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Linda Cross Godfrey

Atlantic Leadership Center, linda@atlanticleadershipcenter.com

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The Power of Language in Changing a Community's Story

by Linda Cross Godfrey

On August 1, 2013, *The Atlantic* magazine, NPR's *Marketplace*, and Esri computer software company, announced a nationwide immersive-reporting partnership called "American Futures Project." Eager to prove there are worthwhile economic and cultural successes beyond Wall Street and Broadway addresses, Atlantic reporters James and Deborah Fallows, and NPR host Kai Ryssdal, began criss-crossing America. Their mission: to select one community in each state that was the best example of resiliency and reinvention. Two months later the trio came to Eastport, chosen as Maine's example, and community #4 in the project.

Eastport was placed in an international spotlight. Thus, began the reporting on Eastport's 10-year revival and the role language had played in turning the economic tide and reversing negative images that overshadowed efforts to change.

Deborah Fallows, a linguist by education and practice, authored a story titled "Do You Speak Eastport: A Town Teaches Itself to Talk Positive" (2013). Deborah pointed to what linguists call *language planning*. "I would say that little Eastport, Maine, is engaged in some deliberate language planning of its own. Why? Just as Eastporters are looking to the power of the ocean tides to create energy for the world, they are looking to the power of language to create energy for the town" (Fallows 2013).

It was true. While the term *language planning* was not known, community visionaries had begun their efforts to inspire change by using words from well known leaders:

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. —Eleanor Roosevelt

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are. —Theodore Roosevelt

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. —Martin Luther King

Specifically selected names for new enterprises brought new thinking:

- The Commons, LLC, renovated a twice-condemned 1887 building into a gallery and vacation rental business with a commitment to contribute to the common good.
- Dirigamus, LLC, a local redevelopment group, took Maine's slogan *Dirigo* (I Lead) to a new collaboration with *Dirigamus* (We Lead/Let Us Lead), underscoring the value of many leading, together.

Attitudes began to change, confidence began to grow, and the spirit and energy of the town began to resurface. People began to exhibit pride, the town looked more prosperous, and others began to take notice. Eastport was showing its colors, yet in media reports, political speeches, even in local conversations, last paragraphs, closing lines, and final words still carried negatives.

Focus turned to what were called the DE-words. It seemed that no matter the positive bent of a report or speech, certain words crept in—depressed, dependent, decline, despair—were frequently used in comments about economics, services, and the future. A quiet campaign began to crowd out the DE-words by intentionally using RE-words: rebound, rediscover, redesign, reverse, renew, re-energize. In 2013, leaders harvested a few dozen media stories written about Eastport in the most recent three years, and not a single DE-word was found.

Examples began to show up in marketing materials:

- Some call the line between the United States and neighboring Canada a *border*; many in Eastport call it an *opportunity*.
- Nearby Old Sow is the largest tidal whirlpool in the western hemisphere. Now, through language planning, it is also referred to it as an *aqua vortex*.

Language planning has extended Eastport's claim beyond being the U.S. place of the first sunrise. Eastport also claims the first moonrise and the first twinkle of the stars. Deep water, dark skies, vibrant retirees, bright youngsters, abundant nature, welcoming people, enriching culture, engaging experiences—all intentionally use language to advantage.

Eastport's resiliency and reinvention certainly included language planning. Thanks to Deborah Fallows and the American Futures Project for pointing this out. We can now recommend language planning as a critical early part of any change process—for people, places, and programs. 🐟

REFERENCES

Fallows, Deborah. 2013. "Do You Speak Eastport? A Town Teaches Itself to Talk Positive." *The Atlantic* (November 18). <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/11/do-you-speak-eastport/281586/>



Linda Cross Godfrey is president of the Atlantic Leadership Center in Eastport, a partner in The Commons, LLC, and Dirigamus, LLC. She has been facilitator of the Washington County Leadership Institute for 19 years and considers leadership, community building, and Downeast Maine her passions.



Photo® Robin Farrin

New Year's revelers at StudioWorks prepare for a two-nation celebration: the midnight Great Maple Leaf and Sardine Drop happens twice—first on Canadian time and then an hour later on U.S. time.



Photo® Don Dunbar

Tugboats leaving the harbor to meet ships approaching the port of Eastport via Canadian waters.



Photo® on Dunbar

Eastport residents are proud of the city's dark night sky and deep water, its welcoming and walkable downtown, and its long fishing heritage.