Podcast Interview Transcript

Christopher Heaney, Sacoby Wilson, Omega Wilson

In each volume of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action,* the editors select one article for our Beyond the Manuscript podcast interview with the authors. Beyond the Manuscript provides authors with the opportunity to tell listeners what they would want to know about the project beyond what went into the final manuscript. Beyond the Manuscript podcasts are available for download on the journal's website (www.press-dev.jhu.edu/journals/progress_in_community_health_partnerships/multimedia.html). This Beyond the Manuscript podcast is with Christopher Heaney of the University of North Carolina School of Public Health and lead author of the "West End Revitalization Association's Community Owned and Managed Research Model: Development, Implementation, and Action"; Sacoby Wilson of the University of Michigan School of Public Health and lead author of "Use of EPA Collaborative Problem-Solving Model to Obtain Environmental Justice in North Carolina"; and Omega Wilson, president of the West End Revitalization Association, which services residents, homeowners and landowners of five African American communities in Alamance County and Orange County, North Carolina. Clara Goldberg-Freeman, a PCHP editorial fellow conducted the interview. The following is an edited transcript of the Beyond the Manuscript podcast.

Goldberg-Freeman:	Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. I hope our audience shares our enthusiasm in finding out more about your project. I am particularly interested in the various issues raised in your manuscripts, and I hope we can cover most of the issues they raise. Omega can you give a brief description of your project that includes a brief background about WERA, the West End Revitalization Association, and the path that led to the development of the Community Owned and Managed Research Model, or the COMR model.
Omega Wilson:	Our organizational history started in1994, when community residents became aware that a major highway corridor was planned through two African American communities in Mebane NC, in and just outside of Mebane. The residents had no knowledge and it had been planned for close to 15 years or more, according to some accounts. That plan was going to eliminate homes, churches, and in some cases cemeteries that dated all the way back to slavery time. Trying to get some handle on how to address it was the part of it that created the organization and created the COMR model as a result of it.
	We were looking for ways to address the issue. We filed a complaint with the US Department of Justice on the question of the construction of the 119-Bypass Highway. Talking to deputy justices, they made it clear to us that we had – in this process that was planned – the highway was planned with federal monies – the community residents were denied their rights to basic amenities, a whole lot more than just the structural path of the highway. Of course we had to prove it. Local, county, and city officials wanted us to prove that they were violating our rights and there was discrimination involved.

We first got involved with some university officials, professors and researchers, who had a conflict of interest because some of them were directly involved in planning the industrial growth that planned along the highway corridor. We had to dismiss that relationship, which was very difficult to do. We needed legal assistance to do it. So out of necessity, came our developing and designing our own way of developing research, our own way of collecting data. As EPA officials call it, ground-truthing, because we found people who we had trusted originally, were in fact compromising what we were doing, very credible PhDs and sometimes legal people. So that's what brought us to the need to develop the community owned and managed research model.

Goldberg-Freeman: Chris, can you continue with this discussion and expand on how the COMR model is different from a traditional community-based participatory research model?

Chris Heaney: Like Omega said, he had been involved with other researchers at major universities in the triangle. They had conflicts of interest. They were coming to the community with an agenda of their own. In many cases, as some academics would argue, they had the best interest of the community in mind. But the way that they approached the research and the collaborative relationship with WERA just was not appropriate. So the COMR model, the principles of having communities own and manage the research process at every step really turns the traditional academic research, including CBPR, those models on their head, it allows the communities to set the research agenda. It allows the communities to obtain funding for their research questions from regional funding groups and federal agencies. Then the community organizations in turn hire the researchers that they feel comfortable working with and have the best interests of the community in mind, and also will solve problems on the ground.

So COMR, as a research model, allows the community members to hire the researchers. The researchers sign MOAs with the community-based organization, and the community-based organization, or CBO, is the PI, or principal investigator, of the research project and also the project manager.

Goldberg-Freeman: Part of our audience might actually be interested in applying this to their own area. Do you have any suggestions on how community-based organizations can decide whether they should try the COMR model?

Chris Heaney: In WERA's case, they are obviously at a high level of organization capacity. CBO's like WERA were doing COMR before Omega called it COMR. He was just basically doing what he had to do to solve problems in his community and not have the research or the activities co-opted in any way. So when Sacoby and I got involved, there was going to be a research agenda that was going to be viable with or without us. It just so happened that there was a great working relationship there between Omega and Sacoby and I. So the idea that we have with COMR is that there needs to be a lot of capacity in the community-based organization in order to apply for grant monies, run projects with and without the dependence of academic partners if things are not going well, not progressing with an academic partner. The CBO has to have the capacity to sustain a research project and in WERA's case, that was always the case.

Sacoby Wilson: In addition to that, we need to think about how their issues relate to environmental health concerns, and looking at the environmental health consequences of pollution sources, the built environment, and those sort of things. So when a community organization starts working on environmental health issues, and whether there is some authority that covers some of the impacts of particular programs or

policies or building projects, whereas they will be out of compliance with the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, The Safe-Drinking Water Act, and the Toxic Substance Control Act. Communities can do community-driven research and use the COMR model to say, "yes, we have data that shows that they're out of compliance," and they can get compliance to either block a project or get compliance which leads to better environmental health conditions and better quality of life.

For community groups that are working on these particular issues, the COMR model can be adapted to solve those particular problems and be solutions-oriented toward getting compliance, and getting data that allows them to prove environmental injustice, and show a need for solutions that will lead to positive changes to public health and quality of life.

Goldberg-Freeman: Also, Sacoby could give some suggestions for those who are interested in the COMR model, and maybe suggest some times when the COMR model should not be used?

Sacoby Wilson: Well to piggyback on what Chris just said, for community groups who are new, who don't have 501(c)(3) status yet. . . . For CBOs that have not gone through the process of electing a president or undergone board training, and do not have organizational capacity; the COMR model may not be appropriate for them early on in their development and early on in their action on particular issues. Omega may want to follow up on that, but that is one of the major differences with COMR. We suggest that organizations that have capacity use this model. Other organizations who are doing traditional CBPR partnerships, they should continue those partnerships until they have the capacity to take over and be the project manager, or the PI. They should seek more equity in the funding to make sure that you have the proper staff and training and have community monitors who will perform some of the work in the field during the ground-truthing. They should have their partners sign MOAs and have the ability to hire and fire just like a business. If you have someone you can contract with and they don't do the job you want them to do, you can release them from the contract.

So we really suggest that organizations that have the capacity to follow this approach, and organizations who do not, build their capacity so they can use this model. We believe that this is the evolution of CBPR . . . and we believe that if you think about the participation of community organizations in other non-US academic models, you have communities and professors working together on the ground all of the time. We suggest communities should be the center of learning, data collection, knowledge production, action and change. You partner with academic experts who bring their expertise in and work with communities who are the contextual experts or community experts on the ground. That's a more efficient approach, a more effective approach to actually solve problems instead of just applying short-term interventions.

Omega Wilson: We started in a stage-by-stage approach, and now I've been selected to be a member of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council for the EPA out of the office of Environmental Justice, because what they want and are encouraging us to do is develop some training modules around a lot of the projects we have done. When we started writing it down and looking at it, there are a whole lot of different modules in this process. But as far as COMR is concerned, we started elementary, where the community residents had identified the boundaries of how big their communities were and where the streets started and stopped, because city officials had basically pocketed the community in a very small area. If it is smaller and less people, then there is less impact, so technically what were we complaining about if the impact was so small? That was one of the first things.

When you start talking about university researchers, very often GIS mapping and spatial data, which many community people do not have the capacity to do or knowledge of, or there may not be an awareness of. We started simply by identifying communities and streets with a simple street map. That was when we first started before we started becoming affiliated with universities, technical people and attorneys. The other part is we learned that community residents were not trustful of the university professionals – even if they were African American. It made no difference. So we had to create a level of confidentiality. When we started our first environmental justice small grant, which was the first thing we did in early 2000s when we first met Chris and Sacoby and some other partners. We had a university professor who had breached confidentiality and actually went to some of the people who we were talking to, some of the people who we had problems with – city officials – and actually mentioned the name of some of the people after that person had already signed a confidentiality agreement. So some of the things we did were out of a necessity to protect the residents. Some city officials and local officials actually harassed and intimidated those residents on their doorsteps.

When we moved to the third stage of it, which is the collaborative problem-solving project with EPA, they encouraged us to come up with ways to double-blind information. So Sacoby or Chris, when we tested drinking water sites, it wasn't a question of them revealing the confidentiality because they didn't know. They knew they were involved in testing water we collected, but they didn't know where it came from. So it wasn't a question of them revealing information and winding up with people being intimidated or harassed again, like we did when we did the previous environmental justice small grant study.

We began to morph the process and create a way of protecting the rights of the residents so they would cooperate in releasing data to us, and that was not easy. It took a while to create a level of confidence and maintain their confidentiality, and protect it. It was not just a matter of people not liking you, when city officials come to your door and harass you because you are trying to get safe water and sewer, trying to maintain your participation in the plan to stop a highway from tearing your house or church down. Then the reaction from local officials was very dramatic in a lot of cases.

Goldberg-Freeman: Sacoby, as the lead author on the use of the EPA collaborative problem-solving manuscript, can you discuss the two or three lessons that you felt were most important in this collaboration and why?

Sacoby Wilson: I'll let Omega answer that.

Omega Wilson: Well the biggest thing that we learned was capacity to facilitate and manage a project was necessary and, of course, that was a growth thing. When we first made our presentation to city officials to try to get them to address the issue, we organized a team based on the group that was meeting to address these issues in 1995. We did a tag team of community residents, four of them, to present the issues, each one of them presenting a different part of it. So there was a lot of nervousness, and this was in a formal city council meeting. That became the seed to our being able to manage and facilitate the problem ourselves because when we asked local public health officials and researchers to come and identify the issue, they did not get it right. They had the wrong street. Many public health officials just denied there was a problem at all; that they had inspected sewer lines and water infrastructure, and that it was fine.

We had to take pictures, we had to write notes and then we had to present that information to the EPA, to city, county, and state officials. We had to say what is being presented by "the people

responsible" is not true. In order to do that, we had to be the people facilitating the meetings. We had to be the people presenting it. At the same time, we had to identify partners who were willing to work with us, and do it based on the need to create compliance, and results. We were not just interested in partnering with university professors or technical people just to create white paper and a research document. We wanted to solve the problem to save people's homes and where they'd lived since slavery ended.

Many of the researchers we contacted saw our problem as something that could raise a lot of money with published articles, books, lectures, and things of that sort. But they didn't have the end goal in mind of correcting the problem. Capacity building on the local side, collaboration and selecting your partners, and going to the end of getting results are some of the key lessons brought by the work we have done.

Goldberg-Freeman: Maybe all three of you can chime in in discussing some of the biggest challenges that you foresee for those who are interested in using the COMR model.

Chris Heaney: I think one of the biggest challenges is going to be funding. Right now, the EPA's collaborative problem-solving grant program is a great way for community organizations to get funding for COMR-type research, where the community-based organization gets the money directly from EPA at the federal level, and then they partner with researchers through these MOAs – memorandum of agreement – and they manage all project activities. So that's one great example of a program that's available that can fund this kind of research that is not in the traditional university-managed model, it's not even in CBPR because it's not community-based it's community-driven, and the community organization is actually managing the process.

So the grant program that EPA has going at the federal level, they also have a smaller regional grant which is very helpful for community organizations who are just getting their start and want to organize around an issue, define partners and start collecting data to document an environmental justice or health disparities or public health problems. The big challenge is continuing to find funding sources for this kind of research, where it is not in the traditional academic model and it is not backed up by a cadre of experts in an academic department. So that's one of the biggest challenges I see.

Sacoby Wilson: I think one of the biggest challenges, and I think Omega talked about this a little bit is community groups having confidence that they can do this. I think part of that comes from training, capacity building, and maybe overcoming some histories between community groups and universities, or the history of who should produce the knowledge, who should control the knowledge and what the knowledge should be used for. For many community groups, particularly community groups that are working on environmental justice issues, here are long histories that they are trying to overcome . . . how facilities are located in their neighborhood or with WERA neighborhoods [for example]. Not only were they overburdened by unhealthy land uses, they were underserved by health promoting infrastructure, whether it be green space, sewer/water services, having gutters, curbs, just basic infrastructure.

So many communities are dealing with those particular issues and they may not have the right collaborative partnerships set up right now, which allows them to actually solve those problems. So gaining that confidence over time is going to be very important, and I think that comes with training. We discussed setting up a training institute. Actually training community groups to go

through the COMR process is something we are very interested in doing and helping them to figure out ways that they can adapt this model and use it to address the local issues is very important so the confidence is there.

Overcoming the history is one of the biggest challenges many community groups have to deal with. The history between dealing with the issues at the local level and the history that they may have with university partners or people; who should own the knowledge, who should use the knowledge, who should create the knowledge is a challenge they have to overcome.

Chris Heaney: I hope Omega can expand upon this because I think he and I are experiencing some of the same things when we go to other community organizations, or maybe not even formal community organizations but communities where they have the same problems. It might not be a highway, but they lack basic amenities. They have another either it's a toxic release inventory facility or a polluting facility, like a landfill, and they're working with local government in any way they can. Sacoby said it is a change in mindframe. But it's also a change in confidence that you need to reorganize the power structure and take ownership of the process and manage the process of documenting the problems in your community, and not rely on the municipality or researchers who are coming in with their own agendas.

So in my experiences working with other communities, it's really difficult to build the capacity. I think it is critical to have this level of organization and capacity going on to reinforce COMR as an option with community organizations, so they do not have to just take whatever grant is coming in at whatever local university, or whatever researcher coming into their community. They have the power to actually do research in a different way based on community-driven principles but it is not in the traditional university-managed framework.

Omega Wilson: One of the things that people fail to understand when dealing with these issues is the environmental concerns, or public health concerns under the environmental umbrella; are not the same thing as environmental justice. The environmental justice part primarily deals with the residents in low-income and minority communities. That is where the environmental justice executive order is written in Washington, DC at the EPA.

Environmental concerns primarily have to do with the environment and, of course, the quality of streams, the quality of the ocean, the quality of the air generally. Of course there's always the discussion and some conflict about what that means. But what we're concerned about is what we have to do to correct those issues for the residents who are impacted, and understand that a lot of the public health issues – the human waste and air quality issues – that are in these communities actually create a greater problem for areas that environmentalists are working on. The training that is involved in this and understanding that some funders that we apply to for grant money, who are environmentalists, and major environmental organizations, have written us back and saying, "You are applying to the wrong organization. Why did you even ask for assistance from us?"

We thought initially we were in the same camp, but it turned out that there's some very, very strong political differences. That's one, where you go to get assistance. The training part of this that the EPA and one of our major funders is encouraging us to do is refine a lot of these successes and failures we have had and lessons learned, so to speak. We have been working on this project since 1994,which is a long time – other community groups do not have to spend their time on that learning curve and may never get to that point.

Chris and I have been working with a community group that has similar issues and they have been working on it for almost 35 years, and they came to us for assistance. They are in a much larger and urban area with a lot of "technical support" within walking distance of the community that is impacted. However, the right ingredients have not happened, so they have asked us to come in and help them build a capacity so they can address the issue. So that becomes a part of the formal training model; how we develop boards, how we have our meetings, how we maintain confidentiality. A lot of the things that we've done over the years are things that we've done. It's kind of like writing the recipes down so people can follow them, and that's a part of what we're doing now so it becomes a part of a long-term training module.

Goldberg-Freeman: Is there anything else you want to add about the training institute in particular so that maybe others can do the steps that you guys have implemented?

Omega Wilson: Well we are in the process of putting together the training module so we can invite other residents in. We have some interest, across the country as a matter of fact, about COMR as well as the collaborative-solving project that EPA has been facilitating for the last few years. What we are looking to do is formalize the institutional structure that Sacoby was talking about, Right to Basic Amenities Institute or Right to Basic Amenities Collaborative to invite community representatives, partners from other communities, people who actually want to help other communities, to look at how we have been doing some of this work. That is what we are in the process of doing now, is looking at setting up what you might say a national symposium or a national collaborative, where we invite people in, local as well as people outside the area. We are working on that now and looking for funding for that right now.

Goldberg-Freeman: Is there anything else that either of the three of you would like to share with our audience that you were not able to express in the manuscripts themselves?

Chris Heaney: We did not fully expand upon some of the kinds of trainings that went on early on around the water surveillance, and the household infrastructure surveys. We develop those issues in a separate paper. What is interesting was that these communities in Mebane, North Carolina, are facing issues with failing septic systems, infrastructure that put in through community development block grants by the municipalities, and was not maintained or it was substandard in the very beginning. It was not up to code. These communities are lacking the basic health-promoting infrastructure that everyone takes for granted whenever they are moving into a subdivision built in the last five years, and has all the amenities and might have a golf course. People take that health-promoting basic infrastructure for granted.

The process that we went through early on with Omega through the initial EPA small grant was eye opening for us. In our review of the well water and the septic systems through the household surveys, we found failure rates that were alarming but not 100 to 50%, which in the end it turned out that in these communities there was 50% septic system failure rates and 100% percent on other streets. So the basic health-promoting infrastructure in these communities is something that the residents all along, in their ground-truthing, in things they knew everyday, knew were problems, and couldn't document because of the institutional racism and the institutional structures that were in place, that were saying, "No, you don't have any problems. It's up to you. The burden of proof is on you."

Omega Wilson: The only thing is that we have a situation where the infrastructure problem, there is some state research being done now that validates what we are talking about. They identified 97 communities – there are 100 counties in North Carolina. In 97 counties, and of course we identified with the work we did over a dozen in Alamance County alone, and including a public school. So the infrastructure problem that creates public health issues, with human waste getting in drinking water, air quality problems, the infrastructure problems, is something that's systemic and it's much, much bigger than a lot of people realize it is. That's something that I think has to be addressed. It is long term and it's going cost a lot of money and some years to address it.