



community development partnership

Creating opportunities for people to live, work, and thrive on the Lower Cape

Supporter spotlight: Brett Tolley

“Chatham is where I’m from, these are the families I’ve known and who helped raise me. I felt an obligation to give back.”

Brett Tolley

National Program Coordinator, NAMA and CDP Board Member



Community organizing around housing is in Brett Tolley’s blood. So when CDP CEO Jay Coburn invited him to join our Board of Directors, Brett knew it was the right fit.

Brett is the National Program Coordinator for the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA) -- a fisherman led organization committed to building a movement towards healthier fisheries and fishing communities. The COVID19 pandemic has caused NAMA to pivot and assist fishermen in weathering the collapse of demand for their catch. “Through my work” Brett reflects, “I have been involved with organizing the fishing community- focusing on long-term policy and strategic planning. We don’t typically get involved in emergency response but because of the trust we have

built over the years, and our national network of values-based seafood businesses, we find ourselves getting pulled into this. There is a lot of deep-seated fear and pain and a lot of questions.”

Born and raised in Chatham, Brett and his wife Danielle met at Elon University in North Carolina. They moved to New York City where Brett started working for a community development corporation that focused on affordable housing while Danielle pursued an acting career. After twelve years, Brett yearned for home and, in 2017 when a work opportunity presented itself, the couple returned to live in Chatham. They now have a two-year-old child and they are expecting their second child in August.

In the fall of 2018, in recognition of the lack of young families in Chatham and the need to sustain a year-round economy, the Board of Selectmen created the Chatham 365 Taskforce to explore ways the Town could encourage an age-diverse, self-sustaining year-round community. Brett and Danielle had just had a baby, and Brett’s organizing work was in high gear when both he and his wife were asked to join the taskforce. “At the time we were busier than we’ve ever been and living paycheck to paycheck, working overtime and on weekends,” says Brett. “We asked ourselves if this was important enough - for both of us the answer was a resounding yes.” Brett adds, “Chatham is where I’m from, these are the

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families I've known and who helped raise me. I felt an obligation to give back." They spent a year on the task force during which they created a plan for community engagement around helping year-round residents find housing and meaningful work. "It was a great learning experience," says Brett.

During this time Brett was invited to appear on the CDP's biweekly radio and television show *This Place Matters* hosted by CDP CEO Jay Coburn. It was the first time they had met. In the days following, Jay followed up with Brett and shared the CDP's scope of work. "I was aware of the business side but not so much about the work the CDP was doing around housing" says Brett. CDP Board member and Chatham native Beth Wade asked Brett to serve on the board. Again, Brett found himself asking if this issue was important enough for him to dedicate his time. Again, the answer was yes. "I am particularly concerned that there needs to be a way for people to find livelihoods with dignity, and the work of the CDP speaks deeply to my core values and what I care most passionately about," says Brett.

As a new board member Brett wants to be patient although he is eager to get to work. "At the broadest level I want to help the CDP advance its mission and move the needle from within," Brett says. "It feels like the right fit because of my previous work with Chatham 365 in engaging people and helping communities move policy recommendations through that decision-making process." He feels that what they accomplished in Chatham could be used as a model for other communities on the Lower Cape.

Brett is now involved with the CDP's Lower Cape Community Housing Partnership (LCCHP) Advocacy Program as a member of the Chatham Housing Champions. "Because of the current health crisis our initial plan is now on pause and we are pivoting. As a member of the CDP Board I think I can be a good liaison between the advocacy group and the CDP by strengthening the grassroots efforts on the ground there," says Brett. "What seems to be clear is that we must recognize that this is a crisis moment for the globe, country, and Cape Cod and the economic outfall will last a long time."

Brett also sees opportunities that will emerge as the crisis lessens, pointing to the 2008 recession which had a huge impact on housing and LMI communities. He notes "Companies and businesses consolidated, bought up property and were able to build on the cheap." It will be important for the Lower Cape to seize what will likely be a similar opportunity and move forward with progressive policies and housing efforts before others take advantage of the low prices and buy up housing stock as investment property. Speaking to his work on the LCCHP advocacy group, Brett says "There will be an opportunity for us to protect against those trends through policy efforts and we need that grassroots movement more than ever."