Supporting Diversity in Community Development through the Krusell Fellowship

Charles Krusell was a pillar in the Twin Cities development community who left an indelible mark on every effort he undertook. He was a champion for public housing and an ardent advocate for urban renewal in the neighborhoods that needed it most. Krusell founded the Greater Metropolitan Housing Corporation to address the critical need for affordable housing in the Twin Cities. Named in his honor, the Charles R. Krusell Fellowship in Community Development is designed to prepare students of color in the University of Minnesota Master's of Urban and Regional Planning and Master's of Public Policy programs to be Minnesota's next leaders and change makers in community development.

Krusell fellows receive full tuition support and graduate research assistantships with three community-development or -planning agencies during the course of their academic program. The program is a partnership between the University of Minnesota’s Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs and CURA. The Humphrey School recruits students and delivers the academic program for the fellows. CURA manages the placement and mentoring of fellows with community-development or -planning agencies and administers the assistantships.

CURA director Ed Goetz was closely involved in creating the program. He notes:

The Krusell fellowship is the culmination of efforts over many years to provide support to students of color interested in housing and community development. The impetus for the fellowship was the recognition that the community-development field lacked diversity, especially compared to the communities in which it worked. We felt from the beginning that this should be a partnership between the University and the community and that the program should provide a way for students to take what they were learning in the classroom and apply it in real community-development settings.

The three narratives from former Krusell fellows that follow illustrate how the program makes academic work more meaningful, enables fellows to be more purposeful in designing their academic program, teaches practical skills, and builds relationships and networks with professionals in the field.

From the Private Sector to Public-Service Community Development

by Noel Nix

I credit the Krusell fellowship with providing me the grounding and experience needed to pursue a career in community development. Before attending the Humphrey School, I was working in market-rate housing management and had a strong interest in directing my career toward working on affordable-housing issues. In the multifamily housing sector, many landlords prefer that prospective renters meet specific requirements regarding income, credit worthiness, and criminal background. Consequently, I personally had to turn down rental applications from individuals and families facing serious hardships who were simply seeking a decent place to call home. I was attracted to the Humphrey School because the Master’s in Urban and Regional Planning program offered a concentration in housing and community development which I hoped would equip me to better serve people like those who I had not been in a position to help.

The Krusell fellowship allowed me to take courses where I was able to dig deep into issues of housing policy, and the placements with community-based organizations enabled me to immediately apply what I was learning in the classroom. More importantly, I was able to get involved right away in working with affordable-housing and neighborhood-development organizations, gaining first-hand experience on high-level projects while having an immediate impact in the community. It was through this experience that I gained an appreciation and passion for the broader aspects of community development, including economic development, workforce development, and neighborhood improvement.

This newfound passion for the full breadth of community development ultimately led me to a position as the legislative aide to Councilmember Melvin Carter III in St. Paul. In this role, I am able to help lead, support, and facilitate efforts to build and preserve affordable housing, leverage regional investments in transit to create new businesses and jobs, build a competitive workforce and extend the ladder of opportunity through efforts to close the achievement gap in our schools, and advance capital projects that enhance the quality of life in our neighborhoods. At the same time, I am able to work one-on-one with individual constituents to ensure the city is a partner in making their lives a little bit better.

Every day in my work, I draw on knowledge and experiences from my time as a Krusell fellow at the Humphrey School. Whether it is bringing together city staff and community stakeholders to solve a neighborhood issue or advising the councilmember on what
policies might help address an issue facing the city, I often find myself thinking back to a case study I have read or a project I worked on for a community organization or in class, to identify how to move forward in a way that will benefit the citizens of St. Paul. In addition, the relationships I developed with classmates have endured as we have all transitioned from students to leaders spread throughout the community.

The Krusell fellowship has been critically important to my career transition from the private sector to public service at a time when increased diversity among the ranks of government and nonprofit professionals is greatly needed. My experience as a Krusell fellow has equipped me to be a strong and effective voice and partner for members of the community who are often underrepresented during critical conversations regarding the direction of our city. I am extremely grateful to the philanthropic partners, faculty, and staff at the Humphrey School and CURA for working to make this possible.

Noel Nix is a graduate of the Master’s of Urban and Regional Planning program at the University of Minnesota. He is currently the legislative aide to St. Paul City Councilmember Melvin Carter III.

Community Development for Affordable Housing
by Miranda Walker

In 2005, I returned to the University of Minnesota to finish my undergraduate degree. I graduated in 2008 with a bachelor’s degree in Studies of Cinema and Media Culture and left Minnesota, weeks thereafter, for the Mississippi Delta for a year-long volunteer placement through AmeriCorps VISTA. During my year with AmeriCorps, I was immersed in community-outreach, -engagement, and -development efforts. My professional objectives became more refined in that year, with community development emerging as my primary focus. After returning to the Twin Cities, I began volunteering with Project for Pride in Living (PPL). While volunteering at PPL, my interest in housing—specifically as a catalyst for community development—grew. Certain of the type of work in which I wanted to engage, I applied to the Master’s of Urban and Regional Planning program at the University of Minnesota. A previous Krusell fellow who was working at PPL as a project manager told me about the Krusell program and her experiences. I applied for the fellowship program and, just weeks before my September 2010 enrollment at the University, learned that I had been awarded the fellowship.

All of my Krusell fellowship internships were concentrated in housing. My first internship was with Aeon, a nonprofit affordable-housing developer in Minneapolis. From this experience, I became acclimated to housing development—the pace of the process, the daily work involved, the skills necessary to work through the process, and the language of the industry. My internship highlighted the gaps that existed between my classroom learning and the real-life work of affordable-housing development. From my first-year experience at Aeon, I was able to choose courses that best fit the work I wanted to engage in after graduation. I was also able to learn alongside Aeon staff members who taught me from their experiences as practitioners and who offered me insight into their own professional trajectories.

My second internship experience took me to the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency, a state agency where I was able to learn about the financing of affordable-housing developments from the funder’s, or underwriter’s, point-of-view. Here again I was able to apply what I had learned in the classroom to actual development work and to build valuable relationships with those already practicing in the field. My final internship experience took me back to Aeon, where I was able to take on more day-to-day tasks after a learning-filled rookie season there and my time with the state.

The Krusell fellowship made all of the classroom learning, on-the-job training, and relationship building that I gained over the course of my graduate program possible. The tuition coverage that the fellowship provides allowed me to focus my time and efforts in the classroom and provided an incentive to complete the academic work. However, the greatest benefit of the fellowship was the opportunity to complement my learning in the classroom with learning in the workplace. The Krusell fellowship gave me a chance to learn in a professional setting alongside individuals that often became mentors. The professional experiences I gained as a result of the fellowship, I believe, translated into not only an immediate job offer after graduation, but a professional focus, skill set, and network that I am using in that position.

Miranda Walker is a graduate of the Master’s of Urban and Regional Planning program at the University of Minnesota. She is currently a housing-development associate with Aeon, a nonprofit affordable-housing developer in Minneapolis.
Making a Difference through Community Development
by Carlos Espinoza

My experience with the Krusell fellowship program was a perfect combination of peer networking and professional experience in community-development organizations. Inclusion in the group of other Krusell student fellows gave me a resource for ideas, support, and enthusiasm for community development. Guided through the program by the late Kris Nelson, each of the fellows successfully completed internships that both assisted Twin Cities community-development agencies and helped in our professional development. My Krusell professional internship experiences included time at the City of New Hope Community Development Department, Dayton’s Bluff Neighborhood Housing Services (DBNHS), and Model Cities, a community-development corporation in St. Paul. These experiences allowed me to see community development from the lens of a local government and two nonprofit agencies.

New Hope is an inner-ring western suburb of Minneapolis with a population of 20,339. At the City of New Hope Community Development Department, I experienced the City’s work in redeveloping homes for low- and moderate-income people. I saw how the City was able to connect with individuals and enrich their lives by providing homes that they could actually afford.

DBNHS is a nonprofit organization that finances the rehabilitation and development of homes for low- and moderate-income families in St. Paul. My time there was spent with two construction managers that supervised home-rehabilitation projects. In each project I was able to see the agency’s dollars at work—fixing roofs, replacing windows, abating lead, and making homes better for people who needed assistance.

Model Cities is a multifaceted St. Paul nonprofit that provides a number of services, including supportive housing, youth programs, and family-support services. My time at Model Cities was spent assisting in the development of two apartment buildings that were being renovated to serve as permanent support housing for young homeless families. Model Cities recognized that providing this type of housing was essential to reduce repeated episodes of homelessness. Working on this development showed me how community-development agencies can help stabilize lives and neighborhoods.

I credit the Krusell fellowship with helping me gain the professional experience instrumental in being hired by the City of Winona immediately after graduating from the Master’s of Urban and Regional Planning program. Perhaps more importantly, the Krusell fellowship opened my eyes to the tremendous difference that community-development activities can have on people’s lives. Overall, the Krusell fellowship professional experiences allowed me to “get close to the action” and understand that when you work for a community-development department or organization, your daily work has a direct and beneficial impact on local people and places.

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