

SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP AND MOVEMENT BUILDING COOPERATIVE INQUIRY REPORT

Leadership for a Changing World Council

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FINAL REPORT

Collaboratively written by the Council with Lewis Jordan and Linda Sartor

Council Background Information

The Council was formed to answer the question raised at the Leadership for a Changing World program meeting in October, 2001: "How do we, as grassroots community organizers, keep our organizational autonomy and build a wider movement to bring justice to our communities?" Members define the Council as different grassroots community organizations that share a common goal of building a wider movement to bring justice to their communities. "We are a learning community. We are a group of organizers working together, sharing experiences and learning from each other. We are a network of Leadership for Changing World awardees that pooled resources to learn from each other and link each other's work."

Council members include:

Gustavo Torres of CASA of Maryland, Maryland;
Wing Lam of Chinese Staff & Workers Association, New York;
Dale Asis, Coalition of African, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois;
Sarah James, Gwich'in Nation, Alaska;
D. Milo Mumgaard, Nebraska Applesed Center for Law in the Public Interest, Nebraska;
Ruth Wise, New Road Community Development Group, Virginia;
Rufino Dominguez, Oaxaca Binational Indigenous Coalition, California;
Salvador Reza, Tonatierra Community Development Institute, Arizona;
Sylvia Herrera, People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources, Texas;
Janet Fout, Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, West Virginia.

Guiding Question

How do we as grassroots community organizers keep our organizational autonomy and build a wider movement to bring justice to our communities?

Summary of Action/Reflection Cycles

Year 2001:	Prior to Linda and Lewis coming on board, the Council formed and was involved in several meetings establishing an infrastructure for the group, including scheduling of regular conference calls, decided on a guiding question, and planning a first action.
Year 2002:	
April 8	First action in Phoenix.
April 9-10	First face-to-face meeting with outside facilitators, Linda and Lewis, in Tucson.
July 9, 30	Linda and Lewis participated in two conference calls with the Council prior to the group's action in Alaska.
August	The Council engaged in reflection on their own while they were still in Alaska.
Aug. 27, 29	Two more rounds of reflection with Lewis and Linda via telephone on return from Alaska.
Sept. 26	Action in Washington, DC.

Sept. 27 Reflection in face-to-face meeting with Linda and Lewis in Tarrytown, NY.
Sept. 30 Action in New York City.
Oct. 23 Conference call reflection on New York action.

Year 2003:

January Sylvia Herrera and Janet Fout joined the Council and participated in the trip to Oaxaca, Tijuana, San Diego, and Fresno.
January 18 Linda and Lewis joined the group in Fresno to facilitate the reflection discussion.
March 29/30 The Council met again on the Columbia River in Washington on March 29, and engaged with Linda and Lewis the following day for the final reflection.

Arizona Action/Reflection Cycle

Action: To support Salvador's Phoenix community, members of the Council participated in a demonstration for day laborers' rights, which was arranged by Salvador's organization.

Reflection on action: The Council determined that it was the quality of their presence that was as important, if not more, than the quantity: The local community was touched by the diversity of the Council's members who came from such far-ranging geographic areas, as was noted in the daily newspaper. The group considered this action an example of "making the local national and the national local," and they realized that this could only be possible if the leadership was not hierarchical. The Council perceived their action as a way of looking at things globally, not just as single issues. They each see themselves as taking the broad experience that they had together and bringing it back to their local people. Members of the Council could see the similarities in their struggles. They realize together that they could focus on unity of will, as opposed to unity of organization, in order to embrace a larger mission.

Decision about next action: In considering the successful aspects of their work in the Phoenix community, the Council decided to travel together to Arctic Village in support of Sarah's work in the Gwich'in nation. Sarah welcomed the opportunity for people of Arctic Village to hear similar stories from people of other communities and for everyone to get to see each other further beyond stereotypes.

Alaska Action/Reflection Cycle

Action: In Arctic Village with the Gwich'in people, who are in a struggle for their physical as well as cultural survival, members of the Council both experienced and modeled leadership.

Reflection on action: While still together in Arctic Village, the Council acknowledged having learned the different ways that leadership and education are practiced in the Gwich'in nation. It also reconfirmed the importance of unity of view and focus of disparate organizations that may not have the same day-to-day practical agendas.

Dale wrote about the issue of keeping native languages alive and saw the connection with his own history. "A language binds a community together and brings a culture alive. In Gwich'in, the word for you, for the Earth and for backbone is one Nan. A language reveals intricacies in a culture that will never be revealed otherwise. I experienced the same doubts and sometimes, shame from being different and speaking a different native language, Tagalog. When I was a

teenager, I tried so hard to hide my Filipino accent. With the wisdom of experience and age and the constant immersion of my parents of my native language, I now cherished that I know my native language, Tagalog."

The Council also had a unique opportunity to exercise leadership by being willing to learn. With an invitation to lead a workshop for the community, the group had first planned to "teach," but they realized that was without having first listened deeply to what community leaders, the Village Elders, had pointed out: the importance of language in their cultural continuity. Salvador wrote: "Within our own group we had a great wealth of language knowledge from Chinese to Tagalog, Spanish to Gwich'in. From conversations with the young administrative Chief, Sarah, and others we found out that there was a feeling of Gwich'in being lost due to the predominance of English by outside teachers and the heavy influence of television in the household.... [T]he group agreed to do a workshop on the importance of language in the process of leadership and defending our rights as human beings wherever we may be from. Since all of us were coming from non-English speaking national backgrounds the implementation was easy to produce. The workshop was a success because the kids not only saw the importance of their own language but they also had something positive to contribute which we did not have: access to Gwich'in language and the importance it has had in keeping the Gwich'in nation strong."

After returning home, the Council's further reflection on the experience in Alaska led back to a sense of the importance of unity of will—the need for a common vision, the invitation to dare to dream. The group recognized that there's a difference between the more short-term technical tactics of reform (how?) and the deeper underlying purposes (why?) and that both seem important. Salvador put it this way: "Embracing the local struggles with the passion of survival for yourself, your family, your community will guide your actions towards alliances and strategic planning that will stop on its tracks the biggest oil giants, the strongest lobbyists, the most fierce financial institutions. It is all about love for yourself, for your family, for your people. Nothing of this will happen if first and foremost you don't have love for the land that gives us everything."

Decision about next two actions: Since the Council was going to be in New York for the program-wide meeting, members decided to plan on supporting Wing in his work. Also, Gustavo was involved in a national demonstration for day laborers' rights in Washington, DC, that had been scheduled for a few days prior to that, so the Council decided to support that as well.

Washington, DC Action/Reflection Cycle

Action: Gustavo's Maryland group hosted, "without controlling," a national movement for day laborers at the nation's capitol. As part of the way organizers organized the action, a different leadership team (from all the national participants) was responsible each day of the action. Salvador became part of the leadership team one day. To begin, 140 people participated in an elaborate discussion about the agenda. Actual implementation of the plans was interrupted by rain; however, the protestors adapted by re-organizing inside the Senate offices. From there, workers visited their senate offices in teams. Rufino was the leader of his team.

Reflection on action: People from the USA, Mexico and beyond were there, and it was important that people tried to break down mental borders that stemmed from national barriers. It

was also important to realize that they were "all Americans" on this continent. The attention on all participants feeling ownership of decisions seemed to be part of the leadership. This requires trusting the process and being ready to be flexible. The need for a common purpose was clear for the individual action and for the Council as a whole. Within the Council, different opinions were expressed about the need for a common purpose and the need for organizational autonomy. At the same time, questions arose as to the role of Council members. Are they leaders, organizers, or coordinators, or all of these? Discussion also concerned the need for strengthening a movement rather than re-creating one. The form of leadership could be identified as community-based.

New York Action/Reflection Cycle

Action: In support of Wing's community, Council members joined the protest, which had been going on for 5 years. For five years, they'd been protesting weekly in front of a restaurant in Chinatown, because the restaurant had a history of exploiting workers—taking their tips, kicking out organizers, etc. The media was there. Rufino spoke in his native language, Mixteco, and translated into Spanish; Salvador translated this into English; and Wing translated it into Chinese. Some people from India and African Americans were also present as well as a sizable representation of youth. After this action, the court took the administration of the restaurant away from the landlord.

Reflection on action: The council agreed that one factor that contributed to the success of this action was the cultural diversity represented there. They also noted the theme of storytelling as being significant—when workers told their stories, they had a powerful impact. One Council member noted how members of the Council are able to step back and step up to take the leadership or spokesperson role as needed. Examples cited were how the Council rallied around Rufino stepping up in New York and Ruth at the presentation to the new cohort in Tarrytown. A significant idea in terms of answering the inquiry question that emerged is that in supporting each others' community actions, what is more important than the tactical "how" of each action is the thinking behind the action, perhaps the "what" or "why."

Decision about next action: In moving further with the inquiry question, the Council began to focus more intently on leadership and organizational models. With that in mind, along with the group's continuing interest in issues concerning immigrant rights, members decided to travel to Oaxaca/Tijuana/Fresno to experience and learn about the organizational model that Rufino uses in his work.

Oaxaca Action/Reflection Cycle

Action: The Council went on an eight-day trip to the places where Rufino does his work for and with his people: Oaxaca, Tijuana, San Diego, and Fresno. At a meeting in Fresno, Rufino presented the organizational structure of Frente (the organization).

Reflection on action: Many Council members saw that this organizational structure could be applied in their own situations and possibly as an organizational structure of the Council itself. They decided as a next action to try out, think about, and create proposed models for an organizational structure that would support the Council of grassroots community organizers to build a wide movement to bring justice to all their communities while maintaining organizational autonomy.

Other reflections included the importance of a leader paying attention to detail and people's comfort, providing food, being inclusive in terms of all voices being heard, having vision, sharing leadership (different people having different contributions that are essential to the group), storytelling, and developing trust. Women are needed and respected in leadership roles, and the youth need to learn to take on the leadership as well as the traditions. Having fun together helps to hold the anxiety that is an inevitable part of this kind of work. Also, leaders need to take some time alone for reflection in order to stay active and strong. Members of the council see the importance of both working internally within communities to maintain a way of life and strengthen the people as well as externally to deal with governments—getting representation in the governments and insuring that they are accountable to the communities.

Emerging Propositions

Leadership does not rest in an individual

Referring back to the Council's inquiry question there is no explicit reference to leaders or leadership, however, a strong shared belief in the misuse and misapplication of those terms has been present throughout the inquiry. An understanding has developed in the group that speaks against the "individual leader" model that seems to prevail in the greater society. Reflecting on the Washington, DC action, Milo spoke of the extreme attention put on making everyone feel that they owned the situation and the importance of getting everyone to feel that they are part of the agenda.

In their actions, the Council has chosen different members to represent the group. In the action supporting Wing in New York, Rufino was chosen spokesperson; during the LCW program-wide meeting in Tarrytown, Ruth was chosen; and in Washington State, after being asked to present to the program-wide meeting, Dale said that he should not be the only one and asked for others from the Council to join him.

In Wing's work, his group makes collective decisions and they go back to the community at large for more input. In doing so, they have had an ongoing presence picketing for 5 years. It is extremely unlikely for this to have occurred if one leader had decided that the group would picket for 5 years.

Sarah was appointed a spokesperson by the whole Gwich'in nation because of the threat to the Arctic refuge. Leaders didn't know how to proceed, so they consulted the elders. The elders spoke of the traditional way of meeting for three days. Leaders called together 15 chiefs from 15 villages around the region. They used a talking stick and wrote a resolution to preserve the Gwich'in way of life.

Wing contrasts traditional leadership models with the Council's approach. Where older models emphasize the leader as the one who knows the most and empowers followers, the Council emphasizes that the leader must constantly learn and investigate. This is necessary before planning an action, afterwards in summing up the action, and for planning further action. Wing summarized a model to represent the Council:

Investigation—Planning—Action—Reflection and Investigation—Planning—Action

- This model
- does not emphasize the role of the meeting and does not solely rely on the decision of people in the meeting. (We encourage input of people who cannot attend the meeting for whatever reasons.)
 - emphasizes learning from the people you work with.
 - emphasizes bottom-up rather than top-down.

Janet said, "Social justice leadership is to come together and do something collectively and still do individual work."

Holistic appreciation of context

The Council feels strongly that a leader can't be effective without being open to understanding and learning about the local situation. "We don't do something before we're asked." Council members try to learn as much as they can about the community they are going to serve, either beforehand at a distance, through email and letters, or by asking questions upon arrival. The need to be open to understanding and learning about the local context was first articulated by the Council in their appreciation of Linda's coming with them to the reservation at the beginning of our first scheduled meeting: "The Council members saw her immediately as an accommodating facilitator that can relate to the holistic view of learning leadership in the environment he or she is situated." In Gwich'in nation the Council members "needed to hear the voices of the community before offering whatever support they had to contribute." In Oaxaca, several Council members went to the authorities to ask permission to enter a site that was sacred to the community. One way to show respect for local leaders and traditions is to "explain why we're here and then ask permission."

Anticipating the trip to Oaxaca, Salvador writes, "I'm not going to take them my ideas unless they ask for them. I'm going to listen to them. Hopefully, we won't go and say we are 'leaders.'" Wing writes about the need to be a good student first, "then you can be a good teacher." He adds, "We constantly sum up what we learned and what we heard from the people and combine that with the knowledge gained from books, previous struggles and other people's struggles."

Sarah describes her experience of photographers in Arctic Village who take pictures of animals, mountains and people as if they are separate. The Council discusses how effective leadership attempts to move beyond this fragmentation of the world.

Leadership cannot be separated from worldview

Members of the group believe that what they do in the world with their organizations should not be undermined by perpetuating a limited vision of the people or the traditions that they serve.

"Leadership" does not pertain simply to an organization's specific agenda, but more to a worldview of which an organization is just one manifestation. A worldview is an expression of a people, of a history, and so the telling of it or the listening to it must come with a respect and a way of honoring the traditions and the spiritual understandings of the communities.

Continuing his thoughts on the Oaxaca trip (mentioned above), Salvador writes, "I am going to learn from a community that has existed since time immemorial, a community that has survived the Spanish onslaught called conquest, has survived the independence wars of Mexico, has

survived the official politics of *Indigenismo* always attempting to rob their lands, their language, their culture for a consumer society that has no inkling of what it means to be close to the land.”

Reflecting on a recent action in his community, a march for immigrants’ rights to drivers’ licenses, Salvador notes that the organizers put the staffs of the indigenous peoples in front in order to symbolize the importance of the indigenous ways of the people served by that march.

When the Council went to support Wing’s demonstration, they noted that the participation went across cultural lines and broke down some of the boundaries in his local community. In reflection on this action, they asked the question, “Is the vision imprisoning or liberating the local people?” In a holistic view of the world, it is not possible to understand the effectiveness or appropriateness of local actions without having a perspective on the larger society. Can there be an effective local strategy without a global vision? The old way (organizing around a single issue) is no longer able to address the magnitude of the issues in the world today.

Sarah writes, “It is important to know where these ideas of social justice leadership come from. It is important to know where you come from. It is part of who you are. You are nothing without it.” And it is necessary to keep future generations in mind, so part of leadership is mentoring the young people.

Importance of common vision

With regard to the "autonomy" of grassroots organizations in a national context, there is a sense that if there is a vision that is shared and the goals are the same, certain differences can be included. That is, actions or characteristics that are distinct or unique to different groups are not an impediment when there is clarity on the overall mission. The Council acknowledges the difficulty of arriving at a common vision that lasts over time, though, even while it is clear that there are unifying visions for specific projects or events, as in Washington, DC.

Wing says, “Social justice leadership revolves around answering the question, “for what?” He writes that there needs to be an emphasis on reaching the long-term goals rather than the short term “how.” The struggle for social change is for a change in values and in the relations of the people.

The Council’s common vision is for health and life for all people. A common thread is that we all need clean air and water, earth, sun and fire. Most western people tend to forget this. We need to connect back to it, human beings connecting to natural surroundings. But this cannot be based on individuals separate from the whole, or we start fighting for fighting’s sake and sell out our communities. The war in Iraq and the war on our mountains is the same. It is the same force at work, the multinational monster.

Dale poses the question, “What are our core values?” He reflects, “It is the connection of spiritual and moral values that takes us to seek justice.” He adds that “maybe the change we see in the world is beyond us and within us.”

Outcomes

In reference to the idea of "building" a wider movement, as in their initial question, the group is committed to being very clear on the idea that a movement is not theirs to build. The group feels

that leadership is part of a movement—inside it, not outside it, and in that sense so-called leaders can only "help to build" a movement in order to maintain a way of life. An alternative metaphor is "growing with a natural movement."

Wing says, "We are in the 21st century. We are part of a local community and part of a global community. We should always build a local movement connected to a national and global perspective. We should do local and think international. We cannot affect things locally without international change."

As the co-operative inquiry comes to an end, the Council is in the process of articulating a model of leadership to answer its inquiry question.

Leadership is not something inside a person. We see leadership as a dynamic process developed through collective actions among a group of people. The leadership process involves three essential elements, which form a continuing, endless spiral. They are learning, planning, and action (and back to learning).

Four key concepts are central to our conceptualization of leadership. First, we believe that racism and sexism are products and promoters of the capitalist system. Therefore, we do not just fight against racism, sexism and other forms of oppression, but we fight against the production of racism and sexism, which is the systemic exploitation. This leads to our second concept. We believe that workers are the source of knowledge and energy because they have the first-hand experience of systemic exploitation. Thirdly, the most important element of leadership is to learn from the people about their needs, struggles and ideas. We emphasize and start with learning as the foundation of leadership because, without knowing where people are at, any plan or action will be disconnected from people's daily life and will eventually end up ineffective. Finally, good leaders do not come from outside of the community and impose their own agenda on the people. Rather, they emerge from the collective struggles. Good leaders do not fight for the people, but fight for themselves because they identify themselves as part of the people.

Leadership is always evolving because it is grounded in workers' everyday struggles, which are shaped by the socio-political and economic conditions that are constantly changing. For this reason, we cannot impose a predetermined plan or direction. A plan that worked yesterday might not be applicable to today's situation. We must learn from the people first and start with where people are at. Plans and actions are constantly shaped by the result of learning, rather than the other way around.

Leadership is bi-directional in two senses. First, while leaders emerge from the collective process, they, in turn, play an important role in the leadership process, actively shaping the direction and formulation of the process. The following lists the essential steps of our leadership method. Leaders must:

1. Learn from the people about their struggles and listen to their ideas, which tend to be unsystematic, scattered, and oriented toward immediate needs.
2. Summarize through study and systematize these ideas and begin to formulate and articulate a more systematic idea, a general task and a long-term goal.

3. Bring these systematic ideas back to the people and help them see the connection between their own needs to the general task and long-term goal. At the same time, put these ideas into action.

4. Listen to the people again, and summarize and evaluate the ideas and actions, and modify them. Then bring them back to the people and help raise their thinking to a higher level and translate that idea into action.

Secondly, the relationships between leaders and the masses are bi-directional. While leaders take the ideas from the people and formulate them into more systemic and broader perspectives, they must bring these perspectives back to the people, help them identify with these perspectives and eventually raise their thinking to a higher level. Leaders cannot be separated from the people. They learn from the people and are, at the same time, accountable to them.

Essays and Reflections written by the group and individual Council members follow this Final Report.

LEADERSHIP FOR A CHANGING WORLD COUNCIL

Leadership for Changing World Awardees

Who are we?

We are different grassroots community organizations that share a common goal of building a wider movement to bring justice to our communities.

We are a learning community. We are a group of colleagues working together, sharing experiences and learning from each other.

We are a network of Leadership for Changing World awardees that pooled resources to learn from each other and link each other's work.

Who are the current Council members?

Gustavo Torres of CASA of Maryland, Maryland

Wing Lam of Chinese Staff & Workers Association, New York

Dale Asis, Coalition of African, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois, Illinois

Sarah James, Gwich'in Nation, Alaska

D. Milo Mumgaard, Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest, Nebraska

Ruth Wise, New Road Community Development Group, Virginia

Rufino Dominguez, Oaxaca Binational Indigenous Coalition, California

Janet Fout, Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, Huntington, West Virginia

Sylvia Herrera, People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources, Austin, Texas

Salvador Reza, Tonatierra Community Development Institute, Arizona

What are the commitments to join the Council?

1. Join 8 to 10 conference calls for the next two years
2. Join 4 face-to-face meetings for the next two years
3. Help to continue developing the Council's common principles
4. Commit \$5,000 from each participant's Individual Learning Account from the Leadership for a Changing World award

Why join the Council?

1. Learn from each other's successes and best practices
2. Engage in mentorship and pooling resources
3. Try to build a wider movement to bring justice to our communities while maintaining our autonomy.

How was the Council formed?

The Council was formed to answer the question raised at the last Leadership for a Changing World program meeting in October 2001: "How do we, as grassroots community organizations, keep our organizational autonomy and build a wider movement to bring justice to our communities?"

March 30, 2003

COUNCIL Common Principles

Leadership for Changing World Awardees

The present concept paper will guide the Council where we can impact on a national level the common issues of social, economic, environment and spiritual justice which affect the local communities where individual Council members work.

Based on this foundation we have developed the following draft principles to ensure a healthy and respectful relationship between Council members. Initially, the Council is composed of nine community-based organizations. However, it is open to all future members.

Common Principles

1. Respecting the autonomy of each member organization. This is a critical and important issue because our idea is not to dilute but to strengthen the capacity of each organization.

2. Non-interference of internal affairs of member organizations: Each organization implements their respective missions free of the oversight of the Council.

3. Utilizing existing capacity of each member organization to enhance our voice: Because we know the power of the collective, we pledge to raise our voices in support of the common issues for which we all struggle.

4. Minimizing the bureaucratic centralization of the Council by meeting quarterly: East Region – South Region – West Region – North Region

We seek to avoid a bureaucratic process that limits flexibility, effectiveness and openness.

5. Learning from each other without imposing on each other.

6. Talking to each other instead of at each other: The multiple experiences of each participant are valid and worthy.

7. Refraining from accusatory language before knowing the facts or circumstances.

8. Seeking to include other colleagues to be included into this process.

March 30, 2003

Conversations in Social Justice Leadership **Edited by Dale Asis**

These are conversations by the Leadership for Changing World Council during a trip to visit the indigenous communities of Rufino Dominguez in Oaxaca, Mexico. These are conversations trying to answer the question: What is social justice leadership?

Wing Lam: General leadership is different from social justice leadership. Social justice leadership revolves around answering the question, “for what?”

Janet Fout: Social justice leadership is coalition building for a common vision and for social change. Social justice leadership is to come together to do something collectively and still do individual work.

We have to start with the youth and start their path for social consciousness and social justice leadership.

Sarah James: It is important to know where these ideas of social justice leadership come from. It is important to know where you come from. It is part of who you are. You are nothing without it.

For effective social justice leadership, you have to be focused. Keep it simple. Do not make it complicated. And part of that leadership is reminding people where they came from and making it part of leadership to know who they are.

If people do not know where they come from, they will not learn their way and will not find the answer for themselves and their communities.

Salvador Reza: But what do you do to cope with change, to deal with a new or current system if you are not part of that system?

Sylvia Herrera: Effective social justice leadership involves both internal and external communities. It is up to us to decide if we want to commit to both (external and internal) communities. We come from a long generation of history. We have a strong bond to the earth. We have to deal with the outside (external communities) and to struggle to keep our communities and our way of life. People can participate and *play* in the current rules of the system. Effective social justice leadership will try to change those rules.

We need to see the different perspectives from both internal and external communities. The intersection between the two different ways and the two different perspectives is important. It is the connection to both communities.

Wing Lam: Reflection is a necessary part of social justice leadership. We should not have a narrow focus. We should learn to use media effectively and answer the important question, “for what?”

Janet Fout: Social justice leadership is building links with the people and building power to move them for change. One action, one event, one cause. We should find people with similar problems in the community because the issues are there.

Salvador Reza: How do we connect the community from the bottom up?

Wing Lam: We are in the 21st century. We are part of a local community and part of a global community. We should always build a local movement connected to a national and global perspective. We should do local and think international. We cannot affect things locally without international change.

Salvador Reza: We are the change makers and we see things are against us.

Dale Asis: In perspective, it is almost unbelievable to think that Rufino Dominguez grew up in such a simple and humble beginnings and created local village councils and a democratic process for his community.

We are all in the same boat. We are so called leaders take us to the same road. What are our core values? It is the connection of spiritual and moral values that takes us to seek justice. And maybe the change we see in the world is beyond us and within us.

Thank you to Sylvia Herrera for documenting our work, our conversations.

Thank you to Rufino Dominguez for his humility.

Thank you to Sarah James for reminding us to look back where we come from.

Thank you to Janet Fout for teaching us to appreciate the small things.

Thank you to Wing Lam for his insight.

Thank you to Salvador Reza for his honor and his conviction.

February 2003

Leadership as a collective process: dynamic, evolving and bi-directional

By *Wing Lam*

Leadership is not something inside a person. We see leadership as a dynamic process developed through collective actions among a group of people. The leadership process involves three essential elements, which form a continuing, endless spiral. They are learning, planning, and action (and back to learning).

Four key concepts are central to our conceptualization of leadership. First, we believe that class exploitation is the foundation of all forms of oppression. Racism and sexism are products and promoters of the capitalist system. Therefore, we do not just fight against racism, sexism and other forms of oppression, but we fight against the production of racism and sexism, which is the systemic exploitation. This leads to our second concept. We believe that workers are the source of knowledge and energy because they have the first-hand experience of systemic exploitation. Thirdly, the most important element of leadership is to learn from the people about their needs, struggles and ideas. We emphasize and start with learning as the foundation of leadership because without knowing where people are at, any plan or action will be disconnected from people's daily life and will eventually end up ineffective. Finally, good leaders do not come from outside of the community and impose their own agenda on the people. Rather, they emerge from the collective struggles. Good leaders do not fight for the people, but fight for themselves because they identify themselves as part of the people.

Leadership is always evolving because it is grounded in workers' everyday struggles, which are shaped by the socio-political and economic conditions that are constantly changing. For this reason, we cannot impose a predetermined plan or direction. A plan that worked yesterday might not be applicable to today's situation. We must learn from the people first and start with where people are. Plans and actions are constantly shaped by the result of learning, rather than the other way around.

Leadership is bi-directional in two senses. First, while leaders emerge from the collective process, they, in turn, play an important role in the leadership process, actively shaping the direction and formulation of the process. The following lists the essential steps of our leadership method.

Leaders must:

1. Learn from the people about their struggles and listen to their ideas, which tend to be unsystematic, scattered, and oriented toward immediate needs.
2. Summarize through study and systematize these ideas and begin to formulate and articulate a more systematic idea, a general task and a long-term goal.
3. Bring these systematic ideas back to the people and help them see the connection between their own needs to the general task and long-term goal. At the same time, put these ideas into action.
4. Listen to the people again, and summarize and evaluate the ideas and actions, and modify them. Then bring them back to the people and help raise their thinking to a higher level and translate that idea into action.

Secondly, the relationships between leaders and the masses are bi-directional. While leaders take the ideas from the people and formulate them into more systemic and broader perspectives, they must bring these perspectives back to the people, help them identify with these perspectives and eventually raise their thinking to a higher level. Leaders cannot be separated from the people. They learn from the people and are at the same time accountable to them.

How does a grass-roots organization support workers from all walks of life so that they can transform their struggles for daily survival into a long-term commitment to change the root causes of their problem? How do grass-roots organizations work together to build the national movement without intervening with each other?

1. The goals of CSWA are the liberation of the working people and the improvement of the people's lives. By liberation, we do not mean simply higher wages and better working conditions. Rather, a real liberation means the right to control our work, our time, our health and our lives. It is important to point out that our long-term goal was not generated by the leaders and imposed upon the workers. Rather, it was a result of learning from people's everyday struggles in the past and the present. Our organizing efforts used to focus on improving workers' working and living conditions, and failed to connect to any long-term goal for systemic change. As a result, the development of the organization was slow. Over years of organizing, we learned from the workers that better wage was not enough because it was the long hours of work that have destroyed their health, their family relations and their lives. In addition, contrary to the common conception that the longer you work, the more money you make, worker's experience in the past years told us that the increase in hours has caused wage to go down. Therefore, no matter how you fought to improve economic conditions in the past, at the end the wage did not go up and people did not get liberated politically, ideologically or economically. These experiences helped us articulate a vision for the future, that is, to have more control of our time. This does not suggest that we do not think better working conditions and better wages are important. They are very important but we see them as short-term goals.

We see workers' immediate needs and long-term systemic change as intimately connected. Any plan or action that only has a long-term goal but does not address individual needs will not receive support from the people and will soon fail. Similarly, any plan or action that only addresses individual needs without having a long-term goal will not last long – people will leave after their needs are met, or people will not join in because they see this will not go anywhere. Good leaders are those who can successfully combine and connect the short-term needs and long term needs.

2. To achieve the goal of worker's liberation, we see workers' organizing as the top priority. Our fundamental belief is that workers are the leading force for social change and they are the source of knowledge and energy. Workers have the first hand experience of how the system works and how they are exploited by the system. Also, they have been fighting for survival in their own ways. They do not need to be taught how to survive. For CSWA, organizing is not to teach workers or to solve their problems for them. Rather, it is to learn from workers, unleash workers' energy and knowledge, and to transform their energy into a collective force in order to change the root causes of their problems.

3. Our approach can be distinguished at two levels. *At the level of base building*, we support workers' struggles by engaging them in a collective action fighting for a common goal. When workers come to CSWA seeking help, we do not treat them like clients and only help them solve their problems. Instead, we encourage them to take matters into their own hands. We encourage them to participate in our campaigns and participate in joint struggles with other workers who also face the same issues. Through this process, we help the workers see that they are not the only ones facing this problem and that their needs are connected to the common goal. It is through this process that transformation (qualitative changes) and accumulation (quantitative changes) take place and power is built.

At the level of coalition building, we support workers' struggles through networking and coalition building. However, our focus is not to form a unity of structure (a national organization or network), but to form a unity of view among independent grass-roots organizations. The main difference between the two focuses is that the former directs most energy and resources toward structural building (i.e. organizing meetings, organizational capacity building), and the latter devotes its energy and resources to serve the base building in each individual community. By focusing on building a unity of view instead of unity of structure, we have successfully worked with other grassroots organizations to build a national movement without intervening with each other. For instance, over the years we have worked with NMASS, Workers' AWAZZ, and other community-based organizations. Instead of focusing on joint meetings, actions or shared organizational structure, our strategy focuses on establishing a unity of view among these organizations while maintaining independent initiatives. Since each organization is based in a specific community, this kind of coalition building allows each organization to develop its own activities that are appropriate to its specific context and needs. Because we emphasize unity of view, we will also emphasize unity from below to unity from above instead of unity from above to unity from below.

Our Health and Safety Campaign provides an example of our approach at the two levels. When injured workers bring their individual cases to CSWA, we encourage them to join our Health and Safety Campaign, which gives them the opportunity to share their experience and to create a network of support with other injured workers. Through this process, workers begin to see that they are not the only ones facing the delay and mistreatment by the workers' compensation system. They also come to identify with the common goal because they realize that in order to end their suffering they have to change the workers' compensation system. Through our joint effort with NMASS and Workers' AWAZZ, the campaign has been able to reach to injured workers in other communities who are facing the same mistreatment by the workers' compensation system. Moreover, injured workers' experiences called the attention to the excessively long hours that have caused the growing rate of occupation health problems and work related injuries in our communities. The Campaign began organizing not-yet injured workers, because if they continue to work long hours they would be facing the same issue. The campaign has now developed into a multi-racial, state-wide movement, fighting not only for the reform of the workers' compensation system but also preventatively fighting for no mandatory overtime - for the rights to control our time, to stop the long hours which have been the main cause for work-related injuries.

Another example to illustrate the unity of view from below is our organizing around September 11th relief work. At that time, the union leaders did not care about their membership. They saw themselves as a health care insurance company; they did not want to fight for healthcare for their workers from the Pataki Administration, which would undercut their business. The contractors association also did not care about the displacement of its members by unscrupulous landlords. We were able to form unity with the union workers to fight for health care benefits for all workers, union and non-union. Also, we united the workers who worked for the contractor and the contractor himself to fight the displacement of garment factory jobs. As a workers' organization, CSWA not only played a leadership role in bringing workers together but also provided leadership to other sectors in the community.

4. We consider ourselves as engaging in and leading a new labor movement. CSWA is critical of the traditional unionism, including its business nature, its racist, anti-immigrant policies and practices, its tendency to become a service agency (health insurance provider) and its narrow scope that only provides economic benefits to a group of people (to their members). We recognize the progressive nature of trade unions in the early twentieth century as they fought to have the right to organize. However, over the years trade unions have lost their progressiveness and have become part of the system, merely fighting for the right to collective bargaining.

To liberate workers from today's increasing exploitative conditions we need to engage in a different kind of labor movement.

- (a) We challenge the traditional view that defines only labor that is done inside the workplace as work. We argue that labor that is done outside of the traditional workplace, such as childcare, care giving, household labor, if not more importantly, has the same contribution to our society and should be considered work too. It should be recognized and compensated by the society.
- (b) We move beyond the traditional union model of workplace organizing because it is too limited. CSWA has been organizing people in multiple fronts to include people who work both inside and outside of workplace. CSWA does not organize a single group. We do not narrowly fight for the rights of immigrants, or for people of color. Rather, we seek to organize people who "work" (both inside and outside of workplace) and are exploited by the system, including garment workers, students, mothers, unemployed, injured workers, etc. How do we organize people from diverse backgrounds into a collective struggle? The main strategy is to connect these people to a common, long-term goal, which not only calls for the recognition and control of our work, but also calls for the control of our time, our health and our lives. This long-term goal allows us to mobilize people from different walks of life and to connect their individual struggles.
- (c) Instead of focusing on improving wages and working conditions, CSWA focuses on the right to control time as the long-term goal. While wage improvement is important, its impact is limited to a certain group of workers. Moreover, wage increase will not lead to a systemic change. For instance, the increase of minimum wage from \$5 to \$6 per hour

will benefit those who just make above the minimum wage. For those who make below the minimum wage, their conditions remained unchanged. It is merely a quantitative change rather than a qualitative transformation – the systemic exploitation of the workers remained unchanged. In contrast, fighting against mandatory overtime, which is embodied in the fight for the control over our time and lives, is to fight for a systemic change. To have the right to control our time means more freedom to do what we want to do and to decide at what speed we want to do it. To fight for the control over our time is to challenge the basic assumption that workers are simply tools for capitalist accumulation and that work is the most important, or the only, thing in our lives. With the right to control our time, we will be able to have more free time for ourselves to care for our health, to spend with our families, to engage in social, cultural activities. That is the necessary condition for us to reclaim our humanity.

January 2003

Our perspective and method of leadership

By Wing Lam

1. Care and concern for the well-being of the people
2. We are not only fighting for others, but we are fighting for ourselves. We identify ourselves as part of the people
3. We recognize that people have a lot of knowledge, a lot of experience, and a lot of energy. We constantly tap and unleash their energy
4. Emphasize reaching the long-term goals rather than short-term or how. Struggle for social change, change the value and change relation of people rather than maintain the status quo.
5. Organize for transformation and accumulation
6. Listen and learn from the people. To be a good student first, then you can be a good teacher
7. We constantly sum up what we learned and what we heard from the people and combine that with the knowledge gained from books, previous struggles and other people's struggles. Raise the understanding to a higher level and bring it back to the people that we work with
8. We will not impose our view on the people, to be accountable to and not separate from the people.
9. Contrast with most models of organizing and leadership. Most models emphasize that the leader is the one that knows the most and empowers their followers. We emphasize that the leader must constantly learn and investigate before planning-action and then sum up the action with investigation and further plan for action again.
10. Connect concretely short-term and long-term goals.

Model of Organizing

Model A

Plan – Action – Plan – Action...

- This model emphasizes the role of meetings and the role of people coming to the meeting. As a matter of fact, only those who come to the meeting can plan.
- This model emphasizes teaching rather than learning. The leader knows the most.
- This model emphasizes agreement and documentation.

Model B

Investigation – Planning – Action – Reflection and Investigation – Planning – Action

- This model does not emphasize the role of the meeting. Do not solely rely on the decision of the people in the meeting. We encourage input of the people who cannot come to the meeting under whatever reasons.
- This model emphasizes learning from the people you work with.
- This model emphasize bottom up rather than top down
- (Our perspective and method of leadership)

Model C

Besides the A and B model, there are models that emphasize and rely on the spontaneity of the people and solely rely on the direct experience of the people that come to the meeting. This ignores or trivializes the experience of others (people's experience before us or people who cannot come to the meeting.) This model often separates the decision and execution. This model separates the leader who makes the decisions and the organizers who do the executions. This model trivializes the leader.

Model C and Model A have a lot in common.

- Separation of the leaders from the members.
- Separates decision making from the ones that carries it out.
- Ignore the importance of continued leadership development. Emphasizes too much the idea of a natural leader.
- Immediate is everything. There is a separation of long-term goals from short-term goals. It often does not even bother to ask what the long-term goals are.

Model D

Top-down. From above

Leader knows everything. Only talks about long-term, or short-term. Do not know how to connect short-term goal with long-term goal. Look down on direct experience. Their plan of actions is very similar to Model A, but different from C. They tend to emphasize the indirect experience (book experience).

February 2003

The Field of Broken Dreams

By Janet Fout

Eating California strawberries will never again be the same for me – not since my recent trip to observe and learn from the community leadership of Rufino Dominguez, the Executive Director of Oaxaca Binational Indigenous Coalition (FIOB), and the Mixteca people with whom he works, many who cross the Mexican border to work in the farm fields of California growers.

This trip was one of the educational activities provided by the Ford Foundation's 2001 Leadership for a Changing World award to Laura Forman, Diane Bady and I. Several other Ford awardees also participated in this trip.

We met in Oaxaca, Mexico where Rufino and other community-based leaders organize and educate workers about their rights on both sides of the border. FIOB neither encourages nor discourages the Mixteca from migrating to the U.S. but encourages them to hold dear their culture and their heritage.

Our trip includes visits to Juxtlahuaca and Tijuana, Mexico as well as San Diego and Fresno, California where FIOB has its main office.

Oaxaca is both a city and state in southern Mexico, rich in indigenous cultures, including the Mixteca people who have survived for centuries against monumental odds. As another Ford awardee, Salvador Reza from Phoenix, Arizona, put it when asked why he wanted to visit Oaxaca he said: "I am going to learn from a community that has existed since time immemorial, a community that has survived the Spanish onslaught called conquest, has survived the independence wars of Mexico, has survived the official politics of Indigenismo always attempting to rob their lands, their language, their culture for a consumer society that has no inkling of what it means to be close to the land. Despite all of this, it is a community that has retained their language, their customs and their traditions on both sides of the artificial geographic line called "The Border".

Hmm, "Rob their lands...their culture..." That sounds familiar.

After reading Salvador's statement, I began to realize that maybe we, in West Virginia could learn from these ancient Mixteca people "new" ways to preserve our own mountains, communities and culture from King Coal and the politicians who are robbing us Appalachian people of our mountains and their natural wealth, communities and culture.

We began our trip from the city of Oaxaca, where we traveled to Juxtlahuaca, a small rural mountain community about six hours away – zigzagging over mostly narrow, winding mountain roads (including a stretch known as the "Devil's backbone"). The summer-like weather and azure skies was a welcome relief from the sub-freezing temperatures and the leaden skies of home.

When we arrived in Juxtlaahuaca, a lovely town nestled in and surrounded by mountains, the trees outside our first meeting place were teeming with familiar Cattle Egrets and melodious great tailed Grackles.

Just like in West Virginia, the people in Mexico hold meetings to discuss community issues. At every meeting we attended, we were introduced and warmly welcomed. Aided by a talented and personable tri-lingual interpreter, Irma Luna, fluent in her native Mixteca, Spanish and English, each of us visitors spoke briefly about our work in our home communities.

Although we are fighting different problems and undoubtedly, the economic inequities suffered by the Mixteca people are greater than those in southern West Virginia, some root causes were very similar; politicians and bureaucrats who turn a deaf ear to injustices, groups of people who are marginalized to facilitate exploitation of their resources and labor, and governments at all levels not enforcing laws.

Similarly, the leadership to bring about positive change in communities emanates NOT from governments and politicians, but from the grassroots – regular people who are taking active leadership roles in community groups like FIOB and the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC).

I was truly impressed by the high degree of organization within FIOB, on the local district or county, regional, state and bi-national level. These leaders are elected by the grassroots, and if their leaders fail to do what is expected, they can be expelled from the group. Local organizations do their own fundraising – an area where women and other family members play a minor role.

But what about those strawberries I mentioned at the beginning? The absolute worst living conditions observed on the entire trip were in San Diego, California.

After crossing the border in Tijuana, Mexico we waited in a large strawberry field feasting on succulent strawberries. We were later joined by some leaders who help migrant farm laborers who led us down paths adjacent to the fields, among shrubs and small trees where the laborers lived.

We saw neither housing, nor facilities for bathing or cooking; but instead, makeshift shelters – not even what most of us consider a decent campsite. A hole with water was used for bathing. How embarrassing to know that while these workers put food on our tables, they are not provided basic needs of food, clean potable water and shelter!

I'm reminded of a quote by theologian Walter Wink: "Those of us who now enjoy affluence and freedom as well as power are predisposed to believe that benign forces shape our destiny. But to the extent that our blessings are incidental by-products of our citizenship in nations that currently enjoy domination status over others, our well-being may be more a result of flagrant injustice than divine providence." We fail to remember that our blessings and abundance often come to us at the expense and exploitation of much of the world.

December 2002

Oaxaca, Mexico – Reasons to Visit and to Examine Social Justice Leadership

By Salvador Reza

I'm not going to be a tourist. They see thousands of those a year.

I'm not going to take them my ideas unless they ask for them. I'm going to listen to them.

I'm not going to tell them how great it is to be a "LEADER" as so far I'm still confused about what it means. I do know what it means in Mexico. It means to be a *Charro* (sell out) leader; it means to be corrupt; it means to be a *cacique* (wealthy macho exploiter); it means to be a politician that speaks nicely during elections and forgets about the communities afterwards. Hopefully we won't go and say we are leaders.

Now I will tell you what I am going for.

I am going to learn from a community that has existed since time immemorial, a community that has survived the Spanish onslaught called conquest, has survived the independence wars of Mexico, has survived the official politics of *Indigenismo* always attempting to rob their lands, their language, their culture for a consumer society that has no inkling of what it means to be close to the land. Despite all of this, it is a community that has retained their language, their customs, and their traditions on both sides of the artificial geographic line called the "Border."

The learning I will get from there may illuminate my future footsteps in our struggle for justice in the so-called "land of the free" and "justice for all." Surviving official Spanish and succeeding Mexican Government OFFICIAL policies is not easy, especially after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) accords which with the removal of Article 27 privatized the *ejido* and as a premeditated after effect, the communal lands held by indigenous communities throughout Mexico, at least half secured after the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Their organizing methods and strategies product of thousands of years of struggle may help me get through the tough years we will be facing with the supposed war on terrorism, if I am humble enough to go as a person without missionary mentalities from the North.

August 2002

Gwich'in Nation Alaska-Last Paradise on Earth

By Salvador Reza

The Bush Plane, a nine passenger propeller driven machine took off in a thick fog that menaced with engulfing us into an unknown world from which we did not know what to expect. Six of us were headed to visit one of the Gwich'in people's villages in the Athabaskan Nation, the Apaches great grand cousins, and forefathers of many indigenous peoples from Alaska to Mexico. We were headed into the land where the sun doesn't set in the summer and refuses to show him in the winter.

Forty-five minutes of thick fog started to clear as if we were entering a storybook of Alice in Wonderland where a thick green carpet of vegetation sprinkled with rivers and lakes began to emerge. There were no roads, cars, houses or any sign of civilization in this new land. We had entered an enchanted land, the last paradise, protected nine months out of the year with a white dress of snow and ice to undress in the summer and change into a blue green dress adorned with white pearls of water linked with rivers lost in the firmament.

The plane would dance to the rhythm of the wind currents that rocked us in wonderment at the mountains caressing us with love of mother earth showing us how it is, and how it used to be sometime back before the damage. Before us was the evil that suffocates us with smoke and oil taken from the entrails of the Earth own bowels, dictating our own damnation along with all of those that left us the inheritance of progress which kills and makes us rabid, mad like beasts, destroying everything we touch.

These are the lands where the Bear, the Caribou, and thousands of species reign from the Eagle to the mosquito, all threatened by the evil of oil, sick minds and hearts the likes of George Bush Sr. and his Mini-Me George Junior. There, at the dirt landing field awaited Sarah James mounted in a four-wheeler. Four wheel motorcycles that serve in rough terrain and are basically the only mode of transportation in a Valley covered with clouds, snowy mountains, and small pine trees waiting for the long winter darkness which is lighted by the moon and the Aurora Borealis with its magnetic solar waves providing the light for this last refuge of human beings away from the self destruction of mankind. They are however, not totally isolated from its tentacles. A few trucks are beginning to crowd the roads two or three, but be careful, pretty soon they'll multiply like Cucarachas.

"Oil" screams the carbureted throats of Fords, Buicks, Mercedes Bens, Chevrolets and all the great auto corporations. "Oil" shouts the great factories of unbridled consumerism that are unhappy with basic needs and are driven by the sin of modernity, "Vanity." Oil and more oil without consideration to solar alternatives push for the destruction of the Polar Caps, the last balancing weights at the Earth Axis in its universal travel. However, balance, is irrelevant to the unbalanced minds in their drunkenness for money and power.

Don't they realize? Don't they understand? The earth is paradise. Here in the land of the Gwich'in our mother has been protected by the cold blanket of ice and snow and by a few valiant human beings willing to protect our mother earth, even in the cold winter of a vicious society hooked on oil like heroin in the streets of the US. US destroying our body, our family, our mother, and our community from which we have chosen to alienate ourselves. We are mother earth and mother earth is US. (Not U.S. based mega corporate giants' intent on her destruction.)"

Leadership within the Gwich'in Nation

Individualistic Leadership is a dirty word. Collective Leadership is the norm. As Sarah James pointed out, in the midst of winter sometimes people don't come back. You have to rely on yourself but you also have to rely on those around you to survive. The gender differences that affect most societies are minimized in the traditional Athabascan Nation. A female has to be ready to survive on her own in case the husband or the father do not come back, and then everyone has to be ready to survive in blizzards with -90°. Thus self-reliance is the key; however, in the words of Sarah James, it doesn't translate to individualism. Thus they divide themselves into bands or villages ruled by collective leadership. Traditionally the elders' circle would have a lot of influence and the Chief would speak on behalf of the group and make decisions with the consent of the elders and the rest of the villager. Today they have partitioned the governance into two parallel tracks of the traditional and the administrative necessities of dealing with the outside world.

However, for big decisions the different bands are called into conference where the traditional collective leadership decide with the Staffs (Ceremonial Sacred Trees Carved into Staffs) being held by the speakers with no one speaking out of turn until decisions are reached in regards to threats that affect the nation. This is the way the decision to fight the oil companies were made. It was not the administrative arm that made the decision. It is democracy in its rawest form. It's a system of checks and balances to minimize self-aggrandizements and corruptive influences of the outside political systems that are always probing for weaknesses in the structure of the traditional Gwich'in government.

In the Arctic Circle Village, they have the traditional structure and the modern administrative structure that deals with the day-to-day needs of the Village and dealings with the State of Alaska government and the U.S. Government. It deals with running the small dirt airport and making sure there is water for the centralized washing facilities. However, the policy of what type of energy the village will try to build is set by the elders, and the traditional council. That's how the decision to look at Solar Energy was made. It was a survival decision based on age-old values. The administrative part of how to bring it about is left to the young, educated team of administrators that know how to deal with the outside world very well.

One of the most notable facts is that the youth outnumber the elders. Thus within a western imposed educational system under the Alaskan School District System, they constantly strive to recapture their language and traditions slowly being put aside by outside teachers with good intentions but who are unwilling to humble themselves to learn without being judgmental and biased toward the so-called modernity.

Our own group dynamics as LCW recipients reflected the fact that some of us subconsciously wanted to "teach" instead of to "learn." Within our own group we had a great wealth of language knowledge from Chinese to Tagalog, Spanish to Gwich'in. From conversations with the young administrative Chief, Sarah, and others we found out that there was a feeling of Gwich'in being lost due to the predominance of English by outside teachers and the heavy influence of television in the household. Yet, in making our group decision of what to teach, language at first wasn't given the importance the Village Elders were pointing it out to be. After re-analyzing, the group agreed to do a workshop on the importance of language in the process of leadership and defending our rights as human beings wherever we may be from. Since all of us were coming from non-English speaking national backgrounds, the implementation was easy to produce. The workshop was a success because the kids not only saw the importance of their own language but they also had something positive to contribute which we did not have:

access to the Gwich'in language and the importance it has had in keeping the Gwich'in nation strong.

In resolving the local challenges emerges the national strategy. Through the encroachment of oil companies and the devastation they have already created for the Alaskan Wild Life dating back to the Exxon Valdez oil spill but also accentuated by regular spillages and oil field explosions, the Gwich'in people realized that the Caribou Calving grounds were endangered when it was proposed to the Congress of the U.S. that the Arctic Circle Wild Life Refuge be open to oil drilling. This hit home to the Gwich'in people, who are traditionally dependent on the Caribou for their subsistence. They call themselves the Caribou People since they depend so much for every part of the Caribou for their food clothing and shelter. They have developed a symbiotic relationship with the Caribou. The day the Caribou disappears they will no longer be in harmony with the cycles of the earth in its infinite wisdom that has served for millions of years in the development of life.

With no resources, no experience, they made a decision to bring the message to the world in a good way. The decision was no compromise for the sake of the Caribou and themselves. What emerged as a local struggle for survival has catapulted world-renowned leaders like Sarah James, who is as familiar with the Halls of Congress as the Chambers of the United Nations. Along with their struggle they have made alliances with environmental groups nationwide and worldwide, they have established relationships with indigenous nations from Alaska to Argentina and have forged a strong alliance that last summer was able to stop the multi-national wealthy oil companies with insatiable appetites for new sources of crude. After all the high-level meetings, Sarah comes back to an old fashioned log cabin at top of a hill that is reminiscent of the old western movies, with no running water, a log heater, and a gas stove that is only as dependent as the weather permits. However, within that little log home is headquartered the struggle for survival of an entire people. However, within those log houses hundreds of Sarah James are ready to take on the struggle if called by their traditional councils, the snowy mountains, or the Caribou on their way to their winter grazing lands.

How do you build nationally while acting locally? The self-reliance and self-determination the Gwich'in people have developed through thousands of years of dealing with harsh climatic changes and conditions give us a clue. Embracing the local struggles with the passion of survival for yourself, your family, your community will guide your actions towards alliances and strategic planning that will stop on its tracks the biggest oil giants, the strongest lobbyists, the fiercest financial institutions. It is all about love for yourself, for your family, for your people. None of this will happen if first and foremost you don't have love for the land that gives us everything.

August 29, 2002

Alaska Reflections: Four Days within the Gwich'in Nation

By Dale Asis

The Alaska I saw was a world I have never seen before. The Alaska I saw was so pristine and beautiful it hurts to step on the moss underneath my feet and trample it. The Alaska I saw was filled with clean air that when I grasp for breath, it suffocates me. The Alaska I saw was filled with warm people like Sarah James that embraced us like we have lived there for years. The Alaska I saw was the natural beauty exalted in its highest form. No wonder, the Gwich'in Nation has one word for man and land, Nan. In the beautiful landscape that surrounded us, it was inescapable to think that I was one with the earth, the sky and its crisp, clean air and the rivers with its pristine waters that flowed around the village. The Alaska I heard was infinite quiet in the middle of the night; it was exquisite. No ambulance sirens, no car horns, no city noises, just quiet. This is my Alaska.

No, the Alaska I saw was not like an MTV video or a *Calgon* commercial. The Alaska I saw was real. There were no toilets other than the *washeteria* a mile away and I had to run to the outhouse with my jacket and ski cap in the middle of the cold summer night. There was no running water. The cold water, when I washed my face in the morning, hurts my face like pins pricking my skin. There were remnants of old washing machines, old tires and an old junk car that litters the Alaskan prairie that they don't know where to dump them. Modern trash has reached the pristine landscape of Alaska.

The Alaska I know was delicious: moose meat that falls off the bone, fresh wild blueberries like I have never tasted before, dried, tasty salmon without the preservatives, caribou meat drizzled in grease and vegetables it chokes my arteries and whets my appetite. In Alaska, I have picked fresh wild cranberries from the field and it never tasted like the ones from the can. All my life I only tasted cranberry jelly in a can that seems to be passed around the table a lot during Thanksgiving but no one eats it. In Alaska, I have tasted the best-fried bread. You have never tasted fried bread until you have tried Sarah James' fried bread.

The Alaska I experienced goes beyond the usual sights, sounds, smells and tastes of a regular camera-toting tourist. The Alaska I learned was an Alaska of Native Americans persecuted and discriminated throughout the centuries. The numerous treaties that were never honored; the frequent wars to fight for their sovereignty and the countless laws that were made to protect them were turned around to hurt them. Whether you are a Native American that has lived in this land for thousands of years or you are a New American trying to make a living and a new life, you are disenfranchised, marginalized, ignored.

The daily work that I do fighting for immigrant rights and trying to give a voice for a *voiceless* immigrant community seems to echo a similar ring to the fight Sarah James is struggling. It's a fight that almost like moving a mountain. Yet how do you move a mountain? How do you build and sustain a social movement that will *move the mountain* and create social change? This is the cooperative inquiry and the struggle among the Leadership for A Changing World awardees are experiencing. In our reflection discussions, I feel the tension among us on how we are trying to

make discordant, different pieces fit and make a bigger quilt for social change. Maybe we are making this first patchwork to create change. Maybe we are trying the first pattern to stitch together our local work to a national agenda. Maybe we are trying to make a difference in our communities.

In Alaska, our experience working and mentoring young Indian chiefs as part of the Young Chiefs Leadership Institute was the most rewarding. It is important that they emphasized the importance of their native language and keeping it alive. The exercise with Wing Lam and Salvador Reza was particularly touching in bringing this issue alive. A language binds a community together and brings a culture alive. In Gwich'in, the word for man, for the Earth and for backbone is one – Nan. A language reveals intricacies in a culture that will never be revealed otherwise. I experienced the same doubts and sometimes, shame from being different and speaking a different native language, Tagalog. When I was a teenager, I tried to hide so hard to hide my Filipino accent. With the wisdom of experience and age and the constant immersion of my parents of my native language, I now cherished that I know my native language, Tagalog. It is an important aspect of who I am and where I came from.

My Alaska trip is a trip of a lifetime, a trip that I will tell my friends and family for years. It is a trip that I will cherish and remember. I am hopeful that our trip to Alaska will move forward the Council and the other awardees to work together, to create the first stitch in a powerful quilt to create social change.