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OPINION

Too few people in Charlotte interact across class lines. That hurts everyone.

By **Sherri Chisholm**

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When I was a freshman at the University of Michigan, a friend grabbed me on her way to an information session for the Organizational Studies Program. Growing up in Detroit, I'd always been told to become a lawyer or a doctor. I'd never heard of organizational studies, but my friend knew I'd like it. Back then, social capital wasn't a topic. It wasn't in the nation's collective consciousness, much less studied and researched.

My experience at University of Michigan reminded me that having social capital is part of how I got my first job out of college at Deloitte, and it's part of my story

in applying to Harvard for graduate school. Throughout my journey, I have spent time with Black and white people, whose worlds were bigger than the one that I knew growing up as the daughter of an educator and steel mill supervisor.

Social capital — the networks, connections and access to people who produce information, resources and opportunities — carries tremendous power for creating access to greater opportunity.

Our city has been tackling this concept for years. In March 2017, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force released an extensive report identifying social capital as one of two omnipresent factors (segregation being the other) with a profound impact on economic mobility, social mobility and general quality of life.

At Leading on Opportunity, we work alongside individuals and organizations across the area to collectively carry the torch of the task force's foundational work. In the past few years, we've seen a groundswell of efforts aimed at addressing social capital.

UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute issued the [2019 Social Capital Survey](#), which provided a baseline measurement of social capital. Harvard University's Opportunity Insights — the same group that authored the 2014 "Land of Opportunity Study" — recently released research on the importance of social capital. Released Aug. 1, the study, "[Social Capital and Economic Mobility](#)," showed that "growing up in a community with greater social interaction across class lines increases children's chances of rising out of poverty."

According to Harvard's study, Mecklenburg County had low levels of social capital, average levels on socioeconomic diversity, and near the bottom for "friending bias" (the likelihood that people of different classes will befriend one another).

Our high degree of friending bias illustrates that we may live across the street from people of a different class, but seldom do we interact or form relationships

with those neighbors.

Efforts to build social capital and bridge the class divide take more than putting people in the same neighborhoods. It means also finding and creating spaces that shift some of the existing mindsets and behaviors. These spaces could be private or public — like libraries, houses of worship and peer-mentoring programs — that are intentionally designed to bring people from different ethnicities and incomes together.

“The recent research is yet another example of what we’ve known for years and deliberately made a foundational component of the 2017 report — that social capital is critical to enabling economic mobility,” said Brian Collier, executive vice president at Foundation For The Carolinas. “Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s results underscore the fact that we still have a lot of work to do. If we really want to move the needle for our community, helping young people build — and understand the importance of — social networks and relationships must be an intentional part of our programmatic and decision-making processes at every level, in both public and private sectors. If we don’t, our promises of a brighter future are empty words.”

If we acknowledge our connections and use them to empower others, more people will be exposed to opportunity outside their current environment. Relationships, role models and experiences help people — like me — see possibilities for their future.

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