

## A Conversation with Teri Barila, Founder of Community Resilience Initiative in Walla Walla, WA

By Ursula Volwiler, Director of Community Engagement

This conversation with Theresa “Teri” Barila took place on December 20, 2021. After almost two decades of ACEs and resilience work, Teri has stepped back from the daily business of the organization she built. She will remain active in product development and as a trusted advisor and Board President Emeritus.



We wanted to hear from her what the last 20 years have meant, and how she sees the organization moving forward. Below is a slightly summarized version of the conversation. The video with the complete conversation is available on CRI’s [Community Engagement](#) page.

With her scientist’s mind, Teri recognized early on that the seminal ACEs study was more than an academic exercise. It was putting the spotlight on a public health emergency that could only be tackled at the community level. She is known for working 80-hour weeks, blurring personal and professional life, in sounding the alarm bell locally, regionally, and nationally that this crisis puts everybody at risk and is everyone’s responsibility to solve.

Colby Kuschatka, current Board President, aptly sums up Teri’s accomplishments: “Teri is an example of just how much positive change one person can create to make the world a better place for all. That change which first happened in Walla Walla has now spread around the world and has encouraged others to begin their own journey towards resilience.”

Thank you, Teri, for being our catalyst, convener, coach, and cheerleader! We owe you so much.

### 1. What was the original impetus that made you start CRI around 2007?

ACEs work in Walla Walla had been going on for a couple of years as an affiliate of the WA State Family Policy Council in Olympia and its director, Laura Porter. The real impetus for Teri came at a conference in Winthrop, WA in Oct 2007. It was the third time that Teri had heard Dr. Rob Anda, co-principal of the original ACEs study. “But this time,” Teri says, “he was telling the story in a different way that just caught me.” He was frustrated about his work with a special committee on children’s issues in Washington, D.C., trying to get its members to understand the power behind the study of intergenerational transmission of ACEs from parents to children. They dismissed it saying that the data were great, but that it wasn’t their business to tell parents how to raise their children.

Teri continues that Dr. Anda looked right at the audience, all 100+ people, but it felt like he was looking straight at her. He was pointing his finger, saying: "It's your job to go home and make something happen in your community." He felt that every community needed to stand up and demand that this information be placed in the hands of medical providers, mental health professionals, etc. To Teri it felt like marching orders because she had grown up in a military family and took orders pretty well. "For the first time I was able to see that full community aspect which became my call to action," she admits. For the first couple of years, it had always felt like fabulous research, but more about mental health, and in her head it felt compartmentalized. "But that day in Oct. 2007, I got charged up because I saw ACEs through a much bigger lens."

## **2. What do you consider the organization's greatest accomplishment(s) over the last 15 years?**

Teri thinks of the accomplishments on two different levels: (a) thinking beyond the cognitive research, and (b) creating a framework based on all sectors.

Resilience takes a connection of empathy and heart, not just the cognitive understanding of the research. "That is what it was for me too," Teri admits, "taking the research and studying these kids at the Juvenile Justice Center to see what these ACEs had done to them. It was still so sectorized." But she learned that community resilience does not come from a practice of individual growth, as important as that is to the individual. Kids learn best when they watch adults practice what they preach. Kids learn best when they are exposed to resilience principles no matter where they go during their day, whether it's preschool, school, church, physical or mental health programs, after-school programs, etc.

Teri started to look at resilience as the responsibility of not just one sector, but all sectors. Could every sector share the information on ACEs, brain development, and resilience as that scaffolded platform on which to build particular strengths, skills, and capacities?

She was learning about community initiatives with her partners, Dr. Dario Longhi and his wife Dr. Marsha Brown, and started to appreciate that individual resilience does not translate to the community level if we focus only on the individual. We now know from Dr. Longhi's research across 118 communities in WA state and also national research on big cities that building strong resilient communities comes from community engagement. "It's that continuity of the framework that glues the community to these resilience principles," Teri concludes.

## **3. What do you see as CRI's greatest challenges or opportunities going forward?**

The biggest challenge in Teri's mind is that this work is a journey, not a sprint, because we are so trained for quick fixes and the new flavor of the month. The true challenge is tackling resilience building as a community-wide effort across all sectors and organizations, individually and collaboratively. It has to work across all levels, both top-down and bottom-up, and it takes a while. Teri counts on that school principal, for example, who is the role model. That principal

probably got the message of “making something happen” from three teachers who had gone to a training and are now nudging the principal toward coming on board.

The challenge is to stay with it when you are not seeing the success or progress you had hoped for. Maybe you are faced with a new administration and its naysayers, feeling like you’re starting all over again. Persistence and perseverance for sustainability are the biggest challenges for anyone attempting this work, which is why the development of core teams is so important. She adds, “We discuss in our workshop how this work can’t rest on just one person, because there is always transition. If you have a core team in whatever your organization is, school district, hospital, etc., then a group of people will champion this work.”

When Teri brought Dr. John Medina, a neuroscientist at Seattle Pacific University and the University of Washington, to Walla Walla, he said: “Think about major public health programs like breast cancer or colon cancer screening, tobacco cessation and seat belts, which took an average of 30 years to cement themselves in communities. We are probably looking at 30 years of getting ACEs and resilience anchored in, a very long window.” To Teri, this is the generational concept that First Nation Tribes understand so well. You may not see the results in your lifetime, but you’re setting the stage. It can be frustrating for all parties involved, for example, when county data don’t show much progress in the first three years of an initiative. “We need to be cautious about quick successes. Sometimes they happen, and sometimes they don’t,” Teri warns, “but that doesn’t mean you change your vision in terms of what this work can do about the #1 public health epidemic, at least up until COVID.”

What about the opportunities? According to Teri, those are the reactions from individuals and organizations as they take on this work and see the pivotal changes that occur. Teri remembers many parents who told her: “Why didn’t I know this sooner? Why didn’t somebody teach me how my brain and nervous system work so I could learn why I smack my kids halfway across the room when they tick me off, without even knowing that my arm has left the side of my body?”

The exciting part is to see people experience the transformative change themselves. That comes with creating awareness where once there was none, which is what CRI teaches and encourages people to practice. We need to understand why we have those triggers that were built into our bodies from the day we were conceived, or even earlier. Dr. Anda said that we have to see the power of what it means to us as individuals and as a community, when we can recognize where triggers come from and the patterns that were created when our bodies learned to defend and protect themselves in stress or trauma situations. “We become conscious of our own internal system and why we do what we do in response to our imprinted beliefs, values, and mannerisms,” Teri adds.

“That goes back to the beauty of our nervous systems which are there to protect us initially,” Teri marvels. Sometimes there are patterns that no longer serve us because we no longer are a 5-year-old child in an abusive home or family with an addiction. We are now adults and can manage those emotions, beliefs, and values. “It’s all about becoming conscious. I keep going back to those words,” she realizes. “It’s about taking responsibility for ourselves and for

learning how that awareness can serve us in regulating and managing ourselves so that we do a better job of modeling the inherent core resilience that comes with a regulated system.”

#### 4. What do you personally want to be remembered for as you step out of the organization's daily business?

“I don’t think I’m that important,” Teri says with a laugh. What is important is to see why Dr. Anda was standing up there almost in tears after having been told that this information wasn’t important to a special commission on children, when it’s so drastically important. “What is important is how you can be that spokesperson or catalyst,” Teri adds. There are these 4 C words that Teri often uses to explain her role in driving the organization forward. Can you be the:

- **catalyst** who gets the conversation started in your community,
- **convener** who brings people together, even if they are the naysayers (who will accept the change when they personally feel what it means to them),
- **coach** and **cheerleader** who keeps the work going?

Somebody once told Teri: “Teri, you are like a pit bull, constantly nipping at my heels to get me involved. But at least you’re smiling while you’re nipping.” To Teri, such a comment goes back to that persistence, which is a strong personality trait one would need, and which Teri believes she has. “It takes that courage and strength to know that this information is critically important to everyone even if they at first think it is just one of those 31 flavors of the month and they’d rather wait it out,” she concludes.

“We can each become that champion, which is another C word, by learning from the naysayers,” Teri recommends, “and finding ways to show how important this work is.” She gets excited when she hears from others after they got stuck and remembered something she said that worked and got them over the hump. “I think it’s just those C words and staying committed (another C word!) when it feels like this effort is taking so long,” she concludes.

Teri is convinced that if you’re not truly living the passion for this work, Convit will be easy to say, “Well, I tried, but it was too hard.” Teri believes that collectively we can see sustainability happen when we stay focused, stay committed, keep that core team energized, and keep spreading the word. “Of course, the longer we’re in it, the more evidence we’ll have to show why we do this,” she adds, “and the easier it is for new communities to come on because there is so much more supporting evidence.”

#### 5. What else do you want us to know about you or the organization that we haven’t covered?

“I really want to encourage you to look into your own history. Understand that relationship of your nervous system to your body and your brain,” Teri recommends. It all starts with us knowing ourselves well enough to then share our stories that open the door better than just putting data on the table. Our brain can only do what it interprets from our history and prior experiences to then try to respond based on that history. A big step is helping your brain learn how to reshape its predictive powers by changing those negative imprinted patterns, which happens through becoming conscious and aware. Then our brain can help us with these new habits and practices because it no longer has to interpret our world perspective based on old data.

Our brains are predictive. It’s up to us to change those embedded patterns, which means figuring them out while they are still there: Why do I get triggered by this particular situation, but not that one? “Believe me, from my own experience, you’ll find them if you keep digging,” Teri urges. How is something that happened in your family of origin connected to something else? It takes your own internal work to understand where and how your own patterns shaped you and how you can be more responsive to the new you, the new regulated skillset.

The application of how the vagus nerve translates into daily life is incredibly powerful to Teri. She mentions simple things like breathing, how we sit, our experience with nature, even inanimate objects. “Go explore!”, she says. We need to explore our own chemistry, our own history, and unpack that backpack that we all carry. Often, we don’t even know what we’ve been carrying in it. Half of it we don’t need because we’ve grown, we’ve had new experiences and a new life. We need to put what we need into that backpack, the things that then help us connect through the community. “Your trauma and your history will affect your ability to share with others,” she cautions. “Be mindful of what you’re bringing to the table. Are you someone’s calm or someone’s chaos?” This quote comes from one of our CRI colleagues who realized that his contribution to his marriage was chaos because of his ACEs history versus his wife’s zero ACEs family. The two of them engaged in chaotic communication until he understood his role in creating that chaos. “That’s the hard work of the internal side of things,” Teri concludes.

“I hope I have been able to create a spark for somebody to think about this information in a slightly different way,” Teri hopes, “to build a more resilient community wherever you are and whatever your community is: your nuclear family at first, your church family, your work family, or your neighborhood. A lot of this is based on your own network and relationships. Garden it and cultivate it. See where it takes you!”