

Organizing and Fundraising: Sisters in the Struggle

by Vicki Quatmann

After 14 years of fundraising for a community organization in the mountains of east Tennessee, I have some observations to share about the ways that fundraising and organizing need to work more closely together to build people power.

From 1979 until 1993 I was the fundraiser for an Appalachian community organization called Save Our Cumberland Mountains, better known as SOCM (pronounced SOCK-EM). I had initially been hired to answer the phone and be available in the office as backup to six organizers who were busy outside the office, but fundraising tasks kept coming my way. Since I had come to SOCM because I wanted to be an organizer, I watched the work of the organizers closely.

Slowly, I learned the meaning of the word "organizing" and the intricacies of the strip mining and surface rights issues that SOCM was already famous for addressing during its short seven-year history. I learned that the job of an organizer is to make it possible for people to work together for what they believe in. It is about gaining control over decisions about new industries, jobs, landfills, strip mines, water, taxes, and schools that can make a life-and-death difference to the future of small rural communities. It is about making elected officials accountable to us, the taxpayers who pay their salaries.

Understanding organizing was intoxicating. It made sense to me – more sense than all my past years of summer volunteer work doing service to needy people through youth camps, cheese lines, and free day care.

I learned that a good organizer never does *for* the people she is working with; rather, she shows them how to do for themselves. A good organizer doesn't speak at the public hearing; rather, she helps those upset about the incoming strip mine to prepare their own testimony and practice their own speech. A good organizer is never found quoted in the press but rather sees to it that the press contacts the local people concerned about the strip mine and helps them prepare their own words for the media.

I learned that a good organizer lays out possibilities and challenges the people to try all the strategies that have been successful elsewhere in similar fights, and before the final strategies are chosen, backs away and lets those people directly affected by the promised strip mine decide how much they are willing to risk in their fight to stop it. Organizers don't tell people, they ask.

I saw organizers push people into taking action by refusing to do it themselves. I worked with organizers who knew that if they did it themselves, they would erode the very foundation of the people-power they were trying to build. I learned that an organizer has done a first-rate job when he is forgotten at the end of a successful legislative campaign and the members are proudly owning the victory, claiming they did it themselves.

Good organizing is about ownership. It's about providing people with the opportunity to become aware of their own capabilities and potential. In fact, a good organizer, if successful, turns each person she meets into a temporary organizer. Cesar Chavez, one of the great organizers of this century, said that people are infinitely more appreciative of what they do for you than what you do for them.

I saw that good organizers must be astute people-readers. They recognize the person who can "spare a little time" who is actually ready to give it all if only someone would ask them. They recognize when the moment is right to put someone to work, knowing that if they don't, they'll lose them for the cause. They are always looking for commitment. They want to grab that first spark of interest and give it a job. Then they move that person to more steady involvement – regular meetings, phone tree, help with research. Eventually, they move the person to the kind of commitment that can only be

made with risk and total awareness, the kind that moves a person to speak out publicly on issues dividing their local community or take responsibility as chair of the local chapter or a position on the board.

When an organizer position came available on a campaign opposing the Department of Energy's irresponsible disposal of hazardous waste in the ground and streams surrounding Oak Ridge, Tennessee, I applied for it. As I worked on the campaign over the next two years, I learned an even deeper respect for what it takes to be a good organizer – strong commitment, sharp intelligence, bulldog persistence, an ability to work with people, and a sense of humor that keeps it all in balance.

Two years into my organizing job, the person who replaced me as fundraiser left on two weeks' notice, throwing my old job back into my lap along with the organizing. Our search for a new fundraiser dragged on and on. Though good organizing is every bit as difficult as good fundraising, there are hundreds of people who believe they can do the one and not the other. I chose to return to my old fundraising job with a renewed sense of purpose and insight into what I was supporting and SOCM hired another organizer.

Two Sides of the Coin

Along with the organizers, my job as the fundraiser was to be out there asking, asking, and asking some more – challenging the membership to greater commitment through their financial gifts; showing them how true ownership and control begin with owning the resources that power their own organization. I became excited about my part in the work. For the first time I proudly identified myself as a fundraiser.

One of my favorite sources of inspiration during my years of fundraising for SOCM was a little booklet titled *Axioms for Organizers* by Fred Ross, Sr. I read it often and simply substituted the word "fundraiser" for "organizer." Try it yourself. Substitute "fundraiser" for "organizer" in the section above where I speak about what I learned about good organizing.

As my years at SOCM fled by, SOCM celebrated its 10th, then its 15th and then its 20th anniversary. Each anniversary became the occasion for making stronger demands for support on SOCM's constituency. At the 10th, pledges per mile on an 1,800-mile canoe trip by one of the senior staff set the occasion for the first serious big-dollar asks. At the 15th, we built a small "Can Do It Fund" to pay for corner-turner opportunities in the midst of rough campaigns. For our 20th, we established our first endowment, a "Year 2000 Fund," and solicited three-year pledges from every member of the organization.

As a fundraiser my job was to get a donor's first gift. We call it an impulse gift. Often the organizers got it in the form of the annual \$10 dues. Then I set up opportunities that encouraged giving at other times during the year so that the new member donor might become a habitual giver. Finally, someone from the organization (myself or another staff member or another SOCM member) asked the member donor to give a significant gift, one that required risk and a serious level of commitment. (Does this sound like organizing?)

I dreamed of a whole army of member volunteers who might join in asking other members to make that step toward serious ownership through a significant gift to SOCM. The staff and I weren't a big enough asking force. Besides, a friend or a neighbor in the community who has made the same commitment is better heard, more respected.

I wanted people to give at a level that moved them away from saying, "You people at SOCM ought to..." to "We ought to..." I wanted them to feel, through their donations, that they were in charge, they owned and had real say over their organization. I dreamed of the day that the greatest part of SOCM's support would come from this membership and supporters, not from foundations.

I have taught fundraising to future organizers at the Southern Empowerment Project where I use an exercise describing a major paper company about to locate in an area that has been primarily dependent on tourism. The weak local chapter of an existing community organization has decided to fight location of the plant. I lay out, in detail, the geography, sociology, and politics and economics of the specific area that will be affected. Then I split the group into two. One half is to be organizers and plan the strategy for how to address this devastating intruder; the other half is to be fundraisers and decide how to raise the \$20,000 that the first year's campaign efforts will cost.

Both times I've tried this exercise the organizer group has been amazed at the powerful potential that the fundraising plan has for broadening the constituency committed to the campaign. In fact, it has been generally true that the fundraising plan, more than the organizing plan, has incorporated the greater effort to broaden the commitment to a greater number of people. The organizing strategies tend to quickly become heavily focused on research and similar strategies that depend on a few skilled leaders.

All the skills used by good organizers are the very same skills used by good fundraisers. Both organizers and fundraisers must be sensitive people-observers. Both must be intensely aware of the potential activist's/donor's self-interests and how those interests mesh with the overall group's goals. Both must be willing to ask the potential activist/donor to make a commitment – of time and/or money – and to take a risk in trusting the integrity of the organization. Both must know how to inspire confidence, convey to the activists/donors that their contribution is extremely important and show regularly how that contribution is making an important difference.

Integrating Fundraising and Organizing

If good organizing is about deepening commitment, no aspect of the campaigns our organizations address will be more effectively served than by our good work to pay the costs. A strong base of constituent support that is giving at its capacity and helping to increase that support in an organized annual campaign is the most important ingredient in assuring our organizations' financial stability and long-term future. A big pool of donors is like a major savings account and organizational pension plan rolled into one – and far more reliable and predictable than any single foundation grant. The effort to build such a pool contributes more to the organizing mission of our organizations than a million-dollar grant from a foundation.

Why not have an equal number of fundraisers as we have organizers? Maybe we could partner each fundraiser with an organizer. Or, why not agree to train all organizers to be effective fundraisers and that there is no longer a distinction? The latter may be the tougher road. Changing old ways isn't easy. That leads me to another "why." Why do we let our organizers get away with claiming that they have no time to raise money in the midst of an intensely hot issue? We know we are kidding ourselves! There is always time for one more sentence with each person we are working with. "Will you give \$___ to support this effort?" "This effort for this year will cost \$___; how will you be helping to pay for it?" No time is better for raising the money that will cover the cost of a campaign than during the hottest moments of the fight! Organizers know that the time when an issue is most deeply felt is when they will get the greatest time commitments. It should be no surprise that the same holds true for fundraising.

It is time for our organizer training schools to teach organizers everything about fundraising and fundraisers everything about organizing, recognizing that the two are equally critical to the health and future of our grassroots social justice groups. It is time for all of us to stop departmentalizing and make fundraising an integral part of the everyday organizing work of each employee and leader of our organizations.