

**April 2011 issue of The Community Psychologist**

**Book Review: The Power of Collaborative Solutions by Tom Wolff**

**A Refreshing Vision of what Community Psychology and Collaboration can do for the World**

*Written by Brad Olson, National-Louis University*

It is common for community psychologists to run into a student, parent/grandparent, member of a non-for-profit, and try to give a simple and yet meaningful explanation of "community psychology." Tom Wolff's book, *The Power of Collaborative Solutions: Six Principles and Effective Tools for Building Healthy Communities*, provides a good example of community psychology at work. Since reading it, I have found myself recommending it to others on more than one occasion. It is a nice modern exemplar, for anyone, of what our field can do.

The book represents our field clearly to those new to it, but it equally speaks to (and can enlighten) those of us who have been working on these community challenges for some time. All of my very favorite books can reach out to anyone. They are both accessibly written and contain a bounty of practical ideas. *The Power of Collaborative Solutions* does this.

The focus is, as the title suggests, on the nature and value of "collaboration." We all know that community psychologists, social workers, legislators, etc. have been well aware of the value of collaboration, at least in theory. Though *The Power of Collaborative Solutions* does tell us how to take it further. It tells us how to practice collaboration regularly, and how to use it more extensively, throughout all of our interactions in life, in our communities, and in all the larger systems within which we work. The book is filled with tips, theoretical orientations, and practical tools. One regularly encounters sections of the text and says, "Yes, I'll have to try that in my next dialogue with X organization. That could be useful." In fact an associate and I

recently used one of the online tools at a museum in here in Chicago. We adapted it slightly, partly to save time, but also for our specific purpose. It worked perfectly, the participants were engaged, and they thought the exercise was very useful. What I realized on reflection is that the only tweak I would make the next time would be to drop the adaptations and go back to the original. They are obviously well thought out and thoroughly tested in the field.

*The Power of Collaborative Solutions*, though, is far beyond an ordinary how-to manual. It takes us from issues of individual psychology to those of families, and is particularly dedicated to making communities more effective. The book is also intent on helping us change ourselves. Even more so, the book is intent on helping us to change the whole world, such as improving collaboration among nations. Not a modest goal. But as is true of the principles of community psychology, the book is as likely to have a powerful impact in the area of self-help as it is in improving international relations.

Tom Wolff, the author, is clearly a true believer in collaboration. There is tone of evident sense of authenticity and efficacy in the book; there is a certainty infused throughout every section of it. That true belief in collaboration is a significant part of the answer to the most serious problems we face, and that sense of efficacy is infectious enough to make the reader believe it, too.

Yet the hope and optimism in the book is nicely balanced with a very critical orientation to our current social systems and approaches. It is filled with the warnings that we need, ones that we cannot hear too many times. We need to be reminded of the dangers of institutionalization, our persistent human tendencies toward victim blaming, and many other traps and biases within the helping professions. But there is hope.

The author's personal/professional narratives add to the spirit of the book. There are very good community stories in every chapter. Sometimes they came and went so quickly, one wished for a little more on the evolution of the organization's challenges and solutions over time. But the narratives are illustrative of what good community psychology should do. There is also no holding back on instances where certain decisions failed miserably and where lessons were subsequently learned. The book is definitely after the truth, wherever that truth might be found.

Students will particularly enjoy this text. It can be a nice formal or informal supplement to many courses. Students interested in consulting, coalition building, and community development will find it invaluable. The must-read chapter for students (probably for all of us) is on collaborative community work as "spirituality." The attention to "spirituality" is used beyond any traditional connotations. Whether one is purely humanist or deeply religious, *spirituality*, the book argues, is what is too often missing in our community work. The chapter guides us towards bringing a greater life-oriented orientation to the work we do in communities.

Members of community organizations, whether trying to improve their internal functions or build partnerships, would learn much. In particular, *The Power of Collaborative Solutions* would help guide them in evaluating their own organizations and their organizational relationships. The assessment and other tools are perfectly aimed for helping them work toward change without the need of outside professionals.

I also love lists, and *The Power of Collaborative Solutions* has no shortage. The succinct presentation of ideas is much of what makes the book so accessible; and the ideas are powerful, integrated, original and always on target. So when I encounter people who inquire about the topic of "community psychology", what it is, what it does, why it exists, I have lately been referring them to *The Power of Collaborative Solutions*. It has some of the best practical and

grounded wisdom that shows off what community psychology can achieve. It presents many classic ideas, but many original ones as well. Whether it is for others or for yourself, you can get a copy at [www.tomwolff.com](http://www.tomwolff.com).