

Alfred University alumnus Bernard Gluckstern spearheads anti-poverty initiative in Allegany, Steuben, Tompkins counties.

7/28/17



Bernard Gluckstern

The Tompkins County office of Cornell Cooperative Extension had been overseeing its Natural Leaders Initiative for about 10 years when Ken Schlather, director of the local CCE, first met Alfred University alumnus Bernard Gluckstern.

A 1971 graduate of Alfred University, Gluckstern pitched an idea that he said would “eradicate poverty in rural America.”

Gluckstern called his initiative The Fund for an Equitable America, and Schlather says the idea dovetailed with his own organization’s efforts to encourage homegrown leadership and entrepreneurial talent. “His putting it on the table concretely helped us think about it more concretely,” Schlather says.

The result of that initial conversation has been a slowly developing collaboration between Gluckstern and the Tompkins County Cornell Cooperative Extension office. The partnership also is reaching out to CCE offices in Allegany and Steuben counties. And beyond those organizations, Gluckstern has been establishing communications with other regional service organizations, including Catholic Charities, ProAction of Steuben and Yates Counties, and Allegany County Community Opportunities and Rural Development.

The Fund for an Equitable America is still very much in the early planning stages, but Gluckstern says he plans to push — and push, and push — until the initiative not only sinks roots in the Southern Tier of New York, but establishes itself as a model for economic development that can be replicated in other rural areas of the United States.

The gist of the initiative is simple: Encourage and assist local individuals to form small business organizations and encourage larger financial institutions in that region to purchase goods and services from the local entities. It’s a variation of the “Shop Locally” mantra, with the additional element of encouraging formation of new businesses with which larger organizations can do their shopping.

Ask Gluckstern for more specifics, and he is happy to respond with a paper that outlines the larger shape of the initiative. The plan begins with the overarching goal of initiating a strategic planning process for transforming low-income individuals and families into what he calls “a middle class, self-sustaining environment.”

To achieve that goal, Gluckstern says the Fund for an Equitable America will promote:

“Assisting low-income communities to create, grow and sustain targeted, profitable commercial enterprises (owned by and employing residents of those communities) to provide goods and services required by the area’s largest institutions”;

“Leveraging a portion of the multi-billion dollar annual business expenditures of anchor institutes into the local community”;

“Ensuring that low-income residents — who in most revitalization efforts have been excluded from substantive or meaningful roles beyond that of ‘service recipient’ — not only participate in, but substantively lead this work with the power to shape the initiative’s direction, structure, staffing and use of resources.”

According to Schlather, Gluckstern’s idea of using local talent to encourage the formation of local businesses dovetails with CCE’s own Natural Leaders Initiative. “We’re talking about folks who aren’t part of any formal leader establishment,” he says, “but when push comes to shove in a community, they’re called on regularly to help get things going. So we’ve been supporting them, training them, networking them.”

Schlather adds CCE has a history of encouraging small business start-ups. In Tompkins County, he notes, CCE has been nurturing its own Food Enterprise Program, which started out as a series of focus group meetings and now is evolving into newly formed small catering businesses.

Closer to Alfred University, Laura Hunsberger, director of Allegany County’s Cornell Cooperative Extension office, notes hydroponic lettuce growing has been the focus of start-up business efforts in Ohio. Hunsberger says she has been meeting and talking with both Schlather and Gluckstern — as has Larkin Podsiedlik, executive director of the CCE office in Steuben County.

In addition to Cornell Cooperative Extension and local non-profits, Gluckstern says he has been seeking bipartisan support from local and state political officials (He emphasizes the bipartisan nature of the Fund), and he hopes to begin contacting major foundations, such as Ford and Rockefeller, for future support.

The idea, he insists, is not just eliminating rural poverty in New York. The “paradigm” of the Fund, he says, will be “applicable with little revision or alteration in every rural county in this nation in which so many of our citizens currently languish in circumstances of impoverishment, dysfunction (and) demoralization.”