

## Introduction

I first heard of Dr. Jason Bradford when [insert story about how you learned about what Bradford was doing at Willits. Talk about asking him to do a GPM interview, and about participating in the conference.]

We are very happy to have Jason's detailed account of all of the organizing he's done since he first moved to Willits. As he explains, organizing is a process that takes place over time. You hold events, you talk with people, you strike up alliances, and the next thing you know, you've got a grassroots group that's right in the thick of the community, working cooperatively with the local Chamber of Commerce and city council instead of bumping heads with them. Jason also shares some hard-won lessons about managing social change efforts, and about how to prepare to be not only an organizer yourself, but a trainer of organizers.

## Chapter – WELL: Willits Economic Relocalization

By Dr. Jason Bradford

Willits is a small town in Mendocino County, California. The population of the greater Willits area (zip 95490) is about 13,000, with about 90,000 in the county. The town sits within the Little Lake Valley at about 1400 ft in elevation between ridges of the Coastal Range, in an area formerly occupied by hunter-gatherer Pomo tribes. The economy was largely based on agriculture and logging during the late 19th and early 20th Century. Logging mills, manufacturing and ranching were the economic mainstays until the 1980s, when many mills closed. Aside from the large services sector, Willits now has a mix of economic activity, including light industry, small lumber mills, animal husbandry, and marijuana production. There was a large influx of former urbanite “Back to the Landers” in the 1970s that slowly changed the culture of the

area. People are very creative around here, and local artists and artisans abound.

Before moving to Willits with my wife and twin boys in August 2004, I had been a highly mobile tropical biologist, but had become disillusioned by the failure of various institutions I worked with to initiate any long-lasting, fundamental changes. And given the reality of Peak Oil, I did wonder how long I could afford to have field sites on the other side of the globe. Having grown up in California, we were looking for a place that was close to our roots, had a small town character within a largely rural setting, and seemed ready to do something about peak oil, climate change, economic globalization, and related ills. Nowhere seemed perfect, but Willits had a lot going for it and my wife (an M.D.) got a job here.

We began settling into our new home--built in 1903 and needing many repairs and efficiency upgrades. I started to make

connections in the community. It was not difficult. The local coffee house was full of conversation. People were talking about books I had read, such as *The Party's Over*, and how none of the presidential candidates were proposing to deal with what really mattered. At the open house for the Willits Environmental Center (WEC), I saw a flyer about the "Big Rollover" written by Randy Udall several years ago. SolFest in the nearby town of Hopland promoted alternative energy and lifestyles ([www.solarliving.org/solfest2004.cfm](http://www.solarliving.org/solfest2004.cfm)). I attended a Willits workshop on GROW BIOINTENSIVE farming by Ecology Action ([www.growbiointensive.org](http://www.growbiointensive.org)). The whole staff and the handful of local participants were aware of the problem of resource depletion as well as its effects on food production and distribution. Willits was a cultural milieu waiting to be stirred.

(SH 2) History of Willits Economic Localization (WELL), Oct., 2004-May, 2006 (SH 2)

On Oct. 18<sup>th</sup>, [year??]I organized a showing of the film “End of Suburbia” at the WEC. About 20 people came, including the mayor, another city council member, and a local reporter. After the film we sat in a large circle and had a lengthy, rather open discussion.

The WEC has a large marquee that traffic on Main Street, which is synonymous with US Hwy 101, can see as they pass. Literally, thousands of cars and trucks pass this sign each day. A steady stream of messages about “Peak Oil,” “End of Suburbia” screenings, and “Sustainable Willits” was displayed during the early days of what became WELL. I had also placed flyers on public bulletin boards around town.

Having a truly local paper helped, as I could easily get articles out about events. Before the first meeting the paper had “Bradford: Oil will ‘peak’ this decade.” Next came the headline, “Planning for the end of oil. Film and discussion of energy alternatives at the Willits library on Monday, November 8.” That event attracted about 60 people and overflowed the meeting room. It was similar in format to the first: (1) see film, (2) engage in a moderated discussion.

By this point, a buzz had started going around town. It was front page news (“Life After Cheap Oil: Got a Blueprint?” [www.energybulletin.net/3132.html](http://www.energybulletin.net/3132.html)). We’d had a packed house and lively discussion. Many of the local “movers and shakers” were engaged. I had never been involved in community organizing before and was brand new to this scene. But people started coming forward asking how they could help. I had to find some way to turn the focus away from me and onto the development of a process owned by the public.

The next meeting, which took place on November 23 at the Willits high school cafeteria, was an attempt to do just that. A crowd of approximately 90 people attended, and was divided roughly in half between those who wanted to watch the movie and those wanting to start “doing something.” I had come up with the idea of breaking into “Study Groups” where people would organize around their interests. Before just leaping to “Action,” I wanted folks to get a sense of where we are now versus where we are possibly headed. This would ground us in reality and establish a “frame” within which we could envision a transition. I solicited proposals for these groups and the obvious ones came up: Food, Water, Energy, Shelter, Transportation, Security, Local Currency, Education, Politics and Governance, Community Farm and Ecovillage, Funding, etc.

But we never actually divided up during that meeting. People still needed to voice their general concerns and ideas. It became a two-and-a-half hour chat session that was very cathartic but not

terribly productive. The crowd was obviously diverse and it was becoming hard to keep them together. Some were far into the process of absorbing the information, while others were brand new and couldn't relate to the enormity of it all. I really needed a smart strategy to manage this.

Fortunately, others understood my needs and stepped forward. I started meeting with people between events to strategize and plan. We arranged a great space at the Willits Charter School, which supported what we were doing. From early on, I had told the group that we needed to move through phases of awareness, planning, and then action, although these phases would always blend into one another. The next news article reflected our shift (“Sustainability Planning Underway” [www.energybulletin.net/3655.html](http://www.energybulletin.net/3655.html)).

Another publicity boon came in the form of a new local radio show called “The Party’s Over” that aired every other Monday from 9 to



10 am ([www.kzyx.org](http://www.kzyx.org)). Richard Heinberg was the second guest on the program ([www.globalpublicmedia.com/interviews/269](http://www.globalpublicmedia.com/interviews/269)), and I was the third ([www.globalpublicmedia.com/articles/330](http://www.globalpublicmedia.com/articles/330)).

I was clearly among a well-informed general public that had a strong sense of place and a feeling of local empowerment. Not long before I arrived, Mendocino County had become the first in the nation to ban Genetically Modified Organisms. This was a huge rallying point, and my goal was to create another movement. The daunting fact was that we couldn't rest after an election, we had to shift the culture permanently: we needed a local social movement with staying power.

We formed a Steering Committee (currently about 10 people) and arranged to meet every other Monday between the regularly scheduled large gatherings. This committee combines pot-luck meals with strategic planning and the nitty-gritty of making sure the next events run smoothly. The Steering Committee adopted an

80% consensus rule for debate and resolution, and we initially formed rules on an *ad hoc* basis. A well-established, local non-profit ([www.redinet.org](http://www.redinet.org)) two blocks from my home is our legal umbrella group. So we have a great office and a way to manage donations and obtain grants. The WEC provides us with liability insurance for our meetings. A city council member arranged for us to meet in the Community Center and Council Chambers.

We have hosted a series of guest speakers, panels and workshops, often in collaboration with other community groups. Topics range from peak oil and gas (Richard Heinberg, Julian Darley), climate change (Ann Hancock), sustainable agriculture (John Jeavons, Gloria & Stephen Decater), local economies (Michael Shuman), renewable energy (Steve Heckerth), local and seasonal cuisine (Jessica Prentice), eco-design of the built infrastructure (Richard Register and Kirstin Miller) and others. These presentations have been a great break from the regular meetings, and the speakers

have been motivating and informative. These events broaden the appeal of WELL and enroll more people in the community.

Between speaker events, we hold general meetings that are open to the public but typically attract a common group of people actively organizing what can best be described as project-based clubs or research and advisory groups. Much of the work done has been by these largely self-organized groups outside of WELL meetings, but supported by the administration that goes into putting events together and communicating via newsletters, flyers and press releases. The WELL meetings are a time for project enrollment, networking, vetting new ideas and receiving feedback.

Most of the projects are small-scale, volunteer-based efforts. Some individuals engage in research and political dialog concerning large-scale, long-term issues, such as how to run our economy on renewable energy, create a local food system, change city planning documents and building codes to remove car dependency, and

support hometown manufacturing of basic tools. These larger projects are always in partnership with other organizations and institutions.

WELL is a very dynamic organization, and at the time of writing, is going through some big changes. We are becoming more formal in terms of governance, structure, and planning. This is a normal maturation process and will hopefully make us even more effective as an agent of transformation.

The town is also beginning to change because of WELL. The city council used the WELL Energy Group to study options for local energy infrastructure, including the installation of photovoltaic panels at the city water and sewage treatment plants. Background work from WELL, delivered in the form of well-researched reports, has provided credibility for our “ideas.” Several community groups have used the WELL Food Group as an advisory board for new community gardens. The foundation in

charge of developing a new hospital assembled a "Green Team" of WELL participants from the Health & Medicine Group, the Shelter Group, the Energy Group, and the Food Group to advise on aspects of design, construction and operation methods. WELL participants are engaged in revising city plans and codes to align with the goals of a sustainable, local economy.

The Chamber of Commerce surprised us by being the first to join the Business Alliance for Local, Living Economies. Our local NGO partner, the Renewable Energy Development Institute, has a grant from the city to run a Home Energy Localization Program that will target low-income families. The Bank of Willits is starting an Economic Localization Fund that will use REDI/WELL advisors to manage loan applications. Many grants are being sought through community groups for local food and energy projects.

A truism of nature is that from little things big things grow. The story of Willits has encouraged others within the region to organize. Similar groups have formed in neighboring Ukiah Valley, Anderson Valley, Laytonville, Covello, Mendocino Coast, and Garberville. WELL hosted a Regional Localization Networking Conference in April, 2006, and folks from 30 communities came. Since Willits is a bit further along in this process, many look to WELL for guidance. Thus, I hope the following suggestions will help our neighboring communities and similar ventures around the world.

(SH 2) Perspectives and Tips for Organizers (SH 2)

### **Group Strategies**

One strategy to cope with the problems we face is to drop out of society as much as possible and live a simple life, semi-isolated from the horrors “out there.” However appealing this strategy may

be, global traumas will most likely catch up with all but the isolated recluse. Reversing course and implementing a complete overhaul of our collective lives will require massive political will and cooperative action. I am assuming that those reading this book are more inclined to be politically active and work for social change.

The trouble is, all of us who've grown up in the more affluent parts of the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century are behaviorally conditioned by a super-abundance of highly disposable material goods, nearly unlimited Earthly travel options, and community isolation. These conditioned mind-sets are now part of law and institutional structures reflecting the energetic glut on the upslope of the fossil fuel era.

Truthfully, the bad news is that changing a highly institutionalized culture is perhaps impossible by simply "changing mindsets or values." Mindsets and values are more often reflections of the

material conditions of a society. Frugality as a value follows scarcity, for example, and conspicuous consumption follows opulence. The good news, however, is that reality is conflicting with dominant belief systems. This conflict sets up an opportunity to help the disillusioned or confused by offering a coherent explanation of what is happening, and pathways to realign their thinking with the new environment.

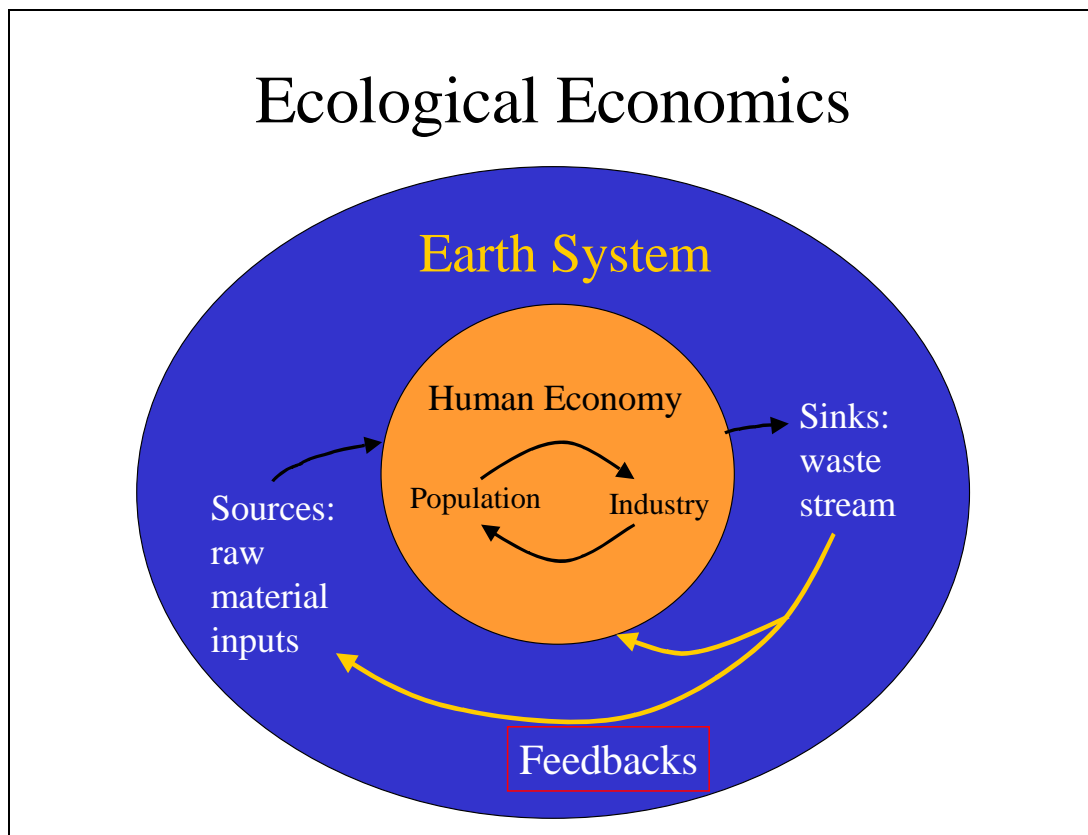
History shows some instances when societies have responded wisely, and plenty of other instances when they didn't change in time. So there's no guarantee that this will be successful. But how can we improve the odds?

With this background, I offer some conceptual models for consideration when organizing groups dedicated to social change.

### *Ecological Economics Model*



To understand and communicate the problems we have, I recommend studying Ecological Economics. It may be impossible to properly respond to a challenge if you don't have the tools to recognize it. Good education is essential.



Picture a circle within a circle. The inner circle is the Human Economy with goods and services being exchanged between the population and industry (or households and firms). This human economy is embedded within and entirely dependent upon the

Earth System, including incoming sunlight, fossil energy, other raw materials, and food. The Earth System also processes the byproducts of the Human Economy.

The size, or scale, of the Human Economy is presently too large relative to the Earth System. Peak Oil, for example, results from placing too high a rate of demand on a resource that is ultimately finite. Climate Change is caused by a build-up of wastes.

Unpleasant feedbacks result from this dangerous state of overshoot, including violent storms, loss of forests from acid rain, toxic fish, etc.

General guidelines for solutions can also be seen through Ecological Economics. A sustainable economy does not use resources faster than they naturally replenish, and it does not create wastes that build up in the environment. Keeping an economy at an appropriate scale prevents the damage caused by pollution that

undermines the functioning of the Earth System upon which the Human Economy depends.

### *Transformative Social Change Model*

Because we need to see large-scale collective actions, it is important to have a clear concept of the role of your group within the community. I use the Transformative Social Change Model to visualize and explain this role.



Picture what you want at the top, i.e., a transformed community through actions. A triangle leading to that consists of the relationships among different affinity groups aligned towards a common goal. At the base is information that defines the issues and goals, and some organizational structure, such as lines of communication and facilities that allow people to come together.

In this model, existing institutions are necessary allies and partners to create sustainable, local economies. Your group will act as a “midWIFE” in this process by being a:

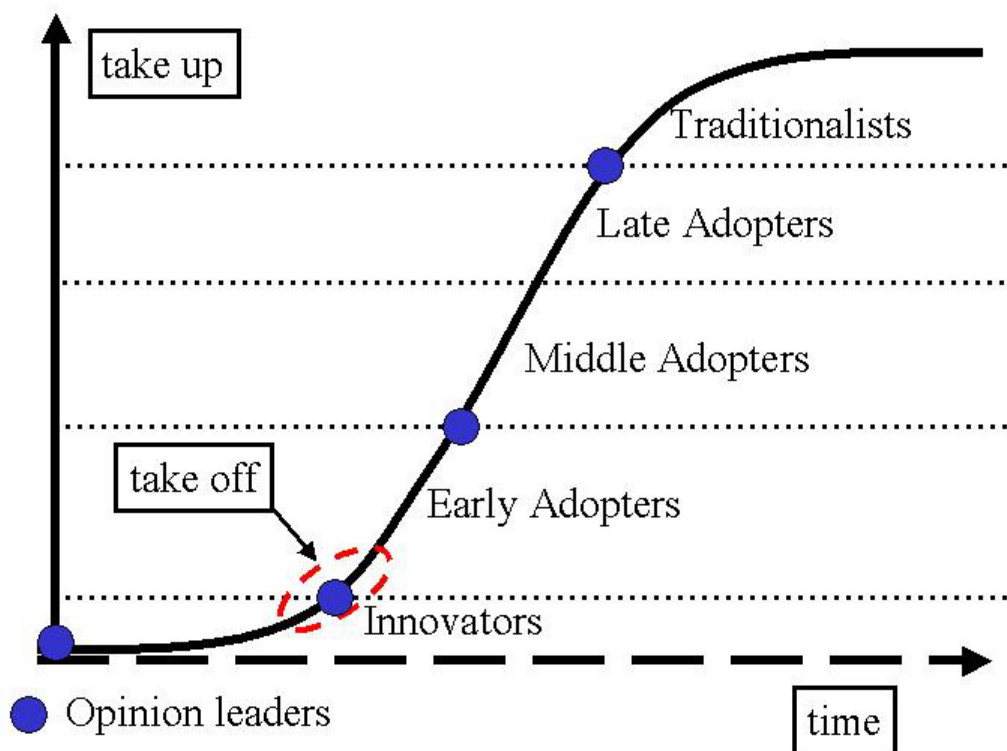
**Watchdog** (when your goals are threatened)  
**Incubator** (when nobody else will get started)  
**Facilitator** (developing and assisting partnerships)  
**Educator** (to inform and enroll)

After a while, the lines between community groups blur as they take on similar projects and have overlapping sets of participants.

*Diffusion of Innovation Model*

Although physical laws will dictate that economies become more localized, the rate at which this occurs and how smoothly we can transition will be determined by the speed of adoption of relocalization as a strategy for coping with peak oil, climate change, and the social stresses of globalization's legacy. So how can a population quickly accept a new idea, such as relocalization?

The Diffusion of Innovation Model offers some strategies for rapidly disseminating an idea.



The key parts of this model are the relationships between future-oriented thinkers, the innovators, who like new ideas because of their “newness,” and the early adopters who must be sold on the relative advantage of a new idea. Selling the advantages of an idea to certain, well-connected people, or opinion leaders, can get it spread within and among social networks. To sell an idea, it also helps to have examples or working models so the early adopters can try it out or see that it has been tested.

When planning how you are going to begin the relocalization dialog where you live, it does not make sense to go straight after the traditionalists. Instead, sort out who in your community has early adopter characteristics, such as a history of being open to new ideas, although with some discretion and deliberation. If these same people, and the institutions they represent, are well respected and well connected, then they are opinion leaders too.

Your job is not to hold onto relocalization as a cause for the identity of your group, but to pass it on across social groups so it becomes widely adopted. GOOD SENTENCE /IDEA The obstinacy of traditionalists may drive you crazy today, but if you do your job right, you will come to love them in their role as protectors and administrators based on the principles of sustainable, local economics. At the beginning of any organizational drive, try to approach traditionalists with compassion because their initial reaction may be one of great disillusionment. . We have found that some traditionalists are interested in localization because it reflects their disposition, and many are already upset with the centralization of decision-making and economic power. They are naturally more suspicious, however, and it may take longer to win their trust than any other group in town.

### *Communication Techniques*

If you were to go to work for a company selling encyclopedias door-to-door (a job I had for 3 weeks), the company would train you on the product line and the pitch. You would learn how to get into the door, respond to common questions, and make the close. With these basic rules in mind, I have some techniques I use to remember what to say when talking to people.

First I think about the images of those models discussed above.

Then I connect those models to mnemonics. With Ecological Economics, I might be explaining the bigger picture and I'll remember the word "slurp." The mnemonic is SLRRP and stands for Security, Local Revitalization, Resources and Pollution. With this I may spontaneously say something like:

"I am worried about depleting resources, like oil, and pollution, like greenhouse gases. I think we would be more secure if we didn't rely so much on importing all our basic goods. We'd have a better local economy and a more vibrant community. So I am learning about how can we produce more of what we consume right here in an environmentally conscious way, free of depleting resources and harmful toxins."



Then I might go into some heartfelt talk about my values and recall the word “risk.” The mnemonic is RISC for Responsibility,

Ingenuity, Security and Community, which you could turn into:

“I am very proud of what we are doing because I feel responsible for the well-being of my family and friends. I want to make sure they live in a secure and interesting community. This means protecting the environment and fostering economic diversity. By using our local talents and ingenuity, we can create many new job opportunities here.”

To discuss the role of WELL, I would think about the

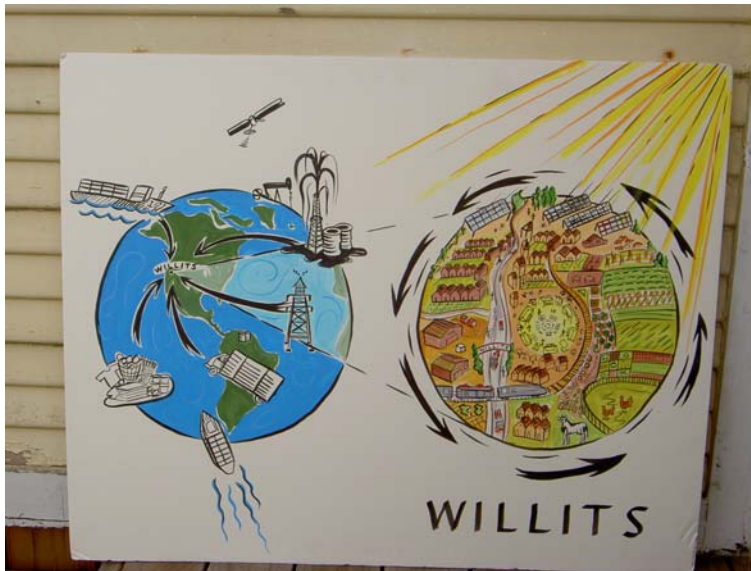
Transformative Social Change Model and the “midWIFE”

mnemonic to say:

“Our organization is promoting responses to some big challenges, so we don’t expect to handle these by ourselves. On the contrary, we must form many partnerships with existing institutions. What we do is educate about the problems and offer solutions. We facilitate dialogue among people to overcome obstacles. If nobody else is willing to take on some task, we may incubate a project to get it started. And sometimes we need to be on the lookout for threats, like a good watchdog.”

WELL also has a set of posters for presenting to small to moderate sized audiences. There’s one on Ecological Economics, a vision of the transition from a global to a local economy, illustrations of

various topics being studied and projects initiated concerning Food, Water, Energy, Transportation, and a review of the process of strategic planning and action. These posters provide nice visual aids for the audience and keep the presenter on track.



## Personal Preparation

If you are motivated to start a Post Carbon Local Group, I recommend you first do a self-assessment. Make sure you are beyond any panic or depression stage from learning about peak oil. Only after going through the various stages of grief and coming to a place of acceptance will you be strong enough to take on a leadership role. Once you have realized that you are not in control, you will be able to lead. People will sense that what you are doing is not primarily about your own ego or salvation. The sincerity you convey will build immediate empathy and trust. Share your own feelings in order to allow others to be comfortable with theirs.

The organizing process will overwhelm you unless you can delegate and relinquish control. If someone comes to you with a good idea, tell him or her how great it is and then ask if they can take care of it or find somebody who can. *Your job is to create a large cadre of community leaders who will carry through with plans to change our economy and culture in a sensible way.*

Sort out your strengths and weaknesses. Personally, I am a "big picture" person steeped in the facts and theories. I have never run a small business, created a marketing campaign, or run a strategic planning workshop. The only reason WELL has done so well is because others with complementary skills have filled niches that I leave empty. If you are starting a new group, it is wise to have partners and to discuss the roles you will take on before initiating public meetings.

You will be disappointed many times along the way. People will fail to follow through on their word. People will be slow to comprehend what you are intimately familiar with. Folks will come and go. Have nearly infinite patience, but be there to step in and get something done if it really needs doing. Forgive yourself when you blunder.

Most of all, enjoy creating a new way of life and a new community of caring, responsible people. Embrace the wonderful moments

you have now and recognize that you can only be expected to change yourself and your community, and just hope the world follows.

For more information about WELL see our website:

[www.willitseconomiclocalization.org](http://www.willitseconomiclocalization.org)

### **Acknowledgements**

In this chapter, I am speaking about WELL from my own perspective, not for WELL. However, there are dozens of people I've become very fond of and whose wisdom I've tapped into. If they read this chapter I hope they will see a bit of themselves in what I've expressed and know how much I have learned from them. Thanks to all of you. I feel at home in Willits.