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THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE OZ

Oz expert Dina Massachi follows the literary path paved by L. Frank Baum toward deeper understanding of his themes and stories



Scan to watch a video of the Lakeview Neighborhood Alliance Data Walk.

LAKEVIEW
NEIGHBORHOOD
ALLIANCE
"serving a diverse community with strong families"

DATA DRIVEN

UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute is empowering communities to push for inclusive change

PHOTOS BY KAT LAWRENCE

Municipal organizations, area nonprofits and neighborhood advocates rely on the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute's Regional Data Trust and the Quality of Life Explorer to make informed decisions and create positive change. Here's how the Urban Institute is working with community advocates to ensure that data is not just numbers but also stories that inspire meaningful action.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER

Like many Charlotte-neighborhood community members, Jamall Kinard often asks the question: "What's going on in my neighborhood?" Kinard is the executive director of the Lakeview Neighborhood Alliance and his interest in learning more about his community is rooted in helping lift the historic neighborhood up from concentrated poverty.

He recently joined the board of directors at the Charlotte Regional Data Trust, a community data repository operated and maintained by UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute and governed by a community and University board of directors, which oversees a regional integrated data system. With on-demand neighborhood information such as education, employment, income, home ownership, health care and transportation access, the ability to create actionable neighborhood snapshots is precisely the type of project the Urban Institute is chartered to support. The board also advises on the broader work of the Charlotte Urban Institute, including the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Quality of Life Explorer, a partnership comprising the Institute, the city of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

“Lakeview is an Opportunity neighborhood,” said Kinard, referencing the city-wide economic mobility initiative focused on decreasing intergenerational poverty and advancing systemic and structural change. There are often negative stereotypes around neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and biases around those neighborhoods of why they’re poor. We need to have the historical context of how we got here. Access to and understanding of community data is important to developing our neighborhood’s plans and goals.”

Charlotte’s municipal and nonprofit agencies frequently rely on community data to inform their decision making around policy and program development and resource allocation. They look to the Regional Data Trust and the Quality of Life Explorer as reliable sources of neighborhood information.

A PATH TO USEFUL DATA

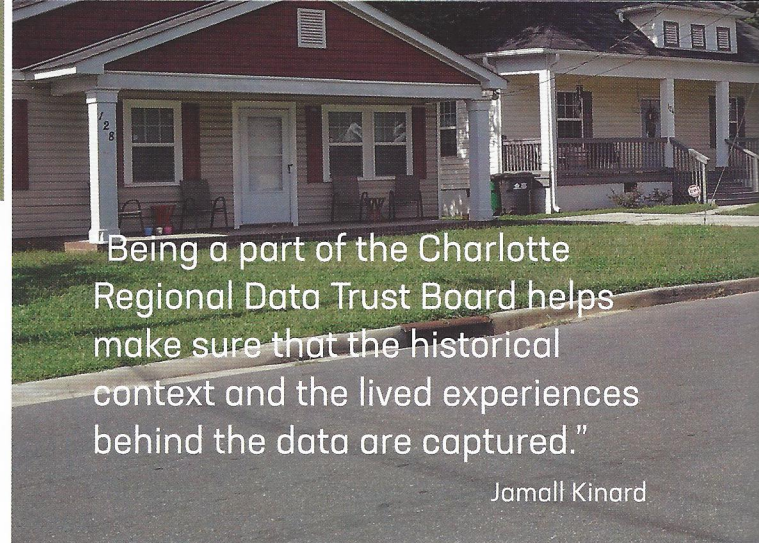
Yet data alone only tells part of the story. That’s why there’s a fresh emphasis from the Urban Institute to expand how data is collected and used.

“Research is better when you ask better questions,” said Lori Thomas, Ph.D., executive director of Charlotte’s Urban Institute. “Sometimes people with lived experience have much better questions and know what to ask when researchers like us who haven’t experienced it in the same way, may not. Improving our data infrastructure to better serve our community is a focus for us. We’re democratizing data access and use so people can have direction and self-determination in their own stories.”

Thomas and the Regional Data Trust Board members recognize that some Charlotte neighborhoods — particularly those with lower income levels and home ownership, and heavy social service program participation — are overrepresented in the data collected. She notes that data lacking deeper context can fail to provide a complete picture for decision makers. Thomas and her colleagues are leading a push to expand outreach to improve the process and make it more inclusive and transparent. Thomas recruited Kinard for his hyper-local perspective and to help the board expand its thinking behind the information it collects and reports.

“Meaningful social interventions come about when those who are impacted by decisions made are at the table,” said Thomas. “Jamall is co-chairing a recently created community data advisory committee with Melvin Herring, Ph.D., a fellow board member who directs the social work graduate program at Johnson C. Smith University. We want to build representation for individuals who often are left out of the front part of the data conversation. The data is about them but sometimes does not include their voices in determining how data collection questions are asked, or how data-driven decisions are made.”

Reach and use of the data is broad in the Charlotte community. Members contributing data to and developing programming from the Regional Data Trust include the city of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Medic, Atrium Health, Novant Health, Habitat for Humanity, Homeless Management Information Systems, Charlotte Housing Authority, Crisis Assistance Ministry,



YMCA of Greater Charlotte and more than a dozen others.

How information from the Regional Data Trust and Quality of Life Explorer is used is as varied as its diverse membership. CMPD uses crime and related statistics to determine the effectiveness of Neighborhood Watch and community intervention programs. Charlotte Mecklenburg Library looks at trends in after-school programming. Community groups pull detailed data for use in grant applications. Charlotte’s Urban Institute is there to assist and serve the community and add insight to their applications.

One way the Urban Institute helps community members dig deeper into their neighborhood makeup is through the online analytic tool, the Quality of Life Explorer. Data variables are organized around nine dimensions: character, economy, education, engagement, environment, health, housing, safety and transportation. Dashboard features help users explore these dimensions and generate custom reports. Data previously stuck in stand-alone organization silos is now easily integrated for more comprehensive analysis and reporting.

RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR CONTEXT

For Kinard, raw data is simply a starting point for discussion. He’s shown the board how without the appropriate context surrounding community data policy development, decisions made can have unintended consequences. He cited the recent discontinuation of a bus route in the Lakeview neighborhood as an example. The decision, based upon the number of housing units in the neighborhood, was absent community input or discussion. It’s had a particularly detrimental impact on the neighborhood residents.

“There was no communication or community involvement in



Jamall Kinard led Lakeview residents on a "data walk" to gather community information, bottom left; Urban Institute research associate Angelique Gaines collaborated in capturing and interpreting the data collected.

the decision," said Kinard. "Many residents depend upon that bus line serving our neighborhood. We have a lower-than-average percentage of car owners here, and public transit is a lifeline for many." Kinard noted the nearest grocery store to the neighborhood is more than three miles away. "With no bus route providing direct access, a trip to the market can be a half-day ordeal involving transfers and great hardship."

Kinard is determined to be part of a wave of community members actively involved in data collection and provide first-hand narratives, lived experience and context behind these numbers to better influence outcomes. "Being a part of the Charlotte Regional Data Trust Board helps make sure that the historical context and the lived experiences behind the data are captured," Kinard said.

Thomas and the Regional Data Trust are working to better educate community members on the data collection process. Charlotte's Urban Institute recently led residents and Lakeview Neighborhood Alliance members on a "data walk" of their neighborhood. The goal was to learn more about what data is captured, how residents can supplement the information with their lived experience and how they can use the information to advocate for resources.

Angelique Gaines, a research associate with the Urban Institute, co-led the community walk with Jamall Kinard. "We gave residents the opportunity to interact directly with data displays," she said. "One data display identified public transportation options closest to the Lakeview neighborhood."

Although the data showed that Lakeview was served by a nearby bus route, residents described this transportation option as not providing them with a direct route to the nearest grocery store or to work, making access an issue for those who relied on public transportation. "Difficult and long commutes were challenges," she continued. "Lakeview residents were able to share their own experiences and help tell a more complete story about access and connectivity."

DATA FOR CITY PLANNING AND BEYOND

The Urban Institute's data analytics tools like the Quality of Life Explorer have reach and application for city and county planners, municipal, social service agencies and beyond. Charlotte native Andrew Bowen is the innovation and data officer for the city of Charlotte. He directs a team that represents the city in partnership with Mecklenburg County and the Urban Institute to administer the Quality of Life Explorer.

Their role is to combine, analyze and contextualize the more than 80 discrete variables found in the tool's database.

"We're often called upon to provide data analytics and trend data," said Bowen, who noted Charlotte's Unified Development Ordinance and the Charlotte Future 2040 Comprehensive Plan are examples of community area planning and visioning processes that take advantage of data analytics.

"One of the things that we were able to do because of the Quality of Life Explorer and the access to so much valuable information is tie and align each of the community plans to their neighborhood profile areas," Bowen said. This allows city planners to compare data points across zip codes."

Bowen, who's joining the Regional Data Trust Board, noted the Quality of Life Explorer category of "character," for example, shows median age, population density, race/ethnicity and vacant land. These elements can be tracked and reported over time. "Ten years from now, after these community area plans are put together and some of the UDO pieces are implemented and visioning gets realized, there's a built-in ability to report, look back and tag all these different elements to a standard unit of analysis. It's a powerful tool."

Charlotte City Council Member Marjorie Molina '22, M.S. in Management is an advocate of the Quality of Life Explorer. She uses the tool to share valuable insights into the demographics and needs of her District 5 constituents. "I recently held a town hall where the Quality of Life Explorer was the star of the room," Molina said.

She remarked that many people make assumptions about the character of her district absent hard data. Reviewing detailed neighborhood statistics was revealing. The custom report indicated the median resident age in her district was much lower (just under 35) than many realized. "There are more young people in our neighborhood than often come to public forums like the town hall," said Molina, noting this informs how and where she can best access these residents for their opinions.

"When I'm asked to weigh in on decisions on issues like the development options for the Eastland Mall site, I want to make sure I'm acting on behalf of those in my district," she said. "It's important to have, for example, an accurate racial, ethnic, age and income makeup to inform on projects like this for fit, economic viability and interest. Often, it's organized [community] voices that are the loudest but not necessarily representative of the majority. That's where tools like the Quality of Life Data Explorer are invaluable."

Thomas says ensuring that a broad range of community voices are heard leads to more buy in. "It is a unique thing we are building to ensure people have representation," Thomas stated. "We are breaking new ground in the community by building up an advisory committee and bringing them into the overall structure and governance of this data asset. We want to view data from a more complete perspective. It leads to better decisions."

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