

# Transforming Lives, Changing Communities

**How Social Justice Organizations Build and Use Power**

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**About this publication**

The case examples cited here are drawn from leadership stories developed by the Research and Documentation component of the Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) program in collaboration with LCW award recipients, their closest associates, and members of their communities through the process of narrative inquiry research. The examples illustrate the work of these organizations in 2003 and 2004 (except where noted). Many are now implementing new programs, engaging new issues, and building new constituencies. Some individuals now serve different roles in their organizations or have moved on.

A critical component of LCW is the Research and Documentation component, based at the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University. (For a description of LCW and RCLA, please see the inside back cover.)

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# Building power to create change.

*“...you have to be willing to believe  
that you can have some power  
and that it’s a good thing.”*

*Brenda Torpy, Co-Director, Burlington Community Land Trust*

This publication uses stories to describe ways in which effective social justice organizations perceive power and build the power necessary to create change in their communities.

An organization has power, in the way we explore it here, when it uses its organizational strength to make a social and political impact. This is a complex process that looks somewhat different in each organization. Through the words of staff, leaders, and members, we explore the following key elements that the organizations we feature here incorporate into their work:

- **Overcoming Obstacles:** When organizations help people overcome external and internal obstacles to realizing their own power, they can then build a strong base of members and leaders.

Immigrant workers with the Teamsters for a Democratic Union in Pasco, Washington, overcame fear to create a new kind of union that successfully won millions of dollars in unpaid wages.

- **Recognizing Everyone's Value:** For some organizations that directly serve people, the consumers of those services hold value. They are potential sources of power, which organizations can use to address the root causes of social problems.

At Philadelphia's Project H.O.M.E., power begins with the internal strength that homeless people possess. From this base of understanding and strength, the organization addresses poverty issues that are at the root of homelessness.

- **Establishing Relationships:** Organizations can continually foster deep, lasting relationships among their constituents who, together, can win campaigns and shift who has power over their community's issues.

At the Sacramento Valley Organizing Community, grassroots leaders sustain a politically powerful network built on one-to-one, public relationships.

- **Strengthening Skills:** Leaders can learn skills by participating in organizations, making an impact in the political arena, training others, and speaking out, in addition to what they learn in workshop sessions.

Locally based leaders, who are members of organizations affiliated with the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations, learn by doing. They come to understand the power of collective action.

- **Cultivating Values:** Programs, campaigns, and organizational cultures that arise from a community's values can be essential for solidifying a power base.

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission relied on incorporating the cultural values of its member tribes into all aspects of its efforts to successfully restore salmon to the river.

- **Forging Alliances:** Alliances can effectively bring together diverse groups of stakeholders for specific purposes, based on common interests, thus multiplying their power.

Families Against Mandatory Minimums uses bipartisan, strategic alliances to reverse what it views as a devastating trend in public policy: mandatory drug sentencing laws.

- **Maintaining Community Control:** An organization that has community control within its structure can define its issues boldly. It can pragmatically address people's concrete interests and reach attainable goals, while sustaining hope for a radically different way of being.

The Burlington Community Land Trust has broad, locally based, institutionalized support for a bold vision of community control of residential land. It engaged people in realistic programs to work toward this vision.

## HIGHLIGHTING STORIES OF POWER IN ACTION

Following are seven organizations' stories. We include examples of communities that are based on geography as well as those based on common issues. The stories highlight different ways in which members of a community form relationships with one another, learn skills, and realize their own power, both personally and collectively. With a seat at the table, these organizations ultimately redefine who influences social policy on the issues that affect their communities.

# Overcoming Obstacles

“That’s when we started to lose our fear. We saw that we weren’t alone. And we had a plan for working together to achieve something.”

*Maria Chavez, meatpacker, Teamsters for a Democratic Union*

## TEAMSTERS FOR A DEMOCRATIC UNION ORGANIZES IMMIGRANT WORKERS

Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) is the national reform movement in the Teamsters Union. Through grassroots organizing, TDU Local 556 in Pasco, Washington, built a movement of meatpackers, some of the nation’s most vulnerable immigrant workers. By educating and training a network of workers, they voted out union officials who were acting more in management’s interest than in the workers’. TDU members built a new kind of union to organize for immigrant workers’ rights both on the job and in the community.

Four companies dominate the meatpacking industry. Competition between these firms creates a high incentive to drive down labor costs by pressuring employees to work faster for less money, in very dangerous conditions. Knives are sharp, the floor is slippery, and workers wrestle with 150-pound slabs of meat. In 2002, the injury rate in meatpacking was 10 per 100 workers per year, compared to a pan-industry average of three per 100.

This story shows how TDU members in the Pasco plant overcame a primary obstacle to their empowerment: their fear of management.

### Losing Fear

In the summer of 1997, a line worker had surgery on his hand and shoulder, yet the company doctor insisted that he was well enough to work. Management had repeatedly disciplined the worker because he was having trouble keeping up. He asked the union shop steward, Martha Perez, for help, but as usual, Perez refused. A group of activist workers gathered petition signatures from half of the workers in the plant, calling for Perez’s ouster. Her response to the petition, says Maria Martinez, a leader in the workers’ struggle, was “These people don’t even speak English. How are they going to get me out of here?”

The bylaws for Local 556 gave the union’s top officer the power to appoint all stewards, and those he appointed, like Martha Perez, were utterly ineffective. Changing the bylaws to allow for elected stewards would require a two-thirds vote by the membership. Activists set out to teach union civics to more than 1,500 members previously uninvolved in union activities. They drew a map of the plant’s four departments and its dozen production lines. They identified volunteers who could inform others on their lines about the changes they had the power to make in the union. Maria Martinez says they looked for people with clean work records and a high level of respect from workers and managers alike. “So that when people saw these people speaking up,” she says, “you would think there must be a real problem.”

“That’s when we started to lose our fear,” says Maria Chavez, a TDU Local 556 co-founder. “We saw that we weren’t alone. And we had a plan for working together to achieve something.” In January 1998, the workers voted unanimously to give members the right to elect stewards. They elected Maria Martinez as chief steward, defeating Perez 547-84.

### Building on Success

Workers continued to use their network. They organized line meetings in the cafeteria. They taught members about their rights and made plans for dealing with shop floor problems. They reported two primary issues: verbal abuse, such as threats by line managers, and the fact that employees needed permission to go to the bathroom. They began to collectively confront abusive supervisors using write-up tickets modeled on the company’s disciplinary tickets. Conditions improved as workers collectively began demanding more dignified treatment.

### Striking to Raise the Stakes

In the spring of 1999 the union’s contract was about to expire. While the reform movement had control of the stewards’ positions, they were not the officials who could negotiate contracts. In the past, Local 556 officials had negotiated with management without any real membership involvement, but TDU activists decided that things would be different this time. “Again, we used the network to organize a contract campaign in the plant,” says Melquiadez (Flaco) Pereyra, a worker. They did this “...through line meetings and one-on-one interviews.”

With negotiations underway, the company abruptly fired Maria Martinez, the newly elected chief steward, for questioning a supervisor’s treatment of a line worker. Employees immediately walked off the job and began a wildcat strike. This was a turning point in the evolution of Local 556. The workers now realized that they could effectively pull together. But the local’s principal

officer never joined picketers on the line or took part in any negotiations during the five-week strike. Instead, two officials from the Teamsters International came in and pushed workers to give in to the company's demands. Without support from the International, the workers' insurgency came to a crossroads.

Morale weakened and workers began returning to work in larger numbers. At a meeting of 50 rank-and-file strike leaders, one worker and activist told the group, "Before I got involved, I didn't have any hope. Now I do. If the [other] workers return to work and we [the strike leaders] stay outside, that will be the end. We can't let that happen. We need to go back in [and end the strike], and we need to fight to take over this local, and we need to create a place of hope...for all immigrant workers throughout eastern Washington."

### **Winning Back Control**

Later that day, strike leaders announced that, regardless of the strike's outcome and the contract negotiations, members would form a slate to challenge Local 556 officers in the fall elections. Several months later, on August 7, 2000, workers swept the Members' Voice slate into office, with a rehired Maria Martinez taking the top seat by a three-to-one margin. Again, the workers' network had shown its power.

After winning office in Local 556, the reform leadership duplicated the networks established at the Pasco plant in the other plants it represented. It built new leadership; improved pay, benefits, and conditions; and expanded to take on broader immigrant rights issues—mobilizing lobbying campaigns and rallies in support of pro-worker immigration reform. TDU members also united thousands of meatpackers in a series of class action lawsuits to demand millions of dollars in unpaid wages.

With power, control, and millions of dollars at stake, management set out to break the movement of immigrant workers in Pasco. When a company-backed candidate was defeated in the next local union election, he circulated a petition to decertify the union from the plant. Once the petition was filed, the company promoted this man into management and launched a union-busting campaign that included a threat to close the plant if workers voted to remain a union shop. Workers voted in favor of the union in one election but were defeated in a second. The Teamsters International subsequently merged Local 556 with another local union.

Despite this setback, the movement of immigrant workers in Pasco continues to make a positive impact for other meatpackers across the country. Their class action lawsuit for unpaid wages was the first decision made by the Roberts-era Supreme Court. Workers in Pasco won \$8.4 million in back wages and expect to win \$10 million more in other cases still pending as of Spring 2006. Most importantly, their unanimous victory at the Supreme Court sets a precedent that will enable meatpackers and poultry workers across the country to file similar claims for unpaid wages for off-the-clock work they have been forced to do for years.

By overcoming the workers' fear and building a network among them, TDU members had the base to exercise a force of power that continues to resonate.

"We sent a message to the company and the union officials that we weren't the same ignorant workers they'd known for years," says Flaco Pereyra. "We weren't going to stay quiet. We were going to fight."

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This example draws from the narrative story *How Immigrant Meatpackers Built a Movement for Change* and is updated through Spring 2006.

# Recognizing Everyone's Value

“The people who are actually homeless, I think they’re a prophetic sign in our society...that something’s radically wrong.”

*Sister Mary Scullion, Executive Director, Project H.O.M.E.*

## **PROJECT H.O.M.E. LINKS DIRECT SERVICE AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

The problem of homelessness, according to Philadelphia’s Project H.O.M.E., lies not within homeless individuals but in how society marginalizes them. With direct service for homeless people as its centerpiece, Project H.O.M.E. seeks to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty by empowering homeless people and their supporters, meeting immediate needs, and pursuing policy change.

In fact, a social change mission permeates every aspect of the organization. “Our culture isn’t provider-client. Our culture is ‘we’re all in this together,’” says Joan McConnon, Associate Executive Director. Thus, the organization cultivates relationships among homeless people and staff who “come with a passion...and come with a commitment that they want to spend their lives trying to make it a better or a more just world,” McConnon says.

### **Respecting People’s Power to Transform Themselves**

Project H.O.M.E.’s empowerment process lies fundamentally in the way it values society’s most vulnerable people. It encourages staff members to listen to homeless individuals, to comprehend the challenges they face, and to understand what their experiences mean to them. This process affects staff members personally and allows them to provide much more effective support than they would otherwise.

“Everybody has the potential to turn their life around, and our role basically is to help them to do that and to explore the possibilities and the options they have to do that,” says a staff member and former resident. “And we get to do that by treating them nice. By getting to know them, by hanging out with them on the street, by taking them to the hospital when they need it, by not getting mad when they do something like spit on us or whatever.” In turn, the staff trusts that the organization will maintain a consistent approach. “We can take people from the street and pretty much know that the relationship that we have started is going to continue—that people are going to continue to be treated properly and respectfully.”

### **Seeking to End Homelessness**

Going beyond the staff commitment, Sister Mary Scullion, Executive Director, comments that the issue of homelessness brings out a sense of mission in people across all sectors, which enables Project H.O.M.E. to engage the wider community in its vision: Project H.O.M.E. offers “...a very reciprocal process of transformation,” Sister Mary says, “where everyone has a role to play in making this a more just and compassionate society.”

Project H.O.M.E. begins with street outreach and offers a range of model residential and community programs. This includes hundreds of housing units, from entry-level to permanent housing, each with comprehensive services, including healthcare, education, and employment.

The organization mobilizes community members who want to make a difference on the issue of creating housing and opportunities for homeless people. Project H.O.M.E. has used some dramatic tactics, such as hunger strikes and encouraging mass numbers of people—both homeless individuals and their supporters—to follow the mayor around the city and attend rallies at the state capital. Victories include modifying a “sidewalk behavior ordinance,” which would have criminalized people on the streets, and using Federal Fair Housing Legislation to secure the right for a permanent facility to house homeless and mentally ill people. Further evidence of the organization’s impact appears in the January 2004 report *Strategies for Reducing Chronic Street Homelessness*, prepared for the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, which specifically cited Project H.O.M.E.’s organizing efforts.

The organization continues to address the structural causes of homelessness, primarily through public policy education and advocacy. It conducts voter education and registration in shelters, residences, and programs across Philadelphia. More than 70 percent of Project H.O.M.E. residents voted in a crucial mayoral election in 1999.

By recognizing everyone’s value, Project H.O.M.E. empowers homeless people and the staff who serve them, as well as community members who want to live in a more just society. It creates opportunities for people to truly see and value one another. Together, they have the power to shift the politics of homelessness in Philadelphia.

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This example draws from both the ethnography *Until All of Us Are Home: The Process of Leadership at Project H.O.M.E.* and from the narrative story *Promoting Self-Sufficiency Among Homeless People: A Continuum of Care and Social Policy Alternatives*.

# Establishing Relationships

“A group of people in a room that have no relationship with each other is a mob. A group of people in a room that have a relationship with each other is power.”

*Larry Ferlazzo, organizer, Sacramento Valley Organizing Community*

## **SACRAMENTO VALLEY ORGANIZING COMMUNITY MOVES LEADERS INTO RELATIONSHIPS AND ACTION**

The Sacramento Valley Organizing Community (SVOC) is a three-county, grassroots organization with 40 member institutions, primarily churches in northern California. Its multi-issue organizing has secured more than \$30 million to build 360 affordable single-family homes. It led a nationally recognized citizenship campaign that resulted in thousands of immigrants being sworn in as U.S. citizens. Its “one-stop” welfare-to-work center places people in living-wage jobs that pay \$9.50 an hour and higher. SVOC, however, goes beyond working on individual issues. It shifts the balance of power that affects its constituents. It does this by fostering relationships among locally-based leaders and moving them to action.

### **Finding and Cultivating Leaders with a Base of Relationships**

Staff organizers go door to door in the community to find potential leaders. They talk to people about their beliefs and their dreams. In these conversations, the organization looks for people with a base of relationships in their communities, who, as they say, have a following and can deliver it. Organizers also look for “cold anger” as a sign of someone who can be a SVOC leader. That is anger that is focused rather than fiery and out of control. “Hot anger” says Larry Ferlazzo, organizer, “isn’t structured in a strategic and effective way.” Hot anger, he says, is what you get on talk radio. “They feel like they’re actually doing something when they’re not accomplishing anything,” Ferlazzo says.

The organization invests in a week-long leadership training, sponsored by the Industrial Areas Foundation, to start turning these potential leaders into actual leaders. Here, leaders learn an Iron Rule: Never do for others what they can do for themselves.

### **Focusing on Relationships**

The key to SVOC’s approach is its focus on relationships. As everyone in the organization continually builds the base of members who have connections in their communities, SVOC also cultivates relationships among them. This means, “to approach things relationally as opposed to [diving into] a task, because the relationships will be the glue,” says Larry Ferlazzo.

SVOC’s campaign to help immigrants secure driver’s licenses offers an example of the power of relationships. A Mexican American leader active in SVOC told an African American leader about her frustrations in trying to obtain a license. The African American leader held one-on-one meetings with African Americans she knew. She learned that they too faced complications around getting licenses. Having identified a problem and a constituency, she invited a range of SVOC leaders, as well as an expert on immigration, to meet together. “We just had conversations. People just told the stories,” she says. “And that’s how it started. And we had Latino sisters there too. And they began to share their stories and we began to share and see a commonality, that we have these issues together.”

### **Moving to Action**

From the bond of their relationships, the Mexican American and African American members of SVOC were then able to use their power. The campaign became a more substantial push as leaders pursued policies to make securing driver’s licenses easier for immigrants.

In moving to action, leaders of each of SVOC’s campaigns also learned the political landscape, including which policy makers they needed to win over in order to implement various programs and projects. They learned the requirements of the local legal landscape, such as zoning regulations and minimum wage laws. Their expertise, therefore, expanded beyond what they knew about living with problems to include possible solutions.

Having leaders speak out publicly from this knowledge base has been another core element of SVOC’s approach. It has helped community leaders regain a sense of their own strength and their ability to act. “You know this is a great day. I’ve got a house,” said an SVOC leader at a groundbreaking for one of its new housing projects. “Many of the people I know got a house. It’s a great victory. But that’s not the real victory today. The real victory is that I’m up in front speaking to you—that I can be across the table with the mayor and congressperson to negotiate. And even more important, that my children see me doing these things.”

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*This example draws from the narrative story **Building Community Power by Building Grassroots Leaders**.*

# Strengthening Skills

“When people are willing to commit hours and hours and hours of their time or do crazy things that they wouldn’t normally do...it’s because something sparked in them and shifted them...this is what we’re going for.”

*Mimi Ho, Regional Organizer, Northwest Federation of Community Organizations*

## **THE NORTHWEST FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS TRAINS SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERS**

Four multi-issue, economic justice organizations compose the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NWFCO): the Idaho Community Action Network, Oregon Action, Montana People’s Action, and Washington Citizen Action. They organize low- and moderate-income families around issues such as healthcare, education, and housing. NWFCO develops the leadership skills of community members whom these issues directly affect.

Terri first learned about the Idaho Community Action Network through a food program she accessed to feed her family. A low-income mother, she saw herself as being “stuck in this little hole...I had no impact on anything,” she says.

Through participating in NWFCO’s leadership development process, which combines workshop training with hands-on experience in its locally based organizations, Terri underwent a personal and political transformation. Originally attracted to Idaho to “get away from the government,” she found herself working for legislative changes to benefit low-income families. She gained greater competence, authority, and the power to directly influence local and statewide political processes.

“Now I have the motivation to think [that] I can do anything I want to do,” Terri says. “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.” Instead of thinking she has no power, she now thinks, “What are my options? Let’s make some options.”

### **Learning by Doing**

NWFCO’s leadership development starts with recruitment. Staff and organizational leaders go door-to-door and engage in one-on-one home visits where they listen to people affected by the issues and invite them into the local organization.

As new members get involved, they immediately participate in campaign activities to help win community issues. They build relationships with others. They start to take on leadership roles in campaigns and in the organization.

Staff members train these new leaders in basic organizing skills, often in one-day sessions called Saturday Schools. Topics include issue identification, campaign strategy, and recruitment. The local training is embedded in the organizations’ structures. This is “a consistent part of the work,” says Mimi Ho, Regional Organizer. “It’s part of the work plans, it’s discussed, it’s in calendars, so it’s part of the culture of the organization.”

Leaders then take on more responsibility and visibility, assuming public roles in campaigns. They participate in local board training sessions to acquire organizational leadership skills such as financial management and agenda setting. As their responsibilities increase, they attend a four-day, regional training on door knocking, home visits, leadership meetings, and issue forums.

Senior leaders continue to develop advanced skills. They participate in training that focuses on NWFCO’s core principles and values. Senior leaders work on developing their public speaking. They also learn the Saturday School curriculum in order to train other leaders in their own states.

At the most advanced stage of their development, senior leaders travel to other states to recruit, train, and mentor new leaders. “We send many of our senior leaders to another state to take over staffing responsibilities for a period of time and come back and debrief and reflect on those experiences,” explains Lee Ann Hall, NWFCO Executive Director.

“No one had to teach me how to open my mouth,” says Anita, a senior leader with Montana People’s Action who originally got involved to fight for uniform rules and regulations for mobile home courts. However, she says, “I had no clue what I was doing except shooting off my mouth and saying, ‘This is how it affects me.’” She needed a “structure” in order to feel “rooted and grounded.” Anita gained the direction she needed through leadership training with NWFCO.

Terri, of the Idaho Community Action Network, goes so far as to say that the training and experiential education that she’s received through NWFCO is “...equal to college. Literally, equal to college.”

## Taking Action

Participating in campaigns and in building a community-based organization are intertwined with each step of the training cycle. NWFCO staff believe that participation changes people's understanding of power itself, as well as their ability to make a difference. Because the local groups train and activate large numbers of people, one aspect of what leaders learn by doing is how to use their collective political power to influence decision makers and get results.

Anita, of Montana People's Action, describes the effect that directly participating in collective action had on her: "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." For Anita, who formerly did not even vote, "...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."

NWFCO ultimately won the rule changes that prompted Anita's initial involvement. She went on to become the chair of the state-wide board of Montana People's Action. For more than 15 years, she has worked on a range of issues, including healthcare funding and a living wage ordinance. She stays involved in part to bring new leaders into the struggle. She is motivated "when people like me, who didn't feel their voice meant anything, see that we can win."

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This example draws from the ethnography *Leadership Development for Community Action: An Ethnographic Inquiry* and from its addendum, *Developing Leaders through a Six Step Cycle*.

# Cultivating Values

“The water came not from rivers and creeks and streams, but water came from a sacred place. And it came with a song and a prayer. And because of that we had to have a certain reverence, not just for the fish. They were only one of the many life forms that would benefit.”

*Ted Strong, former Executive Director, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission*

## **THE COLUMBIA RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION DRAWS ON THE HISTORY, CULTURE, AND SPIRITUALITY OF ITS MEMBER TRIBES**

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission joins together the power of four American Indian tribes, the Nez Perce, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Yakima, to bring salmon back to the Columbia River. These Pacific Northwest tribes founded the Commission in the mid-1970s when dams, irrigation, logging, development, recreation, commercial fishing, and industrial pollution had greatly reduced the once thriving population of salmon that had sustained the tribes and their cultures for centuries.

While more than 150 organizations claim some portion of control over the Columbia River watershed, the tribes have the right, under an 1855 treaty with the U.S. government, to harvest fish from the river and manage its resources. Prior to the creation of the Commission, there was no organized body led by the tribes to implement and protect these rights. At the time of the Commission’s founding, the American Indian Movement had some momentum. This fostered the ability of the leaders of the four tribes to organize to create an inter-tribal agency. Still, the Commission squared off against some of the most powerful interests in the region, including power, timber, and shipping companies, as well as commercial fishermen, developers, and state and federal government agencies.

A series of federal court decisions has continually reaffirmed the right of the tribes to manage the resources of the Columbia River. “There’s now a greater acceptance that the tribes are at the table,” says Roy Sampsel, Commission Executive Director during the 1970s. “But it’s only because of the growth, persistence, and insistence of the Commission, and the fact that they have this legal foundation that’s been challenged many times and never overthrown.”

Through the Commission, the tribes now protect and implement their treaty rights, which is critical to their spiritual, economic, and social well-being. With an emphasis on building power by maintaining unity among the tribes, fostering traditional, inter-generational leadership, and developing legal, policy, and scientific expertise linked with cultural concepts, the Commission is successfully restoring salmon stocks.

### **Uniting Behind “The Spirit of the Salmon”**

While favorable court decisions have provided a powerful foundation from which to work, the Commission has had to redefine its role continually in managing salmon. Early on, “...everything was project-oriented rather than ecosystem-based,” says Rob Lothrop, Director of the Commission’s Policy Development and Litigation Support Department. “The tendency was for everybody to run wherever the next fire was lit or wherever we saw smoke rising,” adds Ted Strong, former Executive Director. “The tribal elders wanted a more stable organization. And they wanted an organization that had a sense of cultural pride and spiritualism.”

So in close consultation with elders, the Commission formed a plan to capture the essence of what salmon meant to the tribes and their respective heritages, while providing scientific direction for restoring salmon stocks. “Culturally we could say, ‘This is where we know salmon used to be,’” says Ted Strong. “But science would tell us whether or not it was possible to reintroduce or supplement with additional brood stock to create healthy, viable populations out there. And science would tell us whether or not federal policy was even close to being acceptable.”

The plan, Wy-Kan-Ush-Mi Wa-Kish-Wit—which takes its name from a traditional spiritual principle meaning “the spirit of the salmon”—has been officially adopted by the Commission as its Tribal Restoration Plan for Columbia River Salmon. With a comprehensiveness that other plans lacked and an organizing principle based on common sense, it has led to effective, integrated policies and projects.

“It doesn’t have the same kind of legal authority as the Endangered Species Act or some of the other mandated plans,” says Lothrop. “Its influence is in the fact that it really knitted together the various stages of the salmon life cycle and represented a statement from tribal culture and tribal government of a vision for salmon restoration.” In order for the salmon to survive, Strong adds, “The whole ecosystem had to change. Dams had to be altered. River flows had to be altered. Water quality had to be improved. The rate of development had to slow down. People’s lifestyles had to change.”

The result of the tribes' unity and persistence in the face of continued powerful forces is that salmon runs have inched back up to the point where the Commission allowed the first net fishing effort in nearly 40 years. The Commission has successfully opened fish hatcheries and returned brood stock to key Columbia River feeder streams and rivers. The Commission continues to push for policies aimed at mitigating the impact of everything from drought to overdevelopment, including the operations of the Bonneville Power Administration, which operates all of the hydroelectric dams in the Columbia River basin.

### **Planning for Seven Generations**

Another guiding principle for the Commission is the Native American principle of "planning for seven generations." The spirit of the salmon passes from generation to generation. Commission staff members have multiple stories of learning about the intertwined history of the salmon and the four tribes from tribal elders. "I learned about fishing as I was growing up," says Don Sampson, Executive Director from 1999 to 2003. "I would travel with my uncles and my father, and we would fish. And also, and probably more importantly, my grandmother would talk about fishing. And they talked about the places that they fished and the importance of salmon. And we were participating all the time in cultural activities like going to the longhouse for the salmon feast." As Sampson grew up and the situation around the salmon grew more precarious, those same elders directly asked him what he was going to do.

The tribes' traditional approach to leadership does not necessarily involve training. Instead, the elders pass down lessons through subtle stories that require attentive listening to both words and body language. Elders also exert gentle pressure, for instance, by suggesting to a young Don Sampson that he become a lawyer to fight for treaty rights. Elders also provide a critical network of support, by attending an important or intimidating meeting, for example, or inviting leaders to sit together, slow down, and think things out.

The Commission works through the tribes to impart these principles to upcoming generations. "They're the next generation of leadership, and they need to know that none of this happened by accident—it was because of culture and history," Sampson reflects.

Through drawing on the traditional value of intergenerational leadership and using culturally meaningful ways of sharing, teaching, and learning, the Commission upholds and implements good public policy to put the salmon back in the river. It also relies on all of these to maintain the unity among the four tribes that constitutes its base of power. "We all share the salmon. We share our cultures. We share the table. We share our families," Sampson says. "And that's what always brings us back together."

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This example draws from the narrative story *Bringing Salmon Back to the Columbia River: How Native American Tribes Are Implementing a Watershed-Wide Plan* and from unpublished research notes.

# Forging Alliances

“You have people from every race and class, and suddenly they’re united by the horror of what has happened to them. There’s this sense of bonding that really transcends the usual political divisions. What we generally say is, ‘There’s only one thing everyone in this room agrees on. Mandatory minimums don’t work. They’re wrong.’ Other issues are left outside the room.”

*Laura Sager, Executive Director, Families Against Mandatory Minimums*

## **FAMILIES AGAINST MANDATORY MINIMUMS GALVANIZES DIVERSE ALLIES**

Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM), based in Washington, D.C., mobilizes the angry and grief-stricken families of people incarcerated under mandatory drug sentencing laws. It seeks to overturn these laws state by state and to change legislation at the federal level.

Under mandatory sentencing laws, even first-time, nonviolent offenders receive extensive prison sentences. Drug defendants constitute approximately 60 percent of the federal prison population. JeDonna Young, for example, was with her boyfriend in Michigan when he was arrested on a drug trafficking charge. Even though Young’s boyfriend insisted that she had nothing to do with his drug activities, they both received sentences of life in prison without parole.

With 30,000 members in nearly 30 states, Families Against Mandatory Minimums has won numerous legislative victories at both the state and federal level. A critical aspect of the organization’s power comes from educating and mobilizing a growing and diverse corps of mandatory minimum opponents, along with its base of families directly affected by mandatory minimums. Allies include federal judges who oppose the constraints placed on their judgment and authority, legislators who are aware that shrinking state budgets cannot accommodate a growing prison population, policy makers, a union that represents prison guards, and civil rights advocates who know the toll that mandatory minimums take on low-income communities of color and are beginning to view both current policing and sentencing procedures as discriminatory.

### **Forming Alliances Based on a Clear Goal**

Families Against Mandatory Minimums maintains a single-issue focus in order to build this broad-based support. “The broader the issue you’re trying to address, the narrower the coalition because you have fewer people who can sign on,” says Laura Sager, Executive Director. “The coalitions that [Families Against Mandatory Minimums] puts together are so effective because they’re so clear-minded on the end goal,” a former General Counsel to the House Judiciary Committee adds. “And they’re willing to compromise in a way that doesn’t sell out on the idea, but in a very realistic way, which makes them even more effective.”

“When you’re talking about changing laws, you’re talking about the real development of a base that has the political power to make the changes you want, and it’s very strategic,” says Sager. “You have to look at building coalitions that cut across party lines and cut across the usual divisions in order to achieve the objectives you want [in establishing alliances and coalitions].... You have to understand the limits. They’re likely to be temporary and issue-based, and you may agree to disagree at a later point. The process of building coalitions is ‘seize the day.’ You seize the factors that are moving in your favor and then move on.”

“I’ve always felt really strongly that we have to have Republicans and conservatives in whatever coalitions we have,” says Julie Stewart, founder, “because in many states, the majority of the legislators are Republican, and in the federal system, you definitely need Republican votes.”

“If we get too ideological about politics,” says Laura Sager, “then we’re unable to see how we can really develop our political strategy in the real world.”

In Michigan, the organization sought to eliminate the mandatory sentencing law—among the harshest in the country—not just modify it. It mobilized in the way it knows best, in what activists describe as a grassroots and “grasstops” campaign, working from the bottom up and from the top down. The campaign raised broad awareness of the damage and injustice done by mandatory minimums in the state. FAMM amassed the kind of diverse, yet highly focused coalition that has proven so successful on this issue.

In the spring of 2002, the Michigan legislature essentially eliminated mandatory drug sentencing and repealed lifetime probation, while at the same time offering early parole to those who had been sentenced under previous guidelines. That law represented a change in attitudes and policy that was so significant it set the standard for future campaigns. For JeDonna Young, after spending 21 years behind bars, it meant her freedom.

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*This example draws from the narrative story [Changing Mandatory Drug Sentencing Laws on the Federal and State Levels](#).*

# Maintaining Community Control

“I think private ownership of the land is a really bizarre concept. It makes no sense. It makes no more sense than private ownership of water.”

*Mary Houghton, Co-Director, Burlington Community Land Trust*

## THE BURLINGTON COMMUNITY LAND TRUST ENGAGES THE COMMUNITY IN A BOLD VISION ISSUE

In the vision of the Burlington Community Land Trust in Vermont, housing is a basic right, not a commodity to be bought and sold. The Trust builds shared decision-making and control within the organization so that members can use this vision not as an unattainable rallying cry, but as a concrete issue that members use to sustain their communities.

### Creating Permanently Affordable Housing

The Land Trust directly subsidizes local low-income families in buying homes on land it owns, controls, and keeps perpetually affordable. When the homeowners sell, they receive 25 percent of the increased equity. The Trust receives 75 percent and uses the money to help keep the housing permanently affordable. “The Land Trust wanted to make those subsidies permanent for whoever needed the affordable housing,” says Howard Dean, former Vermont Governor. “I think it’s the way the federal government should do housing.”

“Grassroots activists get it because of community control, but very conservative people get it because it’s a good use of public wealth,” says John Davis, who works with land trusts throughout the country.

As of 2004, the Trust had developed 320 moderately priced single-family houses and condominiums and helped more than 400 families buy their own homes. It has developed affordable housing on Burlington’s desirable waterfront. In addition to housing, the organization has developed a variety of commercial properties in and around Burlington, including artists’ co-ops, retail outlets, and office space for nonprofit organizations.

### Committing to a Grassroots Base

The Trust’s ability to define the issues in a visionary way, while pursuing them practically, lies in remaining accountable to its grassroots base through institutionalized democracy. It cultivates a membership of more than 2,000 people, and all members have voting rights. The community-based Board of Directors makes all substantive program decisions. For example, Land Trust board members serve on the loan committee, which lends money to homeowners, renters, and others. “The organization views the money not as agency money we’re doling out to clients, but as money belonging to the membership,” says Bob Robbins, board chair and Land Trust leaseholder. “It is disbursed by the membership to other members. There’s a communal view that is very different from staff administering funds.”

The Land Trust also maintains an internal policy that requires a diverse set of opinions among its board members. In fact, the organization openly encourages debate. One founder describes early debates over the amount of equity Land Trust homeowners would be allowed to keep when they sold their houses. Some people argued for zero equity, insisting that no one should make equity, which was inherently evil. Others said that homeowners had to have some stake in maintaining and improving their homes. “We always had this balance, and that’s why those debates went on for so long,” the founder comments. “When we talk about the board, that’s one of the striking things...people could so disagree and not fall apart. The disagreement was like...building a bond over the idea of, ‘We got to get it right.’” By institutionalizing this aspect of the organization’s origins, the Land Trust remains true to its mission of broad-based community control.

In addition, communities invite the Land Trust to come in, and the Trust then builds off those invitations. “We really try to draw some leadership from that community,” says Amy Demetrowitz, Project Developer for the Land Trust. “We always make sure we have a board member in the community, and through them we’ll do presentations to the city council. We’ll target certain events to that neighborhood. We think, ‘If we’re going to go and recruit and work with a new community, how do you make that meaningful?’”

The Burlington Community Land Trust’s ability to define its own issues lies in an institutionalized, democratic process that engages hundreds of local residents. The organization enjoys broad support for a bold vision of community land control. It uses this to build a substantial amount of affordable housing on land it holds in trust for the community.

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*This example draws from the narrative story [Enabling Low-Income Families to Buy Their Own Homes While Holding the Land in Trust for the Community](#).*

# Why examine power?

*“Without the organization behind me, I’m one voice. But when I’m representing our organization, I’m many, many voices. And people listen.”*

*Anita, senior leader, Northwest Federation of Community Organizations*

**P**ower is a rich and vast topic. Clearly, its meaning is multilayered, and its implementation is unique to each situation. Organizations that build and use power effectively exist across the range of nonprofits, including those that provide social services; those that advocate from a policy perspective; and those that use a grassroots, community organizing approach.

As the organizations we feature here demonstrate, building and using power to create change can include the following:

- Persevering through significant obstacles and creatively surmounting them.
- Forming relationships among individuals, among constituencies, among organizations, and among allies—including unlikely allies.
- Recognizing constituents' existing skills and experience as well as developing their expertise, leadership, and influence.
- Drawing on community values and beliefs and applying these to political issues.

We hope that these stories offer ideas for other communities and organizations to help them harness the power to change their constituents' lives for the better.

You may obtain links to the featured organizations, as well as the fuller narrative stories and ethnographies about their work noted throughout this document, at: [www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership](http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership).

### **About the Research Center for Leadership in Action at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University**

The Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) promotes practice-grounded, social-science based, interdisciplinary research that will help strengthen both the theory and the practice of leadership in public, nonprofit, and community-based service. The Research Center for Leadership in Action is based at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. It was launched in August 2003 with support from the Ford Foundation.

### **About the Leadership for a Changing World Program**

Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) is a program of the Ford Foundation that recognizes and supports community leaders known in their own communities but not known broadly. In addition, it seeks to shift the public conversation about who are authentic leaders to include the kinds of leaders participating in this program. Each year, Leadership for a Changing World recognizes 17 to 20 leaders and leadership groups. Awardees receive \$115,000 and participate in semiannual program meetings, collaborative research, and a strategic communications effort. LCW is a signature program of the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Advocacy Institute and RCLA, NYU Wagner.

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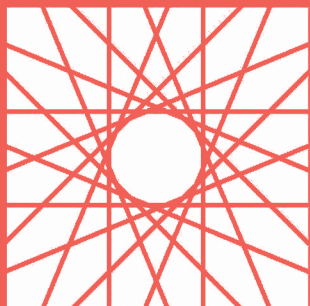
**For more information about Leadership for a Changing World and the Research and Documentation Component, visit [www.leadershipforchange.org](http://www.leadershipforchange.org) or call 212.998.7550.**

### **Credits**

Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla from RCLA managed the production of this booklet.  
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