”

And I said, "Well, first of all, we're not all exactly white."

He said, "Are you white?"

I said, "Well, yes, I am." And then I said, "Are you aware that in three of our large school districts, the ethnic minorities have now become the majority?"

He said, "No, I wasn't aware of that."

I said, "Are you aware that in the Salt Lake School District, where there are 37 schools, we now have 87 different languages being spoken?"

He said, "No, I didn't know this." This was a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal*.

And I gave him the percentages of African American and Hispanic and what have you, and I said, "And furthermore, I'm an elder in the Presbyterian Church."

At which he said, "Okay, Pamela, you've made your point." I was trying to let him know that we have a community that is diverse here, that we have been working on building up that community.

We had over 600 evacuees that came. Nearly 300 of them stayed here. At our last reunion, about four or five months ago, very few of them turned up. Why? Because they have built a life for themselves in their new communities.

I talked to one couple with two children who had ended up down in Sandy, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews. And I said, "You're in a very white neighborhood. How are your neighbors?"

And they said, "We don't think that they've noticed that we're black and different." The neighborhood had come together to greet this one family, made them feel very special. And the Andrews decided to stay here. And what has happened with many of those 300, families and individuals, is they became part of what we call the Utah community.

Now there are a few of them left who still need help, but we've stopped the special help now. They are treated like Utah residents and go through the usual channels to get help. There are some, second- and third-generation welfare recipients, and some who were homeless, and we're having problems trying to get them to become self-sufficient. But we never give up on anybody, and we have continued to do that with these Utah residents who were former Katrina evacuees.

We have many, many refugees amongst us. They come in through the federal government. We have them from Sudan; we have them from Somalia; we have them from Vietnam; we have them from Russia. But many of them are on the west side. They're in Rose Park, they're in Glendale, they're in West Valley City, they're in South Jordan, they're in Taylorsville. Many people living on the east side in this city never see people of a different color other than white. And yet it's such incredible education and really thrilling to listen to people from other countries, as I know some of you are, who have so much to share in terms of where you have come from and what your cultures are like. And that's what we've been learning. We feel very strongly, many of us, for the refugees who are here because of torture, because of killings and because they wanted to come out of the refugee camps, who are willing to share with us and help us to be better, much as they're learning about the American culture.

What about our own community? Are we building it, or are we tearing it down? What about homelessness right now in our Salt Lake City? What about families and individuals living in poverty? What about hunger? There's a lot of different ways of being hungry.

I was amused but saddened by the fact that the federal Agricultural Department has taken what you might call the Scarlett O'Hara approach to Americans without enough to eat. It will never call them hungry anymore. I'm quoting now from the *Washington Post*. "Rumbling stomachs? Malnourishment? That's not hunger, the Department said. It's 'very low food security.' Whatever the intention, this linguistic airbrushing diminishes the shame of the problem, its persistence and its scope, that 11 million Americans reported disrupted eating patterns.

"It really is a national embarrassment. Imagine the department going after the description on the Statue of Liberty: 'Give me your energy deficient, your financially challenged, and your space-impaired masses, etc.'" The federal government was trying to use a euphemism for people living in poverty, so they can't talk about being hungry.'" But those of us who work with people who are hungry, we call it. "Are you hungry?" We get them food to relieve the malnourishment.

But what about the other hungers that we find right here in our city, in our county, in our state? Many people have these on a daily basis too. People hunger for a decent shelter, people hunger for good health, people hunger for clothing, people hunger for blankets. People hunger for companionship. People hunger for opportunity. And people hunger for love and compassion.

I have many, many homeless friends. I probably know about 70% of homeless people, and they give me probably more than what I give them. They've taught me so much. And they're like you. They're like me. They're like all of us. They have their dreams, they have their hopes, they have their goals.

Last December there was a National Homeless Memorial Day. Across the country in the cities there were candlelight vigils held for those homeless people who died. In Salt Lake we had 42 people who were homeless who had died. We came together—service providers, advocates and homeless people—to mourn, to grieve, to recite their names and to remember them all with stories and with love. We will do that every December 21st.

What can and should we be doing? There are the usual things—we can give food to the food bank. We can give clothing to the various organizations—Volunteers of America, Road Home. We can make sure that they're warm enough.

But what else can we do? President Bush two years ago came out with an initiative to end chronic homelessness within ten years. And by chronic homelessness, he means those people who have been out on the streets for years, who are consuming emergency services—ambulances, police, fire departments, hospitals, and many, many beds in the shelter. And what we're doing, rather than taking people off the streets and putting them into treatment programs, we're now taking people off the streets and we're putting them into their own apartments.

We've done this for just a year and three months now, and we have 17 people—17 men—who have made it, who are still in their apartments. Some are obviously doing better than others. One of my friends, Bobby Fritz, who I've known for 15 years on the street, he's been in his own apartment for a year and two months. And I go by to take him special treats or food, and also just to sit and chat. He proudly tells me he's opened a savings account at one of the banks, and he showed me the 47 dollars and 13 cents he has in the bank. He proudly showed me how clean his apartment is, and reminded me that I've known him for 14 or 15 years.

Fred Lampropoulos, who is the President and CEO of Merritt Medical, is quite the

humanitarian. He was talking to me one day and asked how he could help. I told him about this project that is called Housing First, or the Pathways Program. So he decided to give me his Jazz suite at the Jazz game. Now, that's not just a little box. It's a big box that not only seats 26 people, but also has an area to sit and eat, and has the food.

We decided that I could take some of my homeless friends, or formerly homeless friends. So they all showered. Unfortunately, three of them got very nervous about going and drank a few beers, so we couldn't take them. But the others piled into the vans with the providers and the case managers who have worked so closely with them to keep them in their apartments, and we got to the EnergySolutions Arena, and they had a wonderful time. They ate constantly. In fact, the person who kept on bringing the food said, "I've never seen any box eat as much as this box."

I said, "Is it all right?"

She said, "Oh, absolutely." And I explained who they were, and that a year and a half ago they'd been out on the streets. She was so impressed.

But they whooped it up and hollered. It was a very close game with the Denver Nuggets. And the Utah Jazz won, and it was very exciting. But what was exciting for me was the response of my homeless friends. Some of them said, "You know, this really makes us feel an important part of the community." And others said, "I feel like a normal human being."

One of the case managers said, "You know, normal human beings don't get to sit in these boxes normally. We're up there."

But we all had a good laugh about it, and then the next day the men sat down to write thank you notes to the guy who had given us that. What a wonderful thing to do. Later this month, there will be 100 studio apartments for more people to bring them off the streets and do case management. You see, there are things that can be done to change people's lives. You're all part of a team that needs to change people's lives.

There's another way to build a community. On Christmas Day, my friend and I went out to all of our homeless friends, out in the camps. We took out hot turkey meals with all the trimmings and gifts that had been donated by people and lovingly wrapped, and took Christmas to their community out in these camps. And then we went by to the places where people live in one-room apartments who are mentally ill, and took them gifts and food too. And then we went by the Pathways Program, and went to each of these different apartments. And we were greeted with great joy and with great pleasure and with great gratitude. But we were also grateful that we were in a position to serve people.

And then in the evening, for the last nine or ten years, I've put on a dinner at the Salvation Army. I had 45 volunteers, most of whom have come every year and I've watched their children grow. We have people sit down, and the volunteers do a wonderful job of treating every homeless person they come to with dignity, and treating them with the real spirit of Christmas. I think that day as we were all serving, the love of Jesus Christ was flowing through us and out to many of our homeless friends.

Some of you may have heard this, but here's another instance of a community coming together, and it's the Special Olympics community. I don't know if any of you have had the opportunity to work with those Special Olympians who are mentally and physically retarded. It's the most wonderful lessons we could ever learn. But this one got me, and you may have already seen this.

It was a few years ago, at the Seattle Special Olympics. There were nine contestants, all of whom were physically or mentally challenged and disabled. And they assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly with a dash, but with a relish to win and to run the race. All—all except one boy, who stumbled on the asphalt. He tumbled over a couple of times, and he began to cry. And the other eight heard him, and they all turned around and came back. One of them, a little girl with Down syndrome, bent down and kissed him and said, “I will make it better.” All nine of them linked arms and walked the 100 yards and crossed the finish line together.

That was a community coming together. A community of Special Olympians. And then the crowd helped to build that up by standing and applauding. The cheering went on for about five or six minutes. And why? And why are people still telling this story? Because deep down within us, we all know that what really, really matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means us slowing down and changing our course.

I had an appointment with Bishop [David H.] Burton a few months ago, and I was running late because I had stopped to help somebody who obviously needed help. So I got to his office late, and I said to him, “I’m so sorry I’m late, but when the Lord puts opportunities in front of me to help out, to reach out and help people, I’d be stupid not to take opportunities like that.” And he agreed, so I was forgiven and he gave me the full time.

What was I there for? To ask for something. We could not do much of what we do for the homeless and low-income people without the LDS Church. We couldn’t do nearly half of what we do, because of their generosity through Humanitarian Services. There’s so much that needs to be done and I know that many of you are involved.

You know, sometimes we run up against barriers as we’re trying to build communities to come together. And one of our mantras is, “Those of you who say it can’t be done should get out of the way of those of us who not only say it can be done, but are doing it.” And I think we—all of us here today—know, many times, what works. Every one of us here today has the ability to help other people cope, survive, and also triumph.

Sometimes we think, “Well, here’s an opportunity.” And I don’t know about you; I have a friend who says that sometimes an opportunity comes up to reach out and help someone, and she said, “I don’t do it until I get the holy nudge.” Well, I’ve gone one step further. Sometimes I’m not thinking right and I’ve missed the holy nudge, and then bingo—I get the holy shove. And let me tell you, when you get the holy shove, you get in there and you help out regardless of how you’re feeling, tired or what.

Sometimes we don’t quite know what to do, and I have a quote for that. “Some people see a closed door and turn away. Others see a closed door and they try the knob, and if it doesn’t turn or open, they turn away. Still others see a closed door, try the knob and if it doesn’t open, they find a key. And if the key doesn’t fit, they turn away. And finally, some people see a closed door, try the knob and if it doesn’t open, they find a key. And if the key doesn’t fit, they make a key that does fit, and thus they become the key-makers.”

I would suspect that many of you sitting here today are key makers. I feel very strongly that by becoming key makers we become very creative. We become very innovative. And we do make things work.

I really thank you for all you’ve done and all that you’re doing. But I’m also going to

thank you for all that you will do to get involved with the schools, with the children at risk, of trying to get them out of poverty. Education is the way out of poverty.

I was at a school last Friday—550 children. Eighty-five percent of the kids are living in poverty, seventy-nine percent ethnicity, and yet they're the most wonderful kids and the most wonderful parents who are trying to help. I just think we can be more ambitious.

There was an English politician, and he was campaigning for re-election. He stood up in front of this vast crowd and he said, "I am proud to be an Englishman. I was born an Englishman and I will die an Englishman."

And a Scotsman got up and said, "Ach, man. Have you no ambition?"

And I think we can be more ambitious. We can initiate projects. We can join in projects. We need to look at the various communities, the communities of the homeless people. How do we help build it up? How do we help people living in poverty? How do we help the refugee population? How do we help people who are struggling? So often, people make a list of the problems and possible solutions. People say, "Oh, we need to do a needs analysis. We need to do a gap analysis." What if we were to do the opposite, and discover the assets in the various communities that we are trying to build up? What if we were to look at the homeless and say, "What assets and capacities do you have?"

There was one homeless man who was so eager to learn, and he just couldn't seem to get a job. We got him one with a construction firm. All I had to do was buy him some steel-toed boots and off he went. And now he's a full-time worker, a much-valued worker. He has a family of his own. But what I saw in that man—his assets—he was willing, he was strong, he was healthy. He needed an opportunity.

We need to look at the individual talents and productive skills that abound in many low-income people. We need to move away from stereotyping people. I've heard several legislators say, "Poor people? Hmm. It's their own fault that they're poor."

And then, when we were talking about all-day kindergarten, "Uh-uh," says one senator, "Children should be at home during the kindergarten years, and their parents should teach them."

"Well, excuse me, Senator. Sometimes the moms and dads are out working, earning minimum wage, and they're gone until seven or eight [o'clock]."

"Well, that's their fault. They need to get a better education."

And so it goes on. We need to avoid that. We need to be positive about the people that we're trying to help. We need to make sure that we influence other people, that we don't stereotype. We need to make sure that we get into the schools.

Did you know that mentoring a low-income child for one hour per week per child builds up their academic scores, increases their social skills, and also their self-confidence? Did you know that when you smile at somebody, you may have made a difference in their whole day? Did you know that when you make an effort to walk across the room and talk to somebody who's standing alone, you may be helping somebody out of a crisis? You may be able to share with them your love of Christ and the love that Christ has for them, too?

There are so many little ways to help, and I would like you to join in this interactive prayer with me to finish, please. It's by St. Teresa of Avilla, who said, "God has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out upon the world. Yours are the feet with which He is

to go about doing good. Yours are the feet with which He is to bless His people.”

So if you’ll join me, please touch your foreheads. “May our thoughts be kind and wise, and may we approach all with compassion. May we let go of harsh judgments.” Touching the ears. “May we become aware of the suffering around us, and may we hear their cries of distress.” Touching the mouth. “May we have the courage and wisdom to speak up for those who are wronged, to be a voice for those who suffer from injustice of any form.” Touching the hands. “May we be ready to give when someone needs our gifts, and may we be open to receive from others when we are in need ourselves.” And touching the heart. “May we be willing to meet our own suffering and do so with deep compassion for ourselves.” And touching the feet. “May our faith give us strength to walk with one another as brothers and sisters, knowing we are each one a necessary part of this beautiful world.”

Thank you for your time, and remember we are the hands of Christ, and we are here to do His work. There are small ways and big ways that every one of us here today can make a difference in this wonderful world with which we have been blessed. Thank you.