

# A Decade of Commitment to Building a Movement of Families

*Report to the Board of the  
Marguerite Casey Foundation*

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## Excerpt

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# **Profiles in Movement Building**

*Eight Grantee Case Studies*

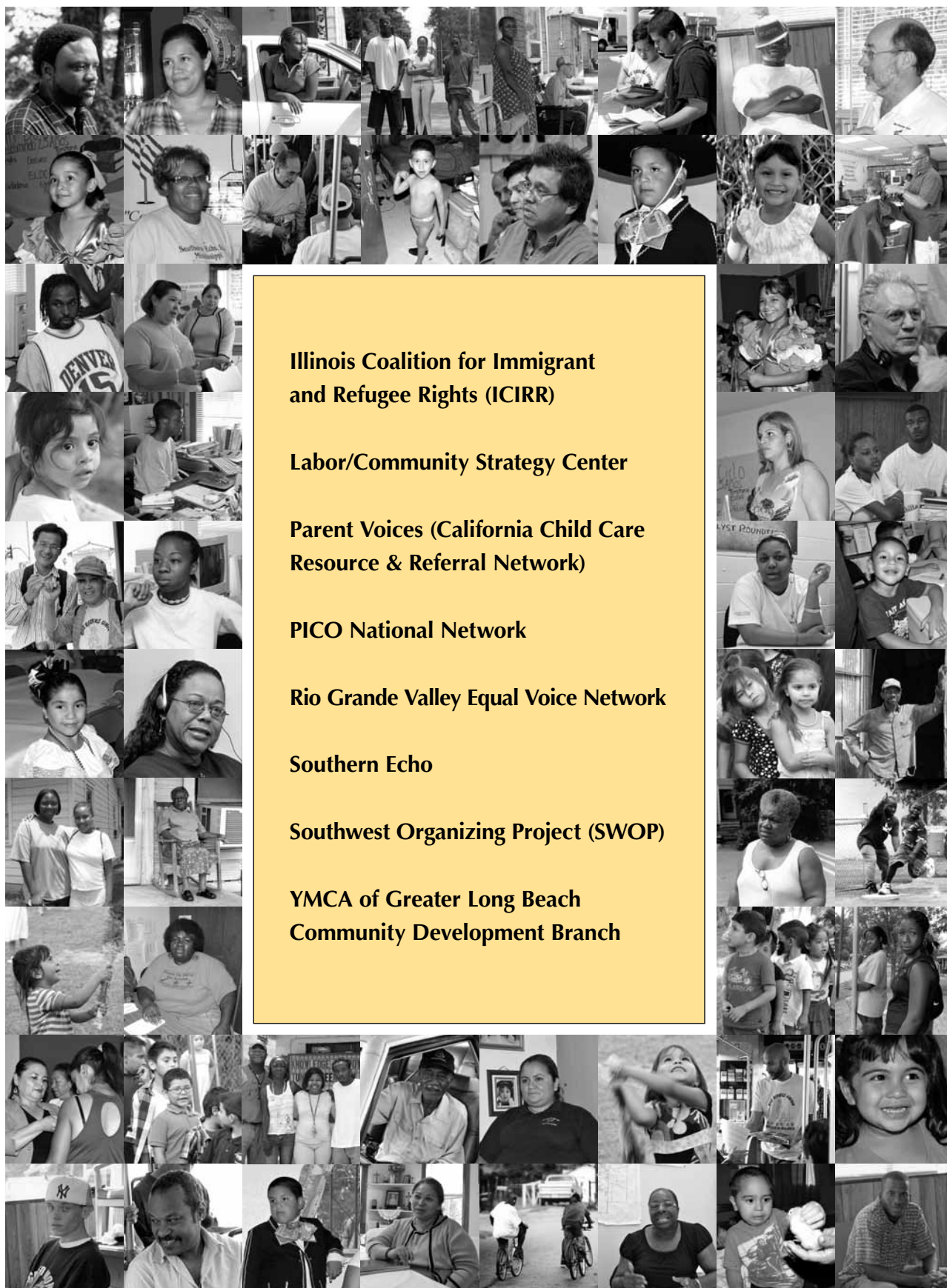
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*A hotel maid riding the bus. A daughter following her mother's community organizing tradition. A Muslim widow raising three children while starting a nonprofit. A family living in a trailer in a colonia at the border. A first-time, black, female mayor, jubilant at victory, and then depleted by redistricting.*

*Los Angeles. Long Beach. Albuquerque. Chicago. The Mississippi Delta. Rio Grande Valley at the Texas border. Sacramento. San Francisco. Washington, DC. From urban sprawl to arid mountains to humid swampland to barbed-wire fences to the corridors of power – the lives and civic struggles of everyday people across the United States are inextricably tied to the historical texture, cultural flavor, and specific, geographic location of the places where they live and work. Each circumstance is unique, yet the players share many commonalities, including the continual struggles of poverty in day-to-day life, tangible experiences of economic or racial injustice, and nuanced perceptions and analyses of social and political power dynamics in their communities – along with an optimistic sense that a better life can be made by pushing the boundaries of community conventions and expectations. By forging ties to one another and to grassroots organizations with seasoned organizers, these exceptional “common folk” can slowly build momentum, seizing small moments and historic opportunities for change.*

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What follows is a collection of eight case studies that illustrate the different paths this movement toward social change can take.



**Illinois Coalition for Immigrant  
and Refugee Rights (ICIRR)**

**Labor/Community Strategy Center**

**Parent Voices (California Child Care  
Resource & Referral Network)**

**PICO National Network**

**Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network**

**Southern Echo**

**Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP)**

**YMCA of Greater Long Beach  
Community Development Branch**

## **Building a Voice that Unifies Diverse Cultures**

*Shaped by watching Spanish activists beaten bloody by military police while studying in Madrid at the end of the Franco regime, Josh Hoyt was abruptly introduced to state-sanctioned terrorism. Spurred to action, he found he could not simply return home to work in his grandfather's fresh produce business in the suburbs of Chicago. He spent time working in poor communities in Latin America and then returned to Chicago to immerse himself in training with the Industrial Areas Foundation. After seven years as an organizer with IAF, Josh took the helm as Executive Director of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.*

**I**magine 80,000 kids losing a parent to a curable disease – the media would have a field day stoking public outrage. Now, imagine the trauma and suffering of more than 80,000 children suddenly without a mother or father due to deportation of an undocumented parent. Fraught with controversy, the plight of these politically invisible Midwestern families would languish unacknowledged without the tenacious and fearless efforts of the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), located in Chicago's downtown "Loop." "The idea of working to protect families within the immigrant communities has ended up creating an incredibly powerful framework," says former skeptic and former Executive Director Josh Hoyt. "The ability to do this work is a gift of Marguerite Casey Foundation and the Equal Voice Campaign." A deportation "800-hotline," staffed by ICIRR-trained counselors fluent in Spanish, Portuguese, English, and Korean, together with "Deportation 101" training classes, legal counseling, and social services – all offered by ICIRR – provide needed support to immigrant families at immediate risk of losing a parent to deportation.

The proverbial melting pot of immigrants and refugees, Chicago is home to generations of Irish, Poles, Greeks, and Italians who staked their claim to neighborhoods around Chicago's South and Northwest side decades ago. Following the Civil War and decades afterwards, African Americans moved from southern states to seek jobs and to escape repressive Jim Crow laws. Newer waves of Latino, Asian, African, and Arab immigrants sought refuge

in Chicago. Known as a “city of neighborhoods,” Chicago is also one of the most segregated cities in the nation. The 140+/- organizations that make up ICIRR represent extremely diverse constituencies. “There’s a social glue where the diversity is

**“The idea of working to protect families within the immigrant communities has ended up creating an incredibly powerful framework.”**

something which people feel good about. They also feel that together we have been very effective at moving public policy issues that none of us would be able to move by ourselves,” explains Hoyt.

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## **Partnering for Power**

The city’s long history of absorbing many different immigrant groups has left a lasting effect on local politics. Though the region has a reputation for “ferocious” Chicago-style politics at times, it is also known to have a climate for coalition building. With so many waves of immigrant groups over the decades, no one group has ever completely dominated the political agenda and, in fact, groups have learned that it is critical to form alliances in order to advance mutual interests. In addition to working with its broadly-diverse membership, ICIRR has been strategic about building relationships with elected officials at every level – from local to national. ICCIR has a history of good relationships with mayors, governors, and local congressional leaders who represent the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois.

Newly-elected Mayor, and former Chief of Staff in the Obama White House, Rahm Emanuel

expediently embraced immigration issues in Chicago. In contrast to his policy position when working in the Obama administration, Emanuel recently called for the creation of a city-wide Office for New Americans, one of the key tenets of ICIRR’s

pre-election platform. The previous mayor, Richard Daley, was “an outspoken advocate for immigrants,” though he did not necessarily follow through with financial resources to implement his public positions. ICIRR has also successfully established an open dialogue with Governor Pat Quinn. Despite a disastrous state fiscal situation, ICIRR has been able to win close to \$3 million in funding for new immigrant programs the organization will administer, including an Americorps volunteerism initiative, an expansion of their citizenship program, and a new Parent/Mentor program to support the work of immigrant women volunteers in their children’s schools. This past Spring, despite \$1.6 billion in cuts to the state’s Medicaid budget, ICIRR was able to successfully defend the \$56 million spent to provide healthcare to undocumented children.

One of ICIRR’s biggest challenges is the changing composition of the Illinois Assembly. As a result of the census and changes to district lines, more than one-third of legislative seats turned over in the 2010 election. ICIRR faces the daunting task of educating new legislative members about the needs and issues confronting immigrants. Incoming ICIRR Chief Executive Officer Laurence Benito admits, “That poses challenges for us, organizationally, in terms of the education that needs to take place in order for legislators to take on the hard votes – particularly on things that they don’t understand.”

After 26 years, the leadership of ICIRR claims that there is always more to do, but its recent efforts have been impressive. In 2006, with the

support of ICIRR, then-Governor Rod Blagojevich allocated \$3 million in the state budget and signed the New Americans Initiative for Citizenship. In conjunction with this effort, ICIRR has accepted the role of administering the citizenship campaign

**“In the suburban areas, immigrants are the ‘new soccer moms.’ They are the swing voters.”**

for new Americans – receiving state funding to provide comprehensive support for immigrants as they move through the process of becoming U.S. citizens. Much of this funding is regranted to small linguistically- and culturally-embedded organizations who work daily with particular immigrant populations, and who are trusted by these groups. Over the last seven years, ICIRR has directly assisted more than 58,000 immigrants to fill out citizenship papers and voter registration forms to become active, voting citizens. “This is no easy task,” says Hoyt. “The citizenship application is ten pages long and it’s a legal document asking for a lot of information and requires getting fingerprinted, photographed, acquiring affidavits from the police. Our track record for completion and approval of these applications is about 95%.”

And more recently, in 2011, catapulted by ICIRR-trained youth lobbyists, the Illinois DREAM Act (SB2185) was passed in 2011 in spite of defeat at the national level. Signed by Republican Governor Quinn on August 1, 2011 at a ceremony attended by more than 800 supporters, the DREAM Act creates a state-level commission and a DREAM Fund which offers scholarships, college savings, and prepaid tuition to undocumented students who have graduated from high school. ICIRR has given

a powerful voice to the immigrant families who are part of its membership network – and beyond.

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## **Educating and Activating Voters**

What has allowed ICIRR to be so successful at helping its members impact policy? A twin strategy that begins with a close study of data. ICIRR carefully tracks demographic data in Chicago, in the surrounding region, and throughout the state, noting ethnic compositions, population changes, and movement of immigrant groups. “In the suburban areas, immigrants are the ‘new soccer moms,’” says Benito. “They are the swing voters.” Closely tied to data analysis, ICIRR works with its membership on voter registration drives to make sure that permanent legal residents are registering to vote, getting the educational information they need to become active civic participants and, most important, going to the polls to vote.

Rebecca Shi, formerly an ICIRR Fellow and now with Chicago’s Southwest Organizing Project, describes the process of going door-to-door in Chinatown registering more than 1,600 people to vote. She and other ICIRR organizers reached out to seniors in their 70s, 80s, and 90s, often in multiple Chinese dialects to ensure full understanding of issues important to them, to register them, and encourage them to get out and vote in elections. Shi describes ICIRR’s insistence on collecting information: “They are very demanding in terms of numbers. Every single night we had to report our numbers – how many doors were answered, how many people we registered to vote, how many volunteers we signed up, how many people we talked to that were legal permanent residents and who would be interested in citizenship. It was very data intensive.”



In the last seven years, ICIRR has helped more than 109,000 legal residents and citizens register to vote. There is no “glory” to this hard work of reaching out to individuals by walking the neighborhoods, knocking on doors, going to community events, and making thousands upon thousands of phone calls. But with persistence, the reality of the electorate is reconstituted and the

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“body politic” is changed to reflect the true diversity of local residents. Cook County Commissioner for the 7th District Jesus (“Chuy”) Garcia praises ICIRR for its organizational approach: “ICIRR is successful because they’ve developed meaningful, powerful, and lasting relationships with the emerging immigrant communities in Illinois. These residents now have a powerful voice because of ICIRR’s multi-national, multi-ethnic character.”

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## Working Beyond the Win

Buoyed by the pomp and ceremony of policy wins, ICIRR continues to stay focused on its day-to-day mission. ICIRR’s Immigrant Family Resource Program, funded through a contract of about \$1.5 million with the Illinois Department of Health and Human Services, offers more than 75 competitive grants to non-member as well as member organizations. For example, when a low-income Arab woman in Chicago is fleeing an abusive domestic situation, instead of walking by

herself into a public aid office, she can go to ICIRR member Arab American Family Services where Arabic-speaking staff will help her file necessary applications, go with her to the state office, and personally introduce her to a case worker who can help her take the next steps to safety.

“We have government contracts. We invest a lot of time and money in helping organizations be stronger service providers, delivering concrete benefits to people, whether it’s food stamps or citizenship. Some of the things that we have done would be anathema to the pure Alinsky tradition,” admits Hoyt. Hoyt is referring to Saul Alinsky, considered the founder of modern community organizing.

Alinsky was born in Chicago to Russian Jewish immigrant parents and, after a childhood in which he thought he would become a rabbi, was instead galvanized by the appalling conditions in Chicago’s meat-packing district. He developed his first campaign, “Back of the Yards,” to organize the residents in this aptly-named neighborhood adjacent to the Union Stock Yards. Alinsky’s seminal 1946 book, *Reveille for Radicals*, outlined his approach to helping poor, under-represented communities to form “People’s Organizations.” Considered radical by many, Alinsky used techniques that the mainstream considered absurd. He believed in continual conflict between the poor and the powerful and eschewed joining political parties or cultivating the support of entrenched political interests. His legacy was captured through the formation of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) which has trained generations of community organizers. Many of these IAF-trained organizers, including Hoyt, went on to found and to lead organizations that worked to develop new organizing models.

“Alinsky had no respect for the political process. You had to operate outside of it in order to



make it do what it was supposed to do,” explains Hoyt. “ICIRR is deeply grounded in the community organizing tradition and yet in a number of ways we are an innovation or a hybrid. We have trained a lot of community organizers of color, really good ones. We are very, very proud of that. But we are not doctrinaire. We look for things that work and then build on them.”

Beyond the New Americans Initiative and the Immigrant Family Resource Program – its two state-funded programs – ICIRR is dedicated

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to community organizing as a means to both shape policies around immigration and to directly strengthen the impacted communities. “The primary responsibility of our board of directors is to help develop strategy and provide leadership on various actions,” says Benito. Every quarter, the entire ICIRR membership meets in “Action Councils” to discuss and ratify policy agendas and positions, guided by policy committees and the board. The board is comprised entirely of representatives from member organizations. “ICIRR is very intentional about setting policy direction,” Benito says. In November 2011, ICIRR hosted its first annual New Americans Policy Symposium, which joined local and national policy experts in a series of community conversations with ICIRR member representatives about key issues impacting immigrants throughout Illinois, including early childhood education, human services, healthcare, political engagement,

employment, and immigration reform among others. These conversations are playing a key role in setting a policy agenda in the years ahead.

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## Writing ICIRR’s Next Chapter

In addition to forging new policy for the coming years, ICIRR has also transitioned into new leadership. After almost ten years as executive director, Josh Hoyt has passed the baton to Benito who praises Hoyt as “unique,” and the right person to have built the organization to this point. Benito makes no claims to try to replicate Hoyt’s charismatic leadership. The agency has long prepared for leadership change and has gone into this transition with “eyes wide open.”

For the past five years or more, Hoyt has worked extensively on national issues, while Benito has focused on organizational infrastructure and state-level issues. “The appreciation and love of organizing – that is not going to change under my tenure here. It’s central to what we do,” Benito says. “I will find my own voice in the organization.” Commissioner Garcia gives credit to ICIRR’s organizational strength: “They have grown their staff and deployed their human resources in an effective manner by creating relationships that are deeply rooted. It’s made them a very sustainable organization.”

ICIRR’s purposeful focus on leadership cultivation at senior levels infuses a relational style across the entire organization and its membership. ICIRR works first to build leaders among the communities represented by its membership and then, simultaneously, fosters new leaders within the ranks of its staff – often by recruiting community

members it has trained. In particular, ICIRR is committed to supporting youth to become the next generation of leaders. “There is a whole generation with new ideas about what organizing means, and knowing how to use social media. It’s very different from traditional Alinsky-style organizing,” Benito explains. “Bringing new voices to the table, incorporating new technology – those are things that we’ve embraced, as an organization.”

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### **Living a Compelling Story**

The poignant story of one young woman helped by ICIRR sums up much of the organization’s purpose. “Monica” (name changed for this story) moved with her family when she was eight from Zacatecas, Mexico, to a western suburb of Chicago. She and her parents were undocumented, though her brother, three years her junior, was born in Chicago and is a U.S. citizen. Monica struggled with immigration issues, particularly as she sought her dream of getting a U.S. college education – although this was nearly impossible due to difficulty with registration and high tuition fees charged to “international” students. Desperate to find a way to go to college, she stumbled upon an organizing meeting hosted by ICIRR at her local church. Through her involvement with ICIRR, she was able to participate in the HERE (hotel workers union)-sponsored “Freedom Rides” – eye-opening, educational bus tours of Illinois, which ended up in Washington, D. C. and New York City – she became “radicalized” and found new courage to give expression to her fears and her deep sense

of humanity. She participated in ICIRR-led youth trainings to prepare her to go to Springfield to lobby for in-state tuition for undocumented students and then made multiple trips to the state capital.

Monica describes the adrenaline rush, “We were in the chamber – it was the Senate vote... I’m there with about 150-200 other youth. This moment was going to define my future. And they went into the vote, and it passed! That was the shift for me. I realized, this is what power is... a group of youth who shared their stories and had done a lot of work to ensure passage of this legislation. I liked this!”

Following her involvement as a student, ICIRR recruited Monica to be a Fellow, organizing her own neighborhood and leading citizen education efforts and voter registration drives. Compelled by the work, she eventually formed an organization represent immigrants in the western suburbs of Chicago. ICIRR has helped her gain grant funding from Chicago-area foundations. Coming full circle, Monica’s agency is now an ICIRR member, and she serves as a member of the ICIRR senior leadership team. She says of her experiences, “I think a lot of the transformation comes through the actions. One of the things that comes with the transformation, is finding your own voice. To me, it’s literally finding my own voice, and finding my own power.”

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### **Finding Balance; Funding Balance**

ICIRR continually practices a balancing act as it seeks to coordinate and mediate the agendas, priorities, and passions of its youth activists, its member organizations and constituents, and civic and political leaders throughout the city, across the state, and at a national level. Tolerant funders and sustainable financial resources have also been

crucial to ICIRR's impact on issues important to its membership. Like the elected officials in Chicago, many in the city's philanthropic community have been sympathetic to, and supportive of, the immigrant experience. The local foundations "get it," according to Benito. However, as is typical of many funding organizations, most foundations choose to fund specific programs which are tied to definable outcomes. Here, Marguerite Casey Foundation stands almost alone providing grants with an implicit expression of trust in the grantee

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organization, which allows organizations such as ICIRR a high degree of flexibility in implementing programs and actions. ICIRR's work is largely concentrated in the state of Illinois, but it lends its voice to immigration issues in other states such as Arizona and Alabama, and on a national level – work which might not be funded by local foundations. Benito states emphatically, "Marguerite Casey's support gives us the flexibility to continue to work towards our mission, but also to react to things that may seem tangential, but are core to what we're about as an organization." Beyond this, Marguerite Casey Foundation's development of Equal Voice has enabled ICIRR to build broader alliances, well beyond immigrant-focused organizations.

*Mujeres Latinas en Accion*, another ICIRR member organization, was founded in 1973 to provide services which reflect the values and culture of Latinas. "We were started by a group of women who felt the need to form an organization from which a voice could be present to empower

its community," says Maria Pesqueira, Executive Director of Mujeres and an ICIRR board member. "We're really an organization that's about 'first voice.' Our mission is to empower Latinas." One of the longest standing Latina organizations in the country, it offers a comprehensive set of social services along with advocacy focused on non-violence, reproductive health, and leadership development. When asked about her organization's participation in ICIRR, she shares, "ICIRR has really pushed the envelope on how services need to be

offered to immigrants across the state of Illinois. ICIRR has a very strong foundation. They have the strength of the membership that is very supportive. It is the leadership, the governance, the membership, coming together to create this process and figuring out what direction the organization is going to take; not just from a leadership

perspective, but also from priorities that are programmatic and advocacy-focused."

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## Dedicating One's Life to Organizing

One young ICIRR leader explains her dedication to the work of community organizing, "For me, it became a spiritual thing, central to my own dignity and my own humanity." Though ICIRR is a secular organization which embraces a vast diversity of cultures, as well as religious beliefs, the agency itself cannot help but have a spiritual element to its work.

Explaining his dedication to the work, Hoyt says, "The underlying philosophy of making democracy real, giving people a voice, organizing around self-interest, building power, operating off of shared values... you know, Genesis 1:26, 'We're all created in the image and likeness of God, and so you see God in the least among us.' I feel like ICIRR is deeply embedded in those traditions."

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## Advancing Through Advocacy

**A**t age 9, Itadel and her Palestinian family left their home in Jordan to pursue better educational opportunities in the United States. Now completely fluent in English, she describes how her father, a former school teacher, worked sweeping floors in a paper products factory in Chicago in order to give his children a better life. Itadel and her siblings tried to help their tearful mother assimilate as she gave up her traditional dress and haltingly learned English.

For Itadel, school was key. "Education is really dear to me," says Itadel, "Our teacher accepted us for who we were. She showed us the best of what America is. She was our window to the world." Following Catholic high school, Itadel dutifully entered a marriage arranged by her family when she was 19. As she and her husband settled into an Arab-American "family compound" in Chicago to raise three children,

**"I had this feeling that I wanted to contribute in a different way to the community... more grassroots. I wanted the women and the children to be able to walk into an agency that felt like home, that was dignified and respectable."**

she somehow found time to help other Arab-Muslim mothers and children navigate the institutional world of America, accompanying them to parent-teacher conferences and doctor's appointments, and occasionally getting drawn into court proceedings and social service agencies over family disputes involving child abuse, sexual assaults, and other hidden issues which the Arab immigrant

community refused to publicly acknowledge. In spite of community disapproval, Itadel summoned the personal determination, as well as support from her husband, to pursue a bachelor's degree in social work at University of Illinois-Chicago. Tragically, her husband died two weeks after she graduated, leaving her a widow with three young boys at age 32.

With tremendous courage, Itadel went on to pursue a Master's degree in Social Work. Following jobs at several social service agencies, she and her business partner, Nareman Taha, decided to use personal savings to form their own agency, Arab American Family Services (AAFS). Today, Itadel runs a statewide agency with a \$600,000 budget. "As an Arab agency, we're trying to figure out how to meet our community's needs with respect for the different beliefs and values they have within

their cultures. There's 22 Arab countries, but we're not all the same... there's different dialects, different values, different sects of Islam."

Seeking solidarity with other immigrant organizations, AAFS decided to become a member of ICIRR. "I think what ICIRR brings to the table is it makes you realize that you're not the only one doing the work," says Itadel who cites leadership training, issue education, connections to elected officials, organizational networks, funding, and expanded credibility as some of the valuable benefits of ICIRR membership. In return, Itadel works tirelessly to support the advocacy efforts of other member organizations – taking time from her own agency to go to Springfield to speak to legislators and participate in organized marches.

At times questioning ICIRR's ability to focus on critical issues when the membership represents such a broad cross-section of immigrant groups, Itadel credits the effectiveness of ICIRR's annual organizational "one-on-one" strategy, allowing ICIRR staff to sit down individually with staff representatives of member organizations to look at how ICIRR can better support its members and to identify and discuss their priority issues, which are then put to a vote of the full membership to determine the top three issue priorities for the year. "It's a huge impact for us to have a voice... It really is teaching us to advocate even within the ICIRR organization because it's all about advocacy."

Itadel is grateful for the confidence ICIRR has given her and her organization: "They entrust you to make it or break it. That's part of growing new leaders – they push you to be a leader, even more than you think you are." Itadel feels that a number of ICIRR community leaders have gone on to take key positions in government agencies where they can leverage the deep understanding of local immigrant communities to provide access to needed resources.

Highly supportive of ICIRR's ability to educate and prepare its members for issue campaigns and to grow new leaders, she is concerned about the possibility of ICIRR becoming too large. "To its credit," she says, "ICIRR will never turn anyone away from the table."

**"They push you to be a leader, even more than you think you are."**

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## Moving Together Toward Justice

Born under China's "one-child" policy, Rebecca Shi was largely raised by her grandmother and an extended family in Beijing when her physician father was offered a prestigious fellowship in heart surgery at Harvard University. Her mother, a pathologist, followed him to Boston with the belief she could practice medicine. However, she was unable to get legal status and so she spent seven years working in Chinese restaurants. Separated from her parents until she was ten years old,

Rebecca was finally able to move to the States to be with them and learned fluent English in a bilingual immersion program when she was in 5th grade.

After majoring in history at the University of Chicago, Rebecca considered going into investment banking or corporate law. However, after a sophomore year internship with ICIRR board

**"We don't just go into a community, do voter turnout, and then leave. At the end of the day, it's about developing leadership and having this grassroots leadership address issues that affect them."**

member Tuyet Le at the Asian American Institute and racked with personal guilt and a sense of injustice due to her mother's continuing undocumented status which prevented a return trip to China following her own mother's death, Rebecca decided to pursue a fellowship at ICIRR. "The component of ICIRR's community organizing which really spoke to me is that we don't just go into a community, do voter turnout, and then leave. At the end of the day, it's about developing leadership and having this grassroots leadership address issues that affect them."

After two years with ICIRR, spent organizing communities in Chinatown – especially related to electoral redistricting – Rebecca went on to join Chicago's Southwest Organizing Project. An ICIRR member, SWOP itself is a coalition of 29 community-based organizations which focuses on leadership development around issues related to education, safety, housing, and immigration. SWOP's constituents are predominantly Latino and African American and closely aligned with ICIRR. Rebecca feels "SWOP and ICIRR work really well together, because the issues are so similar. We move together."

## Forging a Road to Transformation

*In 1960, a group of black college students were denied service, and then refused to leave a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Soon after that, a Brooklyn-born son of Jewish garment workers joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Eric Mann quickly began coordinating anti-racism sit-ins and tackling other social issues such as housing and employment discrimination and promoting equal access to the voting booth. Since that time, Mann has spent more than 40 years looking for the next battle to join. "I haven't looked back," said the activist. He led a successful boycott of Trailways buses, fighting the company's discriminatory treatment of black employees; he spent over a year in prison for protesting the war in Vietnam; he worked for eight years as an auto assembly worker and led a union organizing campaign to keep a GM plant from closing in Van Nuys, California; and he was a delegate to the 2001 U.N. World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. Along the way, he also founded the Labor/Community Strategy Center, which gave rise to the groundbreaking Bus Riders Union – an organizing model that is being emulated in various communities across the country.*

**T**he city of Los Angeles is 467 square miles, and the county is a little over 4,000 square miles. "It's huge," says Tammy Bang Luu, associate director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center, "If we were doing traditional community organizing, we'd be very limited in our scope. The bus, as a site of struggle and as a place to organize, is still an important public place where many diverse communities intersect." Los Angeles County has 183 bus routes, covering close to 1,500 miles, and carries more than 1.1 million passengers every day. Most daily bus riders in Los Angeles are low-income, and reflect the majority-minority population of the region – Latino, African American, and Asian. A landmark consent decree with the Metropolitan Transit Authority in 1996 brought a great deal of visibility to the Strategy Center and especially to its now internationally-known Bus Riders



Union (BRU). The Strategy Center has grown well beyond its original focus, but is still deeply identified with its broad-reaching transit work.

Barbara Lott-Holland was a regular bus rider, and initially, a reluctant recruit to the BRU. Today, she is cochair of the BRU and a leader on the Strategy Center's steering committee. "BRU revitalized me as a human being," says Lott-Holland, "It was the turning point." Among its supporters, the BRU counts 200 grassroots leaders,

**"I was disgusted with the bus system, but really didn't think that everyday people had any rights, or any avenues to fight back. But the Bus Riders Union gave me a platform to organize on daily basis."**

3,000 dues-paying members, and 30,000 on-the-bus supporters. Through strategic organizing work over the last decade, the Strategy Center has achieved crucial policy successes, including playing a role in acquiring public transit earmarks of \$2.7 billion, which has helped create 1,000 green jobs and funded the purchase of 2,500 clean fuel buses which will take 2,000 polluting, diesel buses off the roads. The BRU also played a key role in building support for MTA's bus-only lane on Wilshire Boulevard, one of L.A.'s major traffic arteries, bringing the voices of bus-dependent working people into the political process in order to influence transit decisionmakers.

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## Using the Bus as a Gateway

For many at the Strategy Center, the bus is a touchstone for working class struggles and has

become the conduit for learning about multiple critical issues in the lives of bus riders and their families. Strategy Center organizers ride the bus each day and sit next to passengers for a few minutes at a time, talking to them about their concerns with public transit. These conversations often move on quickly to discussions on other issues.

In 2006, when BRU members talked with parents and young people on the buses as part of a campaign to get discounted student bus passes, they learned that large numbers of students were getting \$250 truancy tickets from the school police for coming to class late – often because the bus was behind schedule. This discovery led to a series of deeper discussions among staff and leaders at the Strategy Center about what they believed was the mass incarceration of people of color – especially young, black and Latino men – and how the truancy ticket issue represented the "pre-prisoning" of youth. "What was bubbling up is this concept of the school-to-prison pipeline," says Luu, "California is number one in spending for prisons, and 48th in education spending. When you talk about what's going on with the future of the state, we need to be paying attention to this as a human rights crisis."

This analysis harkened back to an extremely transformational experience for staff members when they attended the 2001 U.N. World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. That experience ultimately led to the creation of the *Community Rights Campaign*. Promoted through schools and on the buses, the campaign seeks to reduce the criminalization of low-income populations of color and reduce unnecessary police presence in those communities. Based in six L.A. high schools and started by Strategy Center

member, Patrisse Cullors, the campaign features a program called *Taking Action*, which meets once a week in a club-format at each school campus. “The difference between organizing on the buses and organizing in the schools is huge. The level of intimacy that happens when you’re in a school is very different than on a bus. The conversations are different,” says Cullors. “On the bus, you literally have five minutes to try to convince someone to join the organization. Going into high schools, it’s very common that young people don’t actually

### **“The Community Rights Campaign became like a home to my soul.”**

want to hear what you have to say. But the moment we start to name their experiences, it’s like a light bulb gets turned on.” Community Rights Campaign Organizer Carla Gonzalez describes the feeling of that experience as a student: “In eleventh grade, I got super involved in understanding why things were the way they were, like racism, sexism, homophobia. Words like this became part of my vocabulary. All the anger just surfaced, and I was searching for anything that would feed this want. The *Community Rights Campaign* gave me the resiliency that comes from being part of an organization that is making change.”

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### **Educating Students to Educate Others**

Cullors and other Strategy Center organizers work with students to develop campus-based campaigns around issues identified by students – which include truancy, but which have also been broadened to budgeting and other issues that impact students’ ability to afford textbooks or

to enroll in pre-collegiate classes. The campaign has also led students to become more analytical and provided them tools to think strategically and independently. For instance, Cullors helped guide students at two L.A. high schools to develop and run a survey which reached more than 2,000 students, asking questions about their personal experiences with truancy, police, and school administrators. Once students analyzed the data, they had hard numbers to support their anecdotal experiences of illegally-issued truancy tickets.

This survey data played a part in negotiations between the Strategy Center, LAUSD school police, and the LAPD, resulting in a directive to limit the issuance of truancy tickets to students on their way to school within

a three-block radius of any school campus. As part of the same campaign, the Strategy Center secured the support of L.A. City Councilmember Tony Cardenas to amend Municipal Code 45.04, the daytime curfew ordinance. Cullors explains the impact the campaign has had on the students and their communities. “We have whole families come into the Strategy Center. Students involved in *Taking Action* say ‘this is really important to me,’ and so they bring in their little sister, or little brother, and then they bring their mother. And then the mother brings the father.”

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### **Going from the Local to the Global**

The Strategy Center has taken this work to the national struggle to stop the “pre-incarceration” of high school students. The Center’s *Community Rights Campaign* has become a key player in the “Stop the Schools-to-Prison Pipeline” campaign. According to Manuel Criollo, Director of Organizing for the Strategy Center and the lead organizer for the

Community Rights Campaign, school policing has “swept up our black and brown students across the country and pushed them out of school and closer to the criminal legal system.”

Relentless pressure by Strategy Center organizers has brought national attention to the Los Angeles School Police Department around this issue. The LASPD recently released data on citations issued to high school students for infractions such as tardiness or being in possession of cigarette lighters or Sharpies, which are viewed

### **“We started doing global warming public health education on the bus.”**

as graffiti tools. With the budget-enforced closure of juvenile courts, many of these citations lead to an introduction into the criminal justice system over minor incidents that were once handled by the schools.

On June 25th, 2010 the Campaign organized a workshop on this topic at the U.S. Social Forum, cosponsored by both the *Advancement Project* and *Padres y Jovenes Unidos*. A resolution emerged from this meeting which included demands for the decriminalization of school discipline and replacement of exclusionary practices such as expulsion, with classroom, family, and community-based prevention and intervention measures

Historically rooted in social and economic justice, the Strategy Center has increasingly embraced the issue of climate justice, not only because of the moral imperative to reduce global warming, but because the health impacts of environmental contamination, especially from automobiles, fall most heavily on low-income communities of color who often live in heavily-trafficked transit corridors. Whereas the BRU had

traditionally concentrated on fighting fare increases and service cuts, the *Clean Air Campaign*’s emphasis on global warming broadened the focus, “to fight for bus-only lanes, to do public health education on the buses, to do research around auto free zones, and to look at different ways that people are trying to restrict the automobile in public spaces,” says Luu.

After sending delegates to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 in South Africa, Strategy Center leaders developed the *Clean Air, Clean Lungs, Clean Buses Campaign*, a health education outreach program that makes the connection between tail pipes and global warming. “We started doing global warming public health education on the bus,”

explains Luu, “We started talking to bus riders about what comes out of the tailpipe.... to really take on the automobile.” *The Clean Air Campaign* expanded the Strategy Center’s agenda in a way that gave strategic coherence to much of the work of the BRU, linking together economic, transit, and health issues which impact BRU members. Involvement in dialogues about environmental justice led the Strategy Center to initiate its first significant national effort in 2009, *Transit Riders for Public Transportation* (TRPT). “It was a major stretch for us,” says Strategy Center founder and Executive Director Eric Mann, “But through a lot of miracles, and the great work of our staff, we built TRPT, and now have 26 members in 14 cities.” The national campaign seeks to bring together riders of public transportation – both bus and train – along with public health providers, environmental and civil rights groups, trade unions, and community organizations to advocate for a massive expansion of public transportation and “radical restriction” of automobile use. TRTP members work locally in their own chapters but also come to the Strategy

Center in Los Angeles for organizer training and to coordinate national strategies. The campaign's current focus is the re-authorization of the \$500 billion Federal Surface Transportation Act. "80% of those dollars go to highways and roads," explains Luu. "Who's missing in that discussion are real riders themselves, in terms of where the money is getting allocated and questions about what the priorities are for that money." Through a partnership with the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, the TRTP has connected itself with a number of seasoned advocacy groups

**"When you start to talk about police, it brings in a whole other set of conversations around safety, trauma, prisons, and institutions that have really destabilized our communities. How do we have a conversation with a young person who was just put in handcuffs at school and then walked through the entire campus? Oftentimes these are the conversations that are the most full of shame, where families don't even talk about it."**

in Washington, DC, including transit groups such as Transportation for America and Transportation Equity Network, and long-standing civil rights groups like the NAACP and Urban League. In some respects, this effort represents the evolution and expansion of the Center's role as it strategically and systematically created partnerships at the national level with a broad array of organizations that might not have been seen as early potential collaborators. "These groups have been seen as the real heavyweight influence in DC," says Mann, "But the fact that we would work with them, and they wanted to work with us, is pretty tremendous."

Trying to forge alliances with established organizations and make their voice heard inside the beltway has not always been easy for TRTP and the Strategy Center. Luu elaborates, "We might be threatening to more mainstream groups because we're coming with a pretty radical program. But, I think with our history, we've established our right to be there." TRTP has given the Strategy Center a national profile in another way too. Many transit riders and community leaders around the country have now become aware of TRTP and the BRU and are calling the Strategy Center to learn how to start their own local bus riders' unions.

Another broad-reaching tactic is "Voices from the Frontlines," a weekly radio show on KPFK 90.7 FM and a live, streaming webcast, hosted by Eric Mann and other Strategy Center staff. The show routinely interviews national and international activists, academics, and policy experts on a range of progressive issues, often discussing the strategies and tactics of social movements. "We have phenomenal guests, and people love being on the show. It helps them clarify their own thoughts," says Mann. The Strategy

Center has run the radio program for eight years and continues to assess its value as part of its larger program. Mann feels the radio show is part of the "movement building experience" and has hopes to syndicate it in the next year.

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## Organizing Future Organizers

Whether it's high school students bringing parents, or BRU activists bringing their children, the Strategy Center has always placed a central importance on multi-generational involvement,

including youth. Some of the organization's brightest emerging leaders have come up through the ranks of students and other young organizers. One of the Strategy Center's important leadership development programs is the National School for Strategic Organizing (NSSO) which is viewed as a community organizing "boot camp" by the young trainees accepted into the program through a highly-competitive application process. NSSO combines academic coursework in the history of social movements and the techniques and strategies of community organizing with intensive "real-time" organizing on the buses. In 2006, the Strategy Center launched the Summer Youth Organizing Academy (SYOA), as an offshoot of the well-established NSSO. Approximately 20 students are selected through an application process each year. Many of the students have previously been participants in the school-based Taking Action program; others have been directly

**"The theory of transformative organizing is that most people are attracted to a social justice movement more than an issue-based movement. Our members do not live single issue lives."**

involved with the Strategy Center. Throughout the summer, alumni from SYOA and Taking Action lead participants through intensive tutorials, as well as ongoing organizing on the bus and in their schools. SYOA pushes its participants hard to make them think and learn about class, race, and economic issues. But the trainers are also sensitive to the needs of the younger organizers. "The way you push an adolescent is very different than the way we would push an adult. Because they're still growing," Cullors explains, "It's a more patient,

careful process with young people." The process pays off as many SYOA graduates become vocal leaders in their communities and frequently take leadership staff positions at the Strategy Center. Cullors herself is an alumna of the program.

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## Embracing Member Differences

Though the Strategy Center is known for its "hard core" progressive agenda and intense civic engagement, it is also seen as a perceptive, highly-sensitive organization which respects both the group and the individual. The agency places a very high value on a multi-racial, multi-lingual, multi-cultural environment. Headsets are worn at every meeting so that members can hear translations in at least three languages – English, Spanish, and Korean. Carla Gonzalez, a staff organizer describes the supportive environment, "As a young person,

when I came in, there was always dinner for me. I knew I could come here, do my work, and have dinner. It was so comforting, and I didn't have to worry... Somebody was thinking about my needs." Eric Mann explains the importance the organization places on treating its staff and members well, "A big part of our budget is food. It's nice to start a meeting with a meal."

Offering an external view of the organization, Aurea Montes-Rodriguez, a partner at the Community Coalition echoes comments about the respectful culture of the Strategy Center. "They are very intentional in connecting with everyone that comes to their events, and having a conversation around areas or issues that are important to the people at that gathering."

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## Transitioning Seamlessly to Emerging Leadership

Many staff and organizing leaders have made a long-term home at the Strategy Center and have continued to evolve into leadership positions, even as the organization has expanded enormously. When Mann determined that it was time to step away from day-to-day executive management of the organization, the careful cultivation of newer and younger leaders ensured that the transition would be smooth, even in a vastly larger organization. Mann explains, "I've changed the nature of my leadership... We created two new positions – Associate Director and Director of Organizing. The transition has been moving seamlessly. It's been planned and conscious. By the time Tammy Luu became Associate Director, everyone said, 'Oh,

**"The Strategy Center isn't just talking about the MTA. We're talking about the totality of urban life and all the multifaceted ways in which racist institutions relate to us and we relate to them. The bus is just a convergence of those conversations, but it's not the only conversation we have."**

that's great!' It was the same with Manuel when he was appointed Director of Organizing. Everyone was thrilled."

Center leaders concede that it is a lot of work to manage the organizational growth, including the expansion of issue campaigns and the influx of young – sometimes teenage – organizers who need more concentrated coaching on writing, speaking, and strategic positioning than their adult colleagues. Leaders are increasing their

management of the organization through simple, but important, steps such as having weekly meetings of staff members from all the campaigns, in order to avoid situations that have happened in the past, where two campaigns unknowingly organized community actions on the same day. Asked about future growth, as she coordinates day-to-day management, Luu answers with a sigh and a smile, "This is exactly the question we're asking ourselves. Do we want to be this big? What is the right size? Do we want to keep on doubling? At some point, is it unmanageable?"

In the meantime, Mann has moved on to a role as coach, speaker, writer, and strategist – in essence, an engaged, but less visible leader, stepping back gracefully, willingly and supportively. His latest book, *Playbook for Progressives*, details the 16 key qualities of a successful organizer and examines the concept of "transformative organizing," which he believes operates at three levels. The first seeks to reform corrupt or oppressive systems; the second aims to expand the mind-set of the people and communities being organized; and the third level ultimately transforms the consciousness of the individual organizer. Luu explains how Mann's new book is helping to codify the focus of Labor/

Community Strategy Center, allowing leaders to ask the big questions: "How do we think about the work of transforming society, while transforming the people you're organizing, and transforming the organizer herself? We're seeing our work as part of that process. I think it's a huge contribution."

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## **Building on History while Looking Ahead Strategically**

Extensive growth of the organization would never have been possible without the early, and unwavering support of Marguerite Casey Foundation. Luu is frank, “Marguerite Casey— it’s a grant everybody wants. Let’s just be real... It’s focused on working families. It wants to centralize race as a core issue. It wants to prioritize organizing. And it’s general support.”

Leaders at the Strategy Center have been appreciative, and even amazed, that the Foundation has been so willing to fund social

**“How do we think about the work of transforming society, while transforming the people you’re organizing, and transforming the organizer herself? We’re seeing our work as part of that process.”**

change programs in largely black and Latino, working-class communities. On occasion though, they have felt the need to negotiate for more time – along with Foundation’s trust and patience – to demonstrate the results of their programs. When Marguerite Casey Foundation launched Equal Voices, the Strategy Center was an early participant and felt it helped to expand their alliances and level of impact. “We’ve been part of the Equal Voice process since the first convening, and we’re getting traction,” relates Luu, “We’ve been meeting with all of the Foundation’s grantees in Southern California, which includes a good cross-section of the base building organizations, the social justice, community organizing organizations... We’ve been part of this process to try to figure out collective work that we can do together.”

The Strategy Center is at a crossroads in its development and appears to have moved fairly smoothly into an expansion phase. But, Center leaders do not take lightly the years they have worked to build their campaigns and their credibility in working-class communities across the vast, urban expanse of L.A. As Mann recounts the organization’s history, he remarks, “It takes years and years and years. You’ve got to get to a scope and scale, and build and sustain relationships. You need to be seen as part of the fabric of the city. You don’t come and go. We’re in our 22nd year, and I think we’re more vital this year than ever.”

Bob Allen, a colleague and ally at Transportation

Justice Program sums up the Strategy Center and its work with admiration.

“I don’t think you’re going to find anyone that builds a base with that same clarity and vibrancy and who has also produced results in those kinds of different sectors,” said Allen. “They are building one of the more unique multi-racial, multi-lingual bases that you’ll

find anywhere in the country.”



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## Barbara Lott-Holland: The Long Journey to Activism

**H**ow do you take a bus ride from Los Angeles to South Africa? Barbara Lott-Holland made that trip. It was part of her journey from working mother to reluctant activist, and from community leader to global thinker.

Barbara Lott-Holland is the cochair of the Bus Riders Union, a project of the Labor/Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles. She has been active in the organization for more than a decade and has seen the organization take a similar journey – from a single-issue, local grassroots organization to a model for collaborative activism.

When she first moved to Los Angeles from Houston in 1968, Lott-Holland was simply looking to build a better life for herself. And she did. “You struggle, you fall in love, you get married and you continue to work – trying to be part of society,” she recalls.

**“I pretended not to be interested – because I didn’t want anybody coming over and talking to me. But... I realized these people had the information that I needed. I came for the information – not to join. That was the furthest thing from my mind.”**

But when the economy crashed in 2000, the company that Lott-Holland had worked for ten years closed their Los Angeles office. Suddenly, she was without a salary or benefits and was riding the bus from Los Angeles to a temporary job in Manhattan Beach.

“After I lost my job, the cost of feeding my family, along with car maintenance and rising insurance premiums, meant I had to give up

the car. I found myself on the bus again – but I noticed that the service had got worse. Buses were breaking down, showing up late or not at all.”

She had just made the significant expenditure of buying a bus pass when Lott-Holland heard about a potential bus workers’ strike. And the only people bothering to inform her that her livelihood was at stake were activists from the Bus Riders Union.

“I had plotted out the best bus route to get to work,” said Lott-Holland. “My commute was anywhere from one hour and 45 minutes to almost two and a half hours. And I was sitting on the bus, excited about my new temp job, when I heard this organizer talking about the bus workers going on strike. My heart sunk. I needed the

bus to get to work. And I was appalled that MTA wasn't telling people that there was the possibility that there would be no service," she said.

"So, I tried to listen to the conversation between this activist and another bus rider. I pretended not to be interested – because I didn't want anybody coming over and talking to me. But then this woman started giving out information about which buses would be running. Of course, I wanted to hear about my bus. And I realized these people had the information that I needed."

So, Lott-Holland attended a meeting of the Bus Riders Union. "I came for information – not to join. That was the furthest thing from my mind."

But at the meeting Lott-Holland learned about the victories won by the Bus Riders Union. They had saved the bus pass from disappearing. And they took the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to court, winning a consent decree that required better buses and better service, along with new services designed to connect low-income communities and communities of color to areas with employment opportunities and medical care.

From that point, Lott-Holland began a new education – not only in the politics of public transportation and community

organizing, but also in a broader and interdependent progressive platform. Through the Bus Riders Union, Lott-Holland became involved in the *Clean Air, Clean Lungs and Clean Buses Campaign* to combat climate change by promoting clean, affordable bus transit, bus-only lanes and auto free zones.

And today, Lott-Holland is working on the *Community Rights Campaign* to fight the police practices that target high school students who are late to school – a policy that contributes to the staggering number of incarcerated black and brown youth.

"Giving a student a \$250 ticket is bad enough in itself," said Lott-Holland. "But they were handcuffing our students, searching them, putting them in the back of the squad cars, parading them through the school to the dean's office – all because they were late to school." And often because these students depend on the overstressed and imperfect public transportation system to traverse the city in order to get to school on time.

And in the same way that Lott-Holland has come to learn that all of these issues are connected, she now knows firsthand how everyone in the community is connected.

"Barbara has become one of the organization's most vocal advocates for language rights," says Eric Mann, executive director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center.

**"I missed the opportunity to be involved during the King days, and I realized I have an opportunity now to fight with an organization that is making things happen."**

"When we have our monthly BRU membership meeting, everybody's got a headset on so they can hear translations of what people are saying.

"Some will say: 'Why do I have to listen to this Spanish and Korean person?' And Barbara will say: 'Because if you don't, I'm not going to call on you. If you don't want to hear what she has to say, why should she hear what you have to say? Now, either put on the headphones or thank you for coming.' When Barbara does that, it has an amazing effect; to see a black woman so strongly defending Latino and Asian language rights."

"One of the things the BRU did for me was it allowed me to do some soul-searching," said Lott-Holland. "I joined the BRU when they were fighting against Prop. 227. It was to force primarily Spanish-speaking kids to speak English and give up their native language. I realized it was what my people were forced to do when they came

to this land, forcibly brought here. I realized that wasn't the type of person I wanted to be."

Some years later, Lott-Holland would travel to South Africa for the World Conference on Sustainable Development. "We looked at how the world's climate and environment were being devastated by our wants – not our needs, but our wants – here in the United States. It was amazing to see what people in South Africa could do with a bucket

of water that we couldn't do with a bathtub of water.

"We came back to the planning committee and said 'Los Angeles is the car capital of the world. We are 5 percent of the world's population and yet we consume 25 percent of the resources. What can we do?'" she recalled.

It has been a long journey. But, Barbara Lot-Holland is not finished.

"The Bus Riders Union has been around for more than 15 years," she said. "During that time we've put over \$2 billion back into the bus system in the form of lower fares that were maintained for eight years. We have a rapid bus program that's going on here in the city because of the work of the Bus Riders Union. The MTA was trying to go back on their own clean air policy and buy diesel buses and we fought them every step of the way to ensure that their fleet was made up of clean, natural gas buses. And we get calls all the time from around the country from people wanting to start a Bus Riders Union. So we will continue to fight for the civil and human rights of our communities. And we understand that that reaches across the waters as well."

**"Giving a student a \$250 ticket is bad enough in itself. But they were handcuffing our students, searching them, putting them in the back of the squad cars, parading them through the school to the dean's office – all because they were late to school."**

## Working with a Base to Empower Parents

*As an energetic mother of three very young children in San Francisco in 1972, Patty Siegel realized that securing child care was a significant hurdle to finding and keeping a job. An early visionary in California on issues related to children, she started the Child Care Switchboard to help working parents in San Francisco locate quality, affordable child care. Together with other women who were making similar attempts in other parts of California, they launched the California Child Care Resource & Referral Network in 1980. By 1995, the Network boasted a 30-person staff and a statewide membership of more than 65 resource and referral (R&R) programs located in nearly every county in California. The organization was, by then, a powerful force in the state at the policy level, but Siegel recognized that the voices of parents – which the community-based R&Rs heard daily – was not being heard in the chambers where decisionmakers were drafting legislation that impacted families. And thus, Parent Voices was born. Siegel's intensive organizing experience – from her student days in the 60s to decades of work at the neighborhood, city, state, and national level to her training in the 90s with the Industrial Areas Foundation – was a decisive factor in helping to shape the philosophy that guided Parent Voices as it grew into a powerful parent advocacy group throughout the state of California.*

**M**ay 2, 2012, was a brilliant, sunny day in Sacramento as more than 750 parents and children descended from buses that had made their way from 15 counties around California. Affectionately known as “the Army of Blue,” the exuberant, chanting crowd wore their trademark blue Parent Voices T-shirts and carried hand-made posters and bright blue balloons, as they marched to the steps of the Capitol building. The 16th annual *Stand for Children* day, sponsored by Parent Voices, was crowded with seasoned leaders and first-time participants, rallying for continued state support of safe, affordable child care. With \$450 million in state budget cuts proposed for the coming year, more than 29,000

children faced losing critical child care services. Not only would these children be deprived of a safe, stimulating learning environment if these cuts came to be, their parents would risk losing their jobs if they could not find daily care for their kids. Following a Call to Action, a Power March, and lively entertainment, the group gathered to hear compelling speeches from parents and children who are directly affected by state budget cuts to child care.

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## Standing with Allies

Assemblymember Holly Mitchell spoke in strong support of child care rights. Formerly the director of Crystal Stairs, a child care resource and referral (R&R) agency in Los Angeles (and a member of the California Child Care R&R Network) and a Parent Voices member, Mitchell is now chairperson of the Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Health and Human Services and advocates regularly for an ongoing commitment to affordable child

**“We just don’t have a society that sees child care as a public good... Most people think of child care as a personal responsibility. It is not seen as a societal responsibility.”**

care. “Parent Voices and Community Voices are a powerful force to save child care,” said Mitchell. “We must work together creatively to sustain and create jobs, provide families the support they need to work... and we must ensure the safety net is not so frayed that the smallest Californians slip into neglect and poverty.” Other elected officials also spoke out in support of child care, including Assemblymember Sandre Swanson and

State Senator Mark Leno. Parent Voices members presented Assemblymember Swanson with an official Resolution, honoring the work and support he has offered on behalf of the organization. The day concluded with parents visiting their district legislators, to request support through the spring budgeting process and to ask Democratic leaders, especially, what more they could do to advocate for child care in their districts. The event received strong media coverage, including a long spot on KPFA, a Bay Area listener-sponsored station.

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## Taking Root

Parent Voices grew out of a 1994 meeting of the Board of Directors of the Jennifer Altman Foundation, at Commonweal in Bolinas, CA. The meeting had been called to decide how to most appropriately spend a \$100,000 gift intended to impact child care issues in California. Around that time, after a four-year battle, child care advocates had succeeded in obtaining federal funds through the Child Care Development Block Grant to provide additional funding for much-needed child care support.

In spite of that win, as Patty Siegel, recently-retired director of the California Child Care Resource & Referral Network points out, “there were no parents at the table,” which seemed to be a glaring omission. “How could we be talking about child care issues and not include the key players - parents?” asked Siegel. The Jennifer Altman Board was responsive to the necessity – raised by Siegel – of adding the voices of parents to these critical budget and policy dialogues. Thus, in the wake of that thoughtful analysis and the strong ideas, the concept for Parent Voices was born.

Confronted with critics who argued that it was too difficult to organize busy, low-income parents, Siegel admits that in those first days, she and other colleagues did not have “the whole answer” about how to structure and start up a new parent-led entity. After another planning retreat

**“Our philosophy is that parents know what’s best for their own families and their kids, that they should make critical decisions about their care. Parents are also the best storytellers about how their families are affected by policies, budget cuts...”**

that included R&R leaders, academics, and policy makers, an early structure and vision emerged for the new organization. With R&R affiliates in each of the state’s 58 counties, Siegel relates, “We were in a privileged position, because for more than two decades we had been talking to and hearing from parents. We had so much information, so many stories; parents had already been calling us, or coming to our offices, looking for help.” As a nexus of parents and child care professionals, the Network seemed like a logical leader in efforts to help empower parents; now each Parent Voices chapter is part of their county’s R&R agency. Yet, as Kim Kruckel, Parent Voices’ first lead organizer explains, “There’s a long-held opinion in the movement for social justice that it’s very hard to organize through a social service delivery system. It’s hard to give the recipients, or the clients, or members, ‘the true voice.’” In spite of naysayers and unaware of the potential for agency tensions and conflicts down the road, it was determined that instead of becoming an independent 501(c)3 nonprofit agency, Parent Voices would become a program within the statewide Network. “The

idea was that Parent Voices could be a bridge between social services and social change,” says Mary Ignatius, current statewide organizer of Parent Voices. The Jennifer Altman Foundation’s initial grant, in 1995, funded a part-time organizer position at the Network and provided five R&R member agencies partial funding to create an organizer staff position in their respective communities.

A pivotal moment came in the spring of 1996, when parents and Parent Voices staff from the member agencies traveled to Washington, DC to take part in *Stand for Children* – led by Marian Wright Edelman, executive director of the Children’s Defense Fund. The campaign called for more than a million parents and children to march on the Capitol. This exciting trip energized Parent Voices’ participants and provided momentum to the nascent organization as well as planting the seed for the statewide *Stand for Children Day*. That event is now an annual tradition led by the Network’s Parent Voices every spring in Sacramento.

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## **Energizing the Member Base**

Talented, experienced staff within the member organizations have provided strategy and given additional structure to Parent Voices. Kim Kruckel, for example, is a former tenant organizer in San Francisco who became the lead organizer at Bananas – one of the initial Parent Voices chapter members (and a R&R member agency). All R&R member agencies are encouraged to take part in Parent Voices and those who do – there are currently 18 – sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Network which specifies funding commitments and expectations

related to numbers of parents trained and types of activities each chapter will take part in.

Though each chapter varies in its infrastructure (e.g. some have full-time or part-time staff; some have their own steering committee or board) each is expected to adhere to the programmatic vision of Parent Voices and dedicate staff for the organizer role. Organizers from each chapter communicate via conference call every month, under the guidance of the Network organizer, to share activities, practices, and concerns of the

**“It took a lot of courage on the part of parents, but they saw the injustice of the whole process and that became a motivating factor.”**

parent groups in their chapter. Parents become “members” by taking a regular role in chapter activities. Through the R&R member agencies’ newsletters, Parent Voices connects with more than 20,000 parents, and counts 2,000 as active, parent members. One parent from each participating chapter sits on the state-wide steering committee, which guides the entity. Early on, staff determined that it was important to have an annual calendar of activities with a carefully planned series of events – including the “Stand for Children” rally and parent training seminars – which help participants anticipate activities and take part in the rhythm and focus of the organization. *Knowledge is Power* workshops and parent training sessions are a core focus of Parent Voices. Using game show formats and engaging skits with role playing, Parent Voices’ staff work with parents to help them understand complex state budgeting issues and child care policy, while encouraging parents to formulate

their own understanding of, and responses to, legislative and budget topics.

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## Building a Platform

A parent brainstorming session in February 2012 generated ideas related to a streamlined reporting process and reduced paperwork for child care subsidy eligibility – ideas which were then included in an assembly bill (AB1673) introduced

by Assemblymember Mitchell. Though the bill was defeated, members of Parent Voices were strongly encouraged by the brainstorming process and plan to continue that effort as a way to include parent ideas in new legislation. Parents are given ongoing opportunities to speak at state and local budget hearings. Through the trainings and practical experience, parents learn to speak articulately and forcefully to new audiences made up of elected officials and media representatives. Kruckel feels “...if you’re not building parents’ ownership and their investment over the whole process – from understanding the policies, to presenting the positions in a public forum, to running the organization, raising the money to pay for the bus, to practicing their stories on the weekend before they go up to the Capitol – if you’re not doing all of that work, they’ll just go to the Capitol for the day, and then they’ll go home and their lives won’t be really changed.”

Ten years after going to Washington D.C. for *Stand for Children*, a turning point came for Parent Voices, with its successful *Defrost the State Median Income (SMI) Campaign*. Eligibility for state child care subsidies is based on annual income and family size, and although the regulations state that it should be updated annually, the legislature had



kept eligibility frozen for five years. The eligibility levels had been capped years before. Families were losing child care funding when their income went up just slightly (and nowhere close to the Consumer Price Index - CPI), nudging them over the eligibility limit.

With SMI as a core issue affecting families, Parent Voices' efforts really kicked in. Hundreds of parents from across the state brought their household budgets to Sacramento; they went to

**"If you're not building parents' ownership and investment over the whole process... they'll just go to the Capitol for the day, and then go home, and their lives won't be really changed."**

every budget hearing and met with all legislative members of the Budget Committee – from both sides of the aisle; they visited the district offices of their senators and assemblymembers with their household budgets in hand. "Here's what it costs to live," they repeated as they showed in very dramatic ways (in words, graphics, data, and photo essays) how the cost of living had risen and how their salaries could not cover basic necessities and child care as well. Their persistence paid off and their efforts were covered broadly in the press.

Relating the parents' policy win, "They felt successful," says Kruckel, "And they were successful. Then they turned their attention to 'Now we're going to build our organization. We're going to find new leaders, we're going to find the next issue.'" Success galvanized this group of parents, and from that time on Parent Voices had a core of committed parent leaders in counties throughout the state.

In 2010, Parent Voices geared up for a months-long battle to save child care funding for former Welfare recipients who – although working – had household incomes which inched over eligibility guidelines. The program, called CalWORKS Stage 3, had been removed from the budget by then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger through a line-item veto. Parent Voices planned an extensive campaign that included a five-day-long "Week of Action," ongoing budget activism, and media outreach. Efforts were coordinated through each chapter's monthly meeting and regular updates on the organization's Facebook page.

Accompanying this effort was a lawsuit led by parent plaintiffs at the Oakland chapter, and backed with a petition signed by more than 5,000 parents. "It was a crazy time," says Ignatius, "It took a lot of courage on the part of parents, but they saw the injustice of the whole process and that became a motivating factor." That child care budget fight lasted for a year, and the parents persisted by celebrating the milestones. Inasmuch as there were defeats and discouragement in the drawn-out timeframe, parents were energized and many new parents became active members in the organization. Monthly chapter meetings had full agendas and were frequently crowded with parents, eager to learn new information, and hear about successes, but they were sometimes let down by the stark realities and the challenge of fighting the system. "Those meetings became a safe place to cry and share emotion," says Ignatius, "Parents could seek comfort, and then turn tears into power." Their efforts eventually led to the restoration of Stage 3 funding in the 2011 state budget... and a big celebration.

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## Structuring for Success

Successes did not come without conflicts or difficulties, some internal and some external. Parent Voices staff frequently affirms its parent leaders and the strong voice they have on issues, yet they

**“You have to be able to show your power. You have to hold those elected officials accountable. You have to put people on the spot. You have to be in their face.”**

concede that some external factors are beyond their control. For example, last minute state budgeting deals are often made “behind closed doors,” leading to disillusionment among parent activists, many of whom are young and in the political trenches for the first time. Internal challenges and debates have often centered around varying priorities between the Network (which generally sees the broad impacts and potential for success and defeat long-term) and R&R chapters (which sometimes look more locally and shorter-term) about some policy issues. At times, Parent Voices is more vocal than the Network, and has taken public positions on a broader spectrum of issues. But ultimately, leaders of Parent Voices – both at the Network and in the communities – are pragmatic. “We understand that you need to have power to get stuff done. The Network realized that, the chapters realized it. You have to be able to show your power. You have to hold elected officials accountable. You have to put people on the spot. You have to be in their face.”

Grant funding from the Marguerite Casey Foundation came at an opportune moment in 2004. Parent Voices had solidified its structure and was in a position to benefit significantly from unrestricted general operating support. “The Marguerite Casey

grant gives us stability,” Ignatius says, “without it, we’d be gone.”

This crucial funding allows Parent Voices to maintain a dedicated infrastructure which assists parents with ongoing advocacy. It also provides the flexibility to respond to new opportunities or crises in key moments and help “avoid a tailspin for parents.” In addition, the grant permits Parent Voices to make “mini-grants” to its chapters for specific work in local communities, thereby leveraging the grant funds. “Marguerite Casey Foundation is one of the very few foundations in the

entire country that supports real organizing for parents and for families,” Siegel gratefully relates. “In fact, Marguerite Casey views their grantees as a family of organizations committed to social change.”

As a grantee, Parent Voices took an active role as the Foundation developed its Equal Voice campaign in 2008, sending more than 700 representative parents and staff to the kick-off convention in Los Angeles. For these low-income parents, initial involvement and ongoing participation in Equal Voice has been “incredibly positive.” Describing the uplifting experience for parents at the convention, Siegel says, “when most of your life, you have felt downtrodden, alone, and oppressed, and then suddenly you are with 3,000 other people that look like you, that have the same struggles and issues – and now you feel like you have a platform, and you’re going to work together to make something happen – it’s very empowering.”

## Building a Faith-Based Voice

*Born and raised on a dairy farm in San Jose, California, John Baumann felt called to the priesthood from a young age. He enrolled in the local Jesuit high school, Bellarmine College Prep, and went on to complete his theological degree. In the course of his theological education and experiences, he and a close fellow student, Jerry Helfrich, became interested in “social ministry.” While attending a Ford Foundation-sponsored ecumenical gathering in Chicago in 1967, he was exposed to “energetic and visionary” clergy, who ultimately introduced him to Saul Alinsky and his colleague, Tom Gaudette. After an intensive field placement under the tutelage of Gaudette, and the completion of his theology degree, Fr. Baumann spent four years organizing in Chicago before being called back to California by his Jesuit Superior to take up a home state placement where, in 1972, he started the Oakland Training Institute, the early predecessor of PICO.*

**S**tanding at the podium before 500 people at the Astor Crowne Plaza Hotel in New Orleans, Rev. Alvin Bernstine’s voice resonates with the singing authority of the African American Baptist ministerial tradition, as audience members echo “Amen” from their seats throughout the conference hall. As he wipes beads of sweat off his forehead, he preaches on the Old Testament teachings of Joshua and exhorts his listeners to “have courage and be of good faith” as they “work from the heart place” to lift off oppression and transform their own communities. In the face of ongoing struggles and frequent defeat, the dynamic, moving oratory offers an uplifting reminder about the ultimate purpose and goal of faith-based community organizing.

Members of the PICO National Network (originally known as Pacific Institute for Community Organizations), clergy and lay people of all faiths came together at the Gathering of Clergy in Louisiana last November, representing 53 federated organizations – whose membership collectively counts more than one million individuals in congregations around the country. The PICO conference – the first-ever gathering of this size and scope

– included small group and full assembly sessions related to economic justice, racial equity, violence prevention, education reform, and immigration. Over the course of three days, attendees connected with one another, were galvanized by an array of inspirational speakers, analyzed issues in working groups, participated in a rally with a local congregation, and adopted PICO's newly-drafted Prophetic Statement.

"We want to build a faith movement in our country that really challenges the dominant narrative," says Scott Reed, PICO's executive director, "It is about understanding that our country can be more than it is. We really can be a land of opportunity that really does care about racial justice and really does care about equity. And the faith community can play a central role in having a different conversation about policy and politics than the country is currently having." Involved with PICO since 1977, Reed has grown up with the organization. His ambitious vision is made audaciously believable by the humble certainty

**"We will challenge our elected leaders from both parties to put the needs of working families, the poor, and the common good of the nation ahead of short term political calculus and special interests."**

with which he states it. The Prophetic Statement, drafted and adopted by clergy representatives, is one of PICO's key strategies for changing the dialogue across the country. Guided through the draft process by PICO staff member Michael-Ray Mathews, the Statement was publicly introduced at the conference in New Orleans and includes a call to "unify people of faith around reducing poverty

and increasing economic and racial justice." Over the course of this next year, the Statement will be shared with faith leaders and congregations across the United States – and hopefully, well beyond the PICO membership. PICO is aiming for thousands of faith leaders to sign the document and participate in a variety of community organizing activities connected to it. Mathews explains that this process represents the launch of a new clergy organizing campaign called the *Prophetic Voices Initiative*. "This Statement is a call to clergy to teach, preach and organize in this moment in order to cultivate a prophetic moral voice that can participate in the public debate in this country – the debate about where we are going and who we are."

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## Reaching Beyond Expectations

The growth of PICO's geographic reach, membership, and influence has far exceeded the expectations or original plans of its founders. The seeds for PICO were planted in 1972 when Fr.

John Baumann returned to California after organizing in Chicago. Through meetings with Fr. Oliver Lynch at St. Elizabeth's Church in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland, Fr. Baumann determined that he wanted to start a neighborhood-based group that would teach residents how to organize around issues related to their own lives. With his close friend and colleague, Jerry Helfrich, he started a loose-knit organization known as the Oakland Training Institute (OTI), which focused residents in "block clubs" on local issues such as urban blight, housing, and crime. Fr. Baumann shares that the early organization did not have an articulated vision. Instead, it was built from an experiential belief that "organizing could

relate to people's pain... By bringing people together you could develop power and with that power you could take action. By bringing people together to change their situations.... We built POWER so that we could sit down across the table from people with power and negotiate."

In 1977, having determined that training could not happen in a vacuum and needed an outlet for practical application, a companion entity, Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), was formed. The organization was launched at a convention attended by first-time governor, Jerry Brown,

**"Our analysis is that faith is core to moving the American political needle. We're not willing to cede that to the religious right."**

and was run by Scott Reed. From a historical perspective of those early days, it is difficult to disentangle the work of the two entities; they were almost one and the same. In 1983, believing that their work might grow throughout the West Coast (but never beyond!), the founders renamed OTI, calling it the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations (PICO). Around this time, OCO went through a major transformation in its philosophy from a neighborhood-based group to one that was faith-based.

After badly losing a political battle over a local jobs issue with the Port of Oakland, OCO regrouped to lick its wounds. The organization's staff conducted close to 200 "one-on-ones" (in-person, sit-down, heart-to-heart conversations) with its community leadership to determine how they had failed and what changes could be made to improve their approach. Scott Reed remembers, "We began to ask them what their experience of the organizing

had been, why were they in it, what were they looking for? And the piece that kept coming up was this deeper value – but it lived in a different room than the organizing. So, the big understanding was that people really are about values." After gathering extensive input and following heated internal debate, the organization determined that while neighborhood-based organizing encouraged residents to coalesce around specific issues, it was hard to connect the organizing to their lives as a whole. Faith-based organizing reached large numbers of people in congregations, often beyond designated neighborhoods, and resonated with individuals by tapping into how their faith and values guided the way they hoped to live. As Fr. Baumann explains it, "Clergy love the spotlight and I'm not in this to put clergy on pedestals." Yet, he felt at the time that most community organizing

only involved the activists, whereas the "faith-based model pushes deeper into the community," reaching out to "people sitting at home who didn't know how to get actively involved."

Today, PICO has fully embraced the model of faith-based organizing and believes that such an approach is critical to balancing the influence of opponents with differing political and religious values: "Our analysis is that faith is core to moving the American political needle," Reed shares. "We're not willing to cede that to the religious right... They're creating a whole economic narrative that's about radical individualism... That's actually not the message of most faith traditions – but who's challenging them?"

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## Articulating the Core

PICO is guided by four core beliefs, which have been articulated and continue to be refined over time. The first is that “everyone has a story.” Each unique narrative is linked to others in a larger history of social struggle. Organizers and community residents can only seek change by “being rooted in that story in their lived experiences.” Second is a belief in transformation, which alters the individual, the community, and the systems and structures in which they exist. The third – not easily summarized, is stated as: “You have as much justice as you have the power to compel.” This core belief seeks to build power among the oppressed, with the view that “people should have a say in the decisions that shape their lives.” The fourth belief states that “power is in the relationship,” which is realized when people build strong, democratic organizations that are rooted in their communities, and that seek change through relational power, based on trust and shared interests.

The moral voice of the PICO Network gained national stature in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit and destroyed parts of the Gulf Coast, especially

**“PICO is an organization that can both deliver and create a movement at the local level, but also become a national force.”**

New Orleans. “We were scheduled to have a press conference on Medicaid in Washington, D.C..... and it turned into a Katrina event,” says Gordon Whitman, PICO’s Director of Public Policy. “We did a lot of Katrina organizing... The highlight of that was bringing about 80 clergy from around the country to New Orleans for a study trip, and then sending them home to do lobbying,” which

ultimately played a role in releasing four billion dollars in Congressional housing funding, in part, to help rebuild housing in Louisiana. A factor in PICO’s growth and expanding success in communities and at the policy table is its willingness to form alliances and partnerships with other organizations. “Folks have not always played well in community organizing,” Reed concedes. Factors such as the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and political scandals related to ACORN in 2010 forced community organizers into “waking up” and getting “some humility.”

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## Building National Stature

Though PICO had a reputation – along with other community organizations – for working in its own “silo,” in recent years it has formed alliances with other organizations. Sometimes these alliances begin as single issue-based campaigns – such as the joint effort forged with SEIU around healthcare reform. But these often grow into long-term relationships. Vice President of SEIU Healthcare in Wisconsin, Bruce Colbern says, “PICO is an organization that can both deliver and create a movement at the local level, but also become a national force. They said what they were going to do, delivered it, followed through with their base, produced real people, and had a real impact... In terms of developing trust, they had capacity.”

In recent years, PICO has worked assiduously to cultivate partnerships with other organizations. Reed explains that the organizing world is seeking greater cooperation. Focused on bank accountability, PICO’s *New Bottom Line Campaign* represents a “cornerstone realignment within organizing.” Through the percolating

conversations of organizing staff, PICO began to define an opportunity to work with *National People's Action* (NPA) on issues related to financial accountability and reform. Aware that there was much to learn from NPA's immersion in financial reform issues and no overlapping "turf" issues, PICO sought out collaboration. Following a series

**"Power isn't just a therapeutic approach. It's not about just helping someone feel better about themselves. It's really about trying to change something."**

of staff and leader discussions, PICO and NPA partnered together with other organizations – including Jobs for Justice, Partnership for Working Families, Alliance for a Just Society, staff from the Gamaliel Foundation, and other ACORN legacy groups – to mount a ballot campaign in Missouri. The groups sought two ballot initiatives: one related to a fair minimum wage, the other to place a cap on predatory lending. Through a massive, coordinated, on-the-ground effort across the state of Missouri, PICO and its partners gathered 350,000 signatures for the ballot initiatives. Reed feels that the success of this campaign represents the "remarkably exciting, hopeful, and inspiring, new tone of organizing."

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## **Structuring to Include Members**

PICO is both strategic and nimble in articulating and shaping responses to key issues and events. It strives to be "at the table" on issues it believes have both trans-local and national impact. PICO's decisionmaking is framed by leaders at multiple levels. PICO's governing board is comprised of

the heads of each of the 53 federations; in addition, every two years, each federation appoints a representative to the National Steering Committee, which is guided by PICO staff. The Steering Committee has a monthly conference call, as well as meetings several times a year, to discuss issues and priorities to help direct the organization. A

Clergy Council, made up of clergy leaders from PICO federations around the country, conducts regular phone meetings, and periodic in-person gatherings to discuss local and regional concerns, and to help clarify and set PICO's national agenda. The Council played a major role in determining the

priorities – guided by their communities' values – of PICO's Prophetic Statement.

Though there are times when PICO members must be "all for one and one for all," PICO leadership realizes that not all 53 members will be in a position to take part in all of PICO's campaigns; however, staff hopes that the organization can have influence on certain issues in all 50 states. Some members may feel that PICO is "forcing it" at times by taking the lead on key issues, but in general, PICO staff makes every effort to hear the concerns and priorities of local federations and the members of their congregations.

When the Marguerite Casey Foundation launched its Equal Voice campaign in 2008, PICO adopted the campaign platform, identifying issue areas which align with Equal Voice, including access to healthcare; immigration reform; affordable housing; education; and public safety. PICO was in the thick of a deep policy focus on healthcare, and scored two major policy wins around that time, including the re-authorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and authorization of the Affordable Care Act. Whitman explains, "...Building a pro-family



agenda at the federal level is a big effort, and having Equal Voice as part of it has been really helpful...The participation in Equal Voice has been good, and has been part of creating this climate saying that grassroots community voices need to drive change in this country." PICO is currently engaged in multiple campaigns which focus on

**"People are not a means to an end. So, caring about them is important."**

issues identified either by their membership or by core staff; in addition to affordable healthcare, other examples include the *New Bottom Line*, which focuses on bank accountability, *Lifelines to Healing* which prioritizes violence prevention and criminalization of youth and people of color, and the *Civic Engagement Campaign*, which aims to reach out to infrequent voters to encourage them to take part in local, state, and federal electoral processes.

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## **Staying Connected While Growing**

Over the last four years, PICO has transitioned its leadership from Fr. Baumann, who is now focused on PICO's international work, to Reed, who oversees the organization's day-to-day management. Whereas PICO's direction formerly had a "pastoral" aspect to it, it is now guided very intentionally by an assessment of what types of organizing are needed in which communities.

PICO and its Network affiliates have an annual budget of about \$30 million and 250 full-time staff members around the country, PICO has grown enormously, but its approach today remains true to its founding spirit. A key organizational technique is the "one-to-one," a meeting between two people

– usually an individual from the community and a trained organizer or leader. The one-to-one meeting can take place "in their homes, at a kitchen table, at McDonald's." The organizer engages individuals, asking them what their story is, what they care about, what their concerns are for their family. "We ask 'What have they done about it? Why haven't they done more?'" PICO organizers are expected to spend at least fifty percent of their time doing individual one-to-one meetings. Reed says, "We try to move into a deeper understanding of what do they want to do, and why?..."

People are not a means to an end. So, caring about them is important." For the most part, PICO does not have its own organizers on staff, but works very closely with local federations to identify, recruit, and train organizers who join the staff of each federation member. Michael-Ray Mathews oversees this process for PICO and works with federations and other PICO staff to track the work and accomplishments of talented organizers around the country and match them with appropriate placements in PICO-member communities: "We have built a pipeline of organizing candidates who now know about opportunities inside of our network and who are being pursued and recruited to become organizers in the various affiliates of PICO across the network." In addition to helping find strong individuals to lead organizing efforts within the member network, PICO provides staff consultants to support each member federation by working closely with board, staff, and other key leaders within each organization. Consultants are funded by PICO, and are specifically dedicated to the health and growth of federation members.

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## Strategizing for Growth

PICO's membership continues to grow – through a two-fold strategy that includes locating and cultivating existing congregations around the country, and helping to build new organizations in local communities where the need is identified.

**“How do you create scale? And how do you do it in a way that has authenticity to your core mission? I think that we have not figured that out yet... I don't think anybody has.”**

Some federations, such as Communities Creating Opportunity (CCO), based in Kansas City, MO, have been members since PICO's founding 35 years ago. Others, such as Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower, and Rebuild (POWER) have been created in recent years, through direct outreach and thoughtful, ongoing consultation with PICO consultants. Scott Reed describes PICO's highly-intentional structure as a “trans-local network” – to foster issue identification and shared learning – which horizontally connects leaders of each federation across the country into state, regional, and then, national networks.

A central, and more recent, strategy in PICO's growth was opening an office in the nation's capital. “We learned pretty quickly, that not too many groups could do big events in coordinated ways in local communities, at the right time with the right message,” says Gordon Whitman, “That was a powerful vacuum to fill in DC.” Though most of PICO's staff is around the country, Whitman and a four-person communications staff are based in Washington, D.C.. Says a seasoned political consultant, “PICO resonated with Republicans

and Democrats in a way that a lot of traditional groups like them don't. And doors opened for them in ways that doors don't open for others. They've been sought after by organizations that are very well-established.” In PICO's view, their move to D.C. has been a “good decision” and will prove to be a “huge asset” in sharing PICO's story

at a national level and developing partnerships with key policy makers and analysts. As PICO continues to expand its membership and staff, it faces the challenges of growth. While PICO has hired, and continues to have access to, talented staff, leaders have concerns about funding, especially the potential shift in focus of major

progressive foundations who have, in some cases, been disappointed with what has been perceived as lackluster accomplishments by grantees. More critical even to PICO leaders is a concern about staying connected to their base of low-income community residents. “This is the bigger challenge,” explains Reed, “How do you create scale? And how do you do it in a way that has authenticity to your core mission? I think that we have not figured that out yet... I don't think anybody has.”

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## How Do You Spell P-O-W-E-R?

In Fall 2011, one of PICO's newest member federations had its founding convention. Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower, and Rebuild (POWER) grew out of a two-year planning and learning process which initially began when PICO consultant, Wes Lathrop, approached Dwayne Royster, the head pastor at Living Water Church in the West Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. As Royster describes it, Philadelphia has historically proven difficult to organize through faith-based efforts. His own social justice convictions amplified his desire to unite black and white residents – along with growing Asian and Latino populations – through common religious beliefs. Royster explains, “We try to give people a voice for their pain and frustration, and then make them responsible for doing something with it. When we do the one-to-ones, we ask people, “What keeps you up at night? What makes you worry about your families? What struggles are you having in your community, in your life?... In the course of about a year's time, we did 1,000 one-to-ones all across the city, listening to people's stories.” After carefully collecting data from each individual meeting, Royster, together with PICO staff, analyzed the information and developed a set of five themes, including jobs, education, housing, healthcare, and public safety. These themes were then explored in-depth through a series of 50 “research meetings” with community leaders, including elected officials, labor leaders, and corporate and nonprofit heads.

This “credentialing process” gave the fledgling organization credibility with local residents and leaders across the city. At the founding event on September 25, more than 2,200 people assembled at the historic, African-American, Tindley Temple United Methodist Church to support POWER's mission and platform. “The mayor finally agreed to come to the convention,” says Royster, “He walks up, on to the podium, looks around, sees all the people in the balcony– the balcony was full, standing room only on the first floor level. Then he just kind of stops and looks around... When he finally gets up to speak, the first words out of his mouth – he says, ‘Wow, this is power, this is community organizing at its best!’” Funded through foundation grants and membership dues, POWER counts 60 congregations (35 are dues-paying) among its membership,

**“We try to give people a voice for their pain and frustration, and then make them responsible for doing something with it.”**

including several Jewish, Asian, and Muslim congregations. Each member constitutes its own “organizing committee,” and has one congregation member represented on POWER’s board of directors. Congregations are organized by neighborhood into regional clusters with a paid POWER staff person acting as liaison between clusters.

POWER’s leaders determined that it could be overwhelming to organize simultaneously around five major issues, and instead decided to focus initially on issues related to jobs and education, particularly in relation to Philadelphia’s planned airport expansion project. Royster considers PICO to be very supportive of local federations, explaining, “The PICO model is a lot better than other models. It’s much more relational, it’s much more ‘let’s meet people where they are,’ bring them to where they ought to be for themselves, and help them to grow through that process.” He believes that, while PICO hopes federations will take part in national campaigns, it is also supportive

of members’ needs to focus on local issue campaigns, sometimes at the expense of taking part in national efforts. As a new member, Royster feels his organization has a strong relationship with PICO and has high expectations for PICO support through staff strengthening and development; national training for his member clergy and lay people; regional meetings for “critical conversations” to help build and push their agenda forward; as well as possible access to funders in the

**“The Mayor walks up on to the podium, looks around, sees all the people in the balcony... When he finally gets up to speak, the first words of his mouth – he says, ‘Wow, this is power, this is community organizing at its best!’”**

future. Royster senses that PICO expects a lot in return: “I think that PICO is constantly pushing us, bringing issues to us. They’re always pressing us to stretch, and do as much as we possibly can to really be effective in our community... We might not always like it, but it’s very good.”

## Crossing Over from Poverty to Strength

*Ramona Casas was born in Jalisco, Mexico, and grew up in the city of Reynosa, within sight of the U.S. Border. She first came to the United States for work as a nanny and settled in Las Milpas, Texas. That's where Sister Gerrie Naughton of the Sisters of Mercy first knocked on her door in 1986. Sister Gerrie was organizing very low-income immigrant women living in local colonia communities, where amenities and services were few, and civic engagement was non-existent. "I wanted to learn English, so I was one of the first women to work with Sister Gerrie," said Casas. "She offered to teach us English – and that allowed us to get more involved in the bigger community." The group that eventually emerged was called A Resource In Serving Equality, ARISE. Working to support local children in their education and families as they transitioned between cultures, ARISE soon became a local fixture in border communities of the Rio Grande Valley. "Like others, I was at home, only with my family," said Casas. "But working with ARISE, many women have developed real skills. We have learned how to become self-sufficient, and how to become leaders in the community."*

**T**he wall rises suddenly, and in some places, incongruously, out of grassy backyards: dark, metal slats that climb twelve feet in the air. The wide Rio Grande and Mexico lie just beyond it. "Before 9-11, you would see people still wet from crossing the river," says Ramona Casas, of ARISE, "Now that the wall is up, it's more difficult." Violence, family separation, poverty, and constant fear of deportation are daily themes in the lives of residents in the colonias that dot the Texas border along the Rio Grande. At least since the time of American Prohibition, this stretch of the Texas/Mexico border has seen a lively exchange of people and cultures, with Americans and Mexicans crossing over for entertainment or employment, for legal gambling in Mexico and shopping choices in the U.S., and to connect with family members in either country. But in the last decade, the border has become a virtual military zone, with helicopter patrols a regular occurrence, along with armed Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers stationed at moving portable checkpoint stations, creating an intentional uncertainty among residents.

The proposed construction of a physical barrier spanning large stretches of the U.S.-Mexico border in 2006 was an understandably contentious topic. Senior members of the

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) insisted on the need for an impermeable wall, while local residents, activists, and leaders of nonprofit organizations in the Rio Grande Valley vehemently opposed the project. To a large extent, it was the “wall issue” that first brought many previously-separate community groups together. As several leaders recall, then-director of DHS, Michael Chertoff, played political trade-off games with the proposed wall project, insisting that he would only support much-needed local flood monies to

**“Before 9-11, you could see people still wet from crossing the river. Now that the wall is up, it’s more difficult.”**

rebuild weak levies if local activists would back down from their resistance to the construction of the border wall. That prolonged fight led to early collaborations between community groups that would eventually be formalized as the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network (RGV EVN).

Known to locals as “the Valley” or “RGV,” the Rio Grande Valley region lies along the southernmost tip of south Texas, roughly between Rio Grande City to the west and Harlingen to the east. The region encompasses four counties – Hidalgo, Cameron, Willacy, and Starr – with a population numbering more than 1.1 million people, roughly 85% to 95% of whom are Latino. The area is technically not a valley, but a delta of smaller streams and lakes, trickling off from the river. During heavy rains and hurricanes, these areas can become heavily flooded, causing extensive property damage and hardships for local residents. Although Texas has the second biggest economy in the United States – with gross state product of a \$1.3 trillion – the Rio Grande Valley is home to

some extremely impoverished neighborhoods. In fact, according to an October 2011 Census brief on poverty, the McAllen metro area, which lies in the heart of the Valley, was named as the poorest metro area in the nation. The Valley’s geographic isolation, relative lack of natural resources, and reputation as a dangerous border region has made it a neglected hinterland, disregarded by politicians, policymakers, businesses, and funders. Even major, regional housing groups and local universities such as University of Texas Pan Am and University of Brownsville reportedly do not seem to focus on the issues and needs of the local Valley populations.

Though the region is poor, many Mexican nationals are continually fleeing across the border to escape drug violence and to seek better economic opportunities. Mexico’s “drug war” policies have had a tremendously dire impact, escalating violence throughout that country, and especially at the U.S. border. Since his election in 2006, Mexican President, Felipe Calderon has pursued an extreme crack-down on drug trafficking and the cartels which oversee the illegal drug flow. Cooperation and collusion with the drug leaders from among Calderon’s top military generals, along with extensive policing and “squeezing” of drug-dealing territories, has led to an eruption of gruesome violence. Innocent residents can often be killed or seriously injured in competing drug-turf gunfights.

Though some Mexican immigrants manage to escape the violence in their own country, they become trapped in a netherworld at the border. They settle into the clustered, impoverished colonias dotting the region where living conditions resemble those in developing countries – with poor drainage systems, no public lighting, little public transportation, and scattered mail service. With limited access to education and healthcare, and

lacking any ability to impact regional and state policies, immigrants caught in these communities have become despondent and hopeless at times.

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## Connecting the Community

Through the courage and vision of committed residents, small, intrepid nonprofit organizations have been formed to help reverse this trend.

**“We are the voices of the families in need. But it’s not enough for people just to listen to the needs. We need to unite with other agencies in other places that have the same problems – because together, we build more strength.”**

Though many of these nonprofits might focus on a single issue, such as housing, or healthcare, or education and job training, they are all specifically dedicated to helping immigrants in the region – especially those who do not have legal status. Many of these organizations have historically not been able to influence the legislative and policy power structure in the state because they are too small and represent too few people. They have also faced a constant struggle for funding, as there are few financial resources in the region and many major foundations are hesitant to fund local organizations. There exists a perception of limited experience and sophistication, and a sense that the social and political context of the Texas border region is too complex – all of which could lead to reduced effectiveness, and a “failed” investment from the perspective of some funders. These organizations, many founded decades ago,

quickly learned that in an isolated region with few resources, it was counter-productive to compete with one another. Partnerships and collaborations eventually replaced territorial attitudes, helping to build a foundation of trust amongst local groups.

At the same time the debate around the border fence was heating up, Marguerite Casey Foundation began focusing on issues facing activist organizations in the area. Through its “regional conversations” and prior connections to the San Antonio-based think tank Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), the Foundation began funding the work of many of these local organizations.

In the Spring 2008, the Foundation began the planning phases for its Equal Voice campaign. Right from the start, members of the nascent RGV EVN realized the potential of the Equal Voice campaign and they were determined to have a say in how the campaign unfolded in their region. Part of this was the development of the “network weaver” position funded by Marguerite Casey. Initially, Network members grappled with the concept of the position, seeking to determine the role and range of responsibilities, as well as finding the right person. The Network eventually crafted a full-time job description and worked with Marguerite Casey to support the position. And then they found Michael Seifert.

Seifert is currently the region’s network weaver and has held that position for the past three years. Originally from Alabama and a priest by vocation, Seifert had spent time working with community leaders in Mexico. Discouraged by violence and political corruption, he returned to the U.S. and became the executive director of *Proyecto Digna*, an anti-poverty organization in Brownsville, Texas. Attracted to the Valley by the work of a progressive

bishop, he settled into a parish in the colonia of Cameron Park, focusing on community organizing and get-out-the-vote activities to help improve the quality of life of local residents.

When Marguerite Casey first decided to start its Equal Voice campaign efforts in the Valley, Seifert admits he was skeptical. “It seemed like a lot of money,” he says, “I originally thought the groups could have been doing something better with it.” But as the campaign work began to unfold and Seifert witnessed the effort and the enthusiasm

**“Being a part of the Equal Voices network has made us bigger than we are. You know, it’s more than the sum of our total parts.”**

with which local groups embraced it, he changed his tone. “Because the Foundation’s work was nationally-connected, because there was follow-up, and because people were engaged all they way up to the local leadership, there was buy-in from the very beginning.” The groups that ultimately became the RGV EVN played a crucial role in helping to arrange Equal Voice town hall meetings in communities throughout the Valley in 2009. These events attracted more than 2,500 participants and participating groups sent 600 delegates to the Equal Voice convention in Birmingham, AL. “The town hall process really captured people’s energy,” recalled Seifert. “And even though it was sponsored by a major foundation, it possessed a truly grassroots feeling.” Involvement in developing the Equal Voice National Platform was a turning point for the Network. Seifert says of the Network members, “We all understood the need for collective change, but there was nothing to really pull us together. When Marguerite Casey

came in with their support, it was really a catalyst moment for us.”

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## Learning to Work Together

In the years since the RGV EVN has been actively functioning, organizations have generally avoided “turf” issues. At first, many leaders worried that the Network would “take their identity away.” Early on, the occasional tension did arise if, for example, one member was perceived as not adequately participating, or another appeared to be taking too much media credit for a successful public action. But these conflicts have been consistently resolved through extensive dialogue and consensus-building among the Network partners. Members choose

to take part in the Network because of a sense of shared values and a belief that their work should be “mutually satisfying.” There is a conscious effort to build “collective capacity.” Network members strive to create a supportive environment, and all meetings are held bilingually in English and Spanish.

There are currently 11 Network members, all funded by Marguerite Casey Foundation, each of whom help lead and participate in six working groups, which meet bimonthly and focus on specific topics.<sup>1</sup> Working group topic areas include: immigration; education; healthcare; housing; civic engagement; and economic stability. Working group discussions focus – by topic area – on issues, activities, and progress of each

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1. Current Network members include: ARISE; Brownsville Community Health Center; Casa de Proyecto Libertad; IDRA; LUPE; Proyecto Azteca; Proyecto San Diego; START Center; SWU; Texas Organizing Project; and Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid.



participating group. The results of working group conversations are then shared at regular Network meetings. This Network-wide sharing is a means to build awareness and expand opportunities for broader organizing participation across issues. If one working group – for example, housing – is planning a public action in Austin, and shares its plans with the larger Network, other members may choose to mobilize staff, community leaders, and families to turn out for the action – greatly increasing participation numbers.

**“We all understood the need for collective change, but there was nothing to really pull us together. When Marguerite Casey came in with their support, it was really a catalyst moment for us.”**

Though Marguerite Casey grantees are the core of the Network and leaders of the working groups, numerous non-grantee organizations take part in the working groups, as well, in order to widen the regional discussions. Seifert explains that “the rules that work for the Network would be the same rules that would work in a healthily-functioning family situation: mutual respect and an explicit understanding that people do things differently, and people say things differently.”

Seifert’s role as the network weaver has grown and changed over the years since the Network got started. In the first year or so, his core focus was to build trust, develop agendas, convene monthly meetings, and help facilitate dialogue among the members. As the group has evolved and gained traction, members have sought more access to data or help with legislative advocacy skills. They have often reached out to Network member IDRA on

topics such as leadership training and guidance in strategic planning. Seifert helps to identify these concerns and prioritize needs among members. Moving beyond a mere convener, his role is becoming one of advisor and strategist, although he formally reports to the whole Network and is evaluated by a supervisory committee, made up of the chairs of the working groups.

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### **Strengthening the Group from Within**

IDRA has a unique position in the Network. It is both a grantee of the Marguerite Casey Foundation, and a technical assistance provider. Based in San Antonio, its large and expert staff focuses particularly on educational research and policy around the country – seemingly distant from the Rio Grande Valley. Yet, IDRA’s staff have personal and family connections to the region, and have worked closely with a number of Network grantees for many years. IDRA staff travel to the Valley several times a week, keeping tight connections with other members of the Network. When IDRA became a grantee, it was specifically decided that the organization would be full member of the Rio Grand Valley Equal Voice Network. And even though IDRA has significantly more technical expertise and, to a certain extent, a statewide and national focus, its staff participates in Network meetings and activities as an engaged peer and partner. As a large, well-funded organization, IDRA also has access to extensive data and research on key topics that tie into most of the Network’s activities. In addition, IDRA’s leaders have cultivated relationships with legislators and other elected officials, which have become very useful to Network members.

With this additional capacity, the Network is slowly beginning to affect specific policy conversations. For example, in years past, discussions with legislators about increasing hurricane disaster funding in the Valley region were met with nodding heads and sympathetic sighs, but no action. However, after specific training, for example in Section 3 of the Stafford Disaster and Relief Act, they were able to engage more forcefully and effectively with government agencies. They also gained allies among mainstream housing

**“And we showed up at the local council governments, and we knew what we were talking about... It was a game changer that happened in about three months. It was simply astonishing.”**

groups in the region. “We showed up at the local council governments and we knew what we were talking about. And these other groups wanted to join with us to help secure hurricane relief,” said Seifert. “It was a game changer that happened in about three months. It was simply astonishing.”

The Network’s real strength and power lie, however, in its numbers. The individual organizations that make up the RGV EVN are not large enough on their own to attract significant attention or to affect meaningful, lasting change. Yet, as a collective, they have begun to pool their skills and resources, and together have raised public awareness to begin to challenge the powerful Texas establishment. “We go to the local council governments, and they sit up and notice,” says Seifert, “They do not like us. We go to Austin and they know who we are. We’ve made a name for ourselves.”

One example of this influence is the *Workers’ Rights Center*. This program began through a partnership between the Network’s Economic Security Working Group and the *Texas Civil Rights Project*. Many businesses in the Valley, especially those in agriculture and construction, employ low-wage, oftentimes undocumented, workers. For various and often unprincipled reasons, these businesses would withhold wages from their employees. Traditionally, these employees could only recover wages by working with Texas Legal Aid to sue their employer. With the advent of the Workers’ Center, employees no longer need to take businesses to court; instead, through the powerful numbers of the Network, members will stage a protest at local businesses, until they relent and release back wages.

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## Projecting a Stronger Image

The Network has also become more savvy in managing its communications program and in attracting media attention. Seifert and Network members work tirelessly to communicate with each other and with the communities they represent. In addition to regular member meetings and working group sessions, staff knock on doors throughout the colonias. Often, local residents are initially suspicious of people knocking at the door and asking them questions. However RGV EVN groups have become known in the community and update residents on their efforts to improve their environment and conditions.

In addition to managing its own internal communications, the Network has retained a news service to help pitch stories and gain broader media attention. This effort has paid off with press placements and regional radio spots on a variety

of their activities. Members next hope to have a dedicated press officer who can write press releases and help manage a broader communications strategy. In terms of expanded public awareness, the Network gratefully and intentionally adopted the Marguerite Casey Foundation's branding for Equal Voice. From the beginning, it used the Equal Voice moniker as part of its name and integrated the logo and identity into all of its own materials. Members all agreed to use the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network brand to credit any work done

**“With Marguerite Casey... We believe in what they do and they believe in what we do, quite simply. It's in their heart and it's in our heart.”**

by members of the group, in order to try to ensure that any media coverage of Network activities would specifically be seen as part of a collective effort.

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## Looking Forward

When asked about future plans and challenges, Seifert acknowledges the need for a close focus on leadership training, succession, and transition, and credits IDRA with helping to clarify these issues. He points out that there are many seasoned leaders in the Network, some who have been working in the Valley for decades – but they are getting older, and much more work needs to be done to train young organizers and to identify and support emerging leaders from within the Network. He has been learning about leadership training programs around the country and is hoping to replicate some of these intensive program in south Texas.

RGV EVN has been a tremendous asset to the region and Seifert has high hopes for its future, believing it could be a model for a multi-regional or even a national network. He acknowledges that the Valley region is unique, “One of the easier things about working down here is that we're a relatively young group. Most of us are poor, most of us have roots in Mexico, and it's a homogenized area.” He feels that other regions of the country may have more extensive webs of nonprofit service and advocacy organizations, but they also have to

deal with a more polarized operating climate, leading to an atmosphere of competition, rather than collaboration. He explains that Rio Grande Valley's distance from the Marguerite Casey Foundation, and from other Foundation grantees and Network members can make it harder to share

information and learning – but the Marguerite Casey funding has helped increase the Network's credibility, especially with other funders who have recently funded the Network in large part due to Marguerite Casey's ongoing grants. Overall, the experience of working within Marguerite Casey's funded network has been extremely valuable for him, for the Network members, and ultimately for the families they serve.

“With other funders I always felt like I was bending over backwards to make our work fit into whatever it is they wanted. With Marguerite Casey, it's the other way around. We believe in what they do – and they believe in what we do, quite simply. It's in their heart and it's in our heart.”

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## Rising from Within the Colonias

Founded in 1987 by Sister Gerrie Naughton, A Resource in Serving Equality (ARISE) has become a key member of the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network. Sister Gerrie started the group in the Las Milpas colonia in the Rio Grande Valley through funding from her Catholic order, the Sisters of Mercy and eventually secured enough money to start two more ARISE centers.

Today, there are four ARISE facilities, each with its own board, staff, budget, and 501(c)3 status. The group works to help empower local women to become fully

**“ARISE has a very strong belief that we are here for the people to come and learn from our experience. We are from here, we are part of these communities. And we want to take what we have learned – as women – and share it with as many people as possible.”**

participatory members of their communities, providing English lessons, basic life skills and an introduction into civic engagement. Ramona Casas, who has risen from a volunteer to a leader in the organization, explains, “ARISE has a very strong belief that we are here for the people to come and learn from our experience. We are from here, part of these communities. And we want to take what we have learned as women and share it

with as many people as possible. To other communities and churches and colonias – wherever they want to go and take it there.”

Ramona has been involved with ARISE for 25 years. “I’m just so happy and proud to be part of this group,” she says. “I was a housewife and I had stayed at home. I was involved in the church, but when I met Sister Gerrie, in 1987, she started connecting women from the colonia to take on the big needs that have here. At that time, I did not know any English. But I wanted to learn.”

As Ramona got involved in ARISE, she made efforts to improve the life of her family and her community. She describes a drawn-out struggle to find space for her three children to play. The local commissioner claimed there was no funding for a local, public park. After numerous calls and audiences with the commissioner, Ramona and her colleagues got him to concede that he “might” be able to find funding – on the condition that her group come up with a plot of land. This apparent put-off did not

deter Ramona and ARISE, who conferred with the Sisters of Mercy and were able to get land donated from the Sisters, on the condition that it be used for a park.

Ramona and other ARISE leaders persisted with the commissioner who eventually relented and found the funding to create a public park on the land donated by the Sisters. ARISE formed a committee, which met weekly for a year and a half, to design and build the park – which ultimately included green space, soccer fields, a basketball court, and a pool. This project was an enormous triumph for Ramona and others in the group. It was one of the first steps to building the leadership and sense of community power within the organization.

And Ramona is only one of dozens of local women who had never imagined getting involved with their local government or with their children's school. She, and many others like her, have become fluent in English, and have gained skills in budgeting, communications, leadership, and management. They have also learned their own voice

and power, becoming deeply involved in many of the community organizations that are a part of the RGV Network.

She goes on to conclude, "You know, I might not have a college degree, but I know what my struggles are. I know what my community needs. All we need as a community is an opportunity to speak, and for others to hear us."

**"Todo lo que necesitamos como una comunidad es la oportunidad de hablar, y que otros no escuchen."  
(All we need as a community is an opportunity to speak, and for others to hear us.)**

## Researching, Educating, Negotiating, Demonstrating

*Leroy Johnson was supposed to have been born in Mississippi. Instead, he was born on the side of the road, off Highway 55 in Tennessee, as his parents were returning home to Mississippi from a trip to Chicago. "My mama said I was always stubborn. Even as a baby in the womb, I wouldn't come on time." In the early 1980s, Johnson was studying for his MBA when his father called him. He was running for the Holmes County Board of Supervisors against a white incumbent who had been in office for 24 years. "He told me the only way he was going to win was to muster some young votes. So I took a leave of absence from school, and worked on his campaign for nine months. And we won. We generated the highest voter turn-out since 1967." The fact that this kind of work came naturally to Johnson was no surprise; his father had been active in the civil rights movement and as a child, Leroy found himself at countless civil rights meetings and actions. "It was a great education," said Johnson. "Everybody was making speeches and singing. I got to meet Fannie Lou Hamer and all those folks." It is not always common knowledge that the roots of the civil rights movement took hold in Holmes County and other rural places in the Delta. "It was the independent black farmers who were the catalyst," Johnson explains.*

**I**t began about 30 years ago with a listening tour throughout the Mississippi Delta to learn what issues were most important to local residents. "In the early 1990s, we took a six week tour of 15 counties in the Delta – just to listen, to understand what people were concerned about, how they articulated it," said Southern Echo executive director Leroy Johnson. "What we learned was that education was really the bottom line – but people were in denial about the circumstances around education. They were so afraid of it that they refused to talk about it. And because the schools were controlled by elected leaders who didn't reflect the communities, we decided to work on redistricting as a way to build organizations in local communities. We needed to knit together a network of organizations from the local level up, not the top down."

Based on those findings, Southern Echo began to organize low-income families and to develop leaders in the toughest of circumstances, addressing tangled and entrenched issues such as government accountability, environmental injustice, and stark inequity in public education. More than two decades later, Southern Echo has chalked up a string of major policy victories, built a strong and far-reaching network of local organizations, and supported a core of young leaders in what is one of the most economically, environmentally, and educationally depressed regions in the nation.

And still, the people of Southern Echo remain eager to learn and discover new ways to organize, strengthen communities, and build real political power. This is evidenced by their latest project, which they call the South by Southwest Experiment, a multi-ethnic and multi-issue effort that is connecting cultures, histories, and social change efforts across the Southern and Southwestern states.

**“In the early 1990s, we took a six week tour of 15 counties in the Delta – just to listen, to understand what people were concerned about, how they articulated it... What we learned was that education was really the bottom line...”**

The choice of the word “Experiment” in the name is purposeful – indicating both the difficulty and great possibility embedded in this burgeoning project.

“We saw a convergence of understanding across these regions about amplifying the voices of working class families, impoverished families,” said Johnson. “It’s about creating the right type of relationship between black and brown and native communities, and bringing all of those

marginalized communities to the forefront of change and transformation in this country. It’s part of building equity – and building power.”

It is that intellectual discipline and commitment to power sharing that has led Southern Echo through an impressive arc from a local organizing group to a statewide political force to a national leader in movement building.

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## Fighting through History

Founded in 1989, Southern Echo’s ultimate objective according to cofounder Michael Sayer is “to dismantle racism and to empower the African American community in Mississippi – nothing less than that!” He continues, “If that wasn’t our goal, it wouldn’t be meaningful to do all of the hard work.”

The work has been hard, yet the people at Southern Echo have addressed their mission incrementally, with intensity, passion, and commitment. Southern Echo is based in the Mississippi Delta, routinely labeled as the poorest section of the country’s poorest state (or as Southern Echo would say “the section of the state with the lowest wealth, in the state with the lowest wealth – careful to note the difference between being “poor” and being of “low wealth”).

According to the most recent U.S. Census, Mississippi has the highest poverty rate in the nation and it sits at the wrong end of numerous other national charts, such as having the highest rates of heart disease, obesity, infant mortality, low birth weight, teen births, children in poverty, and percent of single parent families. Education data is equally disappointing, with Mississippi in the bottom 10 on nearly every indicator.

History has left a particular legacy in the Delta which translates today into what some have called a “permanent recession.” Farming and industry jobs have systematically vanished, along with many of the area’s future leaders. In the past four decades, the Delta’s largest counties have seen their population fall by 20 percent. And in 2011, the largest percentage of families eligible for supplemental nutrition programs were living in counties in the Delta.

At the heart of these problems has been an educational system that has been critically underfunded and that remains effectively

**“It’s about creating the right type of relationship between black and brown and native communities, and bringing all of those marginalized communities to the forefront of change and transformation in this country.”**

segregated. The majority of white children attend private (predominantly Christian) “academies” while black children rely on an underfunded and underperforming public school system, where barbed wire fences, locked doors, and corporal punishment are accepted norms.

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### **Knitting a Network of Activists**

The dozens of local groups working with Southern Echo have had to tackle this issue in an endless variety of ways – from the micro- to the macro-level, from tutoring to parent training to school board reform.

One example is the Sunflower County Parents and Students Organization which began working with Southern Echo in 1996. The organization is now

fiscally sponsored by Southern Echo but is locally staffed, locally focused, and fiercely independent. “I originally got involved when I was in the fourth grade,” says Demetrius Petty, who is currently the office manager. “I just didn’t like math, period. But I got involved in the Algebra Project, which was a program of the Parents and Students Organization. It was fun, and I learned, and my grades went up. Actually my grades went up in my other subjects, too. So I stayed on. And as I got older, I started to help some of the younger kids. Now we also help them prepare for the statewide tests.”

“We have the longest county in Mississippi,” said Betty Petty. “And we work the entire Delta. You have so many little cities – Drew, Rome, Parchment, then there is Dosville, Sunflower, Mississippi, Ruleville. There’s Moorehead, Inverness, Indianola. We also reach to Greenwood and Humphreys County.”

Petty is the executive director of the *Sunflower County Parents and Students Organization* and has witnessed the severe ups and downs of the education battle in the Delta. Born and raised in Indianola, MS (population 10,680 – an 11.5% drop from a decade earlier), Petty spends “9 out of 10 days in the schools,” working with kids and, just as importantly, with parents.

“We do a great deal of work with parents, helping them understand their rights. In these low-wealth, poverty areas, a great number of the parents are young – and they don’t know what their children are entitled to. And some of them, they are afraid to go to the schools. Because so many times they have been treated poorly and shut down. We can give the community real information about our local educational system that the community can actually understand. And we show them how we want to hold our elected officials, our teachers,



and our school board members accountable to the needs of the community.”

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## Standing Up to Be Counted

To climb the mountain of education reform, Southern Echo needed a big strategy, a fundamental approach to change their state’s pattern of failure. So in the early 1990s, Southern Echo seized the opportunity presented by an impending census to launch a campaign to redraw statewide political districts. The timetable and the potential outcomes dovetailed perfectly, as the redistricting campaign

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became a platform to connect the network of like-minded organizations throughout the region.

“You can’t work to empower communities in the abstract,” said Sayer. “There’s got to be things that are so compelling to people that they’re willing to take the risks to engage in the battles.” The leadership of Southern Echo realized early on that education was that compelling issue that could motivate people and get them engaged in the process of social change. However, in order to have any impact within the current power structure and gain any traction with the community, they needed to find a way to exert influence. They

needed to find a lever of change. And that lever was the redistricting campaign. After almost two years of mobilizing local communities around the issue, the Mississippi State Legislature approved 50 newly drawn districts in a historic victory for Southern Echo and its community organizers; in 2007, candidates supported by Southern Echo won all 50 of those redrawn districts.

“This network was built from the local level up, not the top level down,” said Johnson. “These groups could see how they could collaborate at the state level and be the link between local policy and state policy.”

One of those groups was Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County. According to the 1990 census, Tunica County was one of the poorest communities in the United States of America. In the late 1980s, Jesse Jackson visited the region and called Tunica “the Ethiopia of America,” causing a brief media frenzy culminating in a piece on CBS’s “60 Minutes” highlighting scenes of open sewers and extreme poverty. Today, Tunica is home to more than ten casinos and is the third largest gambling area in the United States. But while some of those funds trickled to the school system, the promise of a windfall for the region’s infrastructure and as a means to decrease poverty have gone unfulfilled.

Southern Echo has been working with local residents in Tunica since 1989, initially to address poverty through a more accurate census count. “Our last census count was 9,227. Tunica has always had, in our opinion, a large population. But they weren’t counting black people properly,” said Melvin Young, executive director of Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County, a transplant from Arkansas and 30-year resident of Tunica.

After years of work on the census count, Tunica County is beginning to look different. “This year, for the first time in the history of the county, we have an all-black Board of Supervisors. And, that’s not important because of their skin color. It’s important because they are all people who have attended accountability trainings from Concerned Citizens.

**“We can give the community real information about our local educational system that the community can actually understand... And we show them how we want to hold our elected officials, our teachers, and our school board members accountable...”**

These are active community folks, and they still have the ear of the community. It’s something we’ve been pushing for, for a long time – for our people to get out and vote and to be knowledgeable about the candidates,” explains Young.

“And, I think it’s a huge success when you can walk into the elementary schools or walk into the high school campus, walk into the middle schools and see the learning environment has really changed. It no longer looks like they’re being trained for prisons. It looks like a real structured learning environment with young folks learning and thriving.”

The success in Tunica is a result of lasting relationships with principals, education officials at the state level, and the organization’s partnership with Southern Echo. “Echo has always been very clear,” said Young. “They are not our parent organization. We are independent. But anytime we need to leverage funding or help with technical assistance, they’ve always said ‘We’re there.’”

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## **Expanding the Pie and Expanding Horizons**

The census and redistricting campaigns were crucial, not only in terms of budget allocations and the potential elections and appointments within newly-drawn districts, but also in terms of the mind set of community leaders. Having coordinated campaigns in more than one county was a leap for most volunteers. These were activists who had only worked very close to home and who operated largely within a framework of scarcity. Simply crossing a county line to go to a meeting was a major step, both conceptually and logistically – many people did not have the gas money to travel from one

county to the next. So the leadership at Southern Echo studiously alternated meetings between counties, building relationships and emphasizing the importance of a broader campaign.

“The cultural premise was that there was a small money pie that could not be expanded. So everyone was competing for slices of this small pie,” said Sayer, explaining the community’s sense of the state budget. “What we explained was that the only way to move ahead is to expand the pie so that everybody gets a fair slice. This was not easy.”

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## **Making the Leap from Policy to Practice to Power**

While these are very demonstrable results, less tangible are the culture shifts around the building and consolidation of power – the type of power that affects families daily. “People talk about power sharing a lot,” said Johnson. “But, you can

never share power unless you really have power to share.”

Southern Echo recognized from the onset that one of the key goals for community organizations was to move from being objects of policy to being architects of policy. In Mississippi, succeeding in getting communities to decide and determine for themselves which policies are necessary to build and strengthen their community represents a seismic shift, not only in policy development but in power development.

In 2011, Southern Echo worked side by side, in an unprecedented acknowledgment of the organization’s power, with the Mississippi Department of Education, to craft a policy around parent engagement in schools that included required accountability standards. “That’s a huge step for any policy organization—to go from crafting

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the policy to crafting the implementation of the policy,” said Johnson.

These systemic shifts are not short-term projects. And they need long-term support. Funding in Mississippi has traditionally been exceedingly hard to secure, with few foundations investing in the region. And while long-term funding partnerships are critical in order to effect lasting change, these are few and far between.

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## Taking the Long View

The need for a long-term approach to change in the Delta is nowhere more apparent than in the case of the short-lived mayorship of Dianna Freelon-Foster.

In 2003, Freelon-Foster was elected the first African American and first female mayor of Grenada, Mississippi; population 13,092. Her election was the result of years of organizing efforts, redistricting campaigns, and leadership training from Southern Echo and other local groups. Grenada was on the front lines of the civil rights movement decades earlier. It was at Grenada’s Bellflower Baptist Church where Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke and it was in Grenada where the Ku Klux Klan attacked children on their way to newly-integrated schools. Dianna Freelon-Foster was one of those children. “There was a lot of violence. Even

now, nearly 50 years later, I find it hard to understand how people could hate children so much that they would beat them for coming to school.”

As mayor, Freelon-Foster was focused on a platform of education reform: increasing school funding, ending corporal punishment, and attracting more qualified African American teachers to local schools. At the time of her election, the student body was 60 percent black, while only

16 percent of teachers were African American.

In 2005, however, there was a new election and a new demographic. Years earlier, the most prosperous and largely white neighborhoods in town had separated from Grenada to form their own individual municipalities. However, soon after Freelon-Foster was sworn into office, these neighborhoods were promptly re-annexed by the city. There were now 1,100 new (predominantly

white) voters in the city and Freelon-Foster lost her position.

“Many people who really took ownership of my victory were those who live in dire poverty – and those were the people who lost hope after this defeat,” said Freelon-Foster. “They didn’t understand the process and to them it was so unfair. These are setbacks that really hurt your organization if it’s not well-established and ready to withstand these things. So, we’re still in the process of regrouping.” Freelon-Foster is the executive director of Activists with a Purpose, and like several other leaders in local communities around

**“People talk about power sharing a lot. But, you can never share power unless you really have power to share.”**

the Delta, shares her time between being staff at her organization along with being part of Southern Echo’s staff.

The Freelon-Foster election is just one example of the ups and downs along the road to systemic change. “This isn’t just about whether you’re going to defeat Mississippi’s proposed charter school bill or immigration bill, both of which are objectives we’ve had and have succeeded in,” said Sayer. “If we succeed on policy battles but don’t build a foundation, we aren’t winning the fight. We’re simply winning some skirmishes.”

Johnson, Sayer, and others at Southern Echo know too well that it is a long term battle to build real power. Issue-based campaigns help move the process along, but long-term thinking – supported by long-term funding – are essential to make a lasting difference.

“The tension from my point of view is about understanding what the empowering process

requires,” says Sayer. “If the outcome you want is to enable communities to develop the tools and skills and the organizational basis to become architects of policy in which you can show how they have affected the outcome of policy struggles... that isn’t a two- or three-year process.”

According to Sayer, if a funder approaches these issues with a short term timetable, that can actually work against an organization’s program. It can prevent the development of a realistic analysis of what it will take to move from the systemic exclusion of communities to enabling those communities to become an integral part of the decisionmaking process.

“There are very few foundations who understand that and who will support an organization that says ‘This is my problem and here’s a solution generated from the community to change that,’” said Johnson. “I think the Marguerite Casey Foundation is trying to do that and that’s why there’s this real congruence between what the Foundation is saying as a funder and what we’re saying as an organization.”

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## Organizing Around a Philosophy

The long-term view is built into everything that Southern Echo does, with training and supporting the future leaders of the movement as fundamental tenets of the organization’s philosophy. Everything at Southern Echo has an “intergenerational” component – a term that comes to life in all their programs, all their trainings, and all their planning.

Being rooted in the Delta, which is steeped in a particular and robust history, geography, and culture, Southern Echo’s first step is always to apply a historical and race-based analysis to any issue or campaign. Next, they apply what they call

the elements of good organizing: *Investigation and Research, Education, Negotiation, and Demonstration* – a process each of the partner organizations adheres to with pride and understanding.

“It has to be intergenerational in order to be sustainable,” said Johnson. “We want young people not just involved, but engaged. We view engagement as different from involvement. When you crank up a car, the car is involved. When you put it in gear, then it’s engaged. We don’t just want

**“That’s a huge step for any policy organization – to go from crafting the policy to crafting the implementation of the policy.”**

to crank up the process and have it run idle. We want it to go somewhere.”

The Southern Echo organizing model begins with a sound base of information – to find out the most accurate information and to understand the goals and the people who need to be part of the process: *Investigation and Research*. Next, there needs to be a way to convey that information effectively and appropriately to the target audiences: *Education*. “Having the most meticulous research in the world won’t do any good if the community cannot understand it,” said Johnson. “We need to turn that information into something the community can see and feel and touch.”

The third piece of the puzzle is the ability to enter into a dialogue from a position of power: *Negotiation*. Southern Echo views effective negotiation techniques as a specific skill set that can be taught and built into community action – but it is often challenging. “People ask ‘Are you saying I have to compromise in order to be effective?’ And we are saying, ‘No – You have to negotiate from strength. What does your

community have, collectively, to bring to the table? How do you put those things together?’ It’s key to building community.”

The last element: *Demonstration* is not defined as a traditional march or sit-in; to Southern Echo it means showing that change can happen. It is not simply winning approval of a policy, but becoming the architects of policy and showing you can implement that policy. And that is where the process shifts from “organizing” to “power sharing.” These precepts – *investigate, educate, negotiate, demonstrate* – serve not only as an organizing model but also as benchmarks for success to be used as measurements to ensure projects are on the right path and whether or not the goals of each effort are met.

As part of their ongoing philosophy,, the leadership of Southern Echo has focused on the central role of family in community. This led to its focus on schools, health programs for children, and stemming the pipeline from schools to jails. “You can’t build communities when you have dissolving families,” said Sayer. “In fact, if you look at struggles in other places, like some of the things that have happened in Africa, you’ll see that the aggressors immediately break up families in order to undermine the capacity of communities to resist. The same thing was done during our own slavery era. Breaking up families was an intentional practice to prevent communities – and community resistance – from taking root.”

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## Reaching Out Beyond the Delta

Since its founding, Southern Echo’s work has focused on the Mississippi Delta, but they have also built a formidable statewide network – working in all of the state’s 82 counties, helping traditionally

disenfranchised and low-wealth communities flex their collective political muscle.

Over the years, they have launched statewide campaigns such as the *Mississippi Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse* to curb the inflated rates of youth incarcerated in the state; helped secure passage of the *Mississippi Adequate Education Program* which increased school funding and teacher salaries; and worked with a network of organizations focused on stopping the unabated dumping of hazardous materials near schools and residential communities. From education to budget reform, to environmental justice, to public health

**“Looking at our young people and seeing them want to make a difference in our community, that gives me hope. And I look at every family that comes through those doors as a relationship. It’s about giving those families respect and hope. Helping them see that there is a brighter side if we work together.”**

– Southern Echo has made a difference in almost every aspect of life in the Delta and in the state.

“We have a statewide public defender’s office now,” said Johnson. “We didn’t have that before. We succeeded in bringing education services inside the juvenile detention facilities. We established an adolescent fitness program for all 82 counties, something else we’ve never had before. So there have been some major, major victories.”

With these victories comes influence. Building and sharing power is not simply a goal between community groups and the establishment, it’s a core tenet of Southern Echo – a way to create a structure that is sustainable, transparent, and accountable.

“If the leadership keeps critical information and is not transparent, that would mean everyone would be dependent on us. And that would essentially be the opposite of what we were trying to do,” explains Johnson.

“They don’t like that top down stuff at Southern Echo,” said Melvin Young of Citizens for a Better Tunica. “It’s always grassroots with them. And, over the years, we’ve all learned that ourselves. Because we want to make sure that the local community-based organizations always have their autonomy. When you’re trying to move local families and individuals, you need that. It has to be grassroots; not grass tops.”

Southern Echo achieves much of its success by working closely with dozens of local and statewide organizations through multiple coalitions, such as the *Education Stakeholders Alliance*, *Mississippi Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse*, the *Pushback Network* (which focuses on civic participation), *Mississippi Redistricting Coalition*, and *Mississippi Demography Group* to name just a few.

One of the most important coalitions is the *Mississippi Delta Catalyst Roundtable*. Formed in 2005, it is comprised of 11 black-led community organizations working in the Delta.<sup>1</sup> The Roundtable is focused on the ongoing issue of quality, accessible public education for all children

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1. The roster includes Action Communication and Education Reform - ACER (Duck Hill, Montgomery County); Citizens for a Better Greenville (Greenville, Washington County); Activists with a Purpose, Washington County); Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County; Nollie Citizens for Quality Education - CQE (Lexington, Holmes County); Citizens for Educational Awareness (Kilmichael, Montgomery County); Sunflower County Parents and Students Organization (Indianola, Sunflower County); Youth Innovative Movement Solutions - YIMS (Duck Hill, Montgomery County; Tupelo, Lee County; Panola County).

in the region. And while Southern Echo has played a crucial role in the inception and development of many of these smaller organizations scattered throughout the Delta counties and in the creation of the Roundtable, it is very clear that each

**“If we succeed on policy battles but don’t build a foundation, we aren’t winning the fight. We’re simply winning some skirmishes.”**

organization was nurtured by Southern Echo to become a separate and distinct entity with strong convictions, opinions, and programs appropriate to the communities in which they are located. Perhaps most significant, Southern Echo views each organization as an equal partner of the Catalyst Roundtable, with Southern Echo sitting at the table as “just one of the 11 organizations.” And this is not simply rhetoric. Despite being by far the biggest, best funded, and most established organization in the Roundtable, Southern Echo is simply one member with one vote. And sometimes they get outvoted. “That’s what equity and power sharing means,” says Johnson. “And when we’ve lost votes, we’ve usually been pushed by the other groups into doing work that we should have been doing.”

“If you have one big organization spreading its wings over everything, you’re going to have a very small leadership group,” says Sayer. “If you have 10, 15, 20, 30 organizations out there, you’re going to have 10, 15, 20, 30 leadership models developing in different ways.”

“We needed to disperse our capacity, our vision, and our skills among multiple organizations,” adds Johnson. “We needed independent partners with their own agendas, their own staffs and especially their own resources to the extent possible.”

One such example was around disability rights, an area in which Southern Echo had not worked previously, but on which several Roundtable members had focused (and created connections with white-led organizations whose sole focus was this issue). After the Roundtable voted to go forward on the issue, effective alliances were built with new partners, such as traditionally white-led statewide disability rights groups. Prior to this, Southern Echo had focused on working with, and supporting, the growth of solely black-led organizations. But, as a result of the Roundtable decision, they moved ahead. Sayers and Johnson say that finding common ground with these groups was ‘transformative.’ It led to deeper and stronger partnerships with organizations such as *Mississippi Economic Council*, *Mississippi Association of School Superintendents*, *Mississippi Education Association*, and *Mississippi Department of Education* – none of which are black-led.

The Roundtable is currently working on creating community engagement councils, developing a student handbook, tackling school discipline issues and dropout prevention, supporting candidates for school boards, and battling the state legislature around charter schools, immigration, and Medicaid.

“You also have the Juvenile Justice Reform Act that came out of Greenville, Sunflower, and Holmes counties. They were just given Resolutions of Recognition by the Mississippi House and Senate for their work on this issue. That kind of recognition for community groups is not something that happens very often in Mississippi, said Johnson.”

An additional challenge for groups like Southern Echo is maintaining positive working relationships with community members, coming from active participation in the organization, who

get elected or appointed to public office. From city councils to the mayor's office, and from heads of public agencies to the state legislature, Echo has seen many from their own ranks reach positions of authority. But keeping them accountable to their communities has sometimes been difficult. "If we don't work to maintain those relationships, we lose them," said Johnson. "I've heard the same thing from other organizations around the country."

As a response, Southern Echo is developing an accountable governance curriculum in concert with their partners in the South by Southwest Experiment. "We can't have onetime allies get into office and then end up writing the same types of policies as the people who came before them,"

**"We want young people not just involved, but engaged... When you crank up a car, the car is involved. When you put it in gear, then it's engaged. We don't just want to crank up the process and have it run idle. We want it to go somewhere."**

said Johnson. "We need a strategy to keep our representatives engaged and keep them moving forward."

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### **Sharing Power, Sharing Connections... Weaving it all Together**

Southern Echo has also broken the mold by helping many small organizations raise funds. Executive Director Johnson has placed the funding of black-led, Delta-based community organizations as a high priority and has worked with national and local funders to encourage direct support for many of these groups. He invites funders to travel

to the Delta to meet activists on their home turf – in order to build relationships between funders and grantees, and for funders to experience the Delta firsthand. While some grantmakers might have been more comfortable using Southern Echo as a conduit for funding, Johnson has instead encouraged direct funding.

"We don't hire staff to come to Jackson, but to stay in their hometowns and build a presence and an organizing base where they live," said Johnson.

Another innovation coming out of the Catalyst Roundtable has been the "Network Weaver," a role funded by the Marguerite Casey Foundation to maintain a functional connection and coordination between and among the organizations within the

Roundtable – most of whom have limited staff and limited budgets – and to help identify what these groups need to support their local strategies.

"It's really a support position," says Joyce Parker, who serves as the Network Weaver. "The role is not to dominate at the Roundtable because that stifles growth. We believe that every organization has to grow and develop. Rather I have gone into communities to support the local work by helping in that office, or if I'm in a space with funders I can talk about the various groups and the work they're doing."

In addition to being the Network Weaver, Parker is also the director of the two-person Citizens for a Better Greenville which operates out of the back of her brother's barbershop – where she acts as a direct line for sharing knowledge between and among community organizations. When one county or township is struggling with an issue, they can reach out to Parker to see if other towns have had similar experiences. Whether it's an uncooperative school board that will not allow public comments, or access to information about



immigration and citizenship services, Parker can find others who have experienced the same problem. And if – as a whole – the Roundtable

**“If the leadership keeps critical information and is not transparent, that would mean everyone would be dependent on us. And that would essentially be the opposite of what we were trying to do.”**

decides they need training or technical support on an issue, Parker can work with Southern Echo to pull those trainings together.

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## Reaching Out Beyond Mississippi

Southern Echo's roots are in the Mississippi Delta; their own staff and the staff members of their regional allies being, overwhelmingly, proud residents (many multiple generations) of local communities. They grew up there and they stayed there; they hope their children will be healthy contributors to the community; and they are working to change it for the better.

But in 2010, the organization took a major step in a new direction. To reflect its multi-state work through the *South by Southwest Experiment*, Echo's leaders elected members to the board of Southern Echo who are not residents of Mississippi.

“Given what the work is now, we feel the board should represent that,” explains Johnson. For him, this decision is part of the ongoing learning process for Southern Echo.

“It's more of the same, in a good way, in a bigger way” he said. “And Marguerite Casey understands that. It's strange to find a foundation that's so

similar to yourself. We started out by going on a listening tour, and developing our organization around those findings. And they developed their program around a listening tour, as well. They said ‘We need to listen to the community first,’ and then they acted. That's like us. And like us, the Foundation believes that it's possible to have a national impact by building from the ground up...that you can build real national power that way.”

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## Creating the R&D Project for the Social Change Movement

Following the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Southern Echo responded in force like so many other nonprofit groups around the nation. They joined with the SouthWest Organizing Project from Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the Southwest Worker's Union from San Antonio, Texas to put new roofs on homes, deliver water and other critical supplies, and helped families restart their lives. But unlike other temporary partnerships, Southern Echo wanted more. The three

organizations launched a solidarity tour across the three states. The tour took them through Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama, and through native communities such as the Houma and the Choctaw Nations.

These were groups and individuals that Johnson had worked with over the past 20 years on various projects – from a waters rights project in New Mexico, to organizing farmers in the Mississippi Delta and Texas, to fighting toxic

dumping and other environmental justice campaigns throughout the region. But while these projects were meaningful, and sometimes successful, the partnerships eventually dissipated, and the momentum built would be lost.

"So we made a conscious decision," said Johnson. "We wanted to build relationships that were more than issue based, or tragedy based. We had to figure out 'How do our lives intertwine? How did we get here and why are we doing the work that we're doing?' We thought it could tell us something so we could create the right type of relationship between black and brown and native communities."

And so the South by Southwest Experiment was born.

**"So we made a conscious decision. We wanted to build relationships that were more than issue-based, more than tragedy-based. We had to figure out, 'How do our lives intertwine? How did we get here and why are we doing the work that we are doing?'"**

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## Moving from the Transactional to the Relational

Following the post-Katrina “solidarity tour,” the three groups met again in 2006 to understand their individual “organizational road maps,” to share their stories and motivations, and to look seriously at the history of their regions, their ancestors, and their cultures. They wanted to identify their common threads and also to celebrate their differences. The ultimate goal was to create a stronger, broader, social change movement – built by having developed purposefully lasting connections.

For too long, Southern Echo had seen, studied, and been part of diverse communities coming together around a crisis or an opportunity, such as during the Civil Rights Movement. But without having built a sense of lasting community, these alliances would typically recede, and the next challenge would begin anew at square one.

“We wanted to move from the transactional to the relational. We wanted to truly build community,” said Johnson. So the leadership of Southern Echo, SWOP, and SWU got together for a three-day retreat in Jackson, MS. They shared their life roadmaps – What led them

to this work?; their organizational road maps – Where were their respective groups headed?; and their historical road maps – What was the real history of their regions and families? “I learned more about those people and those groups in three days than I did in the past 20 years,” said Johnson. We talked about our work and our differences and our presumptions. But we also talked about food. We talked about music. We talked about dance. We wanted to know everything we could about each other. And we also realized that in order to truly build this different kind of relationship we needed to go beyond leadership and even beyond staff.”

So, the groups started to engage in exchanges. All three organizations sent delegations to spend concentrated time on-site with the other two organizations. Southern Echo sent busloads of 50 or more young organizers, staff, and board members, and community members to the other two South by Southwest groups for extended visits. They became immersed in each other’s work.

The groups then traveled together along the Trail of Tears from Mississippi to Oklahoma, and later up to Ohio and Detroit recreating migration patterns of black workers from the South to the North, creating connections between histories and reframing familiar struggles in a broader perspective. Looking at injustice through the lens of another organization’s history and mission proved to be a transformative experience.

**“Look at the Rio Grande Valley and the Mississippi Delta and you have a lot of parallel problems and parallel responses.”**

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## Reframing History

“Look at the Rio Grande Valley and the Mississippi Delta and you have a lot of parallel problems and parallel responses,” said Johnson. “And then you look at their connections between New Mexico and Mexico and you find yourself looking at history differently.”

The group visited Hondo, Texas, to stand under the Emancipation Oak — a huge oak tree where free blacks gathered to hold ceremonies; they went to New Mexico and visited communities that didn’t have running water or electricity; and they crossed the border into Mexico to tour a maquiladora to witness working conditions and speak to workers.

People from Greenville, Mississippi, who had worked in an automotive plant met Mexican workers who were working hard to earn five dollars a day. “We saw that these people were fighting the same forces of history, the same oppressive systems and the same daily injustices that we have been fighting,” explained Johnson. “Our folks came away with a few tears, saying ‘I will never say they’re taking our jobs.’ These issues are now viewed very differently.” The people who went on these tours and who had these

experiences are primed to become leaders according to Johnson and the other directors.

**“Our folks came away with a few tears, saying, ‘I will never say they’re taking our jobs.’”**

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## Growing the Experiment

One of the first joint efforts for the South by Southwest Experiment focused on the 2010 Census. The three organizations developed coordinated programs to more accurately count traditionally hard-to-reach communities in the three regions. The project was so successful that they each received commemorative plaques from the Census Bureau. The more accurate headcount should translate into more appropriate funding and services.

Since then, the South by Southwest Experiment has grown into a more formal coalition, expanding beyond the three anchor organizations. Today, the coalition includes 12 nonprofits from Mississippi, four from Texas, and seven from New Mexico. They came together in San Antonio in November 2011 to share their learning process with representatives from 20 different organizations located in 15 different states. “We took them through our life road map and our shared historical timeline,” said Johnson. “We helped them understand this transition to a ‘relational process’ and what it means to fully integrate young people into that process.”

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## Finding the Importance of Family

Another national convening of the South by Southwest Experiment is planned for Mississippi, this time focusing on accountable governance and building bridges to the new majority. And yet with all of this growth, Southern Echo still insists this is an ‘experiment.’

“Where has the social justice movement been? And where are we going? Corporations get to think about these things all the time. They have huge research and development centers. We’re saying, ‘This – South by Southwest Experiment – is our R&D center.’ The movement can do that, too,” stresses Johnson.

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## Bringing the Experiment Home

One of the most important findings of the Experiment thus far is that it is the common thread of family that binds all the participants together. In every convening and at every meeting, participants underline the fact that you cannot build communities if you have dissolving families.

“No matter if you’re Native American, Chicano, or African-American — your family is going to ground you and your community,” said Johnson. “That is where you derive your sense of culture.

“And once you and I have that better understanding of our common connections, we can engage in a deeper analysis together. We can talk about what didn’t work in a campaign. We can talk about failures. And we can disagree — because we aren’t going to walk away from each other. That’s the relational versus the transactional process. And if you let youth into the process, if you build in the intergenerational component, then these relationships will last a very long time.”

**“We took them through our life road map and our shared historical timeline.”**

## Campaigning for a Better New Mexico

*Robbie Rodriguez first heard about SWOP when a friend at Cornell University read the organization's newsletter and suggested he intern with them. It sounded interesting, but his academics were too time consuming. Years later, he attended a Chicano Studies conference in Chicago when that same friend suggested they attend a panel where representatives from SWOP were presenting information on environmental racism. It was then that he asked for an internship. Thirteen years later, he was still at SWOP. "When I was in college, I took Chicano studies and African-American studies and women's studies – but they always talked about these civil rights movements as having happened in the past, which they did. So when I started working with SWOP, I was blown away. I felt they were doing that same kind of work with that same energy today."*

**“W**e’ve recognized over and over again that the biggest problem facing disenfranchised communities in New Mexico – communities of color and working-class communities – is the lack of strong leadership and organization,” says Tomás Garduno, one of four co-directors of the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). “And it’s a problem that’s been around for a long, long time.”

Sitting in SWOP’s modest offices on a small residential street in southwest Albuquerque, he connects this issue of leadership to the particularly unique history of the state. Native American tribes including Navajo, Apache, Zuni, Comanche, Pueblo, and Ute made their home for centuries in the region. Yet the territory passed through the control of the French, the Spanish, and Mexican governments before being claimed by the Independent Republic of Texas and ultimately the United States in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Hidalgo in 1848. And the effects of this constant realignment continue to this day. Garduno’s own family is actually from Nambé, New Mexico. As he succinctly states, “We didn’t cross the border. The border crossed us.”

However, simply telling that story has now become a political issue. SWOP is currently raising awareness around a set of books they published on local Chicano and Native American history that have been removed from classrooms by the Tucson, Arizona School District. *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, as well as the other books that are on the

**“SWOP has a unique space in the state. We are a mobilizing organization, and we have a broad reach. Through that comes strong leadership development programs that lift up leaders. We want to be a people’s organization in New Mexico. The structures are in place, through which people come, develop their skill sets, are able to speak out, to become more powerful in the state.”**

banned list, demonstrate the interrelated nature of the Mexican, Chicano, and Native American communities in the Southwest. “New Mexico is a minority, majority state, and it has been so historically,” said Marjorie Childress, one of the four SWOP co-directors. “The political climate here in New Mexico is different than in other places, like Arizona for example. What that translates to is that sometimes our state policies may be a little bit more amenable to immigrants or the Latino community, for instance. However, at the same time the broad power structure of property and business owners and local bureaucrats, here, is largely made up of Anglos. And to me, there’s a conflict there.”

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## **Bringing Transformational Organizing to Scale**

Founded in 1980, SWOP grew out of the local activism of community, student, labor, and land struggles of the 1960s – generally referred to as the Chicano Movement. Following ideological and strategic conflicts in that era, movement leaders decided to keep the radical spark alive by continuing the tradition of place-based community organizing. When the organization was formed in Albuquerque, the chosen name “Southwest Organizing Project,” was meant to capture the vision of an expanding entity which would eventually reach from Texas to California. Over time, through its extensive work in the city of Albuquerque and surrounding Bernalillo County, the organization

developed a more local character, focusing its grassroots organizing work with individuals and families in New Mexico, and primarily in Albuquerque where more than 700,000 of the state’s 2 million residents live. SWOP counts 1,000 members in its “core” membership, and many of those are families who go through trainings on issues such as civic engagement or environmental justice, participate in an action, and/or attend strategy meetings. And as with most community organizing, these are relationships built on direct contact. “Often, it’s not the issue that is bringing people to a meeting – it’s who asked them to come. It’s the relationships,” said Garduno.

Building up those key leaders who can create those relationships takes a significant amount of time and energy – they go through trainings, attend leadership institutes, and work closely with staff. And that is truly transformational

work which can change people and communities. However, when an election or a major campaign rolls around, necessity forces a more traditional form of transactional activism – phone calls, direct mail, and door knocking. This dual methodology gave rise to a tension within the organization. So the leadership at SWOP began to try to reconcile these two organizing models, the transformational and the transactional.

What emerged is what SWOP calls Mass Base Organizing. It is their method of bringing both a community organizing and a transformational lens to electoral work. During elections, such as the recent primary elections in Spring of 2012, SWOP contacted more than 100,000 voters using traditional methods: phone banks, predictive dialers, and detailed voter databases.

However, SWOP also reaches out repeatedly to this broad group with specific asks and with a consistent brand. “For seven years, we have been contacting people with the same slogan: ‘Campaign

**“Often, it’s not the issue that is bringing people to a meeting – it’s who asked them to come. It’s the relationships.”**

for a Better New Mexico.’ It doesn’t matter what the issue is, we want people to know that name. People have seen us walk up to their door for seven years wearing that same logo. Because if we can’t have the same face talking to you every time, at least you’ll recognize the slogan and the shirt and you will have built a connection to that brand. That’s how we’re trying to bring this relationship model to scale.”

SWOP contacts their universe of voters three to five times a year, for awareness of elections or actions, for reinforcement of issues and messages, or for petitions or focused Get Out the Vote efforts.

And when an individual responds positively three times to these contacts, he/she is designated a “leader” in the context of the Mass Base. There are currently more than 15,000 such “leaders,” and all of these contacts are recorded in the SWOP database.

“It’s not only important, it’s crucial that communities that have been historically underrepresented be an intrinsic part of the political process, year round,” said Garduno. “Democracy doesn’t end on election day.”

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## Defining a Focus

Such civic engagement efforts are a core part of SWOP’s program. Though SWOP has participated in many progressive issue campaigns over the years, recently staff members conceded that the organization needed a sharper focus. After completing a comprehensive strategic planning process, the organization concentrated on four

major initiatives that fall under the overarching core belief that “all families have the right to healthy, sustainable environments in which to live, work, and play.” Air quality; food justice and local food production; education reform; and civic engagement. This expansive definition of environmental justice is what SWOP is promoting among its social justice allies. Programs range from building a “bucket brigade” of neighborhood air quality monitors to a network of community gardens for residents to grow healthy organic food.

Sandra Ortsman, a SWOP board member and associate director of *Enlace Comunitario*, an agency that supports Latina domestic violence survivors and works to prevent domestic abuse among Latino families, has been involved with SWOP ever since she arrived in New Mexico, as a graduate student.



"I was really pleased with how open SWOP was to collaborating," she says. "With other organizations, it sometimes feels like doors are kind of closed, which is a shame. I think SWOP is amazing at

**"For seven years, we have been contacting people with the same slogan... It doesn't matter what the issue is, we want people to know the name... Because if we can't have the same face talking to you every time, at least you'll recognize the slogan and the shirt and you will have built a connection to that brand. That's how we're trying to bring this relationship to scale."**

creating allies and collaborating, either with individuals or organizations."

Childress explains, "We foster a space within which actual institutions get formed, through organizing efforts on the ground." She describes SWOP's early efforts when they worked with very low-income, Mexican families in Pajarito Mesa to form the Mutual Domestic Water Association. With SWOP's help, the community "created an embedded institution that developed a water system. Through that process grew their ability to work with Bernalillo County. Many community members trained by SWOP have gone on to leadership roles."

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## **Empowering Youth to Lead**

Robbie Rodriguez, former SWOP executive director, began working with a cadre of young people, soon after he began with the organization. These young people were often the children of the organizers at SWOP, many of whom had participated in

social movements of the 60s which Robbie had studied. "These kids had basically grown up in the organization and wanted to start getting involved themselves. This was before the term 'youth organizing' was really being used," said Rodriguez. "But we trained them to do organizing, and soon they were running their own programs." That is a tradition that continues today. "Investing in youth as well as adults, providing opportunities, including staff opportunities – it's a real value, a tradition, a part of the organizing model."

"I pretty much grew up with SWOP," says Celia Fraire, who relates how she watched her mother take part in organizing campaigns and participated, as a child, in music and theater productions sponsored by the organization when she was just eight years old. She went on to become a SWOP intern at fourteen and a board member in her twenties. Now academic coordinator for SWOP's youth program, she says, "I'm a product of SWOP's leadership development activities."

One of those activities is the annual Youth Empowerment Summer (YES) Institute. Each year, YES accepts up to 50 young men and women for an intense program that covers the history of the social justice movement, facilitation skills, media relations, and "community organizing 101."

According to Garduno, the program has produced countless homegrown leaders in the community. One such student, Julian Moya, currently SWOP board chair, began as an intern at SWOP, attended the YES Institute and went on to become the chief policy analyst for an Albuquerque city council member.

But perhaps the biggest evidence of the program's success is the fact that YES is run entirely

by former participants. Everyone planning the 2012 curriculum is a former student. This year they have set a strategic goal to broaden the scope and to have more than 30% of participants come from outside the Albuquerque corridor.

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## Developing Homegrown Leaders

Dedicated to the development of community-based leaders, SWOP has also focused extensively on its own internal leadership and succession planning. In 2010, long-time executive director Robbie Rodriguez announced that he would be leaving the organization to accept a position at Atlantic Philanthropies, taking his experiences to the foundation world. With a year to plan the transition, Rodriguez worked with SWOP to shape a new vision of organizational leadership, appropriate for a 30+ year-old organization devoted to collaboration and innovative approaches to social change.

Rodriguez noted that a new executive director could easily become overwhelmed with travel,

**“These kids had grown up in the organization and wanted to start getting involved. We trained them to do organizing. Soon they were running their own programs.”**

fundraising, organizational and administrative obligations – and potentially lose the collaborative staffing model that had evolved over time. Through a series of ongoing dialogues with senior staff and board, a four-person leadership team was proposed as a two-year trial, in lieu of identifying an “official” and singular executive director. In this shared leadership model, each co-director takes on different programmatic areas of responsibility critical to the organization’s current and anticipated needs.

“It made sense on a lot of levels,” said Rodriguez. “We had built a very strong culture around developing homegrown leaders and a sense of an already shared leadership within the organization. We had very talented people who were clearly capable of taking on more responsibilities and more leadership.”

One board member cautions, “This four-person model does have risk. It relies a lot on chemistry and how well the individuals are able to work together. But it’s also a great opportunity to challenge the idea of how leadership happens.”

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## Reaching Out Through Equal Voice

“Part of being a leader is being open,” said Garduno. “And the best thing that’s come out of our relationship with the Equal Voice campaign – in my opinion – is the encouragement to be open to new partnerships. It’s surprising how insular we can get. But the Equal Voice campaign has really helped us reach out to whole different set of folks.”

According to Garduno, SWOP’s relationship with Marguerite Casey Foundation has provided an opportunity to bring together cross-sectoral and cross-community coalitions, such as with Native American organizations and the South by Southwest Experiment. As a result SWOP is working in a much more conscious way. “We try to imbue all of our leaders with the fundamental belief that anything is possible,” said Garduno. “We see social justice work as a lifetime commitment, so we try to make sure our staff is balanced – so that they can look back and say they made significant changes in their community and they also lived a happy life. Because the more you lead with love, the more opportunities and doors will present themselves to you.”

## **Transforming a Culture from Within**

*From San Jose to Switzerland to Poland to Malibu to Long Beach: While that's not the normal road map to community development work, that's the path Bob Cabeza took. Growing up in Northern California, Cabeza went to journalism school dreaming of becoming a foreign correspondent. But he had a natural gift for working with kids and he soon found himself as the program director at the San Jose YMCA. He needed to satisfy his yearning to see the world, so in 1989 he embarked on an extended trek through Western and Eastern Europe right after the fall of the Berlin Wall. With those life experiences in his pocket, Cabeza returned to Southern California to lead an innovative program in Long Beach to work in youth development programs.*

**I**n the Spring of 1992, Ralph Hurtado was the executive director of the YMCA of Greater Long Beach. According to Bob Cabeza, Hurtado was not a “swim and gym” guy; he was a social worker and social activist. Hurtado was going to launch a new juvenile crime prevention program and wanted Cabeza to lead that effort. And then the streets exploded. The city of Long Beach experienced severe riots following the verdict in the April 1992 Rodney King trial, a fact that was often overlooked as the city’s activists sat in the shadow of Los Angeles. These events convinced Hurtado and Cabeza that they needed to get directly involved with the local schools and reach out to low income and urban communities.

“The Y had not been doing much in the community at that point,” said Cabeza, who is now Vice President of Community Development for the YMCA of Greater Long Beach. “It looked like the old boys club in there.” Known as “Iowa by the Sea” in the 1950s, Long Beach has since experienced dramatic demographic shifts. In 2000, *USA Today* called it “the most ethnically diverse large city in the United States,” with Cambodian and Vietnamese residents and other recently immigrated communities, joining historically large white, Latino, and African-American populations.

And the Community Development Branch of the YMCA now serves every part of this new Long Beach, cutting across language and ethnic barriers and serving everyone from

kindergartners to parents. But the Community Development Branch doesn't look like most other YMCAs. "We are the largest branch of the Y in Long Beach – but we have no facility, just a small office space," said Cabeza. "All of our programs are outreach, so all of our sites are at schools. We believe we should be located in the community as much as possible."

Through a comprehensive scheme of after school programs, technology training classes, peer-to-peer training for other service providers, social entrepreneurship, and a deep commitment to parent and family involvement, this local YMCA has produced real results for local children and neighborhoods. They have become a national – and international – model for not only child development but for youth development as well.

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## Graduating from Kids to Families

One of the first lessons the branch learned was that in order to make a difference in a community, you cannot simply work with kids. You have to

**"If you don't work with families, you're just shooting yourself in the foot."**

work with whole families. "If you don't work with families, you're just shooting yourself in the foot," said Cabeza. Families provide the local network to build relationships and build trust. And trust was hard to come by in a community that – at the onset – seemed wary of the school system.

"A principal would say something about a kid and the parents would pull their child out of school. Or if the parents were undocumented, they would be too scared to send their kids to school. And that's

not a good environment for community building," said Cabeza. So, to build that trust, the Y started with the kids. They hired culturally competent staff who came from the local communities. They hired parents to work at school sites. And when they wanted to hold meetings with the parents, they provided child care and meals, thus eliminating the two biggest barriers to attendance.

"Teaching parent leadership takes a lot of communication," said Cabeza. "We had to show them that you are allowed to talk to your principal, or your child's teacher. You are allowed to go to city council meetings and ask questions. You are allowed to be an advocate for your child," said Cabeza. "But you have to get in there and be part of the change."

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## Bringing the Community into Classes

Part of that change included launching an ambitious partnership program with local schools. "Every elementary school in Long Beach has an after school program. But this model went beyond that,"

said Gonzalo Moraga. From 2003 until 2011, Moraga served as the principal of Stevenson Elementary School in Long Beach, one of four "YMCA Community Schools" that began a close relationship with the Long Beach YMCA. "Most

schools close at 2:30; our school was open until 7:00 p.m. every day – and much of that was for parent programs."

Stevenson Elementary partnered with the Y's Community Development program and became one of the first Community Leadership Institutes (CLI) in the city. Along with programs for the students, the CLI model was dedicated to increasing parent involvement, by offering classes on basic parenting skills, nutrition, and even 'Dress

for Success' workshops. "We developed a full curriculum of classes for the family," said Marisol Zobler MSW, the Family Involvement Director at the Y. "We help parents with stress management, teach them how to read their child's report card, and tutor them on the math skills that are part of the state's academic standards. We developed an intense college-readiness program, introducing the idea of higher education to very young children and followed through with families all the way to high school."

**"We had to show them that you are allowed to talk to your principal, or your child's teacher. You are allowed to go to city council meetings and ask questions. You are allowed to be an advocate for your child."**

YMCA staff also worked hard to facilitate communication between parents and the school faculty. "But very often, it would simply be a case of miscommunication," said Zobler. So the YMCA staff worked with Moraga and his faculty and began to host *cafecitos* – informal get-togethers with coffee where parents could come in and talk with the principal and teachers.

The CLI model also focused heavily on civic engagement and leadership training. Zobler specifically recalls one family that came to Long Beach from Mexico. "They didn't know the language, they didn't know anyone at the school – so I invited the mother to these *cafecitos*. She said 'No,' but I just kept asking."

The mother finally gave in and started coming to the meetings. Her comfort level and her English improved, and she began attending many of the classes offered through the Community Leadership Institute. Eventually she started teaching of some of

these classes, including sessions on the importance of exercise, chronic illnesses, and nutrition, such as how to read food labels and healthy cooking workshops. "She's now one of the parents we actually pay through CLI," said Zobler. "And her children are doing very well. One is now in middle school and also went through our leadership classes."

At Stevenson Elementary, the parents involved with the Community Leadership Institute eventually became forceful advocates in the neighborhood, working with the city to improve sidewalks, install stoplights at dangerous intersections near schools, and advocating before the city council and other agencies on issues such as preventing library closures and street safety.

"We actually got a grant for these parents to go to other communities, and teach them what they have learned," said Zobler. "They visited similar parent groups in Gardena, Carson, Wilmington, El Segundo and a lot of other areas, to train them on the same techniques they learned at home."

The benefits of the program were clear to Moraga: Stevenson Elementary made gains in its Academic Performance Index every year during its partnership with the Y. The school was eventually named as a California Distinguished School. "This was in a real inner city neighborhood," said Moraga. "We had high poverty, high crime, high teenage pregnancy rates, gangs – everything you can think. Yet every year we made gains in the API. We had other partners – but the Y was the driving force. Without the Y, we couldn't have done it."

"The kids just felt much more invested in school because they sensed that their parents were supportive and interested in what they were doing," said Julie Mendell, another former

principal at Stevenson Elementary who worked in the Long Beach School District for 48 years. "This was when 'parent involvement' was an education

**"They were really good with the technology and the skill sets. And the kids were learning a lot. But they weren't youth developers. When six o'clock came they just took off... I made a conscious decision. I said to myself, 'When these young kids in the program today are college age and they come to me looking for a job, I'm going to hire them and train them to be the staff for this program.'"**

buzzword around the country. But it's hard in these communities. These parents have to worry about getting food on the table and keeping a roof over their heads. But the Y program was able to do it. They were able to reach out and provide the right programs. And because of it, the kids were much more willing to try harder."

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## Generating New Leaders

When the economy began to sink in 2006, various funding sources for the Stevenson Elementary program disappeared. But the project continued. "The parents are continuing the program, even without external funding," said Moraga, who is now principal at a nearby high school. "They still meet and work on safety issues around the neighborhood. It's still there."

"You know you have created leaders when your funding gets cut, but the program continues," said Cabeza. And this approach to growing internal leadership is a pattern throughout all of

the programs at the Community Development Branch. Cabeza boasts, "There are approximately 150 staff in the Community Development branch, and roughly 40 percent were once youth participants in the program."

For Les Peters, Director of the YMCA's Youth Institute, hiring former participants is part of the family mentality at the YMCA. "These kids grew up in the same neighborhood, went through the same type of situations and speak the same language," he adds. And that kind of bond is important when you are working with low-income communities.

The YMCA's Youth Institute teaches digital graphics and film technology to disadvantaged youth and includes trips to places like Kings Canyon National Park, where serious time is devoted to relationship building, diversity training, critical thinking, and problem solving. For many of the Y kids, these are foreign concepts. So it is important to have a familiar sounding voice to share these ideas. In addition these trips are not only the first time many of these students have been in a wilderness setting – it's frequently their first time out of Long Beach. The Y has also developed relationships with companies such as Apple and Pixar. "We bring the class to Apple every few years," said Peters. "And they always tell us that along with technological knowledge, they are looking for individuals who are able to work in a diverse group and have those 21st Century skill sets."

In the early days of the program, Peters hired professional filmmakers and graphic designers from the Los Angeles area. "They were really good with the technology. And the kids were learning a lot," said Peters. "But they weren't youth developers. When six o'clock came they just took

off.” That approach did not work for Peters. All the programs at the Community Development Branch needed a strong youth development component built in, and that included bonding with the staff. “I made a conscious decision. I said to myself, ‘When these young kids in the program today are college age and they come to me looking for a job, I’m going to hire them and train them to be the staff for this program.’” And that’s exactly what he did. Today all the staff that Peters hires for the program are former Youth Institute participants.

The Y programs have grown dramatically over the years. During the first two years, Cabeza and Peters struggled to get kids interested and would personally visit schools to recruit young people. In 2011, without any advertising for the program, Peters had to turn away more than 200 applicants. “We look for kids who are not only interested, but who also might be needing some help. We often select kids who don’t have any other school activities or who have specific hardships.”

### **“You know you have created leaders when your funding gets cut, but the program continues.”**

This approach to youth development is beginning to catch on. The national YMCA has recognized the Long Beach Y as a leader in this field and is working to replicate their model in cities across the country.

“We start out with the elementary after school programs. Then we have our middle school and high school programs. Then we have our parent involvement programs,” said Peters. “But the technology is just a tool. We use it to engage the kids, but we see it as a means for youth development, for

teaching critical thinking, for problem solving and for diversity training.”

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## **Beyond Traditional Funding**

When funding for the Youth Institute came under threat as a result of the economy, Cabeza decided to get creative.

“I thought, ‘If we can’t get grant money, what skill sets do we have that we can sell?’ We were training all of these kids in high-end digital media skills – graphic design, web design, movie making. Yet, they were having a hard time getting jobs. So we decided to start a consulting agency.” In 2006, the Y launched *Change Agent Productions*, a social enterprise combining professional digital media artists with urban youth to produce videos, graphic design, and digital media training. It was a great success. In 2011, *Change Agent* recorded \$400,000 in earned income, with \$120,000 going to high school youth in the form of paychecks.

“We started all of this out of necessity, because economically we knew we couldn’t depend on foundation money forever,” said Cabeza. And this success, in turn, helped local parents acknowledge the benefits of participating in these programs, and in higher education. Frequently, parents who have never gone to college will not see the benefit and, at times, actively prevent their children from seeking higher education.

“Some of these parents will say ‘If you’re not getting a job, I’m not going to support you,’” said Cabeza. The programs of the Community Development Branch Y make a real difference with parents, by showing real-world benefits. And that is also why the Y embeds a college readiness component into every program. From Kindergarten

up, there is an emphasis on encouraging children to love learning.

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## Impacting from Within

During this evolution over the past years, Marguerite Casey has continued to fund and support the Long Beach YMCA Community Development Branch which has gone from being seen as something of a rebel within a venerable 150-year old institution, to being seen as a national and international model for community-led social change at YMCAs. "We're a demonstration of how a YMCA can be more diverse, cause-driven, and really build leadership from within a community," said Cabeza. And as the National YMCA has

**"We're a demonstration of how a YMCA can be more diverse, cause-driven, and really build leadership from within a community... We're really excited about being able to inspire other YMCAs, to say, 'You can do this. You can take risks. Get out there and be part of the community.'"**

looked to reach out to more diverse and immigrant communities across the country, it has looked to the Long Beach Y for leadership, guidance, and to understand best practices.

One project of interest to the national Y is the *Cambodia Project* which helps Cambodian Americans connect to their heritage. In November 2011, they sent six staff to Cambodia as a cultural exchange. The journey was documented by Change Agent Productions and has been shared at national YMCA meetings and on YouTube where it has been

viewed more than 12,000 times. It was recently screened for more than 70 YMCA professionals in Chicago. And it is also becoming part of the Y's global curriculum. "We're really excited about being able to inspire other YMCAs, to say "You can do this. You can take risks," added Cabeza. "Get out there and be part of the community."

"The Foundation allowed us to transform. Most of the grants we get are for very specific things. But Marguerite Casey provides general operating grants. That was probably the reason we survived," said Cabeza. "This is our seventh year as a grantee. That consistent funding helps you grow. And we utilize those Equal Voice town hall meetings as a way to practice our parent leadership, with our Community Leadership Institute, and our family involvement programs.

When our parents come to those Equal Voice meetings, it's a huge help for our leadership training. Without it, our parents couldn't be part of a larger, national platform.

"It's one thing to make your school better, or make your street safer, or get better rent policies in the city. But when you combine 200 parents in Long Beach with 1,000 parents in L.A. with another 5,000 parents all over the country, then you have a voice. Then you have some might. That's why I'm there at the Equal Voice table. It's because it connects our parents to something greater than just Long Beach."