Healing Our Communities

A report about the 2017 collaboration between the Chair City Community Workshop and the Montachusett Suicide Prevention Task Force.
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• At the time Tracie Pouliot (MA in Community Art from MICA) was helping organize a series of events responding to the book *Root Shock* by Dr. Mindy Fullilove.
In *Root Shock* Dr. Fullilove names the social trauma that affects entire communities when there is a major dislocation, such as deindustrialization.

Tracie wondered what impact the closing of Nichols & Stone was having Gardner.
As it happened State employees in North Carolina got furloughed the following summer (2009) and so Tracie took the opportunity to return home to Massachusetts and interview people who had worked at Nichols & Stone before it closed.
In 2014 Tracie printed the first of the dozen interviews with former Nichols & Stone employees as a hand made book in editions of 500.
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As we explored people’s stories who had worked at Nichols & Stone we realized we needed to try to have a broader conversation about the collective social impact of deindustrialization. What about Dr. Fullilove’s suggestion that dislocation results in a social trauma?
Healing Our Communities

We partnered with the Montachusett Suicide Prevention Task Force, and with the support of a grant from the CHNA9, we reached out to Dr. Kathryn Dudley an anthropologist at Yale University who has spent her career looking at the social impacts of economic dislocation.
Healing Our Communities: April 2017

In April of last year Dr. Dudley came to Gardner and met with members of the Task Force and community members at the Chair City Community Workshop.
April 2017: How do we address the collective trauma of deindustrialization?
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Re-value work, experiences, and skills that have been de-valued.
Healing out Communities:
April 2017

During Dr. Dudley’s visit she appeared on two local radio shows:
WGAW – Hotline Radio and Freedom Means on WPKZ
In July both the Suicide Prevention Task Force and the Community Workshop were featured in a series on manufacturing on Central Mass.
September 2017 Panel: Re-valuing the Woodshop

We invited Dr. Dudley back for a panel discussion at the Gardner Museum that included someone from Spark Makerspace in Conn., a former vice president of Nichols & Stone, the siblings of a furniture work who had taken his own life and a photographer who had documented the final weeks at Nichols & Stone.
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September 2017 Panel: Re-valuing the Woodshop

About 45 people attended the panel. Thirty people filled out surveys.

- More than 50% self-identified as being from a working class background.

Photo by Paul E Gingras
September 2017 Panel: Re-valuing the Woodshop

About 45 people attended the panel. Thirty people filled out surveys.

• Of those who either identified as being from a working class background or indicated that they had been negatively impacted by the decline in manufacturing in the region more than 75% said that the discussion related to their experience.
September 2017 Panel: Re-valuing the Woodshop

About 45 people attended the panel. Thirty people filled out surveys.

• 100% of those who completed the survey indicated that it is important to understand the impact of declining manufacturing in the region as we address behavioral health challenges such as depression, suicide, and addiction.

Photo by Paul E Gingras
Dr. Dudley’s Report

After her two visits to Gardner Dr. Dudley wrote a short report for the Suicide Prevention Task Force.
• “…rarely are the effects of community abandonment—and its politically popular rationales—recognized as affecting people’s sense of self-worth, personal efficacy, and capacity for collective resilience.”
Dr. Dudley’s Report

- “To be most effective […] individual-level crisis intervention must be coupled with broader efforts to address and ameliorate the traumatic effects of what is an ongoing community-level crisis of disinvestment and disenfranchisement.”
Two manifestations of social trauma:
• Self-blame
• Resignation
Responding to Self Blame:

• “Without an effective, reality-based counter-narrative to fantasies of autonomy and self-control, there can be no reckoning with the social forces that produce widespread precarity and immiseration.”
Responding to Resignation

“only assuaged by forms of collective action that mourn what has been lost and revalue the work traditions and skills that may endure.”
Dr. Dudley’s Report:

• “Like many communities confronted with the loss of manufacturing industries that have historically employed a majority of their workforce, Gardner must find ways to address a collective, not solely individual, experience of economic dispossession.”
Accomplishments:

- Dr. Dudley’s visit was validating.
- There was excitement about re-valuing work, experience, and skill.
- Two radio interviews and an article in a major daily paper brought attention to the issue.
- Panel was a success with directed affected people in the majority and unanimity in the belief that social trauma from deindustrialization needs to be considered.
More to be done

Just days after the panel there was an opinion piece in The Gardner News “Can we make it without making anything?”

The piece looked at the economic impact of a decline in manufacturing, but there was no mention of the social or behavioral health impact.