OXEN and FIREFLIES
Essay by Norman Eddy

Preface:
Here I have written as clearly and powerfully as I can, my two convictions about our plan to share Spiritual Coordination as an important tool in ministry, activism, and community building. Both convictions are in all our literature so far. Good.

1) I have found that my experience described below of Oxen pulling my ambulance out of the mud in Italy in World War II was a fundamental learning experience for me about the power of local people to make change happen.

2) My Fireflies experiences in East Harlem taught me a similar lesson: men, women, youth inspired by their concern for injustice being suffered by their family, friends and neighbors are our most potent leaders in overcoming inequalities and oppression. And this loving concern and faith of the people who experience injustice is seldom mentioned, appreciated, and worked with. This passion is what is most potent in helping to solve injustice.

Here are these stories in detail. My hope is to make much clearer the fundamental role of spirit and action by low-income, non-professional people in overcoming the injustices that face their families and their neighbors in basically poor neighborhoods.

Oxen. In a muddy road on a hill in Italy, my ambulance slid into the mud during WWII. I couldn’t get it out, though I tried hard. I sent a message to a nearby army garage with good, large equipment. They sent a big truck to pull me out. They attached a strong wire rope. They pulled and pulled. The wheels spun in the mud. No help. An Italian farmer at the bottom of the hill offered to pull me out with his oxen. The Army mechanic laughed. They
sent for a much bigger truck with a huge connection. They hoped to lift the ambulance out. Their wheels spun, too. No success. The farmer with his oxen kept offering help. More laughter. Oxen? Oh, well, let them try.

The farmer came, connected his oxen with ropes to my ambulance with his oxen. They pushed their hooves deep through the mud, to solid ground. They pulled and pulled. Soon they had pulled me out. Non-technological living creatures had done what two well equipped trucks had failed to do.

Now looking back on what I experienced in WWII in Italy in 1943, I see that I learned then a method of helping people suffering from injustice that I brought with me when I came to live and work in my ministry in 1956.

East Harlem was then and is today filled with organizations run by educated professionals committed to helping people suffering from injustice. Well meaning they were and yet they don’t listen to the local people, “the farmer with his Oxen,” recognizing their willingness and capabilities to help. Millions, probably billions of dollars are given to these dedicated professionals and their organizations across the country – groups that are HELPING the community INSTEAD of empowering them to LEAD the struggle and become a force for change.

I urge East Harlem professionals to listen to the local Oxen and their farmers to bring about change. I urge us all to remember the famous saying:

“Feed a man a fish and he will be hungry the next day. Teach him how to fish and he will have enough to eat for his life”.
Fire Flies

Early in my ministry in the 1950’s, I learned about a native tribe living in one of the mountain communities in South America. Back in very early colonial days, these Indians had no electric lights, no candles, no oil for lamps. They would have spent their nights in darkness if it were not for fireflies. These bright little bugs flying around all over gave the Indians an inspiration. They learned to collect them and make little lanterns and put the fire flies in them.

In East Harlem and in my home state of Connecticut, I discovered that almost all of us knew fireflies. A surprising number of us put the fireflies in jars and made little lanterns. Light in the darkness!

Again, as I began living and working in East Harlem in 1950, I saw a parallel between fire flies and the light of compassion many of my East Harlem neighbors and friends. They didn’t talk about these feelings of compassion much. They showed it in acts of kindness. I saw and felt this lovely concern in many of my new friends and acquaintances all over East Harlem. I began to bring such people together. They exemplified the truth found in the gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 3:14-16 – “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bush but on a stand and it gives light to all the house.” “Let your light shine before man that they may see your good works. “ Matthew 6:22 “The light of the body is in the eye.”

What we are now calling a Spiritual Coordinator sees the light and the love in East Harlem residents (or people in any community) and knows how to bring them together to shine God’s Light and take action guided by divinity.
The dedicated professionals in settlement houses, churches, private schools, lawyers, health professionals give but they often don’t see the light of love within the local people and work together with them to harness the passion that is in their eyes toward striving for justice.

Oxen and Fire Flies in East Harlem

It was through my life in East Harlem that I first began to document the unfolding techniques of being what I have now been calling Spiritual Coordination.

In my first lesson I was taught by the men, women and youth in East Harlem who were concerned about the oppression of drug addiction. We worked together in spirit and action to get the first hospital beds opened to addicts. Through passing legislation the option to overcome addictive habits medically versus as a criminal was established for the entire state of New York.

In the 1950’s my wife, Margaret Eddy and I were co-ministers of a little storefront church at 322 East 100th Street. She and I and our three children lived on the block. We knew addicts and addiction well. One day, I was walking down the block when a 17 year old youth, part of our 100th Street Church, stopped me. He confronted me “You ministers try to help a few of my friends who are addicts, but what are you doing about addiction?” He was right. Aside from one little hospital for teen age addicts there were no place in New York State where an addict could go for help. He had only two choices. He could get Welfare to pay to send him to a hospital in Louisville, Kentucky, or do one other thing - he could go before a judge and confess to a minor crime he had not committed. The judge knew exactly what he was doing
and why. He would sentence him to a month at Ricker’s Island prison where he would kick his habit “cold turkey”. This method involved going through the dts all alone.

Pewee and I looked seriously at each other. We agreed to get together for prayer and for action with others on our 100th St. block and others in the neighborhood to do something about addiction. We shared ideas. We looked all over. We found what we later called fireflies of the spirit for weekly Narcotics Committee of the EHPP meetings. We learned that our own EH residents - men, women, and youth wanted desperately to do something about addiction.

Soon we were having 25 and 30 different people coming to our weekly meetings. We invited speakers - people who knew something about addiction. The speakers were doctors, lawyers, newspaper men, former addicts, and politicians. We kept attendance records. Over 100 people came. About 10 came faithfully to every weekly meeting. These 10 people became our leaders; the official Narcotics Committee. They became the successful Oxen. I was their caring farmer. We worked together but it was their energy and drive that brought results. We got the first State and New York City Hospital beds for addiction opened beginning at Metropolitan Hospital on East 99th Street.

We did not inspire religion on the group, but we always opened with sincere prayer. Some Bible passages, especially on “light” summed up what we were trying to do and helped us feel Jesus’ Spirit. This experience became a model for continued work in East Harlem in housing rehabilitation, prisons, education, peer counseling, and inner city credit unions.*

Norm Eddy, October 2010

*The full history of the East Harlem Protestant Parish Credit Union is described and available, written by East Harlem resident Ray Rodriguez and the reverend Norman Eddy.