profile
Lucinda Randolph Benjamin

RESOURCE EDUCATOR, WORKFORCE & 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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Cornell University Cooperative Extension (CUCE-NYC) has been in NYC since the late sixties, seventies. Most of the NYC staff were hired to work in the neighborhoods that they lived in. There was a link between Cornell programs and the neighborhoods they served. That was one of the things that drew me to Cornell, the ability to serve my community.

I've been in this position for three or four years. I've been with Cornell since 1988. I was the volunteer administrator from '93 to '97 and coordinator of 4-H youth development between '88 and '92. I was recruited from Community of Caring/Project Bridge, an intergenerational program, where I developed programs that bridged the gap between youth, grandparents and adults at Catholic Charities. Two CUCE-NYC Nutrition & Health staffers who were familiar with my work recruited me for the position of 4-H program assistant. One of the reasons I took the job is because the work I was doing at Catholic Charities wasn't in the neighborhoods that I wanted to work in. Cornell targeted neighborhoods such as Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville and Harlem where I wanted to work. That was a big pull.

In 1993, cooperative extension went through a major overhaul. We were going through our plan of work process. Every four or five years, the scope of work changes for Cornell. What that means is the organization rethinks its programs. Is CUCE-NYC meeting the needs of its clients? We had roundtable discussions with clergy, legislators, agencies that we've worked with for years, and volunteers in every borough except for Staten Island. We had a volunteer roundtable where we had volunteers come in and just hash out issues. Youth were also involved. We couldn't get as many youth as we wanted involved, because when the adults were available, the kids were in school. But we did have a 4-H Youth Council, and we were able to run ideas and get their input. CUCE-NYC came up with a listing of different needs for the neighborhoods, and programs were designed from that. At that particular time, we became issue area focused. CUCE-NYC programs shifted to parallel the needs of the neighborhoods it serviced.

For example, we still had Nutrition and Health, but it changed. Instead of just focusing on basic food, we were looking at food safety issues, jobs in nutritional and health careers and management. There was a big push in workforce development. Everywhere we went, people wanted to know about jobs. Are you creating jobs? Are you training people for jobs? Etc. So that's how the workforce development area was formed. Community development was the same thing, focusing on jobs and developing new skills. We were doing things around utility management, how to save money, how to use what you have better, that sort of thing. With environmental education, it was how to make your neighborhood more hospitable and humane. They also had

a youth development component looking at how to get youth to be stewards of communities and neighborhoods.

It wasn't a matter of us coming in with a list of "This is what we want to do, what do you think?" This was more of a call to ask, "What are the needs in your neighborhood?" Then we were able to go back and say "All right, we are really going to address issues of NYC neighborhoods." We readjusted our staffing and our programs to accommodate those issues. In other counties, it was more of a name change, but we went through a real critical overhaul. Many community issues were identified, but CUCE-NYC staff was limited. We needed more volunteers; we needed more manpower. So there was a need internally for somebody to coordinate that. There wasn't a centralized volunteer system. That became my job. It was a need that became a job. We all had to reapply for positions, and that was one of the areas I applied for. Since I had been working with 4-H and working with volunteers here and in my previous position, I was right for the task.

When CUCE-NYC reorganized, it became a very stressful place. Many staffers had been in extension for a number of years and were grounded in their positions. Now it was as if the rug had been pulled from under them, and they were told, "You're not going to lose your job, but you are going to have to apply for something different." They had to start all over again. For my particular position, volunteer administrator, I knew that was what I wanted, but unexpectedly 4-H came along with me as well. So whereas before, there had been a program leader, an administrative assistant, plus three to four program assistants to support that one program, now it was just me. I was responsible for developing a centralized volunteer system for the whole of CUCE-NYC plus run the 4-H Youth Development Program, and all I had was myself and an administrative assistant. That's it. I was essentially running two programs, one that originally took five people to run it and one that was brand new. That was not a happy time. It was stressful because you had to prove yourself. Everyone was on new ground. There was no predecessor for the volunteer administrator position. It was all new. I had to develop a brand new program and continue 4-H. That was a heavy load.

I learned the hard way that Lucinda has to take care of Lucinda. But it took me a number of years to get there.

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I got very sick. I learned to create my time, to take my vacations, to do what I have to do. I don't feel guilty about it anymore. At one time, I did feel guilty, because if you're not here, something isn't happening.

One challenge for me was learning to work as part of a team. For a long time, out of necessity, I operated as an independent unit. There was only me, the volunteers and the administrative person. Staff changed often, so I learned to depend on myself for most things. Before I could hand off an assignment or share a project, I had to be able to trust that my colleagues would share a similar commitment to program excellence and be around long enough to make an impact. Sometimes, I wound up spending a lot of time training and sharing, and then the colleague was gone. I learned to keep my most important projects close. Eventually, keeping everything on your plate like that makes you sick. Continuity, experience and the need for help allowed me to be a little more trusting and to share my workload with others. We all began to work as a team.

We had to work cooperatively, but it was hard. Some people were split up, 80 percent time there, 20 percent time there. It became very difficult for staff to work together because things were so complex. And since we all felt that we had to prove ourselves, things didn't always lend themselves toward collaboration. We work more collaboratively now. This office (at 34th street) is the result of a change in staffing and the consolidation of five offices into one. Many staff were meeting and working with each other for the first time. It has taken time. There were growing pains, but that's how organizations and teams develop.

There's a thing I say when I'm teaching team development. It's called "forming, storming, norming, reforming and performing." Teams form around issues or problems. Then they go through a storm period, and they have to storm. Storming helps teams/staff find out the personalities of their teammates. What they don't agree on, they act out. It's the growing pains of team development. But afterwards, you start the "norming" process. And then teams say "Let's agree, and agree to disagree. Let's learn what strategies we can work on." Once CUCE-NYC got to that period, it became a little easier, because it wasn't about turf issues. It was about "If we're going to survive and float, we need to stroke this boat together." Then we went through a period of reforming. Some of us changed position. There was a mass staff exodus from CUCE-NYC. But by that point, the people who had resolved to stay and

to make it work did. Those are the folks who have history with Cornell and were able to train the next group to come in without all the stress of before. We had bonded and learned to trust through those stages. Now we're performing!

Living in the communities where we work has given staff and CUCE-NYC validity in the communities we serve. It definitely gives you commitment. You go beyond just your job title, or what your job description says. We're bound to the community because we also want to see a change in the neighborhoods we've been in. People know us. We have name identification and credibility. The people trust us. It takes a long time to develop that trust. You have to keep showing up, keep going back, and deliver what you say you're going to deliver. You have to deliver. When you're working with people — and this is the key — you can't come in heavy-handed as if "We're Cornell; we're the end-all-be-all." Because when you look at our mission statement, or the mission of Cornell, it's take the learning from campus, all the research, and then apply it to the community. But CUCE-NYC can't come off that way because when you look at all the other credible universities and colleges here in New York City — CUNY, Columbia, NYU, etc. — people ask, "why Cornell?" Cornell has to come in more as a community friend. We're helping to enhance your knowledge and skills and advance you to another level. We're not coming in saying, "This is how you should do it." We're saying, "These are the things you seem to be doing right. Let's build on that." That's a different spin.

CUCE-NYC puts knowledge to work. We're adaptable, flexible, and we meet the needs of communities. Extension work is not set in stone. At least, New York City's extension work is not set in stone. We are responsive to the needs of our clientele. We come in with a package, but the package changes to meet the needs of the clientele. And the package is always changing.

The 4-H College Interview Program (CIP) started through a conversation with teenagers. Increasingly, the teens I worked with asked, "Ms. Lucinda, how do you get into college? We're not getting any help from guidance counselors." I began questioning the students about college, and they were saying, "We didn't even think about Cornell." The students somehow didn't equate 4-H with Cornell, the university. So actually the program was need-based from youth.

Orange County 4-H Youth Development had piloted a college interview program, and they shared some of their materials with Jackie Davis-Manigaulte, the original NYC 4-H program leader. So we tried it. After the reorganization, I continued the program, and it has taken on a life of its own. The College Interview Program is a series of workshops developed to help youth juniors and seniors navigate the college admissions process. Students participate in sessions twice per year to learn about college admissions, essays, financial aid, careers exploration, etc. The program culminates in the mock college interview. One-on-one interviews are scheduled so that students can receive final feedback on their admissions package (essay, interview skills, applications, etc.). In the spring, we offer a program entitled "College 101," held at Teachers' College, Columbia University. Students learn the soft skills of college survival: dealing with roommates, money management, financial aid, living on your own, etc. Students get the information that we all wish we had been given when we were going through the college admissions process.

Over the years, I have partnered with many colleges and agencies to develop the program. We network with colleges like CUNY, SUNY, and private colleges. Teachers' College, Columbia University co-sponsors the spring program. The original intent of the program was to offer additional assistance to 4-H youth who were thinking about college. The program is now offered to high school students citywide. The focus is not "how to get into Cornell," but rather "let's explore choices and options for your future."

Staffing has been a challenge. I need additional resources. One of the things I've always wanted to do is to have scholarships available from this office for students who are successful, who have gone through every single bit of it and have successfully gone through the interview itself. There should be some type of incentive. Maybe we could offer bus trips to Cornell or to other colleges. I'd like to expand additional resources because as you do this and you become more comfortable with the students, they come back and say, "Wow, Ms. Lucinda, this really worked." They also tell you, "You know what else would be good, if you had this..." So I've got a list of if-you-had-this, but definitely, we need additional resources.

In addition, the College Interview Program needs more manpower. As the program grows, you need more people to actually coordinate everything. I could use help with answering email requests from students and other follow-up services. It would also be great to have college students to take students under their wing and help them for that first year because then another window is opened up. The students may be emailing me, saying, "I'm having trouble with this." I have to say, "Well, my job was to get to you to college; now, once you're in there, you've got to find who is your resource, your support." There are other opportunities out there, and there are other struggles that we're dealing with here. And our staff hasn't grown. So you want to continue, but

there's a point where you have to stop because you physically can't do it.

As the students go through, there are evaluations that they complete after each workshop. After the whole program is over, we usually have talks with the students who have gone through the final interview. There's a discussion about what was the impact, what was the thing that really got you through, what are you going to take away? There's a discussion with the volunteers who participated in the program, and they give us their feedback: how to enhance it and how they would have liked us to approach them. We pull from all of those.

One of the things that's nice is that students who have gone to career expos or college expos have told us that the difference with us is that you get more of a one-to-one conversation here over a period of time versus going to a big expo and just asking questions. So we really make an impact that way.

This last time, we had one of the deans from the New School who served as an evaluator. He was impressed with what we were doing because he would like to see it done more often. He suggested that we have the prep for the interview taken out of an office space and done at an actual college so the kids get more of a sense of what a college is like. We already do the interview at a college, but the workshops are all done here, which is more of an office atmosphere. He also suggested that we give them more tours of colleges so they get a mindset that they need to act a little more adult.

For some students, they come in with that attitude already. For others, it's more than just a fine tuning of their writing. It's more how do you self-market yourself from the time you walk in the door. That self-marketing piece is something we've been told we need to hone up a little more. When you have to market yourself, we're looking at or-

ganization and what you do. A lot of kids have problems with their self-esteem so maybe on paper they look good, but they don't necessarily come across that way at the interview.

One of the biggest things that has come out this last time around has been writing. The writing is really getting worse with some of the students; their writing skills are poor, grammatical errors, that sort of thing. I've had suggestions from a number of people that we really need to have a course on basic writing. We do essay writing, but essay writing is more about how do you get your thoughts across, how do you come

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up with a topic that you want to work on. What they're talking about, the volunteers and the evaluators, is that we need courses on grammar: how do you write, spelling, just basic things that seem to get in the way. As the project goes on, we're developing.

Most of the kids are going on to college. For some of the students, they get what they need and they're gone, but for the ones who actually finish, who go through the interviews and are not just coming for the financial aid information, those are the students we wind up tracking the most. That's where we keep most of our energies. We have an intern now who is following up with the students to find out where all the students are so we can say that 100 percent of the students who have

gone through the total program are in college. Now we want to go back and see the students who might have gotten one session here or there. We want to know where they are.

I want the kids to know that one, you have options because a lot of the schools where they are, or even parents, tell them, "You only have this or that." So one is to know you have options. Two, I want them to dream big. Because the other thing that comes along with narrowed options is "Oh, don't try for such and such a school because you're not going to make it." So options, and dream big. Three, apply yourself. Applying yourself means do what you have to, but know that you have a network. Develop a network, talk to people, because everyone around you knows at least five other people who can serve as a resource to you. And do your research.

I like linking people to each other. I like the one-on-one. During the last session, we always have a panel discussion on alternatives to college or careers. This time, we had a young lady who was into art. She thought she wanted to go into photography, but her teacher who was a photography major really discouraged her and told her there was no money in it. But we had someone here who was in advertising and was working for *Forbes* magazine. She was here as a lecturer. She was sharing how, when she was in college, her photography was able to get her layout jobs and print issues. And now, with all the work on the web, photographers are really in demand because people who are advertising on the web are looking for photographers to bring their visuals to life. So there's a whole new realm. She also talked about opportunities for jobs while you're in col-

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lege, when you're developing your portfolio, your internships and that sort of thing. She opened up a wealth of opportunities right here in New York City. People are hiring high school and college students. This young woman went from, "I'm not even going to think about photography, I'm just going to try something else" to, by the end of that session, having a contact, a name, a whole wealth of things. It's the linkages. You have options, but you never know them if you never go out and explore and you don't apply. And you've got to dream.

For a lot of students in New York City, even around the world, dreams are diminished. You are discouraged from dreaming. It's like, "Get your head out of the clouds." Kids say, "I want to be a fireman, president" and adults tell you, "Forget about that. Get something else. Do something practical." That's the way folks are raised because no one told them to dream. As a family continues on and on, the dreams get smaller and smaller. The expectations get lower and lower. I have families that are happy if their kids just make it home from school alive. When you're dealing with basics like that, dreams are not that big and if they are dreaming, they're dreaming what I call ghetto dreams — I'm gonna be a rapstar — but they don't break out of that shell. So that's my joy: going beyond the paradigm they set up for themselves, learning that there is stuff out beyond the 'hood that is attainable.

I'm open and available to parents. For the club program, parents are volunteers; they're right there in the neighborhood. So when I go out to the meetings and I'm talking to them, that's when I come in contact with parents. If there's a program that's housed right here, I may come in more direct contact with parents because I have kids calling home. Parents want to know where their kids are. It depends on the program. I have good relationships with parents. Some volunteer, and they like the programs that we do. Sometimes parents use the program as something over their children's head. So if the child really loves the program, but they're messing up at home, they'll pull that kid from this even though this is the thing that is enhancing them. They take it away as a punishment. So you have to work with parents to find other ways for them to work around discipline issues.

As far as growth and expansion for CIP, there are some things I'd like to do. We are going to start reaching out to younger people. Eventually I'd like to go as far as middle school and bridge from middle school. What do you need to be looking at in high school and college? What do you need to be doing in high school to prepare for college or a career? That is the direction I would like to see. As far as what would happen on the other end, once they got to college: I would envision having linkages or partnerships with colleges where I could have college students who are cyber-mentors or cyber-buddies through email who could link up with students in my program. The older students could take them under their wing and help them in their first year. Then, hopefully, that whole group of students who have gone through CIP would sign on to be cyber-buddies for a new group. That would be their payoff, their service for the work that's been done for them. I would also like to see specific funding channeled to this program.

For awhile, we've been surviving off standard funds that have come in for a number of years. We've been guaranteed that, but things are becoming a bit competitive now so we have to go out and find more funding. Just for viability of programming, you need to know people, you need to network. Funds and grants that are coming down the pike are looking for programs that involve partnerships. It's the collaborative units that are getting funded. Funders want to reduce duplication of services and maximize quality. If I'm doing this, and you're doing something different, and we complement each other, we're in a better position to get funding because there's a partnership there. There's more than one agency getting all of the money. It means more services can be provided to more people, more cohesively. So it's important for how we do business, how we keep business going and how we service our communities.

You need people skills. You have to be a people person. You have to have some tenacity about you. The people who have been most successful are people who don't give up. If you keep playing the game, you eventually get through. If you are a person who needs to see quick results, this is not the place for you. You have to have a love for people. You have to be committed to what you do.

Initially they see me as the 4-H lady or the Cornell lady. By the end, they see me as Lucinda, Sister Lucinda, whatever they want to see me as. I think all extension people go through that. It depends on who you are and who you are talking to. Some people wonder if they are buying into you or buying into Cornell. It depends. I think initially I go out and I represent Cornell, but when you look at the time you put in, eventually your spirit pours out and then they buy into you. That's when the trust comes in. We are a representative of extension, and the trust that the individual builds also brings back a trust in Cornell because then they know that the people that Cornell sends out are reputable, knowledgeable. There's a time when I put on my Cornell hat and I speak my Cornellese. In that official capacity, there's a whole other language that comes out. But then depending on the neighborhoods that you're in, you don't want to talk that

Cornellese because that can put people off. Sometimes you have to become real to them and relate on their level, and that's when they relate to Lucinda. You listen, and then you know how to switch. It's a feeling, an intuition, a discernment. That's the key. You listen.

Every community that I go into has the same situation although some communities are a little more affluent than others. Some think of themselves more as volunteers than as clientele with needs. But when you get to it, they still have needs. It is a plus when you can identify with people, but as you work with extension you come to realize that identity is beyond socio-economics and color. We're people. I think my skill is that I'm open, I listen. I keep getting back to that. You have to listen to people and hear how they identify themselves, how they see themselves. And then you package your program around that because everyone doesn't perceive things the same way, and so you market your program accordingly.

For example, if I am marketing the CIP to Bronx High School of Science, a specialized high school, the name Cornell University goes a long way. So I'll beef up the Cornell name because people identify it as Ivy League, and there's a prestige that goes along with that. If I'm looking at another high school, another inner-city area, I may not boost the Cornell name. But I'll talk about essay writing skills. I may boost the career alternatives to college aspect because the guidance counselor may perceive that their students are not going to get into college. Or I may talk about essay writing skills that will prepare you for your SAT or for the Regents English test. So I may market it differently to different students. But once they get to the class, they all get the same information. There's a different spin on the outreach because the students at Bronx High School of Science are definitely looking at the name

and the legitimacy of the program. They're thinking, "Can this get me in the door?" A lot of those students ask me, "Can I write you down as a reference?" They're definitely on another level. My other students are looking at, "Wow, I really need some help with my writing. I really need to know how to talk to people, how to interview and sell myself a little better." When both groups get to CUCE-NYC, I have found out that both groups have strengths and

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weaknesses. Bronx High School of Science students often have the book knowledge, but lack the interview skills. Some of them haven't had any type of service experience. My students from the other schools have had a wealth of other experiences, but their grades are bad, and they don't know that they can beef up their presentation by saying how well-rounded a student they are. A place like Cornell wants a well-rounded student. They want to know that there's more to you than the books, that there's a person who can survive, who can offer something to the school beyond their academics. And they're like, "Oh, I didn't think of it like that." Then the students who didn't think

they had a chance are like, "Yeah, I have a little more to me." So I market the programs differently, but when the students come, they realize that they can learn from each other.

Sometimes you can come to a session or program with the most explicit lesson, and you get there and some major incident has happened. Maybe the school is in an uproar. I had a situation like that, someone was shot outside of the school I was working in. The students and teachers were dealing with something totally different than what I was coming to do. I had to be flexible enough to realize what was most needed from me at that moment. Is it needed for me to come out and teach the Cornell lesson to the letter? Or can I incorporate some of what they're going through? Because my audience may need to deal with their emotions or just let go of some steam. My audience isn't able to get what I'm teaching because they're dealing with other baggage. So I may have to just step aside and let them vent a bit and then get to my subject, or just deal with what they're going through and use that as the focus of my subject matter.

I believe there is always something positive. If you get a group mad, but they become organized, you've done your job. They've come together. I try not to give up. There are some places where I have found that people weren't ready. During my earlier years at Cornell, people would call and say, "I'm interested in 4-H and I want to start a club." So I went out and talked to them. Then you get to the point where people have to commit, where they have to say, "We're willing to be volunteers for this." Some groups will say, "No, I thought

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you were going to run it." And I say, "No, this is volunteer-based. That means I come out. I train you, but you have the responsibility to run the weekly meetings with your kids. I come out to assist as you need me. But as time goes on, it's your group. You plan, I plan with you." But when the time came for them to run the meeting, they're not running the meeting. You call up, and they're not following through. Sometimes, there are personal challenges that adults go through that just prevent them from doing things, or they realize they've bitten off more than they can chew. In that situation, I just stop and send a letter which says, "It seems that at this time you're not able to do this, but that's okay. These are other options for you and your kids." Their kids could join another club that is operating someplace else, or I refer them back to their local school or community board. But they have tried something, and there are other options. Some people would say that's a failure because I didn't start a group. I look at it as they've gotten information, and they're learning a little more about themselves, and they're trained. I also might have found

a linkage through that group for a referral for somewhere else. There might be someone in that group who is willing to assist another club or willing to teach something to another group for one or two sessions. And maybe those same people will call me a year or two later. "I was thinking about you, Ms. Lucinda. Now we're living at such and such project, and you know, we have a community center, and we could sure use that 4-H program." So even though it looks at that moment that it may be dead, it usually resurfaces and something comes out of it.

I'm an excellent motivator. People seem to do positive things when I'm with them. I had an intern who came in and thought, "I'm just going to a local school." I raise the bar of expectation for what they're capable of. I'm available for them to talk about things beyond the workplace. I think that's a little different. Some people just stick to the protocol: I'm your supervisor and that's it. But for me, I'm a little more flexible on that. By the time we finished the internship, the student now knew that she wanted to go beyond. She's in Hunter College right now doing work

on sociology and is going on to other internships. She's come back several times to talk to me, to tell me "You really helped me. You let me know I could do more than what I was just doing." I listen, but I also highlight the things that you have done well and then show you where you can do that and move it to something else. I'm very into showing you options. I'm helping you to discover. And I'm a person you can trust to share your dream with. I won't laugh at your dream. A lot of communities are like that too. They have dreams and hopes, but they shoot themselves in the foot even before they get started by telling themselves, "No, I can not." No! Don't tell yourself that. Try it, do it, do something. I think the saying goes, "If you shoot for the moon and fail, at least you'll fall among the stars. But if you never shoot for it, you never reach anything."

I'm like Jessie: "Keep hope alive." I keep hope alive, that's it. I want folks to dream, and I'm trying to tell them, "Baby, you can do this! Don't let it die. Keep hope alive. With God, all things are possible!"