



## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR COMMUNITY ACTION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY NORTHWEST FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS (NWFCO)

### Introduction

Leadership development is at the heart of the mission of the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO), an effort to strengthen state-based community organizations engaged in the fight for social and economic justice. Through training and issue specific campaigns, NWFCO and its affiliated organizations work to build grassroots capacity to effect social change, empowering under-represented peoples through participation in political action. It is apparent from the numbers of people who emerge as grassroots leaders – thousands in the decade of collaboration under the NWFCO umbrella – that the experience of community based political action can be transformational.

The purpose of this ethnography has been to understand the very personal process by which people begin to act and self-identify as leaders. The research was designed to identify what prompts and sustains people's involvement in community action. What enables people, initially motivated by a need to change the circumstances of their individual lives, to act on a broader stage, working to change conditions that transcend their immediate self-interest? Specific questions addressed by the research include:

- What is it in the experience that enables them to envision a different future, both in terms of what they can do and to what ends?
- What behavioral changes go along with this shift in perspective, as the individual engages in the activity of leadership?
- How do the relationships and activities that constitute these communities of practice foster and sustain this new sense of possibilities?

This ethnography was written by Lisa Weinberg, ethnographer of Leadership for a Changing World Research and Documentation Component at the Research Center for Leadership in Action, housed at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. The ethnography is intended solely as a vehicle for classroom discussion, and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described.

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- Are there qualities that make the experience distinctive at earlier and later stages of leadership development?

The results of this research illuminate what it takes to foster and sustain a sense of efficacy and a commitment to action.

Ten vignettes, which tell the stories of individual grassroots leaders, were written to capture their distinctive voices and experiences, and are intended primarily as a training tool to inspire a sense of possibility and imagination in others. These vignettes are included in Appendix A of this report. The body of this report, in contrast, identifies common features across the experiences of the people interviewed and is intended to inform the design of future capacity-building efforts. These findings, to the extent that they illuminate critical aspects of the grassroots leadership experience – specifically, what enables people to imagine and articulate a different future and to act on that vision – also should usefully inform the Leadership for a Changing World investigation regarding what contributes to social change leadership.

The next section of this report provides a description of the research documentation process, including a description of the four sites at which data were collected. The following section, which constitutes the heart of this report, contains a discussion of research findings. A final section addresses the key research questions by summarizing critical aspects of the leadership development experience and relating it to the literature on empowerment.

### **Research Documentation Process**

During the first phase of this project, individual interviews were conducted with eighteen people associated with NWFCO and one of its affiliated statewide organizations. Interviewees were selected to ensure racial and ethnic as well as geographic diversity. The sample of those interviewed includes:

- 9 white, 4 Native American, 3 African American, and 2 Latino;
- 15 women and 3 men;
- 5 in Idaho, 4 in Montana, 4 in Oregon, and 5 in Washington, with the sample evenly split between rural and urban locations.

The following questions were used in the individual interviews to elicit information regarding how people begin to act and self-identify as leaders. Interviews always began with an inquiry regarding a person's current activities in order to ground the interviewee in her or his experience of leadership.

- What are you currently working on?
- What brought you to the table?
- How has your role changed over time?
- What keeps you involved?
- Has the work changed how you see yourself?

- Do you see the work as taking a toll on you personally?
- What sustains you in this work?

A series of ten vignettes (Attachment 2) were written and drafts shared with those featured to ensure the accuracy of the vignette. Profiles of these people include the following characteristics:

- 6 white, 3 Native American/Pacific Islander, and 1 African American;
- 2 from Idaho, 3 from Montana, 2 from Oregon, and 3 in Washington, evenly split between rural and urban locations;
- 4 who have been involved for 10 – 15 years, 2 who have been involved for 7 – 8 years, and 4 who have been involved for 3 – 5 years.

All of the people featured in the vignettes are women, which in part, reflects the disproportionate representation of women among leaders. The poor quality of interview recordings with two key male leaders also contributed.

During the second phase of the project, campaign-specific activities were observed at three of the four NWFCO-affiliated organizations; (a) an Action Day in Boise, sponsored by Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN); (b) a meeting of Oregon Action's (OA) Healthcare Committee in Portland, and an Action Day in Olympia, sponsored by Washington Citizen Action (WCA). A similar observation was not conducted at Montana People's Action because of serious organizational challenges being confronted by MPA at the time and the sense that the research conducted for this project had reached theoretical saturation. Each observation was complemented by a group interview with available participants. The following questions were used to structure these interviews:

- What brought you to the table?
- How has your role changed over time?
- Has the work changed how you see yourself?
- What sustains you in this work?

Summaries of these interviews, as well as observations made during each visit, are included in Attachment 2.

## **Findings**

This research was designed to explore how the experience of participation in political action can transform people, shaping their perceptions of themselves and their capacity to make a difference in the world. Repeatedly during the interviews, people spoke about previously feeling without voice and powerless to effect change. As one woman in Idaho explained: "I used to think I was stuck in this little hole, that I had no impact on anything." A sentiment expressed by a woman in Washington echoed a common perception among those interviewed: "There's no way those politicians are going to care what a person like me says, so why bother."

People like me? Many of the people interviewed are poor, some are living with disabilities, and as one of the most senior leaders observed, “It’s very hard to see yourself as a player when you’re just trying to get by.” While several of those interviewed had been politically active in the past, most reported never having voted prior to their involvement with NWFCO and its affiliated organizations. The findings described below document their experience of empowerment – the experience of stepping out onto a broader stage and beginning to see themselves as players – and are organized around the four questions that guided this research.

### **What is it in the Experience that Enables Them to Envision a Different Future, Both in Terms of that They can Do and to What Ends?**

“I didn’t think I could change anything, but as a group we can.” A sense of community was apparent among participants at each of the four sites visited, contributing in a number of different ways to people’s sense of empowerment. In terms of political action, the sheer numbers associated with the organization were important for several reasons. First is the power inherent in representing a constituency. As one senior leader put it: “Without the organization behind me I’m one voice. But when I’m representing our organization, I’m many, many voices, and people listen.” Implicit here is the recognition that politics is a numbers game. As this same leader explained subsequently, politicians listen “because we’re the people who put them there and we’re the people who can take them out.”

The numbers also are important because of the sheer amount of work associated with lobbying effectively. Those interviewed repeatedly spoke about the work as a team effort, that “it takes the whole team working together to win something.” As one person put it: “I can’t do that much. I certainly can’t do it by myself.” Being a member of a team also serves as an antidote to pessimism. When asked what keeps them coming back, “this group of people” was a common response. One person explained that it is because they are “the people who actually force confrontation of the issues,” while another attributed it to the fact that they were combating “the apathy beyond this group.”

Finally, there is the sense of fellowship associated with being part of a community. That sense of fellowship begins in their home communities, but extends beyond those boundaries, to the NWFCO network through participation in training events, and the broader nationwide community action movement through involvement in conferences and demonstrations. When asked to explain what about the “grassroots” character of Washington Citizen Action (WCA) appealed to her, one member explained that it was “ordinary people like me coming together.” Another woman, in describing a trip to Washington, D.C., put it this way: “I was right up there holding the banner leading two thousand people to the steps of [the Department of Health and Human Services]. It was so powerful, it gives me goose bumps just thinking about it, that connection among people that just envelopes you.” For many, then, coming together in common cause mitigates a sense of isolation and helplessness; as one person put it, it is an opportunity to “give something back at the same time that you’re a part of something that helps you.”

“We can fight city hall.” A phrase often used by people to portray their previous attitude regarding the possibility of effecting change was “you can’t fight city hall.” Many had a story about learning that the opposite was true. In Oregon, for example, when the state approved revisions to the food stamp application that Oregon Action (OA) had been instrumental in crafting; or in Washington, when the prescription drug bill or the patient’s bill of rights became law, both of which had been the focus of sustained WCA campaigns. Those interviewed often described these occasions as “energizing,” “invigorating,” and “a real high.”

The experience of making a difference contributed to a sense of self-esteem as well as efficacy. As one person put it, the ability to make a difference “helps my frustration, when you feel like something needs to be done and you’re doing it.” Others described it as providing “a feeling of importance,” reinforcing a sense that “I am somebody.” Sometimes, the experience of simply feeling heard was equally profound. Indeed, being listened to by a person in a position of power contributed to the self-esteem of a number of those interviewed. One woman explained that after testifying at a legislative hearing, “I found out my opinion actually matters somewhere, it taught me I’m a real person.” For another, it was being asked for her opinion by a legislator: “She really wanted to know my feelings about the issue and that meant a lot to me.”

“I believe in what I’m doing.” In telling the story of how they initially became involved in grassroots political action, a number of people described an awakening of sorts; for one person “a light went off in my head,” while another “heard this bell go off in my head.” For one woman it was the discovery that “I have a purpose in life,” for another it was her “life’s work,” and for a third it was “a calling.” In each case, it represented a fundamental shift in how they saw the world and their relationship to it. Whether described in terms of a “vision” or “dream,” it was a newfound sense of purpose and commitment that extended beyond their individual lives, and one that sustains their involvement in the work.

Almost everyone interviewed for this project initially became involved with NWFCO’s affiliated organizations because of a personal need. Very quickly, however, they experienced a broadening of interest. As one person articulated it: “The fact that it’s happening in my family makes it more real to me, but it’s not just my family it’s happening to and that just fires me up.” Indeed, it was not uncommon for people to describe a campaign that they were involved in and then note that they did not benefit personally.

The findings of this research suggest that the capacity to envision a different future emerges out of the process of identifying with a community, a group of people who typically are similarly situated, living on the margins and under difficult circumstances. Despite their marginalization, however, as a group they are able to exercise political power, and in so doing convey a sense of efficacy to those who become affiliated. This sense of efficacy, a belief that collective action can make a difference, presumes the possibility of change and perhaps with it a greater openness to a vision of how things might be. Indeed, exposure to specific proposals being advanced by the organization may

enable participants to further visualize such change. Seeing oneself as a player, as an individual with something to contribute to the effort, takes more than exposure, however. It requires opportunities to develop new skills and take on new roles.

**What Behavioral Changes go Along with this Shift in Perspective, as the Individual Engages in the Activity of Leadership?**

“You’ve got to be able to make somebody listen to you.” Perhaps the most important skill acquired through involvement with NWFCO and its affiliated organizations, and certainly the one mentioned most often, is public speaking. In addition to it being a skill around which many people have fears, public speaking is also central to the community action mission, giving voice to people’s experience in an effort to effect social change. One leader described her early encounter with a WCA organizer, noting that he both conveyed an important message, “you have a voice and it is valued,” and “showed me how to use my voice.” Whereas before her involvement in WCA she “couldn’t even think about getting up and saying my name,” now she is someone who regularly speaks in public, likening her transformation to “the fish story” (i.e. give a man a fish and he eats for a day, teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime).

Ultimately, the development of public speaking skills is about more than just speaking in front of others, especially people with power. It is about empowerment. One leader talked about it in terms of a newfound “courage to ask a lot more questions; I have a voice and I use it.” Another, a woman with disabilities, described how her involvement in WCA “gave me the ability to stand up for myself, even though I can’t stand up.” As she put it, “you’ve got to be able to make somebody listen to you.” For some of those interviewed, making somebody listen was about developing the capacity to express themselves so that their “message could be received.” As one leader put it, “I recognized I didn’t have to be militant, just persistent.” Another described it in more concrete terms: “I used to be aggressive in arguing with people on what I felt was absolutely right. Now, I give people what I think, then listen and acknowledge their point of view.”

“To look at a situation from different viewpoints.” Another leader attributed a profound shift in perspective to truly listening to others. As she explained it, listening enabled her “to look at a situation from different viewpoints instead of my own tunnel vision, putting the pieces together and looking at the whole picture.” Many individuals credit this kind of listening with producing more positive and solution-oriented responses. One person described adopting the perspective “what can we do to help you and still get what we need” while working with the Washington Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) on changes to the administration of the food stamp program.

Such encounters had the effect of humanizing public officials as well. Her experience working with DSHS led that leader to conclude that “it is a bureaucracy, but there are real people inside who you can work with.” Whether talking with elected public officials or career administrators, a similar sentiment was described by several of the people interviewed for this project. One leader confessed that she had “always felt too intimidated by their power” to see legislators as human too, with their own stories, until

one legislator talked about her own experience with a disability and dealing with “the system” in order to get her needs met. Similarly, during the group interview in Idaho, participants discussed how they had come to see legislators as “human,” “not better than me,” just with power. A woman in Oregon echoed this sentiment, observing that public officials are “people just like me,” but also people with significant responsibilities (“he’s got to make decisions that affect millions of people”). While noting that public officials “are human and sometimes make a wrong decision,” she acknowledged the fact as well that “they are given a system that’s imperfect.”

“Let’s make some options.” Another skill set often mentioned was that associated with developing and implementing strategy. One woman described it in terms of the “nuts and bolts of developing agendas, leading meetings, and designing campaign strategies,” another more generally in terms of “how and why you do an action.” It was conceived both as a way of thinking (“the way I see and address issues”) and a way of acting (learning how to “work the system”). Perhaps most powerfully, it is about learning “how to move ahead when you think you can’t.” As one woman in Idaho put it, “I just have to think, is there really nothing I can do? What are my options? Let’s make some options.”

“I owe them my entire political education.” NWFCO and its affiliated organizations also support leaders by providing information regarding the issues and the politics associated with those issues. People often mentioned how critical such information was to their political engagement. In addition to participating in activities sponsored by these organizations, many of the people interviewed talked about voting for the first time, or becoming “a more informed voter and a better citizen.” A number of those interviewed reported becoming avid newspaper readers and otherwise learning more about the issues on their own. And one woman talked about the challenge of learning “how to talk politics,” which for her entails talking “about the role of government” and being “able to connect people’s daily lives with politics.” Still another articulated it this way: “I really believe in representative democracy, and I need to represent myself well if I’m going to be a good citizen.”

Finally, a number of those interviewed spoke about basic and fundamental ways in which involvement in community action, and the support of the people they encountered along the way, has changed them. For one young woman it was about learning to read, something with which staff as well as other leaders helped her. Another credited her involvement with leading her back to school, where she is pursuing a college degree. For some, their participation has prompted career aspirations in both community organizing and public policy research. Others credit the work and the community with helping them to remain “clean and sober.” In all cases, it was the support of individuals and the sense of community that facilitated the personal changes reported.

### **How Do the Relationships and Activities that Constitute These Communities of Practice Foster and Sustain this New Sense of Possibilities?**

“She saw something in me that nobody else had seen.” The interviews conducted for this project were filled with examples of people stepping “outside [their] comfort zone,”

learning new skills and overcoming old fears, and realizing a sense of empowerment in the process. In every case the support provided by staff and other leaders was credited with facilitating such personal changes. In addition to training, which led to the acquisition of specific skills and abilities described below, a number of people described occasions when staff identified opportunities and encouraged leaders to take on new roles; “[He] really pushed me, had faith in me to take on roles that I would not have seen myself in.” People described, and I observed staff regularly identifying opportunities (e.g. presenting material at a training, speaking at a hearing or press conference) for leaders to practice skills acquired in training. This approach appears to empower those directly involved. It also provides a model for, and perhaps inspires, newer members attending these events. In the process, important relationships are forged among leaders and between leaders and staff.

“People believed in me.” A major aspect of support is expressed through the cheerleading apparent at every event observed for this project. In addition to encouraging remarks, members support one another by regularly acknowledging one another’s assets and accomplishments. Those interviewed repeatedly described how such support was critical to their self-confidence. Indeed, the support of staff and other leaders is responsible for keeping people involved in the work. As one person told it: “People believed in me, people invested in me, and when I threw in the towel, they came to my house and said ‘don’t quit, you’re almost there.’” Another person described it this way: “Every time I think I’m just going to let it slide, one of them comes to me and says ‘this is what’s wrong and this is what you need to do.’”

“I learn from the community and we grow together.” Learning in community appears to be part of the design of all the activities observed for this project – the Action Days in Idaho and Washington and the committee meeting in Oregon. In each case, events were structured in a way that not only ensured developmental opportunities for individuals (as described above), but also created a situation in which members could learn from one another. At the Action Days in Idaho and Washington, participants were organized into teams by home district, with more senior leaders serving as “captains,” responsible for presenting portions of the training and providing direction during lobbying activities. Similarly, the healthcare committee meeting in Portland was completely member-driven. During the group interview following this latter event, one of the participants expressed a sentiment that was greeted with head nods around the table, suggesting it reflects a common experience among those present: “Another reason I come back is that I learn something from all of the people in this group; history, insights, the stories are tremendous.”

In both individual and group interviews, people repeatedly described the learning that occurred, characterizing other leaders as “teachers, colleagues, and friends.” The learning was formal, related to the nuts and bolts of community action, and informal, through the personal stories about sometimes very diverse life experiences. This was particularly prominent in Idaho, where statewide events bring together people who otherwise live in separate communities (e.g. poor white, Native American, and Chicano communities). As one woman described it:

There's a sense of community I don't experience anywhere else. I enjoy it because the community is so much more diverse than the community I live in. People come from such different lives. I get a new perspective. I learn from the community and we grow together.

A number of the white participants in the Idaho group interview described how working side by side with Chicano counterparts in ICAN, and learning about the issues facing seasonal workers in Idaho's agricultural communities, challenged previously held beliefs. The learning was sufficiently significant to prompt them to take on the cause of immigrant rights, motivated by a sense of justice rather than self-interest.

Participation in training on racial justice appears to have been an important influence on how people engage around issues of diversity. People at each of the four sites mentioned the training and its impact on them individually and as a community. As individuals, the experience often described was of beginning to see racism where previously one had been unaware of it. Collectively, people noted how as a community they had begun to talk about race more openly, having "frank discussions" about institutional racism and framing issues in terms of racial justice. At Oregon Action, members also reported making "conscious choices" about how the organization itself operates, reconstituting the board, for example, so that "the people we want to give voice to are actually running the organization."

"A feeling of warmth and family." The sense of community was readily evident in all activities observed for this project. At Action Days in Washington and Idaho, friendships forged at previous events were apparent as members from different parts of these states greeted one another warmly. In Portland as well the conversation as people entered the office was filled with personal inquiries and expressions of empathy. It was not uncommon for people interviewed in one state to talk about friends they had made in other states through their participation in NWFCO regional events.

Nor did these friendships seem superficial; in fact just the opposite was true. As one woman characterized it, these are the "people who I am open and honest with when the burden gets too heavy." Or another who at a group interview simply exclaimed, "I love you people." Still others talked about it in terms of family; as one woman in Idaho put it, "we don't have any family here, so ICAN has become our family." Indeed, in both Idaho and Oregon, people noted the ways in which their children had become involved in community action, both that "there's nothing we do that you can't bring your kids to," and that "it feels good to have kids excited about what you're doing."

### **Are There Qualities That Make the Experience Distinctive at Earlier and Later Stages of Leadership Development?**

"Change is a generational process." One of the hallmarks of the process by which people begin to act and self-identify as leaders is a broadening sphere of concern that extends beyond immediate self-interest and encompasses larger social issues. Among more senior leaders, this commitment is supported by an ability to take the long view. There is an

appreciation that “some of the changes will take a very long time,” in fact “may not occur during my lifetime,” and the realization that “if we don’t sustain the momentum, it will not happen at all.” It entails being both pragmatic – “we’re not going to change racism overnight” – and hopeful – “change is a generational process.” Ultimately, it is also about a legacy, what a number of people described in terms of “what I leave behind.” As one woman explained, “I have a seven year old grandson. What’s going to be there for him?”

“My personal job is to tell people ‘these are your rights.’” A commitment to “pass it forward” is a quality that distinguishes the more senior leaders. As expressed by one: “Once I found out that there were things that could be done and people just didn’t know about it, I figured they had a right to know.” A similar sentiment prompted another to establish an advocacy program through her church, a venue to share with people what she is learning and, hopefully, mobilize them in the process. Sometimes it is about teaching people how to advocate on their own behalf. Other times it is about working with people who initially are very skeptical, counteracting hopelessness with a sense of possibility. Sometimes it entails “finding out what people are angry about and having the ability to say ‘I can help you with that anger,’ and then developing people’s capacity to stand up and fight back.” In every case, it involves “giving away what was so freely given to me,” which appears central to the NWFCO model and certainly essential to people’s empowerment.

“Let someone else take the spotlight and take the reins, but be there to catch them if they fall.” Another characteristic that distinguishes more senior leaders is a willingness to step back from the more visible roles (e.g. providing testimony, chairing a meeting, speaking at a press conference) and mentor newer leaders. As one very senior leader in Montana described it:

I sit beside them while they’re chairing a meeting, slide them a note, or remind them where we are in the agenda, or help them out if they get stuck. Let someone else take the spotlight and take the reins, but be there to catch them if they fall. Go out to lunch, help them prepare, talk to them about any fears or concerns they might have going into an action.

A very senior leader in Washington characterizes her work in terms of enabling “people to actually feel good about who they are and what they’re doing,” rather than simply the development of concrete skills, recognizing that the former facilitates and supports the latter.

Indeed, the heart and soul of her activism is in her role as trainer and mentor, for central to her vision of grassroots action is the empowerment of others. Perhaps this is another way in which community action is a “generational process.” The role of the senior leader is ultimately about capacity building, about ensuring that there always will be people with the necessary vision, skills, and commitment to pursue social change. There may be a leadership trajectory of sorts, one that begins with discovering one’s own sense of efficacy and leads over time to a commitment to cultivate it in others. This latter focus, of course, is essential to sustaining change over time.

## Conclusions

What is it that enables people to take on leadership, envisioning a different future, both in terms of their own capabilities and the possibility of effecting social change? The most prominent aspect of the experience reported by those interviewed for this project was a set of personal changes that contributed to a sense of efficacy where once they had felt powerless. The existing literature on empowerment thus can meaningfully inform the analysis of findings in the present study. While the focus of this research has been on personal transformation (i.e. changes that occur within the individual), the experience of transformation itself is embedded in a social context. Therefore, in addition to employing the construct of empowerment, it is important to examine the specific ways in which the collective nature of community action facilitates such personal change.

Paulus and Horth (1996) characterize leadership as a collective meaning-making process, an ever-evolving “fabric of knowledge by which a group recognizes its identity,” “the social reality of the community,” and “the means by which the community does its work.” In the case of the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO), leadership is a practice by which members weave the cloth of community through participation in training activities and political action. Both types of activities fuel an emergent narrative regarding economic and racial justice, providing the basis for individual identification with the group, its mission, and collective action.

Empowerment is central to the NWFCO model of leadership development. According to the Cornell Empowerment Group (cited in Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995), empowerment is “an intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources.” Importantly, the experience of empowerment as described by those interviewed is not just about gaining access to power through participation in an organization that has developed such a capacity. Instead, it is about very personal changes associated with how one sees oneself in relation to that broader social environment.

Traditional definitions of the verb “to empower” typically imply that power is a commodity, that power is something that only can be given or granted. Staples (1990) points out, however, that in the case of society’s “have-nots,” “power must be developed or taken by the powerless themselves.” For those involved in NWFCO and its affiliated organizations, a sense of efficacy derives both from identification with the group and the power it can exercise because of its numbers, and through participation in training and political activities, which contributes to a discovery of individual capabilities. In the case of identification with the group and the power it can exercise because of its numbers, power is taken by the powerless, creating a constituency that, given its numbers, can influence decision-makers. For the individual, becoming a part of this process entails the recognition that a group of people working together can make a difference, which challenges previous assumptions regarding social power. Participation in training and political activities also entails the development of power, providing the skills and

knowledge necessary to directly participate in the exercise of such influence. The experience of working together in common cause also provides a sense of fellowship that can counteract social isolation, which is correlated with feelings of powerlessness (Couto, 1993; Staples, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995). Indeed, the research conducted for this project suggests that participation in and identification with a community is a potent force, changing people's understanding of their social reality as well as their sense of possibilities.

Zimmerman (1995) conceptualizes empowerment as a "multilevel construct," which occurs at the individual, organization, and community level. At the level of community, empowerment entails "individuals working together in an organized fashion to improve their collective lives," and at the level of organization it involves "processes and structures that enhance members' skills and provide them with the mutual support necessary to effect community level change." The levels of empowerment are necessarily interdependent; organizational and community empowerment foster and depend upon an individual sense of empowerment. The design and operation of NWFCO and its affiliated organizations exemplifies this model of empowerment in action. At the community level, power is realized through people coming together to lobby for changes in legislation or program administration that address issues of economic and racial justice. Their effectiveness at the community level, however, is dependent on the training, research, and coordination provided by the organization. These activities provide participants with the necessary skills and information to exercise the collective power necessary to effect social change.

More significantly for the purposes of this research, "participation in a community organization provides experience that challenges individual cognitions of social power and provides a collective context through which emotional reaction to that power can be processed" (Speer and Hughey, 1995). Put differently, an individual's sense of powerlessness is challenged not just by one's association with a community organization that exercises social power, but the support and opportunities for action available to the individual through the organization. Among the people interviewed for this project, the training and encouragement received through their involvement with NWFCO and its affiliated organizations was critical, enabling them to take action that previously was unimaginable to them.

Power is relational, and people's perception of power – their own and that of others – occurs in the process of relating to one another. The research conducted for this project suggests that there are several important aspects of relationship that contribute to a sense of personal power. These correspond with the three dimensions of "psychological" or individual empowerment advanced by Zimmerman (1995): intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral. Importantly, "psychological empowerment" is not an intrapsychic phenomenon, but instead occurs within a socio-political context.

The intrapersonal dimension of psychological empowerment involves how a person thinks about her or himself, specifically in terms of perceived control, competence, and efficacy. As noted in the previous section of this report, the experience of being heard,

the ability to “make somebody listen to you” and effect change as a result, was transformational, replacing feelings of powerlessness with a sense of efficacy. Importantly, Zimmerman (1995) distinguishes between efficacy and esteem, noting that the latter relates to judgments regarding self-worth rather than control, and thus may contribute to but is not a component of psychological empowerment. This suggests that the experience of having someone listen, while salutary, does not in and of itself contribute to empowerment; the outcome and not just the process are important. While people interviewed for this project indicated that the experience of being heard was personally meaningful, they also reported that the experience of actually making a difference is what ultimately keeps them involved in community action. Both seem to be accurate, perhaps representing different stages in the empowerment process; what initially serves as a source of motivation does not sustain commitment over time, for which something more is required.

The interactional dimension of psychological empowerment contains a perceptual element as well, but involves what one sees when one looks outward rather than inward; i.e. how people understand their community and the related socio-political issues. Zimmerman (1995) equates the interactional aspect of empowerment with environmental mastery, explaining that such mastery depends on people’s awareness of behavioral options, their understanding of community norms, and their knowledge of how to acquire the resources necessary to achieve desired outcomes. From the interviews and observations conducted for this project, it appears that this aspect of empowerment is addressed through training as well as participation in political action; participants have opportunities to observe others and to take action themselves. A notable experience reported by the people interviewed was that of coming to see people in positions of power as “people just like me,” “not better than me.” This appears to contribute to a sense of efficacy as well as self-esteem by demystifying power. Rather than being a mysterious commodity that some possess and others do not, encounters with people in positions of power reveal how power is (and can be) exercised. Indeed, Zimmerman (1995) distinguishes empowerment from power, which he associates with formal authority, explaining that people do not need to possess formal authority in order to exert control over the decisions of those who do.

Couto (1993) argues that community narratives can provide “a better understanding of a group’s social condition than that which prevails in the dominant culture,” helping people to challenge assumptions that attribute their circumstances to individual inadequacies rather than to power relations in the broader social environment. In the United States members of “have-not” groups are perceived to be “have-nots” and thus powerless because of “individual personal deficits” (Staples, 1990). Not surprisingly then, social class can be negatively correlated with a sense of empowerment (Horvath, 1999). Interviews conducted for this project suggest that an association with a community that challenges the dominant culture’s narrative can positively affect one’s sense of self-efficacy; the belief that “there’s no way those politicians are going to care what a person like me says,” is replaced by the assertion “I’m never going to be rich ... but I can have an impact on changing something in a positive way; just because I’m poor, that’s not going to stop me.”

Zimmerman (1995) describes the behavioral dimension of psychological empowerment in terms of “actions taken to directly influence outcomes.” Similarly, Staples (1990) observes that “empowerment is more than merely a perception.” Instead, it involves the acquisition of concrete skills, practical knowledge, material resources, real opportunities, and actual results. The findings described in the previous section of this report amply document how participation in NWFCO and its affiliated organizations can entail all of these facets of empowerment. The development of communication-related behaviors is particularly notable because of the frequency with which these were mentioned as well as their centrality to empowerment. Learning to speak in public is about more than simply overcoming or managing one’s fears; the stories shared demonstrate that it is ultimately about finding one’s voice, of coming to believe in the value of one’s experience and the potential for influencing the perceptions of others.

The experience of being heard, in turn, contributes to an inclination to listen, or listen differently; and in listening differently people come to see the world differently. Specifically, people come to see the possibility for change and practical, solution-oriented options for realizing it. A notable example is the experience of those who worked with the Washington Department of Social and Health Services to change the administration of the food stamp program in the state. One participant attributed the group’s success in achieving desired changes to their ability to reframe proposals so that they addressed the needs of DSHS as well as those of food stamp recipients. This example, like others described in the interviews, suggest what both Zimmerman (1995) and Staples (1990) conclude, that direct action and outcomes are essential to empowerment.

Both Staples (1990) and Zimmerman (1995) make an important distinction between empowerment processes and products or outcomes, both of which occur at the different – though clearly interrelated – levels of individual, organization, and community. Zimmerman describes the empowerment process as a set of experiences through which people learn about the relationship between their goals and how to achieve them, and gain access to the necessary resources. Staples characterizes it as a dynamic process involving both thought and action, “whereby consciousness is transformed while individual and collective capacities are developed.” What ultimately matters, however, are the results produced by such action. Whether they call them empowerment outcomes or products, both define these in terms of effective action, yielding something measurable and concrete.

Citing a similar distinction made by Albert Bandura, between “self-efficacy expectation” and “outcome expectation,” Conger and Kanungo (1988) assert that the strengthening of someone’s sense of self-efficacy can occur in the absence of any change to their outcome expectations. In other words, “even under conditions of failure to gain desired outcomes, individuals may feel empowered if their efficacy belief is reinforced.” This is important given the systemic nature of the changes pursued by NWFCO and its affiliated organizations. The ability to sustain commitment and effort over time is essential. Indeed, one of the qualities that distinguish the organization’s more senior leaders is their capacity to be strategic in pursuing and celebrating short term gains that can contribute to

long term changes of greater magnitude. Some of the findings of this research suggest that the absence of immediate outcomes, or outcomes of a particular magnitude, does not itself undercut a sense of efficacy. However, given the centrality of outcomes to the community action experience – in response to the question “what keeps you involved,” people repeatedly answered “it works” – it would appear that the results of community action rather than the process alone is responsible for sustaining a sense of efficacy over time.

Just as community narratives can mobilize a group by providing “deep and lasting insights into the need and methods of change” (Couto, 1993), Horvath (1999) suggests that the experience of self-efficacy itself can promote and sustain a person’s commitment to action. Similarly, Conger and Kanungo (1988) conceive of empowerment as “a motivational construct.” The experience reported by a number of people interviewed for this project, in which early exposure to community organization activities yielded a sense of purpose that extended beyond what was immediately possible and in their personal self-interest, represents still another source of motivation. In discussing the critical role of individual empowerment in community economic development, Wilson (1996) describes it as an “inner transformation” that “transcends an egoistic sense of self and links one’s personality to a higher mind.” This may well be what people interviewed for this project had in mind when they referred to discovering their “life’s work” or “calling.”

The importance of community to fostering and sustaining a sense of individual efficacy cannot be overstated. The fellowship that derives from working together in common cause was readily apparent in the interviews and observations conducted for this project, demonstrating how interpersonal relationships along with common values and goals promotes a sense of belonging. Horvath (1999) asserts that this sense of belonging contributes to social cohesion, which increases the likelihood of social action and effective performance. He emphasizes the reciprocal and interactive quality of community, noting that while an individual’s beliefs and values may influence participation, participation in community also shapes people’s perceptions and values. Nowhere was this more evident than in the changing perceptions regarding racism reported by those interviewed for this project and described in the previous section. Importantly, this occurred through training on racial justice as well as working side by side with people different from themselves (e.g. poor White and Chicano members of ICAN coming together at statewide events). Speer and Hughey (1995) observe that relationships in which there are shared values and emotional ties produce more enduring bonds than those based on rational or emotional reactions to issues alone. The success of NWFCO and its affiliated organizations in sustaining a critical mass of core participants over time supports just such a conclusion.

These organizations foster and sustain both the empowerment and participation of their membership in myriad ways. Conger and Kanungo (1988) explain that effective empowerment practices must directly provide information to people about their efficacy. In describing specific practices, these authors draw on the work of Albert Bandura, who identified four categories of such information. All four are apparent in the approaches used by NWFCO and its affiliated organizations. The first, called enactive attainment,

refers to the experience of actually performing a task. As reported in the previous section, people often described occasions when staff identified opportunities for leaders to take on new roles and apply skills and abilities acquired or reinforced in training. The second, vicarious experiences, refers to the empowerment that can occur through observing people similar to oneself performing such roles. Examples abounded in the interviews and observations conducted for this project; e.g. newer members witnessing more seasoned ones as speakers at trainings, hearings, or press conferences, and leading teams lobbying legislators. The third, encouragement, verbal feedback, and other forms of social persuasion, was also evident, in the mentoring provided by more senior leaders and staff as well as the cheerleading that appeared to be a regular part of all organizational events. The fourth and final approach, emotional support, is critical to the effectiveness of the other three. Realizing a sense of personal efficacy ultimately entails moving out of one's comfort zone, confronting and overcoming old fears and the anxiety associated with the unknown. The friendships forged through participation in community action provide essential support when stepping out in ways that challenge the status quo on both personal and societal levels.

This ethnography was designed to explore the very personal process by which people begin to act and self-identify as leaders. Individual and group interviews as well as observations yielded insights about what prompts and sustains people's involvement with NWFCO and its affiliated organizations. Central to this ongoing engagement in community action is a belief in the possibility of effecting social change. Participation in such activities also requires people to act in new ways, developing a repertoire of new skills and performing new roles. The literature on empowerment suggests that these cognitive and behavioral changes are critical. Importantly, individual empowerment is dependent on organizational and community level empowerment; NWFCO and its affiliated organizations provide training and opportunities for developing skills and collective action. Of course, the success of these organizations ultimately depends on the commitment of empowered individuals.

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## Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews

### From One Voice to Many

Anita became involved in Montana People's Action (MPA) in 1991 when the mobile home court in which she lived was sold to an out-of-state investor and a one page set of rules and regulations expanded to sixteen pages of "thou shalt nots." When someone who knew about MPA called a meeting, Anita and her husband attended and ended up on the steering committee. As a result of MPA's involvement and Anita's participation, uniform rules and regulations were implemented across many such communities. Since that time, Anita has worked on a range of issues, most recently health care funding and a living wage ordinance. Anita currently chairs the statewide board of Montana People's Action.

In describing her initial activities with MPA, Anita admits she "had no clue what I was doing except shooting off my mouth and saying 'this is how it affects me.'" That experience was a turning point in Anita's life, challenging her belief that her story did not matter, that her "voice wasn't going to make a difference."

It was an opportunity I had never given myself, to go talk to city hall, because my parents were the type of people who never voted. I didn't vote for years, until I started going and seeing that it really does matter.

What keeps Anita "talking to city hall" is the excitement she continues to experience "when people like me who didn't feel their voice meant anything see that we can win."

The support of MPA and NWFCO has been important to her development as a leader. Public speaking was not an issue for Anita; as she puts it, "No one had to teach me how to open my mouth." What she lacked was a "structure" in which she could feel "rooted and grounded." Training on strategy – "how and why you do an action" – helped, as did lots of background information regarding issues and politics. Together they provided her with a platform from which to step out as a leader.

Her involvement in MPA has provided Anita with a sense of empowerment – "Without the organization behind me I'm one voice. But when I'm representing our organization, I'm many, many voices. And people listen." As she explains:

When I've had an opportunity to go to Washington, D.C. and elsewhere to tell our legislators 'this is what we need back home,' it's not just me, it's not just my story. And that is powerful, because I know when I say 'enjoy your term' it's because we're the people who put them there and we're the people who can take them out. So we can make change, all of us little people who never voted before.

Today, Anita concedes she "always is thinking organizationally." Whereas before she thought "this is my little part and that's what I'm responsible for," now her sense of responsibility extends to others. When she talks to people about a problem they are

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

experiencing, she's thinking "MPA, you have to come." And when people do join MPA, she is there to support them. As a mentor, Anita supports newer leaders in a number of ways:

I sit beside them while they're chairing a meeting, slide them a note, or remind them where we are in the agenda, or help them out if they get stuck. Let someone else take the spotlight and take the reins, but be there to catch them if they fall. Go out to lunch, help them prepare, talk to them about any fears or concerns they might have going into an action.

For Anita, the work is about "being there." Indeed, the personal cost associated with the many rewards of her activism is that the "MPA hat is always on." With over ten years invested in the organization and her community, it is a price Anita is still willing to pay.

### **The Only Things I've Given Up Are My Shyness and Lack of Confidence**

Blanche confesses that she's "always been pretty unhappy with the government," that there's "a lot of bologna going on and [she] wanted to see it stop." For a long time, however, she had done nothing – "did my best to ignore the news" and "didn't vote" – because "I really felt it was useless."

That was before Oregon Action (OA) came into her life; "I had felt so helpless in the past that I thought if there's a chance I could do something about it, I wanted to." Now she follows the news, votes, and much more, participating in OA political actions, doing public speaking, and fundraising on behalf of the organization. Now, as Blanche explains, "the only thing that keeps me away from being more involved is the fact that I have to work."

Blanche is concerned and angered by the big picture – "I don't want to see Americans sit back and be walked on, and I feel that's what's happening" – but believes "the community is a good place to start." Her firsthand knowledge of the challenges confronting people today serves as a source of understanding and motivation:

My mom needs medicine. And I'm sitting here watching her not be able to afford her medicine. She has to decide whether to get her pain pills for the pinched nerve in her back or her nitro patch for her heart. She shouldn't have to choose. The fact that it's happening in my family makes it more real to me. But it's not just my family it's happening to and that just fires me up.

Blanche's involvement in OA, and all she has learned in the process, has converted her anger and previous sense of helplessness into a sense of power. As she puts it: "Once I found out that there were things that could be done and people just didn't know about it, I figured they had a right to know."

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

Her activism has contributed to important changes in Blanche's life. She credits her continuing sobriety to her work with OA: "I got clean and sober five years ago. So I was about two years into that when they came along. I really feel that they've been a big part of me putting my life back together and keeping it together." And, as she explains, "the other things I've given up are my shyness and lack of confidence." Blanche values the training she has received in public speaking, for example, as well as the support and encouragement of OA staff and leaders.

Indeed, it is the fellowship she experiences, along with the "strength in numbers" that enables them to truly make a difference, that sustains Blanche and keeps her involved. That sense of community is palpable; the connection among people "just envelopes you."

### **It's What I Leave Behind**

Carole joined Montana People's Action in 1997 when a program to address urban Indian issues – Indian People's Action (IPA) – was first launched. She admits that initially she was skeptical that it could work. Six years later, she not only remains involved, but has transitioned from a volunteer to a staff position.

At the time she joined IPA, she was working for a local school district as a Title IX coordinator, running a number of programs intended to keep students in school. One of the issues Carole already was working on in that capacity was the disproportionate rate at which Native American students were subject to disciplinary actions. Carole recalls that as she became more active with IPA around just such issues, her supervisor warned her "just remember who signs your check."

One of the notable differences for Carole between working for the school district and working with IPA is her experience of power. At times, she had felt powerless as one person trying to effect change in the system. Now she saw how the IPA membership (and its affiliation with Montana People's Action) could influence change because of their numbers. Indeed, her previous skepticism gave way to the belief that "we do have a voice, they will listen to us."

One of the aspects of Carole's work that she now most enjoys is empowering others. Sometimes it is about teaching people how to advocate on their own behalf. Other times it is about working with IPA members who, like her, are initially very skeptical, but then become very active and committed leaders. In all cases, it is about counteracting hopelessness with a sense of hope.

Another change she attributes to her work with IPA is learning to think strategically, as Carole describes it, "to look at a situation from different viewpoints instead of my own tunnel vision, putting the pieces together and looking at the whole picture." Rather than reacting to opposition by becoming polarized, this entails truly listening to people and

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

responding in a positive and solution-oriented way. Her ability to depersonalize such situations – or at least “try not to personalize it too much” – has certainly helped Carole manage what can sometimes be the strong emotions associated with the issues.

It is Carole’s ability to take the long view that ultimately sustains her and keeps her working with IPA and urban Indian issues. She is both pragmatic – “we’re not going to change racism overnight” – and hopeful – “change is a generational process.” For Carole, it is very much about a legacy: “It’s what I leave behind. I have a seven year old grandson. What’s going to be there for him?”

### **Everybody Makes a Difference**

Deana has been actively involved with Washington Citizen Action (WCA) for fifteen years now. When a canvasser knocked at her door and told her about WCA’s new health care reform campaign, “it was an obvious connection because I had all this passion built up around health care.” The source of that passion was personal. One of Deana’s three sons had been born with a jaw deformity and missing an ear, conditions that were deemed “pre-existing” by the family’s insurance carrier since they dated back to his birth; as a result, the company refused to cover associated expenses. Deana also had a sister who had been born with a birth defect that led to a number of conditions (e.g. series of small strokes); again, no insurance carrier would provide coverage and Medicaid was denied until the very end of her life.

So it was natural that Deana’s first role as a WCA volunteer was to testify at legislative hearings about her experiences obtaining health care for both her son and her sister, about the financial and the personal cost. But she also had previous experience organizing people (she had done volunteer organizing with a number of unions and worked on an arts-in-the-parks initiative), experience that made “it so natural for me to get involved in this whole [WCA] effort.” Not surprisingly, Deana’s role quickly expanded well beyond providing testimony on health care, including by now a long history of board service and leadership for both WCA and NWFCO.

The heart and soul of Deana’s activism is expressed in her role as a trainer and mentor. She warmly recalls how the executive director of WCA at the time “really pushed me,” “had faith in me to take on roles that I would not have seen myself in.” Deana shared his vision of “grassroots members taking a more active role,” and worked with him to figure out how to make that happen. Now she empowers others, supporting their development as leaders and enabling “people to actually feel good about who they are and what they’re doing.” For Deana, this is central to the work of community activism and consistent with a core personal belief, that “what you leave behind when you die is the number of people you’ve touched in your lifetime.”

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

Deana refers to herself as an “idealist realist.” She believes that “we can make change” and that “everybody makes a difference.” Her goal is to impart “a vision that gives people hope” and gives voice to their experience. In pursuing that goal, Deana does whatever needs to be done, performing a number of organizational functions “to ensure that the necessary foundation is there.” She recognizes that “it’s very hard to see yourself as a player when you’re just trying to get by,” and is committed to providing people with the tools and the confidence needed to enter the game. She likens that foundation to the support provided to her by her husband, which enabled her to become actively engaged in WCA when their children were young and sustains her still.

### **A Life’s Work**

Janet’s life as an activist began in 1988, when she graduated from the University of Montana with a masters degree in Psychology and found that the only job she could get was at a nursing home as a nurse’s aide making \$3.90 an hour. Poor treatment of employees and residents alike led Janet to form the Nursing Home Coalition. A contract with Montana People’s Action (MPA) to assist the Coalition in organizing a statewide campaign introduced Janet to a broader mission. By 1991, she had become deeply involved with MPA and NWFCO, attending meetings, rallies, and training sessions. Janet currently serves as the Executive Director of MPA.

Janet’s earlier activism led to the discovery of what she believes is her “life’s work,” fighting discrimination against urban Indians. In 1992, during a rally in Missoula at which the Reverend Jesse Jackson was speaking, Janet was amazed at the number of Indian people in attendance. When she asked them where they lived (“Washington? Idaho? Black Feet Reservation?”), she was surprised to learn that they all lived right there in town. Out of that experience came a vision, to build an organization – Indian People’s Action – to advocate on behalf of Native Americans living outside tribal communities.

According to Janet, “I had a dream and I had to make it happen.” What drives her, whether working on MPA’s broader agenda or specifically on urban Indian issues, is her “anger at injustice.” As she puts it: “How dare you have the audacity to mistreat me or anybody like me, because you happen to have more coins in your pocket, or because of your skin color.”

An important part of realizing the dream entails building an active community base, “finding out what people are angry about and having the ability to say ‘I can help you with that anger,’ and then developing people’s capacity to stand up and fight back.” The way Janet sees it:

Our opponents – people who don’t want low-income people or people of color to have a voice – are just waiting for us to crumble. In order to make sure that never happens, we always have to be passing on what we’ve learned, because we don’t

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

want there ever to be a time when they say “oh, those guys are gone.” We don’t want to be a memory to anybody.

For Janet, this translates into a very personal goal “to be the best that I can be at giving away what was so freely given to me.” So she extends to others the support that has been so meaningful to her: “People believed in me, people invested in me, and when I threw in the towel, they came to my house and said ‘don’t quit, you’re almost there, don’t quit.’” So she gives freely of herself, with only one stipulation, “you’ve got to commit that what you learn you’re going to pass on to others.”

The personal cost associated with finding her life’s work is that “my entire life is this work, everything revolves around it.” Friendships inside the organizing world are an important source of support for Janet, “people who I am open and honest with when the burden gets too heavy.” As she explains: “We don’t do it alone. I’m not one person doing it, we’re a team of people fighting for equitable treatment for everybody.”

Indeed, ultimately it is the work itself that sustains Janet: “I always say it’s the hardest, most stressful, most time-consuming, most heartbreaking and the most rewarding work I’ve ever done, and I wouldn’t give it up for a million dollars.

### **It’s Changed My Whole Life**

Peggy first became involved with Idaho Citizen’s Action Network (ICAN) through an affiliated food program; “I was poor, my daughter had been on drugs, and I was taking care of my grandson.” She ended up getting much more than food from ICAN, notably a sense of purpose and an outlet for expressing it. Indeed, Peggy characterizes her eight-year involvement with ICAN as life changing, “making a difference in the way I feel about the issues – I’m a more informed voter and a better citizen – and the way I feel about myself.”

The first time Peggy was invited to attend a lobby day down in Boise she questioned whether it was worth the trip. In her own words, “I was really shy, had trouble talking to people, especially people of importance, because I felt like I was this dumb and disabled low income person; what did I have to offer?” But with encouragement from another ICAN member, she did go to Boise, and the trip was a turning point in her life: “When I went and talked to those legislators, some of them listened and some of them didn’t, but I really felt like I served some purpose. I felt a sense of power and I felt a sense of pride that I was finally doing something.”

Being part of the ICAN team has been very important to Peggy. It is not just that “it takes the whole team working together to win something.” It is also the camaraderie, “a feeling of warmth and family” that transcends superficial differences (“it doesn’t matter whether we’re black, white, pink, or red, we all work for the same thing”). Along with the training she has received through ICAN and NWFCO, which has provided her with new skills

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

and bolstered her confidence, the support of other ICAN members has been critical; as she said of one of them, “she saw something in me that nobody else had seen.”

While some members of Peggy’s family have expressed pride in her activism, others have had difficulty accepting her involvement with ICAN. As she explains: “It’s taken a toll on some of my relationships because they don’t understand why ICAN is so important to me. It has caused some problems because I was a doormat and now I’m not a doormat anymore.” When asked what enabled her to tolerate the tension in these relationships, her response was short and to the point, simply “I believe in what I’m doing.”

### **A Calling**

Regina became involved in Washington Citizen Action (WCA) in 2001 when an organizer came to her door and talked about the issues that WCA was tackling. She had long been frustrated by “the system,” especially cutbacks that always seemed to come out of human services funding. Hearing about the work of WCA was “like a calling” for Regina. As she describes it: “I heard this bell go off in my head. I need to do more than sign a piece of paper. I really had a want to do something more.” Since that visit, Regina has become an active member of WCA, among other things, doing a fair amount of outreach and public speaking for the organization. She was elected to the WCA board in 2003.

Previously, Regina had avoided even talking privately about politics, no less participating in the political process. Her belief – that “there’s no way those politicians are going to care what a person like me says, so why bother” – was challenged by the WCA organizer she met that first day. According to Regina, he not only conveyed that “you have a voice and it is valued,” but also “showed me how to use my voice.” She credits the organization with teaching her about the issues as well – “what’s happening, how it’s affecting people, how it can be changed.”

The year 2001 turned out to be a challenging one for Regina in other ways, when a disability led to unemployment and subsequent homelessness. Although she had grown up in a low-income family, this experience provided her greater insight regarding poverty and programs such as food stamps and welfare. Her own experience enabled her to listen with a newfound compassion to others:

When I heard people griping – they never make enough money, or they can’t make ends meet, or they’re going to pull their hair out because they don’t know whether to pay for medicine or buy a loaf of bread – I used to think ‘get a job, do something, don’t sit and whine about it, just make it better.’ Then I learned that there aren’t always options.

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

Importantly, it also strengthened her resolve and fueled her activism. As Regina tells it: “It’s really harsh when it’s something that hits so close to home. But when I think about the training I’ve been through, and the public speaking I’ve done because of it, and the new things I’m involved with. I don’t think I could ask for a better way of learning about a new life.”

Now she feels a sense of “personal gain” whenever the organization succeeds in effecting change for the better. It is personal for Regina “because a lot of me got put into that.” The people she has worked with at WCA have been important as well, as teachers, colleagues, and friends.

### **A Whole Different Take on the System**

Rose became involved with Oregon Action (OA) when an organizer came to her door and spoke about OA’s food stamp campaign. At the time, Rose herself was not a food stamp recipient, but her grandchildren were. What she learned that day led her to attend a hearing at which OA enumerated 26 barriers to the food stamp program and 26 ways to remove them. She came out of the hearing with “a whole different take on the system.”

There were a number of ways in which Rose’s view of the system changed, in each case encouraging her emerging activism. First, she came to understand how a program’s design – simply the application for food stamps itself – could serve as a barrier to program access: “I didn’t think of the language of the application being a barrier, because it was never a barrier to me. But what may not be a barrier to me is definitely daunting to somebody else.”

Second, she learned about her rights, rights that at the time were not an issue for her personally. When circumstances changed and a disability left Rose in need of such support, she knew her rights and how to “work the system.” Her concern for access extended well beyond her own needs, however. Instead, it became her “personal job to tell people ‘these are your rights.’”

Third, and perhaps most important to her subsequent emergence as an activist, through her involvement in the campaign to revise the food stamp application, Rose learned that “we can fight city hall.” As she explains, the success of this campaign was a turning point: “All of my life I’ve been told ‘you can’t fight city hall.’ If something is instituted, that’s the way it is and it has to be changed from up above, not from down below. When the state approved the changes, it disproved that whole theory.”

As part of that process, Rose came to see those who make decisions regarding public programs – the heads of departments and politicians – as “people just like me.” She saw the responsibility associated with the office (“he’s got to make decisions that affect millions of people”), as well as the reality that “politicians are human and sometimes make a wrong decision” and “they are given a system that’s imperfect.”

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

It may explain why she now experiences her role as an activist as both “invigorating and humbling.” Offsetting the excitement associated with making a difference is the humility associated with “realizing that what you say is representative of the thoughts of hundreds of people.” Rose appreciates the tremendous responsibility of speaking on behalf of others, concerned that “if I misspoke, or was misunderstood, it would reflect back on all these people.”

Making a difference is what keeps Rose involved with Oregon Action and NWFCO. As she puts it: “You see so much and you learn so much, it’s hard not to be involved.” In part, it is about “the fact that there’s more to do,” that “it’s never ending because society isn’t perfect.” But it is also about the wins, even the minor wins, which serve as a constant reminder “that you can make a difference, your voice is important, your vote is important.”

### **A Purpose in Life**

Terri’s first exposure to the Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) was through an affiliated food program, “a good food program that fed [her] family.” Later, when she spoke with ICAN organizers about the many issues they were working on, “a light went off in [her] head;” she remembers thinking, “I have a purpose in life.” Originally attracted to Idaho “to get away from the government,” Terri now found herself working to effect the legislative changes needed to protect low-income families. She has been actively involved with ICAN for ten years and currently serves on the NWFCO board.

Becoming a part of ICAN was a turning point for Terri. As she describes it: “It has changed my life, it has made me who I am, it has given me motivation. I think I would be a depressed housewife on anti-depressants and I wouldn’t be going to college.” In addition to participating in statewide campaigns, Terri works locally, to get a crosswalk installed near her children’s school in Nezperce and to get a non-profit hospital to actually use the charity care funds it is required to set aside.

Her involvement in ICAN has given her a sense of empowerment as well as a sense of purpose: “Before I used to think I was just stuck in this little hole, that I had no impact on anything. Now I have the motivation to think ‘I can do anything I want to do.’ I can change something in a positive way. I can have that impact. Just because I’m poor, that’s not going to stop me, that’s not going to hold me back.”

One of the challenges that Terri has faced is dealing with her anger over what she’s unable to change: “I’ve had to accept that there are things outside my grasp, things that I can’t control and I have to let go of those.” For Terri, the process of letting go has been about learning “how to move ahead when you think you can’t.” As she explains: “I just have to think, is there really nothing I can do? What are my options? Let’s make some options.”

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

And that's what keeps Terri coming back, all that remains to be done as well as the wins along the way: "Every year it's a fight just to keep our children's health insurance in the state of Idaho, to keep that funding going." Along the way, she's also discovered her own creativity, writing songs that her children then sing at legislative hearings.

Her children's involvement in such activities is just one of the ways in which ICAN "has become our family;" "We don't have any family here, so ICAN has become our family." Terri describes the sense of community she enjoys through her involvement in ICAN:

There's a sense of community I don't experience anywhere else. I enjoy it because the community is so much more diverse than the community I live in. People come from such different lives. I get a new perspective. But even though we come from such different places, we really feel like we come from one place because we're the have-nots. I learn from the community and we grow together.

Learning has been central to Terri's experience in ICAN. She credits the organization's staff – their research of the issues, their knowledge of strategy, and their personal support – for enabling her to step out into the world as a leader. Indeed, she equates the training and education that she's received through ICAN and NWFCO with college, as she puts it "equal to college, literally, equal to college."

### **The Accidental Activist**

Victoria refers to herself as an "accidental activist." Unlike some who she has met for whom activism appears to be a vocation, she sees herself as having "backed into" it. Certainly, it was not part of her consciousness in 1991, when she underwent heart transplant surgery. At that time, five years was considered a good outcome, leaving Victoria feeling like "I had an expiration date." Once past the initial post-surgical recovery, Victoria "just did things I wanted to do; I didn't have a focus."

The events of December 1998 changed all that. One Friday afternoon, when she went to the hospital pharmacy to pick up her anti-rejection medication – "I need to take it twice a day for the rest of my life or I die" – she was informed that her insurance company had cancelled her prescription drug coverage. At the time, she considered herself "lucky" because the pharmacy gave her a 30-day supply to tide her over and charged it to her hospital account.

After appealing to the insurance company, which did no good, she enlisted the help of the Insurance Commissioner and then private attorneys, all of whom at least initially "got nowhere." As Victoria explains: "I had done everything right and I couldn't make it work. All of these resources at my disposal and we could not make it happen." And she began to wonder:

## **Attachment 2 – Summary of Group Interviews (cont.)**

How is it for somebody who is a whole lot sicker, or a whole lot less pushy, or doesn't have the support, or can't read, or doesn't speak the language? How do they manage? And the answer is, they don't. Lots of people die because they took 'no' for an answer.

That was a turning point for Victoria. While the insurance company eventually reinstated her prescription drug coverage, whether because of threats to take legal action or "embarrassing" press coverage, she realized that "we can't fix it for just me and have that be enough."

In January 1999, the Washington State Legislature was debating a Patient Bill of Rights and Victoria was asked to testify by the Insurance Commissioner. She met the executive director of Washington Citizen Action (WCA) at that hearing and discovered an outlet for the "pure indignation" that had sustained her through her own battle. Passage of the Patient Bill of Rights demonstrated to her that ordinary citizens could make a difference.

Since that time, she reports being "very invested in citizen action because it's work worth doing and somebody needs to be there to do it." Her involvement in WCA still includes, but now extends well beyond, health care issues. Yet the work remains very personal for Victoria:

For myself personally, with all the medical stuff, if I stop moving, if I stop continuing to put one foot in front of the other and to look for the next step, I cease to exist. I know if I can keep doing that, we can keep doing that. Some of the changes [WCA is seeking] will take a very long time and may not occur during my lifetime. But if we don't sustain the momentum, it will not happen at all.

Victoria admits that it can be discouraging when "you work very hard for something and it doesn't happen." But she's learned that "the more we're in their face, the sooner they'll take us seriously," while acknowledging that "sometimes you have to walk away and either come back to it later or leave it for someone else."

It is that kind of perspective that sustains Victoria, along with the camaraderie she enjoys with other WCA leaders and staff. As she observes, "it's extremely easy, especially when you're dealing with health issues, to become terribly isolated." Community activism provides a great antidote, an opportunity to "give something back at the same time that you're a part of something that helps you."

### **Attachment 3 – Summary of Activities**

#### **Boise, Idaho (January 18 – 19, 2004)**

##### **Summary of Activities**

Members of Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) began arriving in Boise from around the state on Sunday for the first Action Day of 2004, which was to occur the following day. A group interview was conducted that evening (rather than following the action) because of a full agenda the next day, after which members would need to begin their trips back home. Twelve ICAN members participated in the interview, including 2 Native American women, 1 Mexican - American woman, 2 White men, 4 White women, and 3 teenagers; their association with ICAN ranged from 6 months to over 10 years.

A total of 64 people participated in the Action Day on January 19th. The day started with training about the issues (this action focused primarily on a measure to strengthen utility customer protections) and practical lobbying techniques. Then ICAN members proceeded together to the State Capitol building, arriving in time for the Governor's ceremony in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Members then proceeded in teams of 4 – 7 people each, organized by home district or issue and led by a more senior leader, to visit with legislators. At the end of the day, the whole group reconvened to debrief their lobbying activities.

##### **Themes**

Due to problems with the recording equipment, there is no transcript of the group interview conducted on January 18th. The following themes emerged in that session as well as in my conversations with individual members the next day.

##### **Personal changes associated with participation in ICAN activities**

- Became politically active, including voting in public elections.
- Overcame fears and discomfort around public speaking (training and support of staff and other members credited with ability to do so).
- Experienced an increase in self-esteem; feelings of being “a better person” associated with having “a sense of purpose” and making a difference (“I am somebody. I do make a difference.”).
- Came to see legislators as “human,” “not better than me, just with power.”
- Other changes associated with ICAN involvement included learning to read, attending college, and career aspirations (e.g. community organizing, political analysis).
- Experienced a shift in focus from individual needs to the needs of others (working on issues that do not directly impact themselves or their families).
- Exposure to diversity and racial justice training challenged previously held beliefs and led to taking on causes such as immigrant rights.

### **Attachment 3 – Summary of Activities (cont.)**

Aspects of participation in ICAN that keep people involved

- A sense of community; other members and staff are an important source of support, encouraging and helping one another to acquire new skills and take risks (e.g. public speaking, reading).
- Membership in the ICAN community means power in numbers (“I didn’t think I could change anything. But as a group we can”).
- A sense of efficacy; the resources (e.g. training, research) available to members through ICAN enables them to make a difference.

#### **Observations**

- Members were organized into teams by home district or issue, with a more senior leader identified as captain, at the outset of training, during which they sat together. Leadership was clearly located within the membership and the teams appeared to promote a sense of community.
- Friendships forged at previous ICAN activities were apparent, as members from different parts of the state greeted one another.
- Staff involved members in the presentation of training (e.g. captain of the youth team, age 15, opened the session with a review of the agenda; team captains were asked to demonstrate a role play meeting with a legislator, before practicing within teams). This approach appears to be empowering for those involved and provides a good model for newer members.
- Staff clearly conceives of their role as providing support to the membership, enabling members to lobby their legislators and take on leadership roles within the organization.
- A discussion as part of the training regarding assumptions or stereotypes that legislators may have of members was an opportunity to challenge self-perceptions that may contribute to low self-esteem.

#### **Portland, Oregon (February 16, 2004) Summary of Activities**

A regularly scheduled meeting of Oregon Action’s (OA) Healthcare Committee was the site of this observation in Portland. The chair and other members of the committee agreed to accommodate the group interview as part of their agenda on February 16th. After the chair reported on her participation at the U.S. Action conference in Washington, D.C. and the committee discussed state-based issues associated with access to healthcare and prescription drugs, including next steps, the remainder of the meeting was devoted to the interview.

### **Attachment 3 – Summary of Activities (cont.)**

Six members of the committee attended the meeting and participated in the group interview; one staff person, a woman who recently joined OA with funding from the New Voices Fellowship Program, observed. The activities of the Healthcare Committee appear to be entirely leaderdriven, with the chair facilitating discussion, identifying next steps, and soliciting volunteers for tasks (e.g. draft a letter to the editor on behalf of the committee). Participants included two African American women and one white man. Notably, four reported being previously active politically and were attracted to OA because they experienced it as an organization that can make things happen.

#### **Themes**

##### **Personal Changes Associated with Participation in OA**

- Became energized and engaged by a sense of possibilities.
  - As one of the people who had previously been politically active described it: “I was disgusted, said ‘I’m not going to do anything more in politics, it stinks,’ but then I saw they were doing things for people. It was justice, it was caring.”
- Became politically active for the first time.
  - Another leader conceded that she “didn’t really have a political life before coming to [Fair Share, predecessor to OA], sure I had a lot of ideas, but I didn’t do anything about them.”
  - She credited Fair Share/OA with “my entire political education,” from the nuts and bolts of developing agendas, leading meetings, designing campaign strategies, to “my own thoughts about justice.”
- Became more willing to take a stand.
  - As one leader put it: “I’m more vocal ... I used to fear speaking out, fear the repercussions if I said what I really felt in a public setting.” Now she reports being “even less afraid of stepping out and being up front, or being behind and doing the pushing.”
- Developing more effective communication skills made a difference.
  - She described, for example, developing the capacity to express herself in a way that her message could be received, recognizing that she “didn’t have to be militant, just persistent.”

### **Attachment 3 – Summary of Activities (cont.)**

- Another participant related a similar experience. As she told it: “I used to be aggressive in arguing with people on what I felt was absolutely right. Now, I give people what I think, then listen to [them]” and acknowledge their point of view.
- For someone who wasn’t previously politically active, the challenge was learning “how to talk politics.” Now, she explained, “I can talk about the role of government, I can have conversations with people with different views, and I’m able to connect peoples’ daily lives with politics.”

### **Aspects of Participation in OA That Keep People Involved**

- The ability to make a difference.
- Characterizing her involvement as an “addiction,” one of the participants explained: “Every time we have the smallest of victories it’s such a rush, I can’t wait to get back to figure out what our next whatever is going to be.”
- The importance of being part of a community.
  - For one participant, it is a source of motivation: “Every time I think I’m just going to let it slide, one of them comes to me and says ‘this is what’s wrong and this is what you need to do.’”
  - For another, it is a source of support: “I can’t do that much. I certainly can’t do it by myself.”
  - For still another it is about learning: “Another reason I come back is that I learn something from all of the people in this group – history, insights – the stories are tremendous.”
  - And finally, it is about “friendship:” “I love you people.”
- Talk and address issues of race openly.
  - According to a number of participants, it is not just “frank discussions” regarding institutional racism and framing issues in terms of racial justice, but making “conscious choices” about how the organization itself operates (“The people we want to give a voice to are actually running the organization”).
- Community action can be a family affair.
  - As one participant put it: “There’s nothing we do that you can’t bring your kids to,” and it feels good to “have kids excited about what you’re doing”

### **Attachment 3 – Summary of Activities (cont.)**

- Community action can be a family affair.
  - As one participant put it: “There’s nothing we do that you can’t bring your kids to,” and it feels good to “have kids excited about what you’re doing”

#### **Observations**

The sense of community was immediately visible as people entered the office, apparent in the warm feelings and empathy expressed. Indeed, during the course of the meeting and interview, there were numerous instances in which leaders acknowledged another’s assets and accomplishment or prompted one another to speak about it themselves.

- During the meeting, the chair recognized one member’s appearance on a public service television program regarding the high cost of prescription drugs. She then solicited feedback from others, which yielded the following: “She was articulate, she was clear, she was on message, and her message was very well received ... she was gorgeous, just so bright.”
- During the interview, the committee chair in particular made a point of acknowledging the changes she has witnessed in others.

## Leadership Development for Community Action: Ethnography

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Founded in 2003 at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, a top-ranked school for public service, the Center's unique approach integrates research with practice, bridges individual pursuits and collective endeavors, and connects local efforts with global trends. RCLA scholars use innovative social science methodologies to address ambitious questions that advance big ideas in leadership.

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Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) is a signature program of the Ford Foundation designed to recognize, strengthen and support social change leaders and to highlight the importance of community leadership in improving people's lives.

The LCW Research and Documentation Component is housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. LCW uses three parallel lines of inquiry ethnography, cooperative inquiry and narrative inquiry – to explore questions related to the work of leadership. RCLA is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as a core of the research process. While the award portion of the program has concluded, RCLA continues to partner with nonprofit organizations to develop together new understandings of how social change leadership emerges and is sustained.

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