

**THE GREENSBORO TRUTH AND COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION
PROJECT:
COMMUNICATION FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE
or
Communication for Reconciliation: Grassroots Work for Community Change**

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Spoma Jovanovic, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Communication Studies
University of North Carolina, Greensboro
108 Ferguson Building
P.O. Box 26170
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170
spomajovanovic@uncg.edu
336-334-3842

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On Saturday, November 3, 1979, community activists and members of the Communist Workers Party in Greensboro, NC assembled in the city's black Morningside Homes public housing project. They gathered for a march and educational workshop intended to organize textile mill workers and encourage union membership. Flyers promoting the day's activities peppered the city with a prominent "Death to the Klan" slogan used as the rallying cry. People from neighboring cities came in support of the cause. In the presence of four television camera crews and a number of print journalists, but in the absence of any police, the singing and laughing that preceded the event stopped abruptly when a nine-car caravan of white supremacists--Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi party members--drove to the parade route and with some interaction with the marchers, fired shots into the crowd. Five people were killed and another 10 wounded in 88 seconds.¹ As television crews captured the bloody murders, on-lookers took cover the best way they could.

What appeared to all to be murder in Greensboro that day grew into a far more complex story. The Klan and Nazi members claimed self-defense in two criminal trials. They were acquitted of all charges by all-white juries. A third, civil trial some six years later found the police and hate groups liable for one of the deaths. The question of justice denied in the Greensboro Massacre looms large even today more than 25 years later. Greensboro is a city where trust is low among diverse sub-communities and political protest has been effectively silenced.² It is a city where many political leaders in the 21st century remain convinced that November 3rd was an aberration not a reflection of the city's culture and therefore not worthy of discussion and dialogue.

In 2003, a group of spirited citizens organized themselves into the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project, hoping to reopen the dialogue about November 3, 1979. Patterned after the South African model, the group aimed to bring truth, justice, and healing to a city still ravaged by racial tensions and economic hardship.³ Capitalizing on an initial \$330,000 grant awarded by the Andrus Family Fund in New York City, the project involved local, national, and international experts in a quest to uncover the stories buried over the years by ideological warfare and fear. It was the project's hope that in doing so, Greensboro as a city would provide a model to other U.S. and international cities in how to launch a citizen-initiated process to examine the past so that the future could unfold with real, not imagined social justice ideals: justice for all, safety for all, and a place for all to belong.⁴

From the beginning, established community leaders were not eager to engage in this process of dialogue. The mayor said he spoke for most of the city's residents when he said we should "put the event behind us." One city council woman devoted 30 minutes a day for over a year to defeat the grassroots movement's force. She reasoned her actions were needed to stop further damage to an already fragile city. Talk in Greensboro today centers around its burgeoning downtown development and the addition of a Federal Express hub at the airport. It also includes discussions of needed job retraining programs for displaced factory workers, rumors of a rogue police element that forced the resignation of the City's police chief, and the educational gap between whites and blacks that continues to grow. The city council woman fearing the worst explained that the city needed no other "bad" press to tarnish its few economic development opportunities.

Nevertheless, the truth and reconciliation process moved forward. By June 2004, more than 18 months after plans had been publicly launched, seven truth commissioners were selected from a pool of 67 nominees, to volunteer their time over what would be the next two years. In May 2006, a 529 page document on the context, causes, and consequences of November 3rd was released by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, along with a lengthy set of recommendations for the community to implement.

This presentation reveals the communicative strategies used by the community to create interest and support for a truth and reconciliation process among the city's residents and a national audience. This is a story of a community group advocating for community change by operating with moral authority but without government support. It is a story of a new experiment in democracy to confront past and current problems in ways targeting not legal remedy, but restorative justice, healing and transformation. It is a story that holds interest among communities around the world who face similar histories wreaked by racial and other episodes of discontent. In fact, in June 2006, representatives from Northern Ireland, Peru, South Africa, Rosewood (Florida), Abbeville (South Carolina), Memphis (Tennessee), Sri Lanka, Atlanta (Georgia), New Mexico, and New Orleans, (Louisiana) among other locales, convened in Greensboro to compare processes and notes on reconciliation efforts underway in their cities and countries.

To address the many communicative issues that arise in a process of truth-seeking and reconciliation, I have organized by comments around a set of specific questions and concerns:

How does a community group, without the support, credibility, and legitimacy of government structures, effectively launch a program for social change?

As Abraham Lincoln espoused and others reaffirm, democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Yet, in recent times many of us have abdicated our responsibility to our government leaders by allowing them to set the agenda for our concerns. Corporate interests, strong lobbyists and seemingly “rigged” elections have not helped inspire trust among citizens. Our leaders are charged with representing us, but we are all too familiar with the impact of big money lobbyists and campaign contributors to our leaders’ judgment. Economic development, globalization, and the race for worldwide educational excellence could be defined as worthy efforts, but not when that focus trumps other legitimate concerns affecting the less influential members of our communities—the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the sick, to name a few.

Those advocating for social change efforts recognize that when the privileged members of society set and profit from our collective agenda, it is often without consideration of those without the same power and privilege to set policy and espouse their needs. Critical theorists point out the disparities in our society that contain deep institutional injustices, calling for democratic decision making processes as a condition of social justice (Young, 1990; Purpel, 1999; Giroux, 2001).

And so it was in Greensboro. As city leaders pursued avenues to enhance money making ventures, improve education in the public schools, and develop better race relations, the result was that the city *did* make advances. *Some* people made more money as the unemployment rate simultaneously rose. *Some* students in Greensboro fared very

well in public schools. In fact Greensboro's oldest high school was named two years running among the 100 best in the country for high achievement. At the same time, the drop out rate rocketed for poor and minority children. And while numerous race relations programs were initiated with some success, there was a recent collective call to end the "unbearable racism" that circulates in the community.

The truth and reconciliation effort, recognizing the divide in consciousness and in the city, engaged in a number of approaches to involve and then invite city leaders into its process. Bound to a commitment to democratic principles and a shared responsibility to pursue justice through truth telling, more and more community members joined the effort to influence others—especially those at the top of our city structure—to recognize the value in talking about the past. Retired Reverend Tom Droppers explained his motivation simply by saying, "Five people died at the hands of the Kan and Nazis. I wanted to reveal the injustice of that" (personal communication, July 17, 2006). No demands for public monies were made, but support and participation were urged in one-on-one meetings, in letters of appeals, and in collective action. Still, most city leaders past and present chose to say "uninvolved."

The grassroots organization found other ways to pursue its democratic dream of wide participation in a process to benefit the entire city. One strategy early on was especially satisfying. Following the advice provided by the South African TRC and the consulting group, International Center for Transitional Justice, the Greensboro initiative organized a committee drawn from 14 representative groups in the city to choose the final seven truth commissioners. The selection committee acted independently and in private. It was comprised of appointed members of the County's Democratic and Republican

parties, the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities, the City, Chancellors and Presidents of the area's six colleges, chairs of the student bodies of the same colleges, neighborhood representatives, labor, and others. Only three groups declined to appoint a representative to the panel that would eventually select the truth commissioners: the Greensboro Police Officers Association, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans/Daughters of the Confederacy. The hope was that all residents of Greensboro could feel represented by at least one of the groups and that the work of the selection committee could not be criticized as "biased," "one-sided" or "partisan" in any way.

The truth and reconciliation process in Greensboro was never the work of a small group however. Its legitimacy was affirmed by 5,000 people who signed petitions asking for City Council support of the process. The City Council declined in April 2005 so in a shattering 6-3 vote to *oppose* the process. This was not a vote to stay neutral, it was to *oppose the process*. The 6-3 vote reflected the racial composition of the council with the three black members expressing the dissenting view.

Still, the grassroots organization moved forward with education events intended to build awareness of the process within the city, annual commemorative weekends surrounding November 3rd, and mobilization of students, churches, and African American communities to participate in the truth-seeking process. More than \$500,000 in grant money was eventually collected from foundations, local and national, to augment the individual contributions made to support the truth commission's activities. The grassroots group pressed on, meeting bi-weekly or weekly, sometimes more throughout a three-year period. The TRC was established, an office was acquired, staff hired, and

publications produced. National and international recognition came by way of other truth commissions who shared their lessons, articles that appeared in *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications, and blessings by Bishop Desmond Tutu himself.

How does a search for “truth” lead to “justice” and in what ways do community members exhibit care for silenced voices on the one hand and community development on the other hand?

This has been a sticking point for our community. There are two familiar arguments. The truth will set you free is one. This perspective posits that the truth of what happened in 1979 was covered up; that the facts reveal police and government complicity with Klan/Nazi action. The other argument is that there are many truths, reflecting the myriad experiences of people who have different histories, ethnicities, and class identities. For instance, the TRC in its report made it clear that someone growing up black and poor would have a different impression of the police than someone who grew up in the same town as a white, middle-class or wealthy person. Each person would have experiences to support their views, so truth could not be absolute.

Still, the truth was trumpeted as a precondition for reconciliation. There was broad agreement among the truth commissioners that history has too often been unkind and even malicious to minority interests. A study of the Wilmington Race Riots of 1898 has recently revealed the depths of white supremacy in that North Carolina coastal town that wiped out any possibility for African American success in the region. The race riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1924 tell a similar story. That Greensboro in 1979 may have covered

up the truth in a quest to preserve its image was entirely conceivable and part of the focus of the truth commission's examination.

But in establishing a more nuanced truth than what circulated since November 3, 1979, the truth and reconciliation process had to walk a fine line of searching for accountability while also allowing all interested parties to tell their stories without fear of reprisal. This was not an easy task when you consider the public testimony of a Klansmen who advocated "killing niggers" as a matter of course in 1979 and who even today remains committed to upholding the ideas of his white supremacist ideals. As he shared his views and his story in front of the commissioners and an audience of 200, you could feel the tension in the room as those who wanted the commissioners to press more deeply were left feeling as if the commissioners were unwilling to engage fully in a reckoning of the actions of 1979. The commissioners' stance to active listening rather than public interrogation was a decision that was deemed successful by some, but dissatisfying to others.

What forms of discourse, in addition to the deliberative model, does the community allow into the public conversation? In what ways are the various forms of discourse encouraged or discouraged?

Storytelling or the sharing of narratives was on the key communication strategies pursued in this effort to "fill in the gaps" of previous court records and media reports. The much anticipated stories of the Communist Worker Party members and survivors recounting the blame they shouldered for the community disruption was heart wrenching. The Klan testimony, too, was riveting.

However, among the most powerful testimonies that emerged from the truth and reconciliation process were the personal narratives of the residents in Morningside Homes who were neither a party to the Communist Workers Party organizing efforts nor the Klan/Nazi disruption to it. These residents found themselves in the middle of an ideological warfare, pitting revolutionary rhetoric against racist violence and acknowledging police action was reserved to help white people, not black. In the aftermath of November 3, there was no counseling provided to Morningside Home residents, no meetings with the police to help them recover from the trauma. Instead, there were lock-downs, curfews, and armed patrols of the area. The victims were victimized all over again in the aftermath. The expressions by residents were powerful testimony to the inequities that reigned in Greensboro in 1979. Blacks and whites worked in the textile mills under horrific conditions, but blacks had the worst of the worst jobs. The connections made by these residents at the public hearing in the truth and reconciliation process to *current* conditions in the schools, on the streets, and in virtually every sector of life were palpable. Tammy Tutt, a Greensboro resident who grew up in public housing projects and was living in Morningside Homes when the shootings happened, offered her perspective at one of the truth commission's six full days of public hearings:

In 1979, racist people were able to come into a predominantly black community and launch an attack on people who were demonstrating in a peaceful way. And the community itself did not say a word. I can still see that happen today. I see crack houses, violent gun carriers, stores that sell drug paraphernalia, cigarettes sold to children, small grocery stores who sell forty ounces and no grocery or very

little grocery, and red lining in...other businesses. These are small and present attacks that are going on in communities today. And still the police are not doing anything. The city officials are still sitting by. And the community is not saying a word (Public Hearing, October 1, 2005).

Another group that effectively brought home the pain of November 3rd included the children of the November 3rd survivors—some of them born, some not, but all of them affected by what their parents endured. The children's sobs in public testimony brought audiences to a new, deeper level of understanding that November 3rd did not happen one day—it has lingered for decades within the hearts and minds of children, Morningside residents, Greensboro residents, and city leaders. Alison Duncan's parents were among the protestors on November 3rd. Alison inherited the emotional wounds her parents endured:

There were many people's lives that changed that day, changed to not trusting the system that's supposed to protect you, changed to fear of many things, but my life never changed...it started that way. As a child I was afraid to go to the south of Greensboro...in the back of my mind I thought, you know, people were gunned down in the streets. I didn't understand that the Nazi's and KKK weren't running around all the time. So in my mind of knowing that I could die for working for civil rights, I also started to wish it *would* happen, that it were that easy, that if I could just lay down and have things be different, I would do that. But instead, facing the unjust system and facing the people that have hatred toward you or people you care for-- it's a much harder task (Public Hearing, October 1, 2005).

Cesar Weston's mother was widowed on November 3rd, 1979. Cesar has grown up with a different father, but named for the one he never knew who died in 1979.

I don't know how to bear out the full truth of this matter, while at the same time maintaining the appropriate level of charity for all parties involved. I do know from 18 years of experience that this event left a scar on my mother that may never fully heal and that I now carry a piece of that scar with me for better or for worse (Public Hearing, October 1, 2005).

What other communicative programs in the city enable this project of social reform to progress?

The Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project early on was comprised of and aligned with many segments of the community. Through those connections, programs were established to invite white, black, and youth audiences into a variety of educational and activist activities. A special outreach was made toward the faith based communities to provide a spiritual foundation to the process. The Truth Commission's staff followed a similar outreach effort by crafting programs intended to tap into parts of the community that feared the process in addition to building on the success in other parts of the community where there was a demonstrated interest in the process.

In concrete terms, education about truth and reconciliation and its relevance to Greensboro was pursued in creative ways including:

- Library programs involving poetry workshops on the topic of reconciliation.
- Dialogue training—3 hour sessions to teach people how to have dialogue (not argument) about contentious issues.

- Community meetings in specific neighborhoods and in all-city formats, the largest being where 300 residents spent a full day discussing what they hoped would be included in the truth commission's final report.
- Marches—Spiritual walks and anniversary celebrations that gathered people together in prayer sometimes and in song other times to express a united response to the pursuit of truth and justice.
- Community Discussions—Twice weekly discussions for residents to receive the report summary and discuss with others issues they deemed important. These sessions, scheduled to last 1 hour routinely went 1-1/2 to 2 hours, cut short by the need to vacate the space for another meeting. 10-15 people gathered at 8 different sessions in the month following the report release.
- Report Receiver Meetings—More than 60 representatives of groups around the city, including faith-based organizations, schools, social service agencies, and neighborhood associations, agreed to receive the summary, have members in their groups read it, and meet to discuss the implications for the City of Greensboro. These groups have just started meeting and will likely be in the process of discussion through 2007.
- Educational activities included workshops for college faculty on how to integrate the work of the truth commission into classrooms, a two-year series of public lectures with guest speakers, and courses offered on the truth and reconciliation process at universities in the surrounding areas.

- July 8 meeting of International Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Greensboro where a two day meeting among representatives was followed by a public day of sharing lessons and celebrating the quest for truth.

What strategic moves are used to include multiple voices and/or exclude certain voices in this conversation?

The Truth Commission's process followed on the heels of what was initiated by the grassroots Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project to include as many voices as possible in the truth seeking process and attending reconciliation activities. The Truth Commission is proud of what they accomplished. In their final report, they said:

We have demonstrated this power [of moral suasion] in bringing to the table, against many dismissive predictions to the contrary, not only former communists, but former Klansmen and Nazis, residents of the Morningside neighborhood, police officers, judges, trial attorneys, city officials, journalists and citizens from all parts of the city. In the words of one attorney, we have demonstrated that his process can 'begin to melt the ice' within which many in this community have been frozen and unable to reach each other (GTRC Final Report, 2006a, p. 15).

The movement toward inclusion was assisted by door-to-door campaigns in public housing communities to collect statements from residents living in the area in 1979 as well as from well a well publicized process to send out statement takers to anyone interested in providing comment on the activities or aftermath of November 3rd.

Informational events were held at the city's public libraries, universities, and churches while other outreach efforts focused on individual meetings with the constituent groups

already named. Three public hearings lasting two days each drew hundreds to hear 54 speakers, including 60 journalists who covered the proceedings.

The daily newspaper provided much support for the process, particularly from the editorial pages. The weekly newspapers engaged in more in-depth article development that in all likelihood prompted the daily newspaper to devote more resources to covering the process.

Professors and students from most of the city's colleges and universities organized events to reach the community. A drama professor and students from several institutions staged several performances intended to educate the public about the truth and reconciliation process. An art student prepared many original pieces depicting the tragedy of November 3rd for display in a downtown coffee house. Local musicians wrote original music to shed light on the surrounding events. Students organized other students, designed logos and web sites, and prepared written material to encourage community dialogue.

The move toward including voices has been strong, but the force to exclude voices has also made a statement in the community. The mayor of Greensboro in 1979 is an active and vital leader today yet he refuses to engage in the process of truth and reconciliation. He did not provide a statement to the Truth Commission, nor did he participate in any of its events. The mayor of Greensboro today spoke out vehemently against the process, repeatedly forecasting that it would amount to little more than "a witch hunt." He continues to question the credibility of the final report yet has recently conceded that he was wrong in thinking the process would not open doors to

reconciliation. He urged the City Council recently to continue meeting to discuss the final report.

The letters to the editor suggest that the community is split in its feeling about whether talk in 2006 is valuable to reconciliation in the community. Some argue that the Truth Commission's final report highlights some of Greensboro's long-held ills about which continuing conversation is necessary. Others suggest that the Truth Commission and its supporters exaggerate the extent of any problems in Greensboro and that whatever challenges confront us should be taken up with current issues, not past events.

Dissent and cries of exclusion occurred within the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project as well. Inevitable conflicts among the activists led some to feel discounted. Within an overall climate of inclusion, still a sense of exclusion emerged.

Is discovering the "truth" necessary for this community's reconciliation? Can dialogue without the "truth" bring about the desired healing of economic and racial tensions?

City Councilwoman Yvonne Johnson, an African American leader who has been involved in mediation for 23 years explains that truth emerges from the stories people hold in their hearts:

When people tell their story it is seldom what you think it is, and seldom what you read in court documents. There is something that happens in the process of bearing your soul (personal communication, July 18, 2006).

Another member of the council conceded that reconciliation is a matter of the heart that comes from the sharing of stories, but wondered how reconciliation can happen at a community level.

Angela Lawrence, one of the Truth Commissioners agreed that reconciliation is easier to do with smaller numbers of people, but that reconciliation must necessarily follow a four-step process: first, there is the need to acknowledge a wrong was done; then, people must repent or apologize; the third step is to ask for forgiveness, and the fourth step is to engage in the activities of reconciliation.

The Truth Commission's final report recognized that often truth circulates, but is not acknowledged. For instance, they pointed to the role of race in Greensboro as an always present "social variable that structures power relations in the United States and particularly in the South" (GTCRP Final Report, 2006a, p. 31). To illuminate the circulating truths and to expose others hidden under myths of time, the Truth Commission depended upon a standard of evidence that would judge something as "more likely than not" to be true as fact.

In the end, the most compelling truth that emerged from the final report was that the role of the police was the "single most important element that contributed to the violent outcome of the confrontation" (GCRP Executive Summary, 2006b, p. 7). This fact has been the major talking point in media reports, city council discussions, and community talks to date. The commissioners, however, also recognized that the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi members had malicious intent and that the Communist Workers Party members bore some responsibility as well for their strident rhetoric and naïve understanding of the potential danger involved in goading the Klan to show up that day.

Reconciliation as the healing of economic and racial tensions is a goal yet to be realized, but it is too early to assess the success of the commission's Final Report this way. The next year is being designed to encourage community conversation of the type that targets exactly this kind of reconciliation.

What relationship exists between forgiveness and reconciliation?

In this examination of a community's quest for truth and reconciliation, we met differing views on the role of forgiveness. From a South African resident, we heard that forgiveness is a necessary but insufficient requirement for reconciliation. From a Greensboro Truth Commissioner, we understood forgiveness as the pathway to reconciliation. Community members expressed their own ideas as well, leading at one point to a protracted conflict in an on-line exchange among truth and reconciliation process supporters.

Reconciliation has a variety of meanings. Such flexibility of meaning may be what ultimately is necessary for the accomplishment of community healing (Jovanovic & DeGooyer). Uncovering the truth as a condition for reconciliation is clearly a requisite for at least the survivors of November 3rd, but also for other like-minded folks who have been scorned in the past by systems of injustice. Forgiveness may be necessary for other segments of the community as a means by which the anger surrounding November 3rd can be released. Another measure of reconciliation will be in tangible acts to correct past community harms, such as the adoption of a Citizen's Review Board for police action and an increase in the minimum wage or the adoption of a living wage.

Conclusion

Will this effort by concerned citizens succeed in bringing together a community that has a history of segregating itself along ideological, class, and racial lines? The answer remains to be seen. Most definitively, however, is that this project provides a beacon of hope for heralding the value and promise of the power of communication to heal. Some early indicators that the process is working are:

- A Quaker group comprised of nearly all white members is organizing to meet with an African American church to discuss the report and build relationships along the way.
- Students from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro (20% black) will team with the historically black colleges in the area, Bennett College and North Carolina A & T University, to discuss the truth commission's report. I
- One Episcopalian church will be joining with another to host discussions surrounding truth and reconciliation.
- The local daily newspaper has agreed to implement the recommendation made in the Truth Commission's report to convene a citizen group as "advisors" to the news room on news process, content, quality and ethics.
- A key figure in the shootings on November 3, 1979, an American Nazi Party member who wore a lapel pin featuring five skulls to the trials, met with two of the survivors to express his regret and ask for forgiveness.
- Survivors have apologized for the inflammatory rhetoric they used to advance their goals for social justice in 1979.

- The City Council has met to discuss the executive summary of the report and will follow-up with more discussions as well as recommend plans for the Human Relations Commission to do even more.
- A recommendation that the city and county pay a living wage to employees, contractors, and sub-contractors is the focus of a grassroots effort to put forth a ballot initiative by November 2007.
- A city-sponsored race relations program that was scrapped in recent budget cuts is being picked up by local foundations, affirming the Truth Commission's recommendation that cross-cultural trust must be built using programs like the Mosaic Project.
- College students and community members are preparing a curriculum to teach public elementary and secondary school students about November 3, 1979.

The initial work of reconciliation has been good, with its future success still to be measured. Just as communication is never complete, nor is the betterment or reconciliation of a community. Instead, these are ongoing accomplishments, always subject to revision and improvement.

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¹ Four of the five people killed that day were union organizers working with textile mill laborers at a time when North Carolina ranked 45th in per capita income among the states. The illiteracy rate was "extremely high" and the wages for manufacturing jobs were among the lowest in the country.

² According to a 2001 benchmark survey on social capital, Greensboro ranked 25th of 40 communities in social trust, 21st in inter-racial trust, and 34th in informal social interaction with neighbors, co-workers and friends. In political activities that include protests and grassroots efforts, the area ranked 36th.

³ The Greensboro initiative, though patterned after the South African model, differs from it significantly in that there is no subpoena power for the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission nor is the effort sanctioned by the government.

⁴ These "first principles" of our judicial, law enforcement and community institutions were those recognized by Commissioner Muktha Jost as being "at least compromised, if not grossly violated" in 1979 (Final Report, 2006, pp. 220-221).