

8 From the Eighth: ioby (In Our Own Backyards)

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ioby (In Our BackYards), Erin Barnes (18:48)

Erin Barnes, co-founder and executive director of ioby (ioby stands for 'in our backyards'), discusses how this crowd-resourcing platform for citizen-led neighbor-funded projects strengthens neighborhoods by supporting the leaders in them who want to make positive change. She provides examples of successful projects and tells you how to use ioby to get your ideas for change funded and up and running in your community.

Transcript

Kathy Moore Cowan: Greetings from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. You are listening to Eight from the Eighth, our community development packet series. I'm Kathy Moore Cowan with the Memphis, Tennessee branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Thank you so much for tuning in. Today we are speaking with Erin Barnes, co-founder and executive director of IOBY, in Brooklyn, New York. IOBY is an acronym for In Our Backyard. According to their website, their mission is to strengthen neighborhoods by supporting the leaders in them who want to make positive change, engaging their neighbors one block at a time. The non-profit organization began in 2008 and four short years later, in 2012, Erin and her co-founders at IOBY were awarded the Rockefeller Foundation's Jane Jacobs Medal for new technology and innovation. Welcome, Erin. Thanks for joining us today.

Erin Barnes: Thank you so much for having me, it's great to be here.

Kathy Moore Cowan: Okay. Well, let's jump right in. Tell us more about IOBY. Where did the name come from, how did you get started?

Erin Barnes: Sure, I'd love to. So IOBY connects change with resources and IOBY's name comes from the positive opposite of NIMBY, which stands for Not in my Backyards. So IOBY stands for In Our Backyards. And it's a place where people who are moved to say, "Yes, this is the positive change I want in my own community." They're the people who are the self-selected leaders of a neighborhood who want to invest in positive change. And IOBY provides a set of resources for these neighborhood leaders to get the funding and the sweat equity that they need to get started.

And then we also work to support them to make sure that they get the attention they deserve. For instance, if you had an idea for change on your block, you could go to IOBY by going to the website, ioby.org, and start a proposal to start a fundraising campaign to build support and enthusiasm for your idea on your block.

So IOBY is a community of donors, volunteers and leaders that are all dedicated to making urban neighborhoods stronger and more sustainable. And the IOBY projects are led by citizens and residents of that neighborhood and they're funded by neighbors. And so we got started, IOBY, as an organization got started in 2010 as a New York City pilot. And I'm one of the three co-founders, together with Brandon, Whitney and Cathy Flynn. And the three of us started IOBY because we decided that we wanted to try to make an online platform that powered offline action. And we were lucky to have support from a few critical foundations like the Ittleson Foundation, the Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, the Overbrook Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, that started our New York City pilot. And then after two years of working in New York, we found that we had successfully supported nearly 200 funded and implemented projects across the city and the leaders and the donors that we were working with said that our work was really valuable to their work, so we decided to expand our work nationally then in 2012.

Kathy Moore Cowan: You know, I also noticed on your website that it says IOBY is a crowd resourcing platform for citizen-led, neighbor-funded projects. Now, how does crowd resourcing differ from crowd funding?

Erin Barnes: That's a great question. So just to be clear, I'll just go ahead and just define crowd funding for those who might not be familiar with the concept. So crowd funding, when I'm talking about it, refers to any time that you're pooling lots of small donations online to a single cause or organization. And we combine that concept with resource organizing, which is a concept of community development that you can sustain, the organization that you're working with, by the people that you serve.

And so crowd resourcing is an idea, basically, pooling the different types of capital from within a neighborhood where the project is taking place, so you're able to organize financial capital, social capital, in-kind donations, volunteer support, all to sustain the work of that neighborhood.

Some people have said that it's similar to asset-based community development, in that you're looking towards the community itself to be a source of patient capital to fund the work there. And IOBY is pretty different from other crowd funding platforms that some people might be familiar with in a few key ways. So some people might be familiar with crowd funding platforms like Kickstarter or Indie Go-go. There's also a few non-profit platforms that are kind of similar, like, donorschoose.org, which teaches you to raise funding for classrooms or kiva.org.

And IOBY differs from these in a few different ways. So I'd say the first thing that really distinguishes IOBY from other platforms is that we're mission-driven. And so we're dedicated to seeing the success of these projects. So you'll see that IOBY has very high success rate, usually over 80% of all of our projects get fully funded. We also have a flexible finish policy, so if folks get very close to their target or they exceed their target, you're able to revise your budget and, as long as you can carry on with your project as you laid it out from the beginning, IOBY has very low fees. And we provide technical assistance for all the projects that we work with, with our friendly staff, so that people who maybe are fundraising for the first time or doing a community development project for the very first time know that they have somebody to depend on.

And because IOBY is a 501c3 non-profit, all of the donations that go to IOBY projects are tax-deductible. And finally, IOBY's founding principle is that you know what's best for your neighborhood. And so IOBY wants to provide more than just funding. We want to make sure that the people get all the resources that they need for whatever project it is that you see is the most important thing for your neighborhood, whether that's funding or a connection to other leaders or a relationship with a decision-maker or getting connected with an expert in your field to help you make sure that your project is executed as best as it can be.

Kathy Moore Cowan: Here in Memphis, we're hearing a lot about Create Memphis. And I know that Memphis is one of the latest cities that you've launched. So tell us about the Memphis Project.

Erin Barnes: Yeah, absolutely. I don't think it's a secret to anybody in Memphis that Memphis has totally stolen my heart, so we're really excited about the opportunity to be working there. This is an opportunity that we funded by the Hyde Family Foundation and the community foundation of Greater Memphis, so that IOBY would be able to partner with Livable Memphis, which is a project of the community development counsel, as well as with the Memphis Mayor's Innovation delivery team.

And we started this project together because Memphis wanted to start a priority to encourage citizens to use creative place-making as a neighborhood revitalization tool. And so one main reason why this came about was because of the very successful project on Broad Avenue in Binghamton. I think that maybe many of you know about the project New Face for an Old Broad, which was a project that was organized by a few different partners in that area, some of the local businesses, the arts council, the Broad Avenue Commercial District and the local CDC, to bring together people for a weekend to re-imagine Broad Avenue as a vibrant commercial and arts district.

And New Face for an Old Broad was really just a small effort, made of pretty limited resources, to try and build support and energy and revitalization for that area. And since New Face for an Old Broad, there's been \$20 million of investment in just those three blocks. So this is a pretty extraordinary example of what can happen when people use creative place-making to bring attention to different pockets of areas in urban centers.

And so IOBY's partnership with Livable Memphis and the innovation delivery team is designed, basically, to try and use creative place-making as successfully as it's been on Broad Avenue in other neighborhoods across Memphis.

And the Create Memphis Project is a, sort of, new iteration of that partnership that we launched this summer. So typically, IOBY would work with people who already have an idea that has a very obvious funding need and the project is pretty fully developed. Create Memphis is an expansion of our platform, so that people who just have, like, the very beginning of an idea or a hunch that they might want to get involved, can get started even if they aren't all the way down the path of getting to the point of needing funding for their ideas.

Kathy Moore Cowan: Okay. You've touched on it a little bit, but could you explain how your work is different in cities that you launch, versus your work with individual projects that are submitted?

Erin Barnes: Sure. So IOBY is a platform that's available to anybody in the U.S. who wants to start a project for change in their own community. And anyone who wants to get started can always just log onto IOBY.org and start their campaign. And they'll get a phone call from one of our support staff right away to get them started.

But IOBY itself is just a young organization. We're in our fourth year. And one of the ways that we wanted to grow, outside of our New York City pilot, was to do intentional place-based work in cities where we feel like there's an important need and an interest for us. And so our work in cities, just allows us an opportunity to have staff dedicated to finding great leaders and great projects and connecting them to existing city priorities.

It also allows us to have really rich partnerships, like the one we have with Livable Memphis, so that we're able to, sort of, tie together all the different pieces of what people want to do in their individual neighborhoods and start connecting those people to each other, to build more enthusiasm and support for these types of projects across the city.

Kathy Moore Cowan: Okay. What are some of the other places where IOBY has launched initiative? Are you working in any rural areas, for example, or small towns? If not, do you see a role for IOBY in these areas?

Erin Barnes: That's a great question and it's one that we get a lot. Well, first just so you know, so after we started out New York City pilot, we began a partnership with Miami Dade County's Office of Sustainability. So the year before we began our work in Memphis, we spent a lot of time working in Miami Dade in a similar way. And then we're going to be getting some partnerships with the cities of Detroit and Cleveland next year, so hopefully we'll have some of the lessons that we learned and the successes that we saw and are seeing in Memphis, and be able to apply those in Detroit and Cleveland and other cities.

But your question about rural areas is a really interesting one. We have had a small number of individual projects in rural areas and small towns. For instance, we had a very successful project in Mayflower, Arkansas after the oil spill there last March. And I do think that IOBY can play a role in rural places, although it's uncommon for us. I think it's pretty similar because the key to IOBY's work is really just about bringing neighbors together to work to build places, public spaces, for our neighbors to convene.

And so in very rural places, these common public spaces might be very far away from where people live, but I think, to me, I feel like a main street in a small town has many of the same functions and purposes as, say, Times Square does to New York City. Just a place for people to go to together and be able to interact, have many different purposes for being there and have a commercial district, have culture and lots of different reasons for people interchanging there.

Kathy Moore Cowan: Well, I'm sure our listeners are interested in how their city or town can be selected for the next IOBY initiative. What advice can you give them and likewise, for the individual with a great idea for their neighborhood, how do they get started?

Erin Barnes: Sure, so anybody who has a great idea to make positive change in their neighborhood can get started with IOBY right away. All you have to do is go to ioby.org/idea, and you can just get started to write in your idea right there. And anyone can get started. As soon as you fill out the idea form, one of our staff will give you a call back and talk to you more about your idea and help you start planning a fundraising campaign to get the funding and resources you need to get started.

As for other cities and towns, the way that we select them is part science and part art. We want to work in cities where there's a real need for resources and where small amounts of citizens and philanthropy can be leveraged to make real change on the ground. And we want to work in places where we have strong partnerships like we do in Memphis. So if you're interested in how IOBY can work with your municipality, I'd be more than happy to talk with you. You can always email me, my name is Erin and my email address is erin@ioby.org. I'd be more than happy to talk with you about how we might be able to work with your municipality.

Kathy Moore Cowan: Tell us about some of your successes since starting the organization in 2008. And also, tell us about some of the more memorable projects that you funded.

Erin Barnes: Sure, I love talking about the IOBY projects. I think that they're so awesome. So I think one of the most extraordinary projects that we've ever had the chance to work with actually was in Memphis. The Hampline is one of the biggest projects IOBY's ever supported and it was the first project we ever supported in Memphis.

And this was a campaign to raise funds for a two-way protected signalized bike lane on Broad Avenue and Kilman, to connect two large stretches of bicycle routes across Memphis, on the east side and the west side. And so the Hampline campaign actually started because out of a \$4.5 million budget, there was about a \$70,000 gap to complete the funding for this project.

And so rather than seek out an additional source of city funding or private funding, the leaders of the project decided to crowd fund it. And this is pretty extraordinary, it's a very large project for us and we hadn't worked in this, sort of, hard infrastructure before, but the Hampline was able to raise \$70,000 made up of donations of more than 700 donors, all located within Memphis and some across the United States. There was even a couple donations in Hawaii.

And the average donation was \$50. And I think it was really exciting for us to see, because so many people felt like they were really investing in this new bike lane and felt like they were a real part of it. But I think that the Hampline's extraordinary for a lot of reasons, because it was so big and because so many people were a part of it. But most of IOBY projects are actually pretty modest. Our work starts small, we want people to begin to use small projects to engage their neighbors and ask them for help and participation and have the opportunity for neighbors to work together to solve problems in their own communities.

So the majority of the projects we supported are actually—have budgets of less than \$3,000 and do pretty small things and small steps to make change. One of my favorite ones in Memphis is the Carnes Elementary School garden and the Edge Medical District. And this project is one of, I think, many, many projects in Memphis that are working to transform a vacant lot into something more beautiful.

And this happens to be across the street from the elementary school where a lot of kids have to walk past a lot of vacant lots and a lot of vacant homes on their way to school. And this is just, sort of, an opportunity for elementary school kids to see that change is possible in their community and they're able to physically transform something that's, like, you know, arguably a place of blight and really makes the neighborhood feel sort of sad. And this is an opportunity for kids to actually invest in this change themselves and see that they have the power to make that change in their own community.

Kathy Moore Cowan: What's next for IOBY?

Erin Barnes: Well, I think that one of the biggest things that we're really interested right now is this Create Memphis campaign. So we've been running this campaign for about a month-and-a-half so far and like I mentioned before, Create Memphis is really an expansion of IOBY's opportunities so that even people who don't have a full project totally developed with a budget that has a specific funding need, but just have a little idea of what they want to do for their community, so maybe they see this park at the end of their block that never has anybody in it and sometimes has garbage in it, maybe it's just an idea to do something with that park, but they're not sure what.

Or maybe somebody just really wants to get involved in their neighborhood, but isn't sure where to start—Create Memphis is a way for IOBY to engage people with just, like, a small inkling that they want to make change. And so these are ways for people to just put up the very beginning of an idea and ask other people to contribute their suggestions to developing that out, building new teams of people in the neighborhood and then moving to the point of project development.

And so far, since the—about a month-and-a-half of Create Memphis getting started, we have over 150 ideas that are on the site. And what we're really interested in seeing is how many of those will turn into fully-funded and implemented projects, just because somebody said, "I want to make change in this spot right here."

So I'm really excited to see how Create Memphis is going to play out in Memphis. But just so that you know a little bit about how all of this ties into what's bigger and working for IOBY at the national level, we're really interested in focusing in on a couple different types of projects that we feel like are pretty big points of change for a lot of communities. And so those two types of projects are about food, so that could be around food production, distribution, access, education and justice.

And then the other one is about making streets safer for all pedestrians and cyclists and all people who are using the street. So we're really interested in figuring out what the two—those two types of projects, what the really important access points are for residents and how we can continue to accelerate change in those two areas that we feel like are really important.

Kathy Moore Cowan: I'm excited, Erin, also to be here in Memphis just to watch how this project unfolds and to see the impact that IOBY will have on Memphis. And I'm sure after today's podcast, you'll be flooded with new submissions from people who want to make their community better.

Erin Barnes: Well, thanks, I really hope so. If anybody out there has an idea for change, please don't hesitate to reach out. I really appreciate this opportunity to talk with you about our work, Cathy. Thank you.

Kathy Moore Cowan: We've been speaking with Erin Barnes, executive director of IOBY. For more information about IOBY, visit www.ioby.org. To hear this and other podcasts in the Eight from the Eighth Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Community Development podcast series, please visit www.stlouisfed.org. Thank you for listening.