

Connector Judy Wicks: A Farm-Fresh Approach to Innovation

Liz Dow 09 May 2010

Social innovators serve as connectors who weave the community together. They lead with a win/win mentality born of a strongly held commitment to operate in ways that not only meet their goals, but at the same time enrich and build community. Local entrepreneur Judy Wicks, of Philadelphia's White Dog Cafe, has inspired a generation of social innovators to work this way.

The White Dog Cafe has been an institution on the University of Pennsylvania campus for nearly 30 years. A pioneer in the "buy local" food movement, Wicks has built and sustained a reputation for social responsibility and community building.

Judy's entrepreneurial spirit became evident early in her career when she founded the Free People's Store, now well known as Urban Outfitters, with her then-husband Dick Hayne in 1970. In the early days, the store served as a community gathering place for West Philadelphia residents, reminiscent of the old-fashioned general store. Realizing the need for greater community organizing, the couple published the *Whole City Catalog* in 1973 and

1974, which profiled community organizations in such areas as peace and justice, ecology, social services and food co-ops.

Judy started the White Dog Cafe in 1983 on the first floor of her house, first as a take-out muffin shop and then growing it to a 200-seat restaurant and neighboring retail shop, Black Cat, which sold local and fair trade gifts for over 20 years. The White Dog was sold in 2009 through a unique agreement that preserves the values of the business, such as buying from local farmers, and maintains local independent ownership.

Under Judy's leadership, the White Dog was a place for student camaraderie, family celebrations and conversations about social justice. The restaurant became a hub for student, faculty, neighbors and Philadelphia professionals drawn to Judy's vision, great food and the promise of compelling conversation. Programs included a Table Talk speaker series on issues of public concern, Storytelling Nights for sharing life experiences, a film series, Community Tours of affordable housing, wall murals, prisons, farms, and community gardens, and even an international program that took customers and staff on trips to build people-to-people connections in countries such as Nicaragua, Cuba, Vietnam and the Soviet Union.

When asked when she realized she was a connector, she spoke of her mission. "I am all about supporting the local economy. We buy our produce from local farms, where we

can get the best goat cheese, the sweetest strawberries, and the tastiest fresh greens. We've built relationships over the years and count on each other to thrive. Those relationships have given us a competitive advantage in the marketplace. But eventually I realized that if my goal is to support the local economy (not just to maximize our profits), I should share my local food connections with our competitors."

Social innovators are community catalysts. Regardless of their formal job description or "day job," they see serving the community as their responsibility. They do an outstanding job of performing their formal duties and layer in a level of community service over and above that.

Liz Dow is President and CEO of LEADERSHIP Philadelphia, an organization that has mobilized executives to serve the community for fifty years. Former Senior Vice President for Human Resources with First USA (now JP Morgan), she has also worked for the Hay Group and PricewaterhouseCoopers, and served as a Wharton Public Policy Fellow in The White House. Liz holds an MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree in Counseling from Cornell University. She has served on several nonprofit boards, a corporate board and a university board. Her organization places alumni fellows on nonprofit boards. She recently published *Six Degrees of Connection*, which takes the abstract ideas about Connectors from *The Tipping*

***Point* and makes them real.**