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Judy Wicks: In Business for Life

by Judy Wicks

The owner of the White Dog Cafe on building a business and a national movement

My story of the **White Dog Cafe** begins with the first time I walked onto the 3400 block of Sansom Street in 1972. I was enchanted. The narrow tree-lined street, with charming, if somewhat rundown, Victorian brownstone houses, was an oasis from the high-rise dormitories, office buildings, strip malls, and parking garages that surrounded it. The 100-year-old houses on Sansom Street, with a few small businesses on the first floors, were human-scale—quaint, homey, inviting.

I moved into an apartment at 3420 Sansom, future home of the White Dog, and soon learned that the entire block had been condemned to make way for a shopping mall.

I eagerly joined the local community group organized to fight the demolition and save our homes and businesses. This was my first experience in community organizing; my first act of civil disobedience (but not the last) was lying down in front of a bulldozer that was to begin demolition, even as our group sought a restraining order.

It was Jane Jacobs's fight to save her neighborhood in Greenwich Village and her vision, articulated in her classic book, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, that provided our group with the inspiration to save our block.

From her home above a candy store, Jacobs observed what she called the "intricate sidewalk ballet" of urban life. The complex goings-on of shopkeepers opening up in the morning and closing down at night; people heading to work or school, home again, then back out for leisure activities; housewives chatting on the stoops; children jumping rope and playing hopscotch.

Jacobs wrote about communities where people lived and worked in the same neighborhood. And she challenged the top-down urban renewal of the '50s and '60s in which vibrant communities and thriving local businesses were razed to build sterile high-rise office buildings and housing projects.

She pointed out that the housing projects were segregated by class—low-income projects plagued by crime, moderate-income developments that were dull and gray, and luxury developments that were vulgar displays.

Walkable communities were replaced by suburbs where housing developments and shopping malls destroyed rich farmland for no more than what Jacobs called "cheap parking." As Bill McKibben points out, it was in the 1950s, as people were separated by migration to the suburbs, when happiness in our society began its decline.

Eventually, we won the fight to save our block from the wrecking ball, which gave me the opportunity to buy the house at 3420 Sansom Street. Jane Jacobs's vision of vibrant urban life became my own. I wanted to "live above the shop" as Jacobs described. In 1983, I opened the White Dog Cafe as a coffee and muffin take-out shop on the first floor of my house, where I have now lived for 35 years. Today the White Dog is a full-service restaurant occupying three of the brownstone row-houses. Our gift shop, the Black Cat, sells local and fair-trade crafts, books, and novelties. The other row houses are home to other restaurants, a coffeeshop, real estate office, newspaper and magazine shop, and a hair salon.

By living above the shop on Sansom Street, I saw my own sidewalk ballet and grew to understand first hand how the wonderful diversity of people added to the vitality of my neighborhood and to the success of my business.

It's About Relationships

Jane Jacobs saw cities as the natural ecosystem for human beings. The parts of the city are not separate, but interconnected and interdependent, as in nature. Our strength comes from diversity, not monoculture.

Her obituary in The New York Times said that Jacobs's "prescription for cities was ever more diversity, density, and dynamism—in effect to crowd people and activities together in a jumping, joyous, urban jumble."



Judy Wicks chats with her customers outside Philadelphia's White Dog Cafe. Photo by Tom Gralish for YES!



Judy Wicks lives above the White Dog Cafe. photo by Tom Gralish for YES!

Living and working in the same community has not only given me a stronger sense of place, but a different business outlook. There's a short distance between me as the business decision-maker and those affected by my decisions—a basic principle of the local living economy movement. As a small business owner, I am more likely to make decisions from the heart, not just from the head, and those decisions are more likely to be in the best interest of the employees, customers, neighbors, and suppliers I see every day. Business is about relationships with everyone we buy from, sell to, and work with.

Jane Jacobs talked about the importance of human-scale—whether it be architecture or enterprises. As a society, we are taught that economic growth benefits everyone and success is measured by material gain. Yet continual growth is destroying the planet, using up more natural resources than can be regenerated. And it is the rich who are getting richer, while the share of wealth for everyone else is declining.

I made a conscious decision to stay small and learned to grow in other ways besides the physical. As the Earth Charter says, "After basic needs are met, it's about being more, not having more."

Rather than growing our size, sales, and profits, we can grow by expanding our knowledge, consciousness, and creativity, and deepening our relationships. We can have more fun in our communities rather than thinking that happiness comes from having more stuff and taking vacations to distant places.

Jane Jacobs wrote not only about diverse and lively neighborhoods, but also about regional economies and the importance of producing goods with local resources and labor for local consumption. Today, as we face the dual challenge of fossil fuel-induced global warming and peak oil, Jane Jacobs's vision for walkable communities and vibrant local economies is more significant than ever. We can reduce shipping by developing community self-reliance with local energy security, local food security, and interdependent local economies to provide basic needs.

Jane Jacobs wrote that cities prosper when they practice "import replacement." Business people can ask these questions when they consider how to replace imported goods with ones produced locally: What does our community need? Where are opportunities to build community self-reliance? Where are the gaps in our local economy that we can fill with a new business? When products aren't available locally—such as sugar, coffee, tea, and chocolate—how can we insure fair trade, supporting the producers and workers where products originate?

We have been using the old paradigm of continuous growth to measure success, while neglecting the issues of place, appropriate scale, and broad-based ownership. Democracy depends on having many owners. The more owners, the more freedom.

As we build a new economy of new local businesses, this is the time to help those who have been left out of the industrial economy find ownership opportunities in local living economies.

Jane Jacobs talked about how ingenuity came from the "close-grained juxtaposition of diverse talents." Diversity increases creativity and innovation.

When I think about preparing for the challenges of peak oil and climate change, I imagine a town coming together to prepare for a big storm or an invading army, passing sand bags from hand to hand to protect entrance ways, or rushing supplies of food in from the countryside. Competition is not an option—everyone recognizes that we need each other to survive.

Stewards of Farm Animals

My own recognition of the value of cooperation came from my love of animals. For a long time I bought only cage-free chicken and eggs, but I did not know about the factory farming of pigs until I read John Robbins' book in the '90s. There I learned about the way pigs are raised in confinement with unspeakable pain and deprivation. Treating them in this inhumane way is institutionalized cruelty that is destroying our own humanity.

I realized that the pork I was using must be coming from factory farms, so I took off the menu all the ham, bacon, and pork chops, and our chef set out to find a new source. A farmer who was bringing in free-range chicken from Lancaster County started bringing us pork raised by his neighbors in a small-scale, traditional way.

Eventually, all the meat and poultry on our menu came from small family farms where animals are raised on pasture and treated with respect. We finally had a cruelty-free menu, and I wanted to be the only restaurant in town that could make this claim.

But then I thought, if I really care about animals, the environment that's being polluted by industrial farming, the family farms being driven out of business, consumers eating meat full of hormones and antibiotics, then I couldn't keep this as my market niche. I have to share what I've learned with other businesses, including my competitors."

It is not enough to do the right thing within my company. I had to move from a competitive mentality to one of cooperation in order to build a local economy based on humane and sustainable farming.

So I started the Fair Food Project. Our first project director, Ann Karlen, has been providing consulting to restaurateurs and chefs on how to buy from local farmers. She's connected hundreds of restaurants, stores, and farms, so that our region has become known for our local food system. Community self-reliance is something we can all work on together—a way of doing business that not only builds loving relationships, but is essential to our survival in a changing world.

What do you love?

At its heart, our movement for local living economies is about love. It's love that can overcome the fear that many may feel in the hard days to come. Our power comes from protecting what we love—place, people, animals, nature, all of life on our beautiful planet Earth. Even business. Business has been corrupted as an instrument of greed rather than one of service to the common good. Yet we know that business is beautiful when we put our creativity, care, and energy into producing a product or service needed by our community.

Our materialistic society has desensitized us to the suffering underlying our industrial economic system.

We must open our hearts and eyes and ears—to hear the cry of the pigs in the crates and of animals in laboratories and in the fur industry.

We need to feel the suffering of women and children in sweatshops, or enslaved in chocolate production.

We need to feel the suffering of migrant workers in slaughterhouses and pesticide-soaked industrial farms, the suffering of the people of Iraq, of Nigeria, of the rainforest tribes—everywhere there are oil and other natural resources to exploit and fight wars over. And we need to hear the cry of the whales, polar bears, and the natural world that is dying around us.

What can provide the energy and passion for all that we must do now?

We must simply allow ourselves to love what we love. And in so doing, we will find our place as humans in the family of life—in the jumping, joyous, jumble of life.

Judy Wicks is founder and proprietor of the White Dog Cafe, and cofounder of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE). This article is adapted from her speech at the June 2006 BALLE meeting in Vermont.



Tom Gralish is a Pulitzer-prize winning photographer. For the past 25 years, he has been photographing the life and culture of Philadelphia for the Philadelphia Inquirer. His latest project is "Scene on the Street," a weekly column documenting the city's urban neighborhoods.

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