



Analysis of the 'Kitchen Table' Community Conversations

The Community Assessment Project is gathering information from a variety of sources to measure the quality of life in Santa Clara County in 2012. One critical element of this assessment is the '*Kitchen Table*' *Community Conversation* component. Beginning in mid-2011 and concluding in late summer 2012, more than 80 conversations in informal settings have been conducted to get a pulse of the aspirations of those that live and work in Santa Clara County. As a result of listening to more than 500 community members from all walks of life, the Community Assessment Project acquired in depth knowledge of people's hopes and dreams as well as their frustrations with life in Silicon Valley.

A powerful discovery through this process was that even though we live in a large county of nearly 2 million people, there is consistency of what people want from their community. Sifting through these conversations, common threads emerge, which demonstrates that communities as diverse as Gilroy and Sunnyvale are actually looking for much the same things in their communities. The surprising revelation was people's ***longing for community***. Most are looking for ***a sense of connectedness*** that they know can and should exist, but don't presently have. This lack of community connectedness permeates all other aspirations that were common in these conversations, such as:

1. **Silicon Valley is fractured..... A gap exists and often times that gap is invisible.**
2. **Safety and respect are lacking.....**
3. **Regardless of a family's current economic status, people feel financial pressure.....**
4. **Equal opportunities for a good education and a quality job offer hope for the future.**

While these common themes emerged from all of the conversations there was also a frequent refrain for how best to move forward towards addressing these big challenges....***change is possible, and it's up to us to make it happen!***

People are *longing for community*.....

"It's not like it used to be, I don't know my neighbors"

"I don't talk to my neighbors now, unlike growing up, that's all shriveled up and died."

"I have found the people in my community are not friendly or helpful, do not acknowledge your presence and lack of trust or care for each other."

"Kids don't play in the streets.....When we were kids, we all played outside. My dad was the QB. Now no adults play outside with the kids. "

"It's hard to know my neighbors because of the language barrier. We gravitate to our own language & race because it more comfortable."

"We are all rushing around so much and so focused on making a living so the pace of life doesn't lend itself to getting involved and being apart of the decision making."

"Kids don't play in the streets anymore...you see the families who have moved in, and they drive in and close the garage door and you never see anybody. You try to make eye contact and say good morning and you get nothing."

"We used to have a block party, but we haven't done that in 10 or 15 years."

"I knew all of my neighbors and when I was little I had time to go out and bike with them. But now I am older and my priorities have changed and I don't have the time."

"It's like having love for your neighborhood. If you know your neighbors, you will have love for them."

Change is possible and *it's up to us to make it happen.*

"We need to look in the mirror and see what part we play in this. I haven't knocked on my neighbor's doors and introduced myself. I need to start with myself and what I can do to fix it."

"I'm going to start with myself.....I'm going to meet my neighbors."

"Needs to start with me and my neighbors... my church... if we don't write the letters, it's not going to change."

"It starts with us. Whoever has the idea has to go to the authorities to strategize and put that idea into reality.....have the courage to talk to whoever can make things happen."

"Every single one of us is responsible and needs to take steps to make a difference."

"I want someone to show me the way to be involved."

"Who needs to take action.....Nosotros!"

1. Silicon Valley is *fractured*..... A gap exists and often times that gap is *invisible*.

In many conversations conducted all throughout the county, people talked about living in a community described as being characterized by fractures among various aspects of community life, and split among many disparate parts: geographic, cultural, ethnic, economic, language, age, etc. People often expressed an awareness or frustration with those conditions, but few ideas were expressed on how to overcome this. And participants stated that they felt that others were not even aware of these aspects.

“Honestly, the reality is the affluent parts of the community are very disconnected from the community that is not so affluent. There are things available for certain parts and nothing available for others.

“The most striking juxtaposition, of these two worlds is Palo Alto; you cross Hwy 101 and it’s a whole different world....something feels wrong that this exists. “

“There are so many cultures represented here, immigrant stories are rich, but I doubt people know about this.”

“Because of language barriers we can’t share information, so maybe there are things going on that we don’t know about that are happening.”

“I think it’s just a highly competitive community, and really smart here, and everyone just wants to be the best.”

“People in Palo Alto have no idea what is going on; they never come to this part of Bay Area.....The world ends for them in Sunnyvale.”

“I am surrounded by clients who have a lot of money – I’ve gotten used to it...people don’t feel ‘rich’ until they have \$1M – this ties into the divide.”

“Santa Clara County is one of the wealthiest communities in world. I want to see more giving back from the wealthiest. They may be generous but not in their back yard.”

“Kids in this community don’t have opportunity; income inequality is huge in Santa Clara County.”

“I would like to see more of what the community wants rather than what money can push.”

“When you think about it, how many people in Los Gatos and Monte Sereno really want to give to support East San Jose?”

“We have to move away from polarization, be a bit more tolerant of others, not see them as a threat. Maybe we all need to look at ourselves to see how we reach out.”

“I find community life very “atomized”. People are very busy and it is hard to get to know people in the places we live.”

“The Vietnamese community is closed, the Mexican community is closed. We are segregated by neighborhood.”

2. *Safety and respect are lacking.....*

While San Jose consistently ranks among the safest large cities in the nation, and nearby towns also score well on having low crime and good safety indicators, many county residents continue to talk about safety as a primary issue for them. Particularly safety is an important issue in certain areas of the county, and certain public parks and spaces where residents feel that they can't be out enjoying what their community has to offer. Lack of respect is also something on many people's minds, respect of: elders, each other, the physical environment and our cultural diversity.

"As nice as a community as Santa Clara is it looks so dreadful, weeds and trash and garbage, it looks absolutely dreadful."

"I want to be able to walk around my own neighborhood without fear of being shot to death. In recent times, people have been killed within a few blocks of where we live, simply by being mistaken for a gang member."

"I am afraid to let my kids play outside, 'cause I see other kids smoke and engage in all sorts of bad behavior, staying out 'till 2 am. I don't want my kids to be exposed to that."

"I have a 5 year old. I don't let him out of my sight. It's a safety issue."

"You don't want to feel harassed or put down if you are in a certain neighborhood."

"There are parks in my neighborhood, but there are people drinking and using drugs, so I don't take my kids there."

"People throw garbage and trash everywhere."

"There is a shift in mentality that needs to happen, our neighbors would not say hello, there needs to be a way to reach out to certain people, not feel so threatened."

"I want to trust the police and look to them for help, but it seems that they want to check to see if I have documents instead of helping us with crime in our neighborhood."

"Kids, they are disrespectful. They show no respect to you. We are afraid of telling youth anything at all, 'cause they'll beat you up!"

"When we were growing up, we were taught to show respect to elderly people and to respect everybody else. I don't understand what is going on with parents today. Respect as a word, an idea, goes a long way."

"Cultural awareness...I hear people in the Latino community say someone is Chinese even though there are many Asian cultures. And for people who see all Latinos are Mexican."

"For the police, I can understand that because SJPD is being spread really thin and when someone calls SJPD they will be put on a priority list and the police will only respond to the most pressing ones. So that's probably why people don't trust them because they called the police and they didn't respond."

3. Everyone feels *financial pressure* in Silicon Valley, regardless of economic status.

Though Silicon Valley is touted as one of the success stories coming out of the “great recession” as tech companies are hiring at a rapid pace, more than 1/4 of residents have trouble making ends meet. While technology is driving the Valley’s recovery, thousands continue to struggle just to pay bills; especially the extremely high cost of living. And for those that do see success, there is no rest because job security is not assured and “keeping up with the Jones” means pressure to maintain a standard of living that few can sustain.

“There is none of that “I got your back.” I’ve got to fend for myself. I think that is the reason why the community is not connected.”

“The cost of living is ridiculous; you do the best that you can.”

“Working too many jobs, it’s a rat race, there’s no time.”

“A two income family doesn’t even guarantee stability. You might be okay if you don’t get sick or injured; if you do, you are done in this area.”

“Even a traffic ticket can mess up finances. How do we pay for speeding ticket if we can’t pay bills?”

“There’s no work; we come here to improve ourselves, but we can’t.”

“My dad is the sole bread winner and I have never seen him so stressed out in the past two years. He always says you never know even though I thought he had good job security.”

“I don’t think you can be stable, not with high tech, nothing is stable.”

“By the time you reach 40-45 you’re ‘old’...people don’t feel that secure in high tech.”

“With the salary that I make at this point in my life I should be able to look forward to purchasing a home, but there is absolutely no way that will ever happen if I stay here.”

“Most people here have 50% of their income going to rent.”

“I have purchased a place and have lost it; I don’t have any plans or hopes to ever purchase a house again because it’s so expensive.”

“People aren’t well. The salaries people had could buy a home. They were working to just barely make the monthly payment.”

“I think that people’s hopes are diminishing. There is this inner sense of ‘what’s it all worth?’”

“Before there were a lot better jobs – now people are forced to take “lower jobs” – people who are well educated and working low paying jobs right now just to survive and bring in some income.”

“I see huge economic disparities. I have a daughter that is thinking of going somewhere else because she can’t afford to live here.”

4. Equal opportunities for a *good education* and a *quality job* offer hope for the future.

Santa Clara County represents one of the most dynamic communities with opportunities for academic and professional greatness. However, these opportunities are not within everyone's reach. The county consistently produces some of the best educated young adults from communities such as Cupertino, Saratoga and Los Gatos. Unfortunately, the county also contains some of the state's worst performing school districts such as Alum Rock Union, Franklin-McKinley and East Side Union, and these are disproportionately impacting communities of color. There was strong sense expressed that addressing this lack of educational equality and resulting academic achievement gap is critical to the future of our community.

What the People Say.....

"I want a community with better teachers, supplies and textbooks. I want a community with less discrimination between different school districts."

"Some teachers teach because they have too, NOT because they love it."

"Schools should become more of a hub for ALL community members."

"We see a lot of students moving here and there; coming and going; students aren't developing roots; as a teacher I get close to a student and then he is gone."

"A quality education and decent job for a person are so fundamental."

"Every day education is in the news, our poor children are suffering terribly – school quality is decreasing, we are going back to the old days of having some really good schools and some really bad schools."

"When a parent is educated, it makes all the difference in the community."

"Schools say they want involved parents, but once I got involved and saw the problem and tried to help make changes, they just wanted me to go away."

"Teachers do not know where the jobs will be in 10 years. How they should encourage the kids? Are we delivering what our kids needs? No. We need to prepare the kids for jobs in our county."

"Schools are getting squeezed. They have been squeezed for a long time. We expect more to be done with fewer resources to schools, but how."

"Arts education doesn't start early enough, young people not getting broad enough exposure to arts. They know all about computers but not about arts."

"Kids in the same neighborhood don't all go to the same schools anymore, and that dilutes the community connection. Younger generations are so absorbed with gadgets they don't develop the social skills and they don't want to meet neighbors because would rather email."

"College got very expensive, families now need to borrow a lot a money (half the parents' income). If they don't make much, they chose not to borrow the money. But that impact their kids' future."

Community Assets & Strengths

Here is a list of frequently heard ideas for what people said is working and people want more of.....

- Cultural events highlighting the County's rich diversity that are welcoming and attended by a full of range of people among our diverse communities.
- Neighborhood level resources and/or toolkits to create groups and 'block party'-type activities that help people connect with their neighbors.
- Regular and coordinated volunteer opportunities that help people know about how they can contribute and improve the community.
- Coordination and communication of what community resources are available.
- Active and engaged school principals that are aware of the community's strengths and work with parents to improve their children's education.
- After school programs that help busy working parents, often with multiple jobs, keep kids occupied in safe, fun and educational activities.
- Youth sports programs to divert youthful energy into healthy teamwork activities.
- ESL, early literacy and computer literacy programs that help parents become better partners in their children's education.
- Libraries and community centers available to people 7 days a week.
- Our parks, trails and neighborhoods are great natural resources that deserve better care.

About the Conversations

Beginning in 2011 United Way Silicon Valley began conducting informal community conversation throughout Santa Clara County. These were very informal and friendly conversations among small groups of community members; usually no more than 8 or 10 people sitting around a table. At times participants were treated to a pancake breakfast or an elaborate Mexican-American feast and sometimes something as simple as a good cup of coffee and pastry. What was universal in all of these conversations was the fundamental question, "What kind of community do you want to live in?" This open-ended question was the key to all of these conversations because the facilitator would then go deeper into the specifics of what the group shared related to this aspirational question. When it was all said and done, more than 80 conversations were completed; many in neighborhoods and businesses. The vast majority were conducted in partnership with community-based organizations serving Santa Clara County. A special thanks to all of those organizations that invited their communities to come together and share their hopes and dreams.

Who We Listened To

Young Leaders United	Community Service Agency of Mt. View - Spanish
Friends of Somos Mayfair	San Antonio Elementary School Parents
United Way Silicon Valley Staff *	Vision Literacy – Sunnyvale*
13 th St. Strong Neighborhood Initiative	San Jose Neighborhood - Cinnabar
Gilroy Arts Alliance Center for the Arts	Community Service Agency of Mt. View - English
Stone Church Members	Bank of America - Leadership Group
Asian American for Community Involvement (AACI)	School of Arts & Culture – Staff
East Valley YMCA - Members	San Jose Neighborhood – Rancho Santa Teresa
Project Cornerstone Leaders	Services for Brain Injury – Participants*
Los Altos Hills United Methodist Church	United Way High School Summer Interns Group
San Jose Neighborhood - Almaden Meadows	Silicon Valley Community Foundation Staff
San Jose Neighborhood - Penitencia	Ethnic/Cultural Community Advisory Committees Staff
Santa Clara Neighborhood - Central Park	Opportunity Fund – Small Business/Savings Program*
EHC Lifebuilders - San Martin	Community Solutions – Participants*
Loaves and Fishes - East Side Neighborhood Center	Cambrian Center San Jose Senior Housing*
Loaves and Fishes - InnVision Montgomery Street Inn	Sunset Gardens - Gilroy Senior Housing
San Jose Neighborhood – Yerba Buena	Santa Clara County Corporate Partners (Cisco, IBM, Deloitte, etc.)
Public Health Department Staff*	Texas Instrument Employees
San Jose Neighborhood - Cambrian	Sunset Gardens – San Jose Senior Housing
Vision Literacy Participants*	International Children Assistance Network
QUEST Leadership Group	(ICAN) - Vietnamese Focus Groups*
Santa Clara Neighborhood - Blackford	South County Community Leaders - Hosted by St. Louise Hospital
AACI's Anti-Gambling Youth Group	Marrone Gardens – San Jose Senior Housing
CalWORKS Participants*	Villa Hermosa – San Jose Senior Housing
CalWORKS Managers	Viet Mental Health Network
San Jose Neighborhood – Mountain Spring	El Parador– Campbell Senior Housing
Silicon Valley Independent Living Center	ACE Charter School
Billy DeFrank Center - LGBT Seniors Group	Avenida España – San Jose Senior Housing
Filipino Community Group	Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
Sunnyvale Community Services – Spanish	
Sunnyvale Community Services – English	
Hope Services	
Community Assessment Project Volunteers*	

****Denotes multiple sessions***