



# **BROKE** IN PHILLY **A RETROSPECTIVE**

FIVE YEARS OF COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM IN  
SERVICE OF COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

The origins of the collaborative: The Reentry Project	PG. 4
Evolution to Broke in Philly	PG. 9
Broke in Philly begins	PG. 17
Resolve Philly grows into a freestanding organization	PG. 23
Growing Resolve Philly's resources	PG. 29
COVID hits: responding to the pandemic	PG. 35
A summer of protest	PG. 40
How collaboration powers great journalism	PG. 43
The Broke in Philly legacy	PG. 54
Looking ahead	PG. 61

# INTRODUCTION

Every month for the past five years, a group of journalists in Philadelphia have made time to conspire. They come from the city's biggest and most recognized outlets and from small, neighborhood media organizations. They publish online, in print, on TV, and live over the radio, in Arabic, in Chinese, in English, and in Spanish. Some focus on neighborhoods, others on topics like education and technology.

Philadelphia is known as one of the most fiercely competitive media markets in the country, which makes it remarkable that it's also home to one of the best-known and longest-lasting journalism collaborations. This spring, Broke in Philly celebrates five years of working together to produce journalism on solutions to the challenges of economic mobility.

Those five years have included a pandemic, waves of protests, numerous elections, and record flooding from a hurricane, among other things. The 29 newsroom partners stuck with the experiment, keeping community impact at the center and economic mobility on the city's public agenda, all while advancing

ideas that have been emerging in the journalism world and sharing what they've learned.

"It's a big deal that these newsrooms have come together every month for five years," said Cassie Haynes, co-Founder of Resolve Philly, the nonprofit that houses the Broke in Philly collaborative. "The number of minutes that they've spent in conversation, planning editorial coverage — that demonstrates just how special the commitment that each of the partner institutions have made."

The collaborative has been a labor of love and dedication from journalists who decided to concentrate on solutions to the crises that ordinary people face each day — crises in jobs, housing, health, personal safety, and all of the systems that combine affect economic mobility — through reporting, community engagement, and mutual support.

"The level and quality of the reporting, the in-depth nature of the reporting, was desperately needed, and I would say is still needed," said Michael Nutter, former mayor of Philadelphia.



Stefanie Murray, who heads the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University, researches and supports journalism collaboratives across the country. “In the context of the United States, especially when it comes to that metro regional level of collaboration, [Broke in Philly] has been seen as a gold standard and one to replicate,” she said.

The work has built new ways of working among journalists and with people most directly affected by the issues journalists report on. Broke’s collaborative partners and the Resolve Philly staff who support them have been navigating a shifting landscape within journalism – the tectonic friction between old-school norms and practices on the one hand and on the other, a reckoning over the biases

and inequities baked into those norms and practices. Resolve Philly has meanwhile grown up as a new institutional model, playing a coordinating role, providing resources, and acting as a connector and conduit between newsrooms and communities.

“What I like about Resolve is they research subjects and they go out and they speak to people who are on the ground,” said Jondhi Harrell, founder of The Center for Returning Citizens (TCRC) and one of the collaborative’s longtime community partners. “They do extremely well in getting accounts that are real. Some media just go for sensational coverage, but the news organizations that make up Resolve have always done thoughtful coverage and they’ve really spoken to the



Justin Lee, owner of Fern Rock Hardware.  
Photo by Tyger Williams for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

issues and tried to provide things that make you think and things to spark a continued community discussion, which is important. If you get a person in the community talking about issues, and you are motivating them to really think about how they're being governed and how issues are handled, then that's building community, and that's one of the important things that Resolve does, is they help to build community."

In the process, collaborative partners have formed bonds that have allowed them to respond to crisis, amplifying one another's work.

"I'm sure a lot of people feel this way: you do dozens and dozens and dozens of articles every year," said Henry Savage, now a reporter with *The Philadelphia Inquirer* who used to work with *Kensington Voice*, another newsroom in the collaborative. "You hope someone reads it. Maybe they do, maybe they don't. Whereas when you work with Broke in Philly, or collaboratives like Broke in Philly, you see way more impact. That feels satisfying, and it's just better work."

The collaborative will continue to work together on a new topic, but as Broke in Philly sunsets, this is a moment to take stock of the past five years of a grand experiment in collaborative, community-first, solutions journalism.

# THE ORIGINS OF THE COLLABORATIVE: THE REENTRY PROJECT

The idea of solutions journalism is intuitive for many people who are tired of seeing relentlessly negative news coverage about their neighborhoods. Vernon Ray, a photographer who coaches young people in media production through his program Shoot Cameras Not Guns, puts it this way: “People are attracted to trauma, but you still have to introduce the solution, and the people that are taking their time to work on that solution, they don’t get enough light. Some people do it just for the camera. But what about those that don’t? Who’s on the hunt for the people that are really putting in meaningful work in the community?”

Reporters practicing solutions journalism investigate how problems have been handled elsewhere and present that information in their stories “[People think], we have the worst crime rate, or we have the worst affordable housing problem,” explained Liza Gross, Vice President for Newsroom Practice Change for the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN). “In fact, these are endemic problems and challenges that we’re facing in the U.S. And if this community knew what that other community is doing, and the

journalists could interact with each other...[we could create] different kind of coverage addressing chronic issues that we have without thinking, this is unsolvable.”

In 2013, Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, who had been living and reporting from the global south since 2005, stumbled upon a TED talk by David Bornstein, who founded the Solutions Journalism Network after a long career as a reporter and author.

“We like to think that journalism should be radically helpful to people,” Bornstein said in an interview. “We’re not just publishing stories for the sake of bylines, and being a smoke detector that just keeps beeping with urgency and problems. When journalism does that, people are increasingly just taking out the batteries.”

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Friedman-Rudovsky had never heard the term “solutions journalism”, but realized she had been practicing it for years: reporting not just about problems in society, but effective responses and solutions to deeply entrenched social challenges. She reached out to Bornstein on a whim and the two stayed in touch.

In 2015, she and her family moved back to the U.S., and SJN asked her to be their “chapter lead” in Philadelphia, leading workshops and trainings in the solutions approach. Jim McMillan, who at the time was teaching a solutions journalism course at Temple University’s journalism school, introduced her to journalists in Philadelphia, and she began cultivating a professional community excited about doing solutions journalism.

Soon after, Friedman-Rudovsky had a conversation with Jane Von Bergen at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* who suggested a wild idea: what if in Philly we created a collaborative reporting project on a single issue, from a solutions oriented perspective?

Journalism collaboratives were beginning to pop up across the country, an adaptation to the dwindling resources in conventional newsrooms and the rise in nonprofit news organizations. Yet none of the collaboratives to date had explicitly adopted a solutions approach. Friedman-Rudovsky loved the idea but the two wondered: would it be possible? What topic would they tackle? Von Bergen suggested the challenges of reentry from prison back into the community. That appealed to Friedman-Rudovsky, who had done reporting on that topic. The next question was, would SJN go for it?

In early 2016, Friedman-Rudovsky sent a proposal to SJN for a journalism collaborative in Philadelphia on reentry. At that point, SJN was a small but growing organization with only a handful of people on staff, including Gross. Friedman-Rudovsky recalled that the idea came across as far-fetched. “They basically all laughed at me when I had this idea. Liza says, ‘We didn’t just laugh at you, I thought in my head, who is this crazy person?’”

Everyone involved was skeptical that it would work, especially in the highly competitive media environment of Philadelphia.

“Philadelphia is a particularly cantankerous market where everybody hates everybody else, so I don’t know if

it's possible to think of collaboration there," Gross recalled thinking. "But in the end, we said, 'You know, why not? Let's give it our best shot.'"

Given the green light, Friedman-Rudovsky leaned on McMillan's introductions and support from David Boardman, Dean of Lew Klein College of Media and Communication at Temple University. "I started going around the city and talking about this idea to various leaders of newsrooms and people are like, 'Sure, I'll attend a planning meeting about it. Let's try it,'" she said.

Things went far better than expected. Within eight weeks, Friedman-Rudovsky reached out to her SJN colleagues and let them know people were ready to get started.

"I was a little bit worried. I mean, we had been working on some proto-collaborations, but this was really next level," Gross said.

SJN provided \$70,000 for a six-month pilot that launched in 2017. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation later provided a grant that allowed it to continue for another six months.

Jennifer Preston, then Vice President of Journalism at the Knight Foundation, knew well how competitive the Philly market is, having been a reporter at the Philadelphia Daily News early in her career. "We had been talking a lot about [collaborative journalism], but it was still pretty early on. So it was really important to test it in Philadelphia, especially with the solutions lens, and to see what impact



Jondhi Harrell at TCRC Healing Community Center on North Broad Street.  
Photo by Ryan Collerd for PlanPhilly



that might have on not only journalists reporting stories that were important, but also learning how to embrace civic engagement in new ways.”

Sabrina Vourvoulias, now editor of the communities desk at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, ran the Reentry Project for a while until accepting a job elsewhere. Friedman-Rudovsky stepped in as editor of the Reentry Project in early 2017. She quickly began to lean on the community organizing skills she had acquired before her journalism career began.



“I would always joke that my title could actually be volunteer coordinator, because everyone that I was working with was a volunteer [on the project],” Friedman-Rudovsky said. “I had no power over them. I couldn't force them to do anything. And this is still the case. So you have to lead in a really different way when you are working with people who don't have to do the things that you say.” She focused on getting buy-in and creating an equitable playing field.



## Experience of collaborators in Reentry

“The first meetings, I remember silence. Absolute silence. People were hesitant to say what they thought,” Gross said. “And that gave me a sense of how much trust we need to build.”

An equitable approach was crucial, Friedman-Rudovsky knew. She set about to create an environment where everyone at the table was comfortable speaking. Emma Restrepo of 2Puntos Platform, a Latinx media outlet, became a vocal member of the collaborative, eventually leading the effort to host a focus group inside a prison.

Sara Lomax, President and CEO of WURD Radio, came to the table with a strong sense of mission. WURD is an African American-owned talk radio station – the only one in Pennsylvania and one of the few in the country. “A lot of the people in the WURD listening audience are returning citizens, or have family who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated,” Reese said. “So the Reentry Project really hooked me.”

“As I recall,” Preston of the Knight Foundation said, “there had only been a handful of stories written about reentry, and given the impact of mass incarceration on Philadelphia families, people, neighborhoods, the economy, that just seems crazy. Two years into this project, there were almost 200. And it’s not just the stories, it was how the stories were produced.”

Friedman-Rudovsky wasn’t only organizing journalists; she was also working constantly to build relationships with people in the reentry community, many of them returning citizens themselves. They knew far more than the journalists did about the challenges people face when reentering society after

incarceration, the systems in place to help them and how well they worked, the policies that needed to change, and the human stories that needed to be told.

By making these connections and helping community members and journalists learn how to better engage with each other, Friedman-Rudovsky was playing a critical role that has not historically existed in newsrooms. “I didn’t even know it was called community engagement at the time, but that’s what I was doing. It was very powerful.” Not only did it make better reporting possible, it also led to a series of community events: a hackathon, an employer event, a share-your-story initiative.

The Reentry Project used the collective power of the media to shine a line on the issue and in doing so, it amplified the stories’ impact.



# EVOLUTION TO BROKE

The Reentry Project had been planned as a one-year project, but as the year wore on, Friedman-Rudovsky and the collaborating newsrooms had the sense that they were just getting started.

## "We've done too much work to just let it fall apart and go our separate ways"

"It felt like, 'We've done too much work to just let it fall apart and go our separate ways. Let's explore what we could do together as a second act,'" said Eugene Sonn, who was then News Director at WHYY.

In July 2017, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, a nonprofit dedicated to saving local news, opened a call for proposals. "So I said to the newsrooms, 'Do you wanna do this again?' And everyone said yes," Friedman-Rudovsky said. "I think because we had gotten into a good rhythm of working together, folks were finding it was fun and meaningful, and articles were having impact."



Jean Friedman-Rudovsky at the Reentry Blueprint

The funding they received meant that this would be more than a one-time effort. But there was a hitch: Solutions Journalism Network would not be the home for the work into the future; and the collaboration would have to become independent. "SJN said to me, 'It's not in our long-term plan to house these place-based projects. You can go do this on your own.'" It was a tough moment. "I was pretty worried about what would happen because I had never run anything," Friedman-Rudovsky said. "I was feeling very worried about needing to both be the editor of this new project and also stand up a nonprofit."

She found a fiscal sponsor, CultureWorks Greater Philadelphia, that would allow the group to accept Lenfest's grant, and by January 2018, with help, she created a new entity named Resolve Philly. In the end, she said, SJN's decision "was a blessing in disguise, of course, because if the organization had held onto the project, Resolve Philly would not exist."



Meanwhile, as early plans for the next collaboration were brewing, Friedman-Rudovsky put together a capstone event in November 2017, “The Reentry Blueprint: Stories and Solutions from the Formerly Incarcerated.” After consulting with people who were involved in reentry issues about what sort of event they would find meaningful, she decided to invite five formerly incarcerated community leaders to present what they were doing to support returning citizens in Philadelphia.

“It was really awesome to see all the leadership and expertise within the reentry community itself put on stage. And that really came from the relationships that had been built throughout the course of the project.” At the event, participants were given slips of paper and invited to write down suggestions for what the collaborative should focus on for its next reporting project.

Cassie Haynes attended the event during her first week on the job for the City of Philadelphia as Deputy Executive Director of Innovation at the Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity. She and Friedman-Rudovsky had started becoming friends, having met earlier that year because their children attended the same daycare.

Haynes was impressed with the event; “I was really excited about this project from the beginning.” She appreciated “the opportunity to use the power of a critical mass of local news outlets to change the words that were being used, the harmful stories that were being reinforced in intentional and unintentional ways.” An attorney with a masters degree in public health, Haynes saw narrative change as a strategy to increase economic mobility. That got her thinking more and more about the power of the press.



# Expanding the collaborative

There had been 13 partners in the Reentry Project, but Friedman-Rudovsky wanted to bring more to the table. “It felt really important to me that there be a greater representation of outlets that were led by people of color and serving communities of color. So I spent a lot of time doing that outreach, going out to meet with Eric [Nzeribe] at *FunTimes Magazine* which serves the Afro-Caribbean population, talking to Edgar [Ramirez] at *Philatinos Radio*, trying to bring them into the fold.” By the time the new collaboration launched, there were 19 partners on board, and soon the number rose.

While there was some risk in bringing in people who hadn’t already worked together or built trust, there was also a feeling that greater numbers would increase the collaborative’s strength. “The media ecosystem in Philadelphia came together, and more and more media enterprises got on board,” Lomax said.

“We kept growing as a group, and every time we would add a new newsroom in there, it was like a shot of energy into the collaboration,” Sonn said. “That was one of the reasons that things didn’t kind of fall back and didn’t kind of fade away.”

One of those new members was NBC10/Telemundo62, the Philadelphia region’s NBC English and Spanish affiliate broadcast television stations. They had been approached about joining the Reentry Project but declined to participate. Having a commercial broadcast TV station was a big deal. Local television newscasts are still the primary source of news for many Americans, especially those on the lower end of the financial ladder.

Wendy Warren was the Director of Integrated Media at the stations and became their representative in the collaborative. She had come to TV after a career in print journalism, and she had





experienced first-hand the power of collaboration when she worked at the *Philadelphia Daily News*. In 2008, the newspaper collaborated with other Philly newsrooms on a project called “Next Mayor,” covering the first contested mayoral election in decades.

“I had seen collaboration work,” Warren recalled, “but it’s not what TV does very well. They’re very competitive. They’re always trying to win.”

When this expanded group met for the first time, the same excitement and uncertainty was present, as people from different outlets were meeting each other for the first time.

“As a newer partner who wasn’t a part of the Reentry Project, I remembered being a little bit in awe of seeing some of the faces behind some of the stories that I read,” recalled Diana Lu, then a community engagement editor at WHYY.

“At the very beginning, we had these long meetings with lots of people at a huge table, and it was

kind of really exciting,” Danya Henninger of Billy Penn recalled. “There were people from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and the TV stations and lots of little outlets. And I had never been at a table like that where everyone was treated the same. Everyone had the same amount of time to speak.”

Warren also felt admiration for the others at the table. “It was certainly humbling for me to go to these meetings and hear the kind of work that was being done,” she said. “The *Philadelphia [Public] School Notebook* [now Chalkbeat Philadelphia], I knew how good they were, I’d read them for a long time. And then I would meet PhillyCAM, the public access folks, and I’d just be blown away by what they were doing. Or I’d meet *FunTimes*, the African Diaspora magazine, and realize, ‘oh my gosh, the level of work that they are doing is amazing.’”



The first order of business was to settle on a topic. The group had multiple impassioned discussions that reassured everyone there would be no drop-off in enthusiasm.

The top contenders were poverty and the opioid crisis.

“At the time there was a lot of news coverage of the opioid crisis,” Sonn recalled. “If reporters are already engaged enough on this subject to the point where they’re battling for scoops on it, it also seems to me that there’s a good level of coverage. An area that is flying under the radar and would benefit from having help being put on the map. From a practical point of view, you won’t have turf wars if people don’t already have established beats on that subject.”

Poverty had been an intractable problem for a long time in Philadelphia, which had earned the moniker “America’s poorest big city.” Census data have consistently shown it to have the highest poverty rate of the country’s 10 most populous cities, with 26 percent of residents living below the poverty line in 2018. In that sense, poverty wasn’t “news” — but that’s exactly why it made for a good topic. Sonn noted that, “to some degree, collaboration seems to get attracted to things that are not brand new and possibly going to fade, but something that has

been a lasting challenge in a community.”

It was also a topic deeply in need of a solutions lens. Rather than address “poverty,” a term that invokes stereotypes and a sense of despair, the group defined the topic as “economic mobility,” invoking the idea of personal agency and the possibility of change.

Lomax was once again eager to jump into a topic directly relevant to WURD’s audience. “These are the issues that most impact our listeners, whether it’s poverty or reentry. So many of these things stem from economic fragility and the lack of opportunity,” she said. “Black folks have historically been starved of economic opportunity. And so for the collaborative to zero in on this question and this persistent generational issue of lack of access to capital and wealth I thought was smart and it was consistent with the kinds of issues and the things we wanted to connect our listeners up with at WURD.”

For Lu, the topic had a lot of personal resonance. “The focus on economic empowerment, economic justice and mobility was something that I was really, really excited about.” She was eager to be part of stories that explored solutions, especially at the grassroots level. “Being raised in an immigrant family, there was the hope that we would be able to build our own

wealth and to pass it on to future generations. There are a lot of things you learn that aren't top-down."

"We had the opportunity to talk about the problem of poverty in Philadelphia in a different way and be more thoughtful, more intentional, and frankly less reactionary," Sonn recalled. "That was kind of my big hope for it."

After two meetings to discuss what to call the series, the group landed on the name Broke in Philly.

## About the name "Broke in Philly"



The name has turned out to be one of the biggest internal challenges for the collaborative.

It came out of a conversation Friedman-Rudovsky had with members of the reentry community. "I was explaining the new project and telling them we were trying to come up with a title. They were like, 'You know what we would call it? Broke as F—! Because that's the reality, right? Folks in Philly are broke as f—.'"

She shared the story in the next partner

meeting, essentially as a joke, knowing that Broke AF would never fly, but wanting to share the sentiment behind it. To her surprise, almost everyone in the room latched onto the word "broke." The other options on the table were less catchy and more wonky. "Making ends meet" was another that Friedman-Rudovsky remembers. But every newsroom partner at the time liked the idea of Broke in Philly and chose to adopt it. Friedman-Rudovsky had reservations — primarily because it wasn't solutions-oriented. "I understood that it was a snappy title, and I knew the backstory. And so it felt okay to me because it came from an authentic place, and it came from a place of, this is the reality of what we're living with in Philadelphia. So, name that and say that."

But over time, the name has posed a real challenge and at times has been problematic. "Broke" is a term that people often use to talk about their own situation,

as opposed to terms such as “economically vulnerable.” But it matters who’s saying it, and in what context. For some collab members and would-be members, the idea of using “broke” as a label for stories about people struggling with economic mobility — many of them people of color, and many of those stories being produced by white reporters at white-led news organizations — never landed well.

Jos Duncan Asé, the founder of Love Now Media, first joined the collaborative as a representative of WURD radio, and she has always had a problem with the name. “The term ‘broke’ is offensive and degrading to communities of people who have been systematically and intentionally marginalized,” she said. “I felt somewhat isolated in the collab every time I voiced this,” she added. As a Black journalist serving a Black audience, she sensed that white colleagues in the group didn’t get it, but she’s heard from Black journalists in the city who feel the same way. “However, I love the group and what they are *trying* to do,” she said. Duncan Asé has worked around the problem by using the Resolve Philly logo instead of the instead of the Broke in Philly logo on

collaborative stories that appear in Love Now Media.

“We wrestled for a little while towards the middle of the project with whether to change the name,” Friedman-Rudovsky said. “Finding another name and building another brand was going to be very hard and felt like it could undo the progress we had made with getting the city to understand who we are and what the reporting was about. It was messy and yes, we ultimately made the call, okay, we’re gonna stick with this. That is a decision that Cassie and I own, and we understand there was no good or easy choice,” she said.

The struggle over the name is an example of the challenges the collaborative has taken on: To convey the truth of people’s lives while honoring their dignity. To report on poverty in a way that didn’t reinforce stereotypes. To understand the difference between the intent of the reporter and the impact on the subject of the story. To recognize the deep harms that systems of power have inflicted on marginalized people, and to reckon with the role of the news media in those systems and in that harm.

To produce journalism that is deliberately anti-racist. To learn, by doing, how to do better.

It also signals a continual challenge of representation. Media, even in Philadelphia, continue to be dominated by white people. The collab is more representative overall of the racial and ethnic breakdown of the city than any other single newsroom itself. The dialogue around the name Broke, as Duncan Asé points out, demonstrated the conflict and challenge that arises in groups such as these.

Sonn and the Resolve Philly team have done a lot of reflecting on the problematic nature of the Broke in Philly name, and believe they have learned a very valuable lesson – thanks to Duncan Asé and other colleagues who spoke up. While the group has not yet settled on the name for its next project, everyone involved understands the name has to be more asset-framed and are being much more careful about not making the same mistake twice.

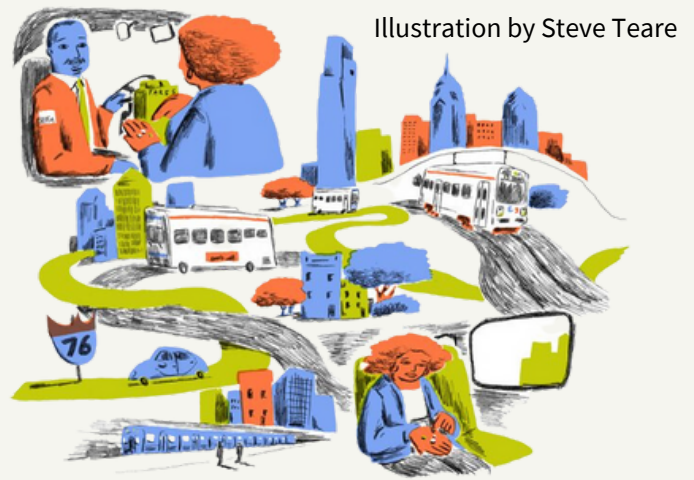


Jos Duncan Asé at the Love Now Media Heart of the Story Event



# BROKE IN PHILLY BEGINS

The first Broke in Philly stories came out on April 18, 2018, along with an editor's note from Friedman-Rudovsky.



**Today, a critical mass of the city's general interest, ethnic, and community newsrooms have come together to say: enough. Nineteen local news organizations have decided to take a more direct, and collective, approach. Today we launch BROKE in Philly, an ambitious year-long initiative that will provide in-depth, nuanced and solutions-oriented reporting on the issues of poverty and the push for economic justice in Philadelphia.**

**BROKE will take a clear, hard look at what works to help ensure greater economic security for residents of our region, and what doesn't. We aim to explore poverty's complex causes and highlight creative approaches that show promise in its alleviation. We will ask questions such as: What's working in Philly to alleviate poverty and further economic security for all? What has been tried and failed—and what can we learn from that? How are other cities increasing economic equity and what are some lessons for Philadelphia?**

*The Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a story on the eviction crisis, which affected one in 14 renters in the city. The Philadelphia Citizen ran a story on a carpooling program to address the challenges of commuting to work. NBC10 and Telemundo62 ran stories in English and Spanish, respectively, introducing the series with data on the scope of the issue.

"On the launch date of the project, we had all of our work ready to go, all ready to go up online and on air at a certain moment, and that day there was an enormous breaking news story," Warren recalled. Yet NBC10 also took time in the broadcast to include a profile of a man surviving through homelessness after an on-the-job injury.

“I will always remember my boss at the time, our news director Anzio Williams, he was so happy to have that story because when you go on a big breaking news story like that, you don't have any extra time to do anything else in the newscast. And we not only had a story, we had a really deep, important, impactful story, because we were in that Broke partnership.”

## Language matters

One of the earliest activities Resolve Philly worked on to serve the collaborative was the language guide, a set of best-practices and guidelines for using human-centered language. Instead of using terms like “the poor” or “the needy,” it’s better to describe people as “experiencing poverty” and those striving for “economic mobility,” or better yet, ask people how they want to be described. That guide grew out of things the earlier iteration of the collaborative had already learned about the importance of language and framing.

“We had learned with the Reentry Project how much words matter, how much labels and identity matter,” Friedman-Rudovsky said.

Aubrey Nagle, now Resolve Philly’s Director of Practice Change and who has headed up language and framing at Resolve Philly since 2019, explained that it was also a practical



Aubrey Nagle, Resolve Philly’s Director of Practice Change

**“The media criticism we all need to hear in this industry, it was happening face-to-face”**

matter for reporters who were encountering pushback from people in the community about the kind of language they used.

“Community members and sources would say, ‘We might not want the story to be told this way because that language is dehumanizing to us.’ Or, ‘That’s really insulting language. It’s framed in a way that makes us look helpless, like we don’t have any agency in this.’ The media criticism we all need to hear in this industry was happening face-to-face.”

Another solution to the language issue that aligns well with journalistic principles is to get more specific. “We don’t want to call an entire neighborhood a ‘poor neighborhood.’ What systems are in place? What history is there that makes a neighborhood what you would call a poor neighborhood? Are the people there paid low wages? Do they not have access to educational opportunities?” Nagle said. “A lot of getting away from that objectifying language is moving toward language that highlights accountability and systems. It’s not because those words are offensive, it’s because they’re inaccurate. They’re not helpful to us in understanding these problems.”

Language and framing are areas where Broke in Philly grappled with the old-school ways of doing journalism by asking: “Is this language really ‘objective,’ or is it rooted in stereotypes and cognitive bias?”

Sonn recalled his initial reaction. “I remember the first time I heard the term ‘returning citizens.’ I remember having my back go up and I was like, I’m not gonna use that term. Advocates can use that term.”

“One of the things I’ve learned from Aubrey and other people is to, in our journalism, when we can, try to just describe things as they are, instead of trying to put labels – instead of a ‘homeless person,’ a person who is living in their car. What are the specifics? It works in both directions because it works both in terms of not using harmful labels, but also helping people reading or listening to our journalism really know what that person’s situation is, rather than going with a label and then making a whole bunch of assumptions.”

Another example of how making generalizations is bad journalism: A few years ago, there was a police shooting in a neighborhood called Nicetown-Tioga, and a man had barricaded himself in a house and was shooting at officers on the street. The block was evacuated. Broadcast stations reported the incident as happening in North Philadelphia. “North Philadelphia is a third of the city,” Nagle said. That made the broadcasts ineffective at alerting residents of the specific place to take shelter. “That was a signal that those reports were written for the suburbs to tell a scary story about North Philly. It’s not actually for people to use, it’s not information people are supposed to apply to their lives. It’s a spectator sport.”

## The first high-impact story

In August 2018, the Philadelphia Weekly published a story that demonstrated Broke's collaborative solutions approach could result in classic journalistic impact. Using public records, it exposed the fact that the city had been collecting "fees" from bail that criminal defendants had posted, keeping 30 percent of the total even after the cases had been resolved. In fiscal year 2018, the city collected \$2.9 million in these fees, which amounted to a miniscule addition to the general fund. For many defendants, hundreds of dollars in fees created major hardships and contributed to a cascade of other financial problems. But the story was solutions journalism. It didn't just highlight the problem, it also discussed how another city had solved for it; New York had a similar rule in place but was able to transition to giving defendants back their fees without feeling the hurt on their city budget. And that was brought to the fore.

Former Mayor Nutter, who was not in office at the time, still recalls the story. "It's one of those things you read about and say, well, that doesn't make any sense, or that's not right. I think it's a perfect example of calling things out for what they are," a quality he said was common to Broke in Philly stories. "And just because we've always done it this way doesn't mean we should continue to do it this way. Just because it's legal doesn't make it right."

The story's author, Maura Ewing, appeared on WHYY's evening newscast. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* Editorial Board published an editorial arguing against the practice. Two months after the story ran, the city abolished the bail fee. It was a journalistic victory that made incremental progress against the systems of economic hardship.

## More ears on the ground

Each newsroom partner has at least one representative who attends monthly meetings. Until the pandemic, all meetings were held in person to foster better relationships. The project's current editor, Gene Sonn, puts together an agenda, inviting the partners to add to it. Newsroom representatives can talk about stories in the works, or brainstorm ideas, or ask for expertise or resources. Ideas for stories and public events emerge from these conversations, and Resolve Philly plays a much-needed project management role to coordinate efforts and drive projects forward.

Resolve Philly staff share story ideas, and their staff can help get them done in other ways too. Sonn sends weekly posts in Slack and emails to the entire collab group; he is also in contact communication with each newsroom's "rep."

For instance, last December as freezing temperatures threatened many Philly residents, Sonn reached out to *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Henry Savage to let him know the team was hearing about heating issues in residential apartments.



He said, 'Hey, could you focus on the residential heating issues while we're going to have a Broke in Philly staffer look at places where there's heating and warming sites for people without housing?' Savage recalled. He investigated the heating issues for service-journalism story letting people

know how to report those issues to the landlord and get them resolved. Meanwhile, a Resolve Philly staffer put together a roundup of heating and warming sites across Philly.

"With that collaboration, we were able to, within two weeks, have a resource for people who were housed and needed help with heating and people who were unhoused and needed help with heating," Savage said. "So a simple email like that can already have more impact, not use as many resources of one newsroom, but still have a good impact on your communities."

At other times, newsrooms initiate projects the collective adopts. In November 2019, several newsrooms attended a gun violence reporting summit organized by what is now the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting. At the next partner meeting, newsroom representatives began asking for a boilerplate list of resources they could include at the bottom of stories for people who'd been victimized by shootings, a practice that's become common in stories about suicide and sexual assault. Henninger and the team at Billy Penn took the lead in putting it together and publishing, and Resolve Philly staff organized it for other newsrooms to use.



# Moving money together

Many newsroom partners have said it's hard to find time to attend meetings and stay engaged in the collaborative given the demands of their jobs. Some have struggled to make the case to their bosses that the effort is worth it – it's seen as something “extra” rather than integral to their work.

“Collaborations like Broke in Philly are a classic case of getting out as much as you put in,” said Jason Villemmez of *Philadelphia Gay News*. “If you have the time and the resources to truly participate, the results can be spectacular. However, if you have a small staff that is already maxed out with their existing responsibilities, it can be incredibly challenging to add on collaborative work.” One small incentive to engage in the collaborative is the collective funding pot: A small amount of money is available – from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars – to offset the costs of reporting on Broke

stories, or doing an engagement event, or anything related to the mission of the project. Members of the collaborative submit a brief funding proposal describing the story and how the money would be used. Proposals are visible to all of the collab representatives – and they are the ones to vote on and decide which ones should receive funding. It is participatory financing at its heart.

Originally, people would pitch stories and partners would vote to fund stories if they fit within the theme of economic development and the larger mission of Broke in Philly. Eventually, the collaborative decided to add a stipulation; to get funding, the idea had to be in partnership with at least one other newsroom organization.



Photo by Rachel Wisniewski

“That part was really important because it incentivized partnership,” Lu said. “You were talking with people outside of even just the meeting. You had to sync up with them to come up with something to then put on paper to pitch.”

The money made it possible for smaller outlets to do ambitious stories. They could use it to hire freelance reporters, pay interns, cover transportation costs, hire

translators or offset other editorial costs. For a small outlet, a little bit of revenue can go a long way.

Next City used Broke funding to report on the aftermath of a fire at the Philadelphia Energy Solutions oil refinery and the refinery's subsequent closure. Chalkbeat Philadelphia reported on efforts to bring trauma-informed practices to the Philly school system. Restrepo of 2Puntos Platform co-founded a Spanish-language reporting collective called VozColectiva and, with money from the collab fund, produced a resource guide to domestic violence services that discreetly folds up to fit inside a cellphone case. WURD Radio did a series investigating whether promises made in 2020 to diversify institutions and support Black businesses have been fulfilled.

"We are an independent, Black-owned radio station and we appreciate the recognition and the acknowledgement that doing this work, being a part of the collaborative, going to meetings, all of that stuff is time consuming," Lomax said. "So I have always been appreciative of the fact that they allow you to do more innovative work by giving you some financial support."

This Broke in Philly communal fund has paid out nearly \$300,000 over the years. But the fund has also been valuable in ways other than financial – the collaborative funding process got the partners used to working with one another, and it reinforced the lack of hierarchy within the group. "It felt so participatory and democratic," Lu said. "For a lot of us, we are not in a position to call the shots like that or even to move money like that."

## It's not the size of the newsroom

Broke in Philly's success owed much to its careful attention to equity among newsroom partners.

Stefanie Murray directs the Center for Cooperative Media, the go-to source in the journalism world for understanding how to make journalism collaboratives work. She said she's seen many other collaboratives fail because they lacked a commitment to sharing power among the newsroom partners and let the biggest players – usually commercial media outlets with a large audience – run the show.

## "The size of the organization doesn't matter as much as the engagement with local communities does"

"I think there's a false sense that size equals impact when you look at these collaboratives," Murray said. "I think Jean and Cassie and Gene Sonn and the entire organization, they've always been very intentional about equity and inclusivity. They understand that the size of the organization or the perceived reach doesn't matter as much as the engagement with local communities does."

Lu echoes this sentiment — and she's been involved in *Broke in Philly* while working at a relatively larger organization, WHYY, and while working for Germantown Info Hub, a small, community-based outlet (which began at Temple University and is now part of *Resolve Philly*). "You can bring something of value regardless of the size of your newsroom," she said. To suddenly have an additional story that week that strengthened the stuff that we could do was like spending your last dollar and you open your wallet and you still have five bucks."

While bigger outlets may have resources to bring to the table — multimedia production, for instance, or greater reporting capacity — smaller outlets are sometimes



more nimble and able to act on opportunities without needing layers of approval. They're also more plugged in to the specific neighborhoods and audiences they cover, and often, the reporters themselves are part of the community.

Independent-hyperlocal outlets that serve immigrants and communities of color tend to have few staff and small budgets, so are often in need of extra capacity. "Our media, we have to be everything: journalists, human resources, coordinators, producers," Restrepo of 2Puntos Platform said. "As immigrants, we are still at the margin." Through the collaborative, she's learned more about how American journalists work and been able to work with WHYY and Billy Penn.

“It has been an invaluable opportunity as an independent journalist, immigrant, and founder of hyperlocal media.

[Collaborating] was a plus for ‘my’ community.”

“I think in journalism there's a lot of snobbery that you work your way up to bigger and bigger places, and that means you're more important,” Sonn said.

“Sometimes if you go working your way up like that, it can also mean you're farther and farther removed from the actual people that you're trying to serve, and also farther and farther away from the real stories. I've been, time and again, so impressed with the things that some of our very small newsrooms bring to the table.”

Warren at NBC10 noted the ways working in collaboration helped her newsroom transcend its limitations while offering advantages to others. “I thought it was important for the collaborative [to have a broadcast TV partner] because we could provide some storytelling tools, video tools, we could provide expertise in things like live streaming and lighting and some of the technical aspects. But I thought it was way more important for the television newsroom, internally, to be involved because it refocused our attention on a really critical part of our

viewing audience. It refocused us on enterprise, on public service journalism, and the things that we always want to say we do, but in the hustle of breaking news, sometimes there's not a spot to do it. This made us stop and do it.”

## **“We are able to see our unique value proposition due to the direct access to partners and their approaches to journalism”**

On the other end of the spectrum are small, community rooted outlets like Love Now Media. Founded by Jos Duncan Asé, Love Now Media uses its platform for “amplifying acts of love at the intersection of social justice, wellness, and equity.” Through the cooperative, “we have built stronger relationships with other news partners who we now value as part of our community,” she said. “We are able to see our unique value proposition due to the direct access to those partners and their approaches to stories and journalism.”

# RESOLVE PHILLY GROWS INTO A FREESTANDING ORGANIZATION

When Haynes was looking to leave her job with the city, she started talking to Friedman-Rudovsky. She had been admiring the collaborative's work and saw exciting potential in developing Resolve Philly as an organization. The two joined forces, and in August 2018 Haynes became a co-founder of Resolve Philly.



Jean Friedman-Rudovsky and Cassie Haynes

"It was a big inflection point when Cassie and I decided to join together," Friedman-Rudovsky said, "because it meant that Resolve could fulfill a bigger mission than being a vessel for a collaborative reporting project, which is what it was up until that point." The big idea was to harness the critical mass of local newsrooms that were working together and had demonstrated a desire to learn, grow and approach their work differently, beyond journalism's

traditional, competitive confines. By building a strong, independent organization around that collaborative work, we could leverage that for a greater impact in our city," she said.

Haynes recalled that the first task was to extend the collaborative's commitment beyond the one-year timeline. "We very quickly knew we wanted to get the partners committed for five years, and that was going to be the thing that enabled us to build more on top of the collaborative, centered around this idea of collaborative reporting and leveraging the power of those newsrooms coming together," she said.

Becoming a freestanding organization meant doing a careful dance: Would the newsrooms see Resolve Philly, the host of the collaborative, as a competitor? At that point, Resolve Philly was not a publisher or a newsroom, but providing resources required it to raise resources, so the competition lay in the scarce fundraising environment of the nonprofit journalism world. That established a challenge for Resolve Philly that it



continues to navigate, maintaining trust with and being of value to the members of the collaborative central to its mission. They walk that line by holding firm to the idea that anything they do in Philly must be complementary or additive, and not in competition. They also carefully chose which funding opportunities to go after, and will often decide not to put in an application if it is an opportunity that newsrooms in the collaborative could benefit from more.



Photo by Kimberly Paynter

The resources they do secure primarily go toward staffing of work that will benefit the wider ecosystem. “Often it was us trying to listen really well and observe and understand the newsrooms that we’re working with and then putting forward proposals of, ‘How about this? We can sense this, and we see that this would be helpful. We see that a data reporter would be helpful, we see that a community engagement person would be helpful. Let’s try this out.’ And then we do,” Friedman-Rudovsky said. The proof that this approach is working is that partners stay involved and the collaborative keeps growing.

## From a 1-year to 5-year commitment

At collab meetings, Friedman-Rudovsky and Haynes began talking about reasons to extend the Broke in Philly project. The arbitrary one-year timeframe had more to do with award cycles than with the project’s purpose. Given the enormity of the topic, what could they accomplish in one year? With Resolve Philly’s fundraising success, it was possible to think bigger.

“I came to the newsrooms with a proposal, ‘what do you guys think about committing to this for five years?’” Friedman-Rudovsky said. “Which is like a big deal for newsrooms. Everyone said yes, and not a single newsroom left.”

**“Everyone said yes,  
and not a single  
newsroom left”**

"I remember that meeting really well," Warren recalled. "I had two feelings. One is, I'm a big believer in letting things end... But on the other hand, there's no question we had just scratched the surface of an issue as big as poverty in Philadelphia, you know?" In fact, five years was a compromise position, as some partners argued for ongoing attention. "One of the big decision points, at least for me," Warren said, "was that we had an election coming up and I really wanted to stretch to the election because it was so important that Philadelphia's representatives, that the governor, that everybody from the president on understand the issue of poverty and how important it was in Philadelphia."

The Broke collaborative's coordinated coverage of the 2019 mayoral election included a public debate and a lot of sharing notes among outlets about what was said where.

"I felt that we did a good job of raising poverty in Philadelphia as an issue in the mayor's race," Warren said. "Nobody could not talk about poverty as an issue. I'd worked on and off in Philadelphia for 20 years, and it was a place where political candidates could say one thing in one audience and another thing to another audience. Because we were all collaborating, they couldn't do that anymore. The paper for the African diaspora was covering mayoral candidates and they would come back to the collaborative and say, 'Well, this is what he said in West Philadelphia.' And we would say, 'Oh, that's not what he said in Chestnut Hill!'"

# GROWING RESOLVE'S RESOURCES

Resolve Philly grew as an organization to support the collaboration and the mission of solutions journalism. The first people to join the Resolve Philly team developed two core resources: language and framing, and community engagement.

## Changing the conversation, with care

Aubrey Nagle was hired in 2019 to provide ongoing support on language, a resource for professional development for journalists in the Broke in Philly collaborative. There also turned out to be a lot of interest from outside the organization, as people across the country looked for guidance. The language guide has been adopted by newsrooms, journalism schools, and even corporations.

Andrea Wenzel, a journalism professor at Temple University who co-founded Germantown Info Hub, said she and other journalism instructors use these resources in the classroom. "It's hugely helpful to have style guides, to provide resources around best practices for language," she said. "It gives some concrete clarity in some ways. It helps us go beyond aspirations of wanting to do equitable journalism or do the right thing or tell good stories, and it gives us more directed, concrete tools to do that work."

The Resolve Philly team was also noticing, through interactions with people in the journalism world, that having resources on language, framing, and best practices also provided individual reporters with a bit of leverage to make change within their newsrooms.

"If you're an individual reporter and you go out and talk to somebody and they say, 'Hey, that language is not cool,' and you're existing in your beat bubble and may not agree with them, maybe you bring it to your editor," Nagle said, "but if you have that experience and then 10 other reporters you're talking to have that experience, you're like, 'Maybe this is actually a problem that we need to start talking about.' Having a language guide to turn to is a powerful amplifier."

# Community engagement at the core

In interviews and surveys, members of the collaborative have consistently named community engagement as Resolve Philly's greatest value to their work, and it has become a core offering of the organization, woven in from the early days of Friedman-Rudovsky's work with the reentry community.

Engaged journalism is a relatively new practice that, like solutions journalism, hasn't been fully adopted among traditionalists. But, it's growing. Many news organizations now have positions like "engagement editor" to explore ways to involve the community in some way. At best, it involves cultivating and navigating relationships with the community. In practice, it varies quite a bit. On one end of the spectrum, engagement may mean a junior staffer is tasked with putting content on social media and combing the platforms for story ideas.



Photo by Drew Dennis

"So much of traditional journalism's community engagement is after all the work is done, and we want to just get more eyeballs on our product," Sonn said. "We can have a little community conversation but it's not likely to really shape what we do."

Resolve Philly is on the other end of the spectrum.

Additional grants from the Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation Fund in 2019 enabled Resolve Philly to expand and, in the process of adding resources, add perspectives and skills from outside the journalism world that turned out to be critical to its success. Resolve Philly's independence as a freestanding organization helps it to play the role of translator, connector, and navigator. But what really makes the difference is allowing people outside the news bubble to lead the way.

It's hard to imagine Broke in Philly or Resolve Philly without Derrick Cain, who has led community engagement work since 2019.

Cain has a special insight on the media many journalists don't: he's been the story. In 2011, the Philadelphia Daily News published a story about mandatory minimums leading to a surge of federal inmates, profiling him as the first person with no previous criminal background to be incarcerated for 10 to life for a first-time offense. A week after the article was published, a stranger denounced him in the comments section, throwing out assumptions rooted in stereotypes and a lot of contempt. Cain saw these attitudes as the product of how crime, justice, and the people in prison are covered by the media. "It wasn't that the piece was written in a negative light" he said. "There's this narrative that's been playing for so many years... so that's how you feel about people, especially returning citizens or people that you don't know. You're going by what you've read in the paper or saw on TV."

The experience led him to address the power of the media. "For me, it was about changing that narrative," Cain said.

He was released from federal prison in 2017. Eager to tell his story and advocate



for criminal justice reform, he jumped into mentorship work and speaking engagements. He was open about his own story while working hard to build a community and an identity that transcended the labels attached to his experience. He won a criminal justice journalism fellowship in 2018 and he met Friedman-Rudovsky at one of her solutions journalism workshops. Cain also made an impression on Sonn, then at WHYY, who had been "wowed" by hearing Cain tell his story at an event that brought Cain and other fellows together with professional journalists.

When Resolve Philly hired Cain in 2019, he was tasked with creating a community engagement strategy for the collaborative. He began by reaching out to people in the community, setting up tables at community events to invite people to come and talk and learn about Resolve Philly and its collaborative newsroom partners. He was getting to know people and their concerns, "and then bringing them into the fold, talking to



them about how they feel about journalism, but also teaching them how the journalism process works” he said.

Simultaneously, he began talking to journalists about the way they do their reporting and working with them to explore different approaches, “to do this reporting in a way where the community members will feel that it was authentic and it was definitely reflective of their life, or their story that they want to tell. So that’s basically what I do. It’s just really being that liaison between the two parties, so that way it could be better authentic reporting.”



“You may be a journalist, but they know who you are now. They see you in the community. You’re not just there parachuting in and getting your soundbite and leaving.”

Authentic reporting requires having relationships in place and when reporters don’t live in communities or know people who do, it’s nearly impossible to get the real story of what’s going on. “That’s where this gap has grown over so many years and why folks feel a little hesitant talking to journalists, because they feel like their story won’t be represented accurately,” Cain said.

By showing up at community meetings and in community spaces, volunteering on community efforts with no particular assignment or agenda, he was demonstrating that a news organization could show up and offer help without asking anything in return.

Cain launched a series of events called Sound OFFs, which started as small conversations of between five and 20 people. Each Sound OFF begins with the question, “What do you love about your neighborhood?”

Sonn said the positive framing makes all the difference. “I don’t think as a journalist I would ever come into a community meeting and ask, ‘What do you love about this place?’ But it sets a completely different tone. Even if, as a journalist, I went into a community and only asked that one thing and then did everything else the way I used to do things, it would actually have a significant difference in my opinion.”

The initial conversation is about getting to know people, Cain said. “This is the relationship building piece.” The next step is to come back with information that the community has asked for.

One example of this feedback loop was a Sound OFF in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of Philly where people expressed a need to understand estate planning – wills, powers of attorney, etc. Cain reached out to a local attorney who agreed to run an estate planning workshop for the community. “At our info session, we heard a need, and we took that and came back with information that can help or support the community,” he said.

This is the mindset an organizer brings to journalism: they see information as a critical resource, and journalism as a powerful set of tools to provide that resource. Once you show you’re willing to share that resource with people who need it, in the way they need it, you begin to build a relationship based on mutual trust. That makes it possible to call on people in the community to help you understand what’s happening, to lend their voices and their stories in service of journalism – if that work is aligned with their values and if they feel respected.

Vernon Ray is one of the people Cain has

built a strong relationship with. Ray built a career as a professional photographer after coming home from prison in 2008. He bootstrapped his business and his program, Shoot Cameras Not Guns, which works with young people to develop their photography and media production skills.

“People loved what we were doing, but nobody was really stepping up to support. Nobody taught me to do any of these things,” Ray said, “but when Derrick came and told me how he can help through Resolve, man, that brother brought the type of support that we needed. He brought people to listen.”



Cain and other collaborators hosted a Sound OFF event with Ray and his mentees that explored issues of mental health, specifically trauma, and violence prevention techniques.

Cain has also hired Ray and his students to do occasional photography work for Resolve Philly events.

NBC10 profiled Ray's program in January 2022. Ray said the story "helped people see the help side of the crisis, the positive side of people actually boots to the ground, getting stuff done, having a safe space and open ears to listen to what the problem really is."

**“Now we’ve got more people participating and perpetuating a positive cycle. That's the part I think media should play”**

Information on solutions is vital, Ray says, because it shows people what they can do about a problem. “Now we’ve got more people participating and perpetuating a positive cycle. That's the part I think media should play. A lot of times, they pick what they want out of the conversation to make the story fit other things that’s going on and make it clickable. I don’t like that part about it. I want to make sure that when we do allow these media folks in the room to hear these conversations and be a part of these things, I want them to tell the truth, the real story. I don’t want nobody to come in and create clickable content. Talk the truth.”

# COVID HITS: RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC

When COVID-19 hit, news organizations — like businesses everywhere — were struggling to meet community needs while navigating confusion, uncertainty, and conflicting guidance from trusted institutions. Suddenly, information felt like a matter of life and death. But news organizations saw their revenue suddenly plummet. Demand for news spiked during COVID, but the money to sustain it did not. Like businesses everywhere, news organizations are also made up of people, people who were scared, some who were getting sick.

The first collab meeting after the pandemic arrived on a Friday at the end of March 2020. It was the first time members of the two-year-old collaborative had met entirely virtually. They got to work.



One of the first projects came from a staffer at *Kensington Voice*, who noticed that her family was unable to access critical health information because it wasn't available in Spanish. *Kensington Voice* employed trained translators, so the editor proposed to start translating stories that other newsrooms in the collaborative were doing about COVID

and share them for republication. The collective voted to fund the project and newsrooms used the Slack workspace to share stories. Between March and November 2020, *Kensington Voice* translated more than 300 articles, including coverage of the general election.

“When the pandemic first began, they already had an infrastructure for collaboration in place,” said Wenzel, the Temple journalism professor who wrote about Resolve Philly in her forthcoming book. “It allowed them to respond quickly and organically to the needs that were arising.”

Molly de Aguiar, a longtime advocate for funding nonprofit journalism, had recently moved to the Independence Public Media Foundation (IPMF), a new philanthropic organization in Philadelphia. Haynes recalled, “IPMF reached out to us and said, ‘If we give you a million dollars, can you do something that responds to the information crisis we’re facing at this moment?’ And we were like, ‘yes, we definitely can.’”

The \$1 million unrestricted grant meant, first of all, that Resolve Philly wouldn’t need to lay off staff. They could provide more funding to support members of the collaborative and take on big projects to meet the moment and serve people most vulnerable to the pandemic.

Resolve Philly purchased \$233,000 worth of ads in collaborative-member publications, giving them a much-needed revenue boost at a time when news outlets all over, like their advertisers, were feeling acute financial stress. The ads were public health messages about COVID, designed to be culturally sensitive and representative of the city’s residents.

## Equally Informed Philly

The grant also allowed Resolve Philly to develop Equally Informed Philly, an initiative to bridge the information divide in Philly through text and place-based information delivery. It was a direct response to the COVID crisis and was also created to be an evergreen part of Resolve Philly’s work.

The text-based part of the initiative became the Equal Info Line. SMS is a means of digital communication available to those who don’t have access to the internet at home or work and those without smartphones.





“We wanted to make sure people aren’t being left behind because of the digital divide” explained Lily Medosch, one of the Resolve Philly team members who staffed the text line at its conception.

Resolve Philly’s ads then began to spread the word about Equally Informed Philly (EIP), generating some 500 initial subscribers.

Since it began, the EIP text line has been a way to do three things, first to take questions from community members that the team may be able to respond to with information resources. Some of the resources have included COVID protocols for interacting with elder family members, how to become a poll worker, how to access rental assistance, how to apply for funds to help repair a home, and what renters needed to know about the eviction moratorium. Second, to send out Broke in Philly stories and other information, including a weekly text message newsletter with service journalism stories and resources. Third, to surface story leads and tips. When a question comes in over the text line that Resolve Philly staff can’t answer, they pass it along to collaborative partners to investigate. Any story that results is then sent back to the person who wanted to know, effectively closing the loop.

An example of one such story is someone who texted the line saying her car had disappeared after she parked it on the street. The EIP team figured out the car had been towed because it was parked in a plow zone, “but the plow zone sign wasn’t very prominent.” Billy Penn produced a story about plow zones in an effort to alert residents so they could avoid being towed.

Medosch estimates that Equally Informed Philly has sent approximately 8,000 text messages as of May 2023 and there are approximately 1,400 English and 70 Spanish subscribers so far, plus others who receive Spanish messages through WhatsApp.

## **Deepening community engagement**

The IPMF grant also allowed Resolve Philly to expand the Community Engagement Team, which now includes Jingyao Yu and Valerie Dowret, a former intern and freelance reporter.

Yu has a background in public health and deep connections in Philly's Asian American Pacific Islander communities. She thinks a lot about language accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and how those things affect the availability of resources.

## **"What does it mean to shift from writing about a community to writing for and with the community?"**

"We often talk at Resolve about, 'What does it mean to shift from writing about a community, reporting about a community, to writing for and with the community,'" Yu said. "Who is this piece for? What is the purpose? Is it to inform, to introduce a different narrative and lens to help build understanding?" Sometimes solutions pieces help people navigate power and influence decision makers, but that's not always what the communities themselves prioritize. "How does this directly benefit the communities who are impacted by these issues – more immediately than, now you just gotta wait around until the policymakers read our reporting?"

Having deep relationships with the community is necessary to guard against the bad habit of relying on the same sources for every story. "We tend to elevate folks that journalists previously wouldn't have thought to reach out to as sources," Yu said. "These folks aren't Googleable, you know? It's us making sure that the narrative is fully representative and that journalists aren't going to the few people who flag themselves as representative of this community, that the community members themselves don't see as actually representing them."

One of the community members who has a longtime relationship with Resolve Philly is Jondhi Harrell of The Center for Returning Citizens. Harrell said he frequently gets calls from reporters and visits from TV crews. "We've been in the media a lot, because we do serious work in terms of food scarcity, violence, and incarceration – all hot button topics." He's noticed the difference between ratings-oriented reporting and that done by outlets not beholden to commercial pressure.



## **"Reporting should be a realistic portrayal of what's going on and some possible solution, so the reader is left with a little bit of hope"**

"There's a lot of ways to go about reporting, and I think the Resolve organizations have always been stellar in terms of not only painting a realistic picture of what is going on, but exploring some of the reasons why this happened," Harrell said. "We can talk about violence and death and shootings in the street, but if we don't talk about lack of opportunity, if we don't talk about economics, if we don't talk about dysfunctional schools and many of the underlying issues that contribute to the situation, then you're not doing valid reporting. I think the Resolve organizations not only do that well, but then they seek to present some solutions. Reporting should be a realistic portrayal of what's going on and some possible solution that's being done by some organizations or some people, so that the reader is left with a little bit of hope."

# A SUMMER OF PROTEST

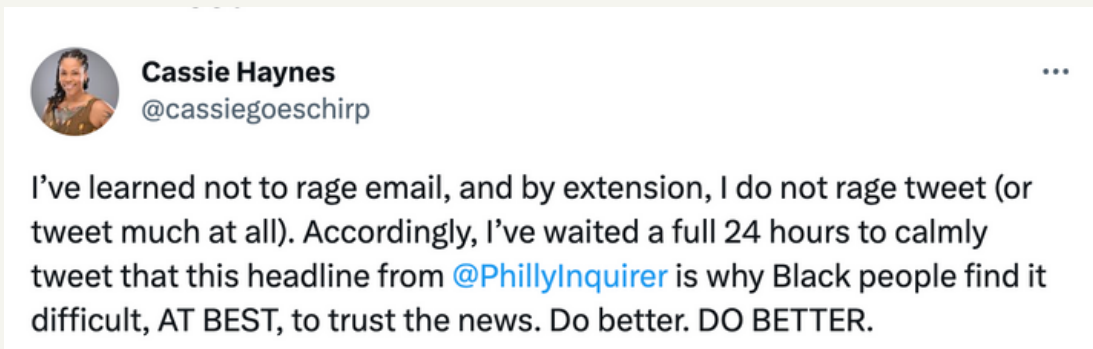
The summer of 2020 was heavy. On May 25, George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis. Black Lives Matter protests sprang up in hundreds of cities across the US throughout the summer, including Philadelphia, which had seen its own police violence.



The statue of former Mayor Frank Rizzo, renowned for his racism and support for police use of force, was soon removed from in front of the Municipal Services Building.

On June 2, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a column with the headline “Buildings Matter, Too,” bemoaning the destruction of architecture during the riots, looting and clashes with police that followed the murder of George Floyd.

“Buildings Matter, Too.”



Cassie Haynes was the person who called the world’s attention to the headline, and a match was lit. Within days, a reckoning was underway within the newspaper. On June 4, 2020, 44 of the newspaper’s journalists of color called out “sick and tired” after sending an open letter to the newspaper’s management, calling out years of systemic racism, tone deafness and resistance to change.

The letter read in part,

**It's no coincidence that communities hurt by systemic racism only see journalists in their neighborhoods when people are shot or buildings burn down. It takes commitment to correct and improve that relationship. It is an insult to our work, our communities, and our neighbors to see that trust destroyed—and makes us that much more likely to face threats and aggression. The carelessness of our leadership makes it harder to do our jobs, and at worst puts our lives at risk.**

An apology from the publisher followed, and the headline was changed in the online edition. Two years later, Washington Post reporter Wesley Lowery wrote an award-winning 6,400-word report, published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, exploring the newspaper's history with racism and the events of 2020 and posing the question, "Can *The Inquirer* really become an anti-racist institution?"

*The Philadelphia Inquirer* had been a newsroom partner in the collaborative since the Reentry Project, the idea for which had come from one of its reporters. But according to the open letter from *Philadelphia Inquirer* staff, the kind of community-centered approach the Broke in Philly collaborative had worked hard to cultivate had not been adopted by the 200-year-old newsroom.

The moment threw into relief the distinction between the collective institution the collaborative had become, under Resolve Philly's banner, and the city's biggest and most established news organization.

"They're the paper of record and their actions have consequences that are felt by members of the collaborative in different ways," Haynes recalled. The collaborative offered a way to come together around a shared set of values and an approach to journalism that was responsive to the community – because the collaborative is a community.

True to the solutions approach, Hayne said members recognized the difference between themselves and the institutions they worked for, and the importance of looking at systems and root causes. "It's not just the *Inquirer* here," she said. "It's not the quality of the journalist, but the system that the journalist is operating within."



Nagle analyzed coverage produced during the seven days following George Floyd's murder by 19 of the Broke in Philly partners, approximately 400 articles (she did not include radio and TV broadcasts as transcripts were unavailable). She used the protest paradigm, a research framework that's been used for decades. It breaks down how much of the coverage framed the protest as a riot, as a spectacle to be observed, as a confrontation between police and protesters, or as a debate over the issues. Nagle added a fifth category for coverage focused on the response to the protests themselves.

"We found that a lot of the coverage in the breaking news that first week was really focused on framing the protest as a riot, focused on property damage and on fires and things like that, [which was] a pretty small proportion of what went on," she said. "And a lot of the work focused on response to the protests – there's so much coverage of what Mayor Kenney had to say that day, or what this Eagles player had to say about them or what this other celebrity had to say about it." Recommendation: provide more context about what people want, what are they asking for, what is the context of the event.

At a lunch meeting, Nagle presented her findings to the partners. "That presentation to the newsrooms was a bit of a mirror, and I think it was probably a little hard for some of our partners to see their work reflected in that way," Haynes recalled of that meeting.

"The same newsrooms that were eventually receptive were the ones pushing back," Nagle recalled. "The pushback was, 'This is breaking news. We're just trying to cover it.'" The problem is, "breaking news is going to shape how the majority of people in the area understand this event, because most of them were not there."

Resolve Philly published a version of Nagle's report online in June 2021.

# HOW COLLABORATION POWERS GREAT JOURNALISM

In five years, the collaborative produced more than 3,000 stories. Here are a few that illustrate the possibilities of collaborative journalism, powered by shared resources to respond to community needs.



## The Toll

Gene Sonn left his position as News Director at WHYY and joined as Director of the Collaborations in November 2020.

“It was complete all-hands-on-deck about COVID all the time for such a long period,” he recalled. Resolve Philly knew it was important to refocus the collaborative’s work on the news needs of its audiences beyond COVID. And so, the team proposed a series under the Broke in Philly banner that could give the newsrooms the opportunity (and good excuse) to turn some of their attention to something other than the pandemic. After a series of community engagement events, the collaborative launched The Toll: The Roots and Costs of Gun Violence.

Shootings spiked in Philadelphia in 2020, after already being on the rise over the previous couple of years. Gun violence took nearly 500 lives in the city in 2020 alone; the ripple effects were harder to quantify: hospital bills, lost income, mental health struggles, opportunities lost.

## "How could we be a responsive community listening organization of journalists and not take it on?"

"It was on everybody's mind," Sonn said. "How could we be a responsive community listening organization of journalists and not take it on?" It took some time for the collaborative to think about how to address gun violence through the lens of economic mobility and solutions to poverty. "We wanted to get at root causes, and we wanted to talk about, what is the price our community is paying?"

The collaborative leaned hard on community listening by hosting multiple Sound OFFs before giving the green light to any stories. The community conversations sought to discover what people living in areas with high gun violence wanted to know, and what they wanted journalists to dig into.

"And there were some stories that grew out of that that I don't know if we would've gotten to had we started with a typical way, which is a bunch of journalists sitting at an editorial meeting either around the table or on Zoom or whatever, all spitballing ideas. Starting with that listening first, it just made the whole series fundamentally different and more useful, making sure we're meeting the information needs of the people who are most living with the consequences of the gun violence."

The first story in The Toll ran in Germantown Info Hub in May 2021, an [article](#) about the connection between food insecurity and firearm use. Love Now Media followed with a [story](#) about the healthcare costs of gun violence. The third story in the series arose from a Sound OFF: in October 2020, Walter Wallace Jr. was killed by police who responded to a 911 call from his parents asking for help with his mental health crisis. At the community event, people asked what they could call other than 911. *Kensington Voice* ran a [story](#) with those resources.

"We knew it met an information need that some people were seeking," Sonn said. "We also knew that it was the kind of thing that journalists are really well

suited to kind of figuring out, doing that research and bringing all that information together.”

Someone texted the EIP text line that their car windows had been shot out. The texter wasn’t involved in the shooting otherwise, but as long as their windows were shot out, they couldn’t go to work and they didn’t have the money to repair them. They asked if there was some resource they could access to get the windows fixed. Billy Penn reported a story.

## Dionicia Roberson and the With Love series

Dionicia Roberson had a long, hard, personal relationship with journalism before she joined the Resolve Philly staff in 2020, initially helping with administrative work during the crush of the early pandemic. If Sonn’s perspective is typical of a conventional journalist, Roberson’s is that of someone on the outside looking in.



Dio Roberson, Resolve Philly’s Associate Editor of Community Narratives

Roberson — known to friends as “Dio” — grew up without a stable home. Her mother frequently moved her and her sister from state to state, often living in shelters. She attended college and eventually found her way to a journalism program. She had a starry-eyed vision of journalism, but that vision changed while she was at school.

“I had a sort of romantic ideal of journalism in my heart,” she said. “It’s about stewardship of information and knowledgeable, actionable things that can help empower people and help improve their lives.

I was taken aback by what the actual journalism landscape looked like when I was in school. By senior year, I was like, I don’t think I could join this industry without making some serious moral compromises.”

She didn’t feel her perspective, as a single mother who struggled with economic insecurity who knew what it was like to be homeless, was welcome in journalism school. The concept of objectivity, as it was being taught, seemed disingenuous at best. She saw more and more how commercial pressures and the competition over eyeballs distorted the practice and the product



into something that bore no resemblance to her vision.

She worked various non-journalism jobs and brought writing and storytelling into her work whenever possible. At one point, a new colleague at one of those jobs — who had recently left the journalism field — told her about Resolve Philly, describing it as a place where people shared Roberson's ideas of what journalism could and should be.

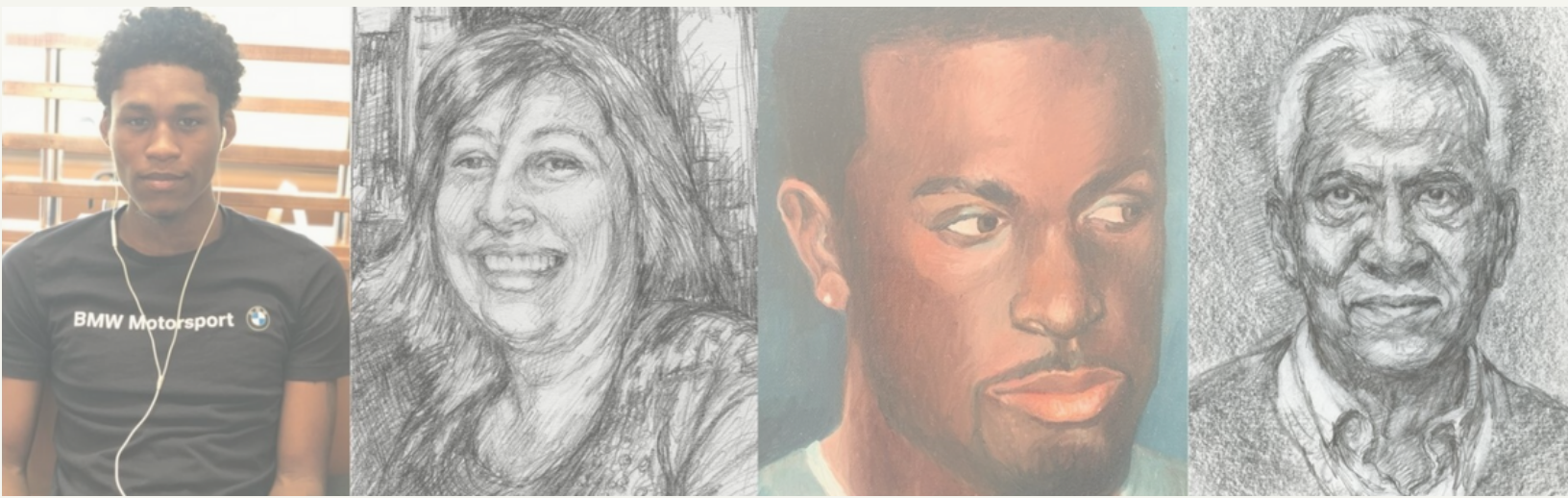
An ex-journalist friend connected Roberson to Friedman-Rudovsky and Haynes, giving her a chance to talk about the field she was so passionate and so conflicted about. They surprised her with a job offer. She joined the Resolve Philly staff around the same time Sonn did, and she saw, in the way he worked, the kind of care and sense of mission she once believed journalism could have. Her love for journalism returned.

**"I felt a resurgence of that old love for journalism, that, yes, this is what we're supposed to be doing. This is what you do with that power"**

"If my complaint from the past was that there doesn't seem to be anything humanistic or genuine about journalism anymore, then those first six months at Resolve absolutely upended that opinion. I felt a resurgence of that old love for journalism, that, yes, this is what we're supposed to be doing. This is what you do with that power. I have Gene Sonn to thank, watching him in action facilitating the collab. He spent a great deal of time just building solid relationships before he ever asked anything of anyone."

Roberson found her calling in the project With Love, which launched on the anniversary of the first COVID case in Philadelphia. More than 5,000 Philadelphians had died of the disease, and with the lockdown still in place and vaccines not yet available, the usual ways of mourning were cut off from people who had lost loved ones. With Love invited people to publicly remember them. A form solicited basic information and people could submit writings, drawings, or photographs, if they wished. They also had the option to talk to a reporter who could help them get their thoughts on paper — that was Roberson. She developed a particular role, supporting community members in telling their stories in their own words.





"I would preface it by saying, 'Hey, don't think of it as a reporter interviewing you. Let's just talk about your mom, or your dad, or your cousin,'" Roberson said. "Having these really sad conversations with people over Zoom was pretty trippy. It was really tough, but it felt rewarding because people would be laughing about something so silly that their uncle used to do. We'd both be cracking up, with tears just streaming down our faces."

The project launched in March 2021, and for more than six months there was a steady stream of interest. As vaccines became available and the world opened up, the project waned. But gun violence was spiking in Philly at the same time and, as The Toll was documenting the impact, With Love expanded to include personal stories of loss due to gun violence.

"Every single person was using their time, their platform and their narrative as an opportunity to vindicate their child," Roberson said. "You could tell how desperate these mothers were to vindicate their kids' names, and that was heartbreaking. I felt like that was a need they had that couldn't be filled in any other way. If you're allowed a platform and you can only publish one thing, it would be that my boy was actually a very good boy." Community narratives are now Roberson's full-time job, and an essential part of Resolve Philly's work. She frequently works with people to develop their stories and place them in outlets and she's helped outlets cultivate the voices of community members.

“Dio offers support to people who want to write something on their own or want to get their message out and don't want to do it through a journalist,” Sonn said. “She's really great at preserving their voice and not squishing any of their voice out of it. She's had to figure out [that role] along the way, because we can't point to other people who do this kind of thing. There are op-ed submission people, but that's very different than what Dio does.”

“When you come across somebody in the course of reporting who has a lot to say, a lot more than you could have in that piece, the ideal way is to connect with Dio, who can help this person tell their own story. You get the benefit of having this great first-person story to pair with your reporting.”

## **Our Kids: Steve Volk brings investigative reporting power**

Steve Volk had been a well-known freelance investigative reporter in Philadelphia for a decade. He followed the Reentry Project from a distance, and eventually began talking to Friedman-Rudovsky about working with Resolve Philly as an in-house investigative reporter. Initially, the idea was for him to cover evictions — he and Resolve Philly data guru Julie Christie had already teamed up on an investigative, data-driven story on evictions for WHYY in 2019.

Then Friedman-Rudovsky suggested he tackle the foster care system. “I was very naive and I thought, here's a nice narrow topic to cover,” he said. He had not yet realized that the foster care system touches on economics, race, class, jobs, substance use and abuse and recovery, and of course parenting. “It's a beat about everything.”



It was also a beat rarely covered, and then only in cases of extreme tragedy. “This is a system in which people are traumatized on a daily basis. We've just been covering it when somebody dies. Well, there's harm going on every day of the year.

It was clear that, from the community's point of view, the city was kidnapping their kids — that's the phrase they'd use."

The first story in the Our Kids series ran in March 2020: "Do LGBTQ Kids in Foster Care Count?" for the *Philadelphia Gay News*. Doing that first piece, Volk realized something: "This foster care beat is actually really difficult. It was a massive undertaking. I had joined the staff and spent about three weeks reading about the system before I realized there was no way that what I was originally hired to do — which was to write definitive, helpful articles, finding solutions to foster care, in a year — there was no way that was going to happen. I could have faked it, but it wasn't going to be really fulsome, from-the-ground-up, community-oriented stories that the community was part of, with their voices driving the story. That was not going to happen in a year." Fortunately, Friedman-Rudovsky and Haynes came to the same conclusion.

There were barriers at every turn: It was hard to find people who were directly affected by the system, and even harder to get them to share their stories. Then there were challenges accessing the data and records necessary to confirm their stories. DHS is arguably the most opaque of all government agencies.

On March 20, 2020, a few days into pandemic lockdown, Volk wrote a story for Billy Penn about how hundreds of foster children had been "left in limbo" by the state courts. On April 3, the court system announced a plan to restart foster care hearings. Steve heard through the grapevine that the story may have helped push the agency to act. "It was an early micro-victory that made me think, 'OK, maybe the system will be responsive to coverage,'" he said.



Illustration by April Lee

A bigger breakthrough came with a story for *Kensington Voice*, profiling a new program of Community Legal Services that provides parents with access to a peer parent advocate to work with them, along with wraparound social services. Original illustrations accompanied the story, which did well on *Kensington Voice*'s social media channels. Volk recalled feeling at the time, "This is the first story that points at what this series should be, and how it should look."

Volk started introducing himself to potential sources by sharing the story with them. “They would get right away what I’m about and what we’re trying to do, the kinds of stories we’re trying to tell.”

## **Adding public records and data analysis to the mix**

Julie Christie loves data. And public records. And “yelling about government,” she said, which is another way of saying she loves public records. Christie had been an intern with the Reentry Project and then with Resolve Philly in its early stages while in college. Friedman-Rudovsky and Haynes were so impressed with her that they offered her a full-time job to begin after she graduated in May 2019. She has always played several roles, but her heart is in data journalism. In 2022, Christie stepped into the role of data and special projects editor and became the go-to resource for data analysis and filing right-to-know requests.

Most newsrooms don't have a data journalist on staff. Within the 29 newsrooms that constitute the Broke in Philly collaborative, only NBC10, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and WHYY do. And while most journalists interact with public records, truly knowing what records are out there, and how to get and make sense of them, is a special skill that requires training and experience.

“Journalists who have the time and know-how can send in records requests with the specific query they want,” Christie said. “But if you’re a daily reporter trying to do an investigation, it’s really difficult to have the time to do that. Being this shared resource among the collaborative makes that a lot more doable.”

Volk and Christie have proven to be a powerhouse team. Together, they produced one of Broke in Philly’s highest-impact investigations.

Volk read a book by attorney Daniel Hatcher that alerted him to the fact that some local governments were collecting Social Security survivors benefits from orphaned children in foster care, unbeknownst to the children or their caregivers.



He and Christie worked together to request the records, and they discovered that the practice was going on in Philadelphia. The reporting was done, in a sense, but the story was missing something crucial: a personal story of someone directly affected.



Vaughn Jackson, legal guardian to Zaveonte Winn, 17, and Xavier Winn, 14.  
Photo by Tyger Williams for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

Months went by as Volk tried in vain to find someone. Then he connected with Vaughn Jackson, a foster parent of two boys, who had found out about the situation when applying for other benefits on the children's behalf.

Finally, in December 2021, *Metro Philly* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* published a story which exposed how the city had collected \$5 million in Social Security survivors benefits between fiscal years 2016 and 2020 from more than 300 orphaned children in foster care, without letting them know.

In March 2022, then city council member Helen Gym introduced legislation to end the practice, which passed in later that year. Because of Volk's story, approximately \$1.3 million per year has been saved from the government's coffers, instead available to the hundreds of children for whom that kind of money could make a big difference.



Vaughn Jackson, the foster parent featured in the story, said he was glad to be part of the investigation. “It was an honor for me to be involved, to help other families, because DHS was taking their money.”

## Shining a light on Philly’s AAPI communities

When Jingyao Yu joined the Community Engagement Team, she began to do community engagement with Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. She had heard concern from the communities about the disproportionate economic impact of COVID on AAPI-owned businesses.



Justin Lee, owner of Fern Rock Hardware, helps a customer in his shop in Philadelphia.

Photo by Tyger Williams for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

Christie had been curious about data on the federal government’s Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans, and after talking with Yu, she decided to investigate whether those loans were reaching AAPI communities.

“There were a lot of holes in the PPP data,” Christie explained. While you could see the names and addresses of businesses that got loans and for how much, you couldn’t see the race of the recipients, nor could you see who applied for a loan but didn’t get it. “People had a hard time investigating the equity of these programs.” It took a lot of data sleuthing to compare where the loans were going to where AAPI businesses were, and eventually it became clear that those businesses were being left out.

“In the story, there’s not a whole lot of data, but it showed us where to go to get interviews,” Christie said. “It took months to get that wrangled together to spit out a couple of sentences. But at the end of the day, you couldn’t have run those stories without those sentences, or they would’ve been very different.”

Yu from Resolve Philly’s Community Engagement Team worked with *Metro Philly* reporter Jack Tomczuk and Diana Lu, then a freelancer, on interviews that formed the heart of the story. The interviews required a lot of careful relationship building, coordination and interpretation. The story was in the works for more than a year, Sonn said. “It would’ve been really easy for people to just give up on it. ‘This is complicated. We’re not gonna get a lot of extra money or a big splash by doing this story. And we could just say, you know what, we tried, but it didn’t work out.’ But there was so much dedication,” he said. In October 2022, the story ran jointly in *Metro Philly* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The relationships the team had built generated a second story that highlighted a network of people who worked hard to help business owners, many of them with low proficiency in English, navigate the red tape required to secure a PPP loan.

Putting data in the service to community is a passion for Christie, and not just when it results in a published story.

“What’s really exciting and gratifying is knowing that the data work I’m doing is coming directly from questions the community has asked,” she said. The Community Engagement Team sometimes collects questions during a Sound OFF event, for instance, and brings those questions to her. She analyzes data and produces a custom tip sheet the team can share back with the community. “It draws such a direct thread through community listening, generating knowledge about this information gap they have that they want filled and being able to fill it. Then it goes directly back to the Community Engagement Team and they can bring it to the community, or it goes to a newsroom for further, deeper reporting.”

# THE BROKE IN PHILLY LEGACY

Beyond the thousands of stories, dozens of community events, and policy changes, here are a few of the things the Broke in Philly project has accomplished.

## Shifting the norms of what journalism is and who it's for

*The Philadelphia Inquirer* now has a Communities and Engagement desk staffed by four reporters and two editors, one of whom was the original manager for the collaborative. And it's not just *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. WHYY hosts the News and Information Community Exchange (N.I.C.E.), a collaborative of journalists, artists, publishers, and laypeople who help connect the station to diverse communities.

Interest in Resolve Philly's language and framing work and its analysis of sources and coverage has become so strong, it's led the organization to launch a consulting practice, Modifier, to support newsrooms across the country.

"In the last five years, there's definitely been a shift in conversation," said Layla A. Jones, a reporter at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* who covers economic equity. While Jones authored many stories at her previous job at Billy Penn that ran under the Broke in Philly banner, she was never directly involved in the collaborative. But she said the collaborative's work and its collective voice has made an impact on the culture of journalism in Philadelphia.

"Definitely, without a doubt they certainly have," she said. "I think it's all about the push in the local journalism ecosystem to make mainstream work more reflective of the communities that they claim to be writing for, and we're trying to make sure reporters are writing for the person instead of about a person."

# Community engagement and community-centered reporting

It would take another book-length report to detail all the advances in community engagement and projects centering community impact that have emerged in the past five years. It's still not the norm, but as the crisis in commercial media gets worse, independent outlets that center communities' needs have been finding success.

"I feel now that [newsrooms are] definitely more open four years later than they were when I first started the job in 2019," Cain said. "You're starting to see a lot more folks, a lot more organizations, want to fold community engagement into their reporting. And I think that's important. It's still a marathon, not a sprint. It's still a lot of work that needs to be done, but I'm seeing a noticeable change in the last four years that I've been doing this work."



## Putting the issue of poverty on the city's agenda

"The thing I care about most about the Broke in Philly reporting is putting the reasons that it's hard to get out of poverty in a city like Philadelphia on reporters' minds consistently," Sonn said.

“Not just when some report comes out from some university, or not when some politician is making it an issue, but have it be something that we pay attention to regularly, like we do so many other things. ... I think that frankly is one of the biggest successes of Broke in Philly, that among our member newsrooms, this is now something that they pay attention to regularly.”

## **"I think that we are seeing more tangible conversations about poverty, about generational wealth or generational poverty"**

“The impact on the city, I think that we are seeing more tangible conversations about poverty, about generational wealth or generational poverty,” Lomax said. “As we look at the mayor’s race, you’re seeing a lot more of the candidates talking specifically about what they’re going to do to ameliorate deep poverty.”



## **Relationships that continue**

Many people who have been in the collaborative stick around even when their job or role changes. Four former interns are now full-time staff; others have prominent positions in the Philly media world, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere.



And a handful of people who left the journalism field altogether still attend monthly collab meetings from time to time, just to stay connected. The Slack workspace has 300 members. People stick around.

Lu started her involvement with the collaborative early in its existence as a newsroom partner when she was community engagement editor at WHYY. She left journalism for a while and then returned to both journalism and Broke in Philly as the Coordinator of Germantown Info Hub. Lu is now in a funder role at the Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation Hub.

"Sometimes your beat changes and you can't keep on working with what you were working with before. But if you're a part of a collaborative, you could still continue that conversation and carry that in your role within the community in a very different way," Lu said. "The reality is you're not going to have the same job for the next five years or 10 years in the same organization. Most people will not. But you could still continue the conversation and do right by the communities you're serving, so you're not severing those ties."

**"One of the best things that came out of this project was mentoring newer news organizations, bringing them into the fold. So they didn't feel so alone"**

"My favorite thing that came out of this project is the collaboration and the connections between the news outlets," Henninger of Billy Penn said. "There was plenty of great reporting that happened and solutions brought and lives hopefully touched by the solutions that were brought forward and spurred, like policy change was spurred. But really as an insider's view, the connections that I've made with other news outlets is the best thing that came out of it. And watching other news leaders and reporters and editors connect with one another and learn from one another about the practice of journalism. And I want to add, one of the best things that came out of this project was the idea of mentoring newer news organizations, bringing them into the fold. So they didn't feel so alone."

Freelancer Malcolm Burnley said he wasn't sure how he'd fit into the collaborative, but he's found it to be "incredibly meaningful," giving him the chance to do print and audio stories with a variety of news organizations. "There are fewer and fewer opportunities to do longform, in-depth journalism in Philly. I know this because I've been doing that work for 10 years, and I've witnessed the deadlines grow tighter and the pay more meager since I moved to Philly a decade ago. Resolve Philly has provided a jolt of energy in the community by supporting projects that include this kind of reporting, and more," he said. "I would tell any freelancer that connecting with Resolve Philly – attending partner meetings, happy hours, and staying informed on their projects – would be the single best use of their time. And as a freelancer, you're always trying to get editors' attention. Where else can you get that many editors together all at once other than a Broke in Philly meeting? Answer: you can't."

## **Influencing the perspectives of funders who fund journalism**

"Every issue that any funder cares about is impacted by narratives that are created and shared in the world," said de Aguiar. "So when we're talking about poverty in the poorest large city in the US, we are inundated with stories about who has 'earned' their wealth and who 'deserves' to live comfortably, and who should get punished for 'not working hard enough.' These narratives have direct consequences on how entire groups of people are seen and treated, on a personal, institutional and policy level. It's more important than ever for philanthropy to fund groups like Resolve Philly, who help newsrooms become the best versions of themselves, as well as to support long-term initiatives like Broke in Philly, where community-led storytelling, ideas, and solutions demonstrate that another world is possible and necessary."

Lu now leads the Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation Fund. "We are hyper-local and focused in the Philadelphia news and information ecosystem, but we also work at a national scale," she said. "One of the things we are looking at is how news leaders and news organizations can contribute to more sustainable business models. A big part of that is trying to understand collaborative models, cooperative models, and how mutual aid fits within a news and information framework."

With Resolve Philly and Broke in Philly, a lot of the collaborative partners, which are almost 30 now, tell that story and make the argument about how connected we all are, especially in a local news environment like Philadelphia.”

## Seeding collaboratives across the landscape of local news

In the six years since the Reentry Project began, journalism has undergone enormous changes. Hundreds of news organizations have shut down, particularly local commercial newspapers that once served as the primary sources of local news.



At the same time, nonprofit news organizations have increased in number and in revenue, and journalism collaborations have arisen to provide mutual support and greater impact. Resolve Philly and the Broke in Philly partners have played a significant role in that expansion over the past six years.

As collaboratives in other states have gotten off the ground, they’ve often sought advice from Resolve Philly. “They were always very generous with their time when other collaboratives reached out to them,” Gross said. In April 2023, Resolve Philly launched a consulting practice, Modifier, to formalize that support and generate revenue to support the work back in Philly.

With a \$5 million grant from the Knight Foundation in 2019, SJN launched its largest project ever: the Local Media Project, an initiative to catalyze 15 collaboratives across the U.S. following the model of Broke in Philly. Each one concentrates on a particular challenge and reports through a solutions perspective, to change the narrative around the issue and stimulate audience engagement. The groups are spread across the country, in Dallas, Fort Wayne, Michigan, New Hampshire, Sacramento, Salt Lake City, and beyond.

## **"Philadelphia, of course, was the root of everything"**

Bornstein, SJN's founder, says Broke in Philly has been "a flagship example of collaboratives that were anchored in solutions journalism as a strong core of its work." As the momentum grows for collaboratives across the country, he hopes others will see the success of Broke. "At a time when journalists sometimes feel disheartened about the power of the press to actually effect change, I think it's really important to draw attention to moments when journalists really have come together and shown that this thing called journalism still really matters and still really can be quite influential in determining our policies."

## LOOKING AHEAD

The collaborative will most certainly continue. Over the past year, Resolve Philly has consulted the newsrooms, community members, and organizations involved to explore what to do next. They wanted to go deeper. The decision was made that the upcoming reporting will be on untangling the systems that power the city of Philadelphia and elevating solutions to systemic challenges. The name is still to be determined.

The hope is that this editorial focus will allow for even greater integration and synergy between Resolve Philly's text line, its recently launched Documenters program (which trains and pays community members to document local public meetings), and other work that ensures reporting is for and with communities who have long been harmed by media coverage. There is also the hope that this approach will give the partner newsrooms the space and encouragement to think in a cross-beat way about solutions journalism.

Though Haynes has departed Philadelphia for Michigan to support her family and stepped down from her position at Resolve Philly, she will always be Resolve Philly's co-Founder, and the visionary seeds she planted and sowed over the last five years live on. "I am so proud of what we've done together, but Resolve Philly needs local leadership. I am forever invested in Resolve's work and the impact we've had and will continue to have – in Philadelphia and across the country."

As Friedman-Rudovsky reflects on the impact of the Reentry Project and Broke in Philly, she sees a fundamental and lasting change in the public conversation. "There's way more stories about reentry, about the hopes and dreams and wisdom of formerly incarcerated folks in this city than there ever was before," she said. "I believe that is going to happen with the topic of economic mobility. There are going to continue to be editors and journalists in this city who are thinking critically about how they're reporting on economic issues because of their involvement in Broke in Philly," she said. "It means opportunities for policy change and for meaningful impact from reporting are going to live on even after this project sunsets. That, we believe, is going to materially benefit the health and wellbeing of the residents of Philadelphia."