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Cincinnati's Strengths Effort Aligns with Joel Mlay's Life Mission

Homeless shelter staffer sees opportunity for building hope through strengths summit

Seeing the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach catch fire in Cincinnati through activities of the city's Leadership Class 34 is exciting to Joel Mlay for a profoundly personal reason.

Joel says he considers this AI effort to be largely about inspiring hope as it offers a way to emphasize the city's assets, rather than deficiencies, and a new vision for the city's future, and that aligns completely with his own life mission.

Raised in Tanzania in an environment of poverty Joel says a strong spiritual commitment in his childhood home nourished an "atmosphere of hope," and he's been long seeking to forward that hope to others.

Most recently he has been doing this through his work as a volunteer co-ordinator with City Gospel Mission, a homeless shelter aiming to break the cycle of poverty and despair in Cincinnati.

Joel notes the key difference he's observed between overcoming poverty in Tanzania and doing so in the U.S. is that while in the former country, it's typically a matter of overcoming deprivation, here it's more an issue of social justice.

Revitalizing communities to understand that what happens to one person in a community affects the whole community and from that understanding to truly care for one another — rather than being consumed only with personal achievement and advancement — is key to beginning to shake those systems, he adds.

Given his background and work, Joel says he knows “hope is the most important thing” for any kind of change.

Joining now with other people, through these AI activities, who are also catching and forwarding this hope of what’s possible, has been the most profound part of this whole experience for him.

Joel has been involved in the Cincinnati AI activities through the CoreChange learning journeys, a project of Leadership Class 34, where groups are using AI to study different aspects of what’s working well in Cincinnati.

He is part of a group exploring diversity, inclusion and collaboration in Cincinnati. The group has been studying neighbourhoods where these characteristics exist, how they’ve come to be and what can be learned so that these characteristics could be introduced in other neighbourhoods.

The learning journeys began in May, with a July 16 event convening the groups to share updates on their findings.

The activities will continue until the whole-system summit planned for the city, either later this year or early 2012. In that multi-day event, which could attract around 1,000 Cincinnati residents from all walks of life, the learnings will be used in conversations around co-creating a new future for the city.

As the movement toward the summit continues, Joel says he senses a growing excitement from those involved.

“We can see a lot of possibilities coming out of the approach of Appreciative Inquiry,” he says.

Axiom News is covering the strengths activity and summit in Cincinnati. To learn more, click [here](#).

To share your own strengths story, please contact [michelle\(at\)axiomnews.ca](mailto:michelle(at)axiomnews.ca), or call the newsroom at 705-741-4421.