

## **Grassroots Fundraising**

by Ellen S. Ryan

All non-profit organizations need resources to carry out their work. The time invested by members and volunteers is usually the greatest resource of a non-profit organization.

Members and volunteers also support non-profit organizations financially. But expanding the base of support beyond the immediate membership and volunteer force of an organization is key to a non-profit group's long-term effectiveness.

Expanding the base of financial support can be difficult because grassroots organizations focused on social and economic justice work are often so busy working on their issues and programs that they develop a hand-to-mouth relationship to money. Everything that comes in is consumed immediately, or at best is earmarked for program work for a future period.

Just as for-profit companies need to invest in research and development of new products, training and improving technology and equipment, non-profits must invest in the future, too. The problem is that non-profits often have too few revenue sources to make this possible. Under-funded and un-staffed or under-staffed, with little experience in fundraising, the hand-to-mouth existence continues.

Effective grassroots fundraising over the long-term is the best way to move beyond the basic struggle for organizational survival, improve the quality of the organization's work and be able to plan for the future.

### ***Attitude***

Attitude, the way the leaders and members of an organization think about the role money plays in their organization, is often the biggest obstacle to raising money in non-profit groups.

Successful grassroots fundraising comes down to asking for contributions - money, goods, services - from a wide variety of people, both inside the organization and out. The active members of small grassroots organizations are usually very willing to contribute to their own organizations, but may be uncomfortable asking others for support. Over time, this sets up an unhealthy dynamic, in which a few core members contribute more time, money and goods (like office supplies) than anyone else.

Not expecting, asking for, and seeking out new opportunities to raise money shuts new members and supporters out of participation in the organization. The organization can develop into a small club over time, with the most active members thinking that since they do all the work, they should also be able to call all the shots in the organization. They stop seeking out new relationships and ideas from outside the core group, and the organization stagnates, or eventually dies for lack of interest.

The term "grassroots fundraising" means raising money and contributions of goods and services, mostly from individuals, that you need to work toward your organization's goals. Grassroots fundraising usually requires face-to-face asking, rather than filling out grant application forms. But grassroots fundraising is about more than raising money. It is a way to publicize the work of your organization, build new networks of relationships in the community, get more people actively involved in working to achieve your organization's goals and expand the effectiveness of the organization. It can add fun to being a part of the organization, help people gain new confidence and skills and insure the long-term vitality of your organization in the community.

### ***Start with your mission***

To begin to increase financial support for your organization, take a look at your mission, the reason your organization exists. Is your mission short-term, long-term or continuing? For example, if the sole mission of your organization is to stop a toxic waste dump from locating in your community, your mission is short-term, even if you wind up fighting the dump plans for five years. You have one specific, concrete objective and you can achieve it with active community involvement. Your need for funds is modest, perhaps \$3,000 a year or less, and you can probably raise all the money you need by asking for contributions and holding fundraising events locally. Small, local, short-term organizations should see grassroots fundraising as their primary, if not only, source of funds.

If your mission is longer-term but specific, like building and managing 300 units of affordable housing, you may have to look for a wider variety of sources for financial support - foundation and government grants, loans, investors. But adding grassroots fundraising to your mix of revenue will give you greater flexibility and control over your work, and will help you attract outside support from grant funders as well.

If your mission is continuing, such as working to combat racism in any form it takes in your community, then you will need a healthy mix of grassroots fundraising that expands over time. Why? While some grant sources might be available, they also dry up, shift and change frequently. Almost all grant sources have time limits.

Foundation and government grants for the start-up of new non-profit organizations are few and far between, and competition is stiff. Ongoing operating support beyond three to five years is uncommon. Grant funding for specific short-term projects beyond three to five years is available, but again competition is stiff, and foundations and governments shift their areas of interest all the time. If your organization has a long-term, continuing mission, then grassroots fundraising must become a major and growing source of revenue over time.

### ***If you want to be around for the long-haul, set financial goals now***

Look at your organizational budget from the revenue side. What were your sources of funds last year, and what percentage came from grassroots fundraising? If the answer is zero, set a goal to raise at least 10 percent of your budget from grassroots funds this year. If the answer is anything other than zero, set a goal to increase your grassroots fundraising income by at least 10 percent over last year.

### ***Start to break the hand-to-mouth habit***

Now look at your budget from the expense side. If your budget does not already have a line-item marked "contingency," add one and make it 5 to 10 percent of your total operating budget. Small non-profits rarely have contingency funds, although larger ones do. Contingency funds are simply set aside for some unforeseen purpose. They are not the same as funds set aside for a specific future purpose. Plan to put at least a portion of the grassroots funds you raise this year into your contingency fund.

If your expense budget does not include a line item for fundraising expenses, add one now. It usually takes money to raise money, and non-profit groups often lose money on fundraising efforts, or net less money than they could, by not carefully considering how much they will need to spend in order to carry out their fundraising work.

In addition, groups often overlook the opportunity to get donated goods and services that will increase their net fundraising income. For example, if a group raises \$200.00 from a bake sale, but spends \$40.00 on paper products for the sale, the net income from the sale is \$160.00. If the group gets the local supermarket to donate the paper products, the net from the sale is \$200.00, plus they have received a donation of \$40.00 worth of products from a local company and made a connection with someone at the supermarket as well.

Take a look at the expense side of your budget again. What are you spending money on? Rather than looking for ways to cut the budget, as non-profits often do, look for ways in which increasing your expenditures would help your organization to grow. Would having a telephone line and voice mail system help people find you more easily? Would having a computer help you do mailings and keep records more accurately? Would having a fax machine save time in receiving information related to issues you are working on?

Get in the habit of thinking about how to improve and expand your organization. Why? It will increase the effectiveness of your work, and motivate members and volunteers to raise additional grassroots funds and ask for donations of goods and services from local companies and organizations as well.

### ***Strategy***

Your grassroots fundraising strategy should tie into the basic purpose of your organization and help you reach your goals on the issues or projects you are working on, recruit new members and increase the recognition of your organization in your community. The list of possible grassroots fundraising activities is limited only by your imagination; coming up with an effective plan means choosing a few activities to get started, and improving on them as you gain experience.

Some of the most common ways to raise money include: membership dues; special events such as house parties, dinners, dances, concerts, carnivals, walk-a-thons; individual face-to-face donor solicitations; direct mail appeals; sales of cookbooks, tee shirts, mugs and the like; sales of food or other items at major community events such as county fairs or sporting events.

Other fundraising techniques such as raffles, bingo and casino nights are also possibilities, although some organizations choose not to use gambling to raise money because gambling is not compatible with the organizations' values. There are often state and local restrictions or regulations related to gambling as well, and your group should investigate them before sponsoring activities that involve gambling. Many other public events, such as dances and concerts, may require special permits, security personnel or liability insurance. As a matter of habit, check on possible restrictions and regulations for any event you may sponsor as the first step in planning the event.

### ***A two-pronged approach***

Most community groups focus their fundraising efforts internally, raising money through their existing membership and volunteers. This is a good place to start, especially if you are just beginning to raise grassroots funds. However, it makes sense to balance your internal fundraising with external fundraising - seeking support from people in the community who are not actively involved in your organization - from the very beginning.

Here are some common ways to build up and diversify your sources of grassroots funds:

- **Individual members or donors** - If yours is a membership organization, setting membership dues is usually the first step in generating financial support. For the most part, dues should be seen as a way for members to provide basic support to an organization and receive voting rights in the organization.

Some groups make the mistake of including premiums - gifts like tee shirts, coffee mugs, baseball caps - with the cost of membership. It is important to make sure that the cost of premiums does not exceed the cost of membership. At a deeper level, it is important to distinguish that membership in your organization means supporting and being active in the organization's work, not collecting gifts.

Other organizations include a newsletter or other publication in the cost of basic membership. While a newsletter may be necessary in order to keep members informed about the work of the organization, do the arithmetic on the cost of producing and mailing a newsletter before deciding whether to include it in the basic dues cost. For example, if it costs \$1.00 a month to produce and mail each copy of the newsletter, and dues are \$12.00 per year, you are probably losing money on membership dues, since it also costs time and money simply to collect dues and keep records on them.

One way to reduce newsletter costs is to ask for donations of goods and services for producing the newsletter, and this is a form of grassroots fundraising as well. If you can get a local print shop to donate the cost of printing, or a store that sells office supplies or stationery to contribute the paper, you have increased the income into your organization and established a relationship with a local business or two as well.

If your group is not established as a membership organization - that is, a general membership does not have voting rights in the organization - you probably call the people who are active in the organization "volunteers." You can still ask volunteers to provide some standard amount of financial support to the organization each year, and call them volunteer donations instead of dues.

Deciding how to set the amount of dues (or basic donation to the organization) requires looking at a number of factors. You want to set dues high enough to cover some of the basic operating costs of the organization without excluding people from membership because they cannot afford to pay dues. Some groups recognize that some people just can't afford a standard dues amount, so the organization allows very low-income members to request a waiver of their dues or contribute less than the standard amount.

One thing that really helps in collecting dues is having pre-printed dues cards and envelopes pre-addressed to your organization for people to fill out and mail in or give to a member of the organization to turn in. Active members of your organization need to be asked to recruit new members, and having an envelope to give people helps everyone in the organization keep track of who has been asked and who has joined.

- **Additional donations from the members or volunteers** - If your organization has had an active dues-paying membership or active group of volunteers who make annual donations for some time, one way to expand your grassroots fundraising income is to ask existing members to contribute more on a regular basis. You can create a special category of sustaining members who pledge an extra amount over basic dues on a monthly, quarterly or annual basis. The additional contributions do not give members extra voting rights in the organization, but are simply a way for loyal supporters to contribute more.

As a matter of habit, asking for contributions at each meeting and event of the organization is a good idea.

Keeping track of the special skills some of your members have, and the places they work, can also help generate additional resources for your organization. A member employed by a local bank might be able to get the bank to contribute its phone lines for use after banking hours for your group to conduct a phone-a-thon to call members to renew their dues.

A member who works for a large company may be able to get the company to donate its old fax machine to your organization.

A member who is a carpenter may be willing to get some of his co-workers to donate a day for a building project you are doing.

Some companies prefer to make donations to non-profit organizations in which their employees are active. Having your members check out what contributions of cash, goods or services might be available at their workplaces expands the resources available to your organization.

Members with special talents can also be asked for special contributions. For example, a member who makes quilts could be asked to donate one for a raffle. Getting the quilt materials and printing of the raffle tickets donated, too, would increase the net proceeds that go to your organization as well.

- **Events that attract people from outside your organization** - Special events like concerts, dinners and carnivals also raise funds. Non-profit groups often overlook the potential for attracting new donors beyond their existing members and supporters for these kinds of events. Like all other forms of fundraising, it is important to do your arithmetic on paper before holding such events, and try to get as many of the things you need donated in order to increase your net proceeds.

Just as important is looking for ways to attract people beyond your membership to such an event. Asking your entire membership to bring friends and associates to the event is basic; doing advance general publicity is necessary as well. Consider the location of your event carefully. If you want to attract the general public, the event needs to take place at a location that is familiar to most people and that has adequate parking.

Take advantage of general community traffic patterns as well. If you plan a carnival in a park, for example, choose a park that usually has a high volume of people passing by and through it. Also choose the activities for your event carefully. If you plan a musical event, make sure there is a following in your community for the type of music you will offer. At any event, make sure you have membership envelopes available to encourage people to join or send a donation after the event.

- **Major donors** - Asking board members and other active members to think through specific names of people in the community who might make a major donation to the organization is the first step in developing a major donor base. Anyone who might be supportive of your organization's goals, but not necessarily an active member, is a candidate for a face-to-face visit by a member to ask for a major contribution.

To get started, at your next Board meeting, take a few minutes to ask yourselves if you can together come up with the names of 10 people outside the membership who might be willing to make a \$100.00 contribution to your organization. Then develop a plan to sit down with each of these individuals and ask for a major contribution.

### ***Remember to thank and evaluate***

Remember to personally and publicly thank everyone who supports your organization. Hand-written thank-you notes to each person who makes a contribution of money, goods and services is a way of extending thanks personally. Listing the names of all your contributors in your newsletter or an annual mailing is a way of expressing thanks publicly.

Also, evaluate each activity in your grassroots fundraising plan on a regular basis. For example, if you set a goal of raising an additional \$500.00 this year, with \$100.00 coming from new dues-paying members, \$300.00 from a special event, and \$100.00 coming from a new major donor, then evaluate how well you are meeting your goals at least every three months, perhaps at a Board meeting.

Keeping tabs on how well you are doing allows you to adjust your plans, which makes it more likely that you will reach your goals and surpass them. It also allows you to learn from your experiences and improve your activities as you go along.

You may learn that concerts in the park are a great deal of work for the amount of money they net, but that asking major donors for individual contributions is the most successful and cost-effective of all your ideas so far. Knowing this may lead you to cross concerts in the park off your list of events and increase the number of members who are making major donor contacts.

Remember, also, to celebrate your success. An annual pot-luck celebration for all those who have helped to raise funds over the last year is a way of saying thanks and inspiring people to keep raising money. (Don't forget to get the food and supplies for the celebration donated.)

# Community Action: Learning the Ropes

Written by Ellen Ryan for the Virginia Organizing Project

Getting involved in a local issue that affects your community can lead you into a maze of unfamiliar territory. Elected officials, bureaucrats, lawyers, advocates, researchers, reporters, experts, even friends and neighbors can all offer advice, but it's important to know how to weigh that advice, and develop a plan of action based on all the information and advice you receive. What follows is a fictionalized story of one man's experience in learning how to sort out the facts from the rumors and take action with his community on a local landfill proposal.

## Rumors

Bob Martin lives 10 miles outside a small town in the rural county where his ancestors settled as farmers seven generations ago. He built a snug six-room house for his family on five acres of land remaining from the original family homestead, and works as a self-employed house painter and carpenter. He and his wife Catherine have two sons in high school; Catherine works part-time in town as a beautician in a beauty parlor owned by her sister, Rita.

Over morning coffee, Bob read the paper Catherine had brought home with the groceries the night before. Buried at the bottom of page five, under the high school basketball scores, was a brief notice of the county board of supervisors meeting agenda for the next week. It included a proposed extension of the county landfill located two miles north of Bob's home. "I guess we're running out of space for all our garbage," he thought. "I wonder how much taxes will go up for this."

Bob headed into town to pick up paint for a new job he was starting, and chatted with Howard Markum, the owner of the hardware store.

"Have you heard about the new landfill going in out near you?" asked Howard.

"Not much. I saw something about it in the paper this morning. I guess there's no end to the trash we throw away. Have you heard anything about what it's going to cost us?"

"It may not cost us anything. Some waste removal company from Ohio wants to build a hundred acre site for trash it hauls from all over New York and New Jersey," answered Howard.

"A hundred acres! Why don't they just dump it up there? Why drive it all the way to Virginia? How are they going to haul it in? We're more than forty miles from the Interstate."

"I guess they're planning some road improvements, too, to handle the trucks." Howard told Bob he should talk to Bill Meyers, a county supervisor, who had told Howard about the plan a week ago.

Bob paid for his paint and took it out to the truck, then went into the coffee shop for a quick cup before heading off to work. Two old farmers from south of town were at their usual table near the window. They nodded to Bob as he walked in; one asked, as usual, after Catherine and the boys. "Sure looks like it's going to get busy out your way if that landfill goes in," his friend said. "Are you thinking about selling out and moving into town?"

Bob said that he hadn't heard anything about the landfill before this morning, but that it looked like he should go to the supervisors meeting next week to find out more. The farmer said it sounded like the landfill was going to be really big, and that the company had negotiated to buy a large parcel of land at the

old military base north of the county landfill. "That's where they'd find a hundred acres," thought Bob, as he went on to work.

That evening, Catherine was waiting for him when he walked into the kitchen. She had worked at the beauty parlor that afternoon and said all her customers were talking about the landfill. There was talk of widening the county road from the Interstate from two to four lanes, and widening the narrow two-lane road in front of their house to accommodate trucks as well.

"Bob, you know I grew up in a mining town," said Catherine. "The trucks ran from the break of dawn until dark when the mine was in full swing. You couldn't hear yourself think most of the time. What are we going to do?"

Bob said he'd call one of the supervisors after supper, and went to get cleaned up. That evening Bob called Bill Meyers at home. He didn't know Bill well; he owned a car dealership in the county seat, and gave Bob a fair deal when he traded in his pickup every six or seven years. Bob knew Bill was very active with the Lions and Jaycees, but Bob didn't go in for civic groups much. Other than functions at their little rural church and family gatherings, Bob and Catherine rarely went out socially; Bob was uncomfortable in crowds.

Bill was home when Bob called, but said he was on his way out to a meeting. He was friendly and more than happy to talk to Bob for a few minutes about the landfill, though. He said it could be a big boon to the county because it would put a lot of the military base land back on the tax rolls. He said the waste company, Evergreen Environmental, seemed to be a real class act, very high-tech, with more than a dozen landfill sites all over the eastern United States. When Bob inquired about trucks, noise and road construction costs, Bill said he didn't have time to go into it right then, but asked Bob to come to the county supervisors meeting next week. He said an Evergreen representative had asked for time on the agenda to do a presentation on their proposal.

The next day was Wednesday, and Bob, Catherine, and the boys went to their evening church service. After the service, Bob usually stood by the pickup in the gravel parking lot, shifting from one foot to another and nodding good-bye to people while Catherine socialized a bit with her friends from the women's group. This time, Bob walked over to talk to Al Baumgartner, his neighbor who had a small tree farm that bordered on the old military base. Al was standing by his pickup waiting for his wife Maggie. He cleared his voice to talk when Bob asked him if he had heard about the proposed landfill.

"I haven't heard much except what's in the paper and what Maggie's heard at the dentist's when she went into town yesterday." Bob asked Al what he thought about it.

"I think it's peculiar that a company from Ohio can't find a place to put their garbage anywhere closer than Virginia. It sounds like they've been talking away to the politicians down at the county seat, but nobody's come to talk to me about what they're planning to do right next to my land."

Bob told Al that he had talked to Bill Meyers on the county board, and that it sounded that way to him, too. Bob said that Catherine was worried about how many trucks there would be, and Bob wondered where the money would come from to improve the roads. Al said that Maggie was worried about their well water, and Bob asked Al what he meant.

"Those landfills all leak eventually. They put liners in them, and it's all right for a while, but eventually they leak. How much is it going to cost down the road if the water goes, and who's going to pay for it? The county landfill with our local garbage is one thing, but how much contamination is there going to be from a hundred acre site?"



Bob hadn't thought about the water. He told Al that he planned to go to the county supervisors meeting, and asked if Al wanted to ride along. Al said that Maggie wanted to go, so why didn't they take his car instead of one of the trucks. Al said he'd pick Bob and Catherine up around six if they wanted to all ride together. Just then, the minister, Tom Kendall, strolled up to them. He was a young, soft-spoken man who had been with the congregation for just three years, replacing the pastor who had been there almost 25 years before he retired.

"Are you talking about the landfill?" asked Rev. Kendall. "That's what most people seem to be talking about tonight."

Bob and Al nodded to the pastor. Al asked, "So what do you think of this, Reverend?"

"I think we need to find out a lot more about what's going on. I don't like to hear people saying that they better think about moving out. I don't have much experience with these things, but something like this happened when I was studying for the ministry. A big feedlot came into the rural community where I served my internship. People panicked and sold out at rock-bottom prices because the smell was so bad.

Bob told the pastor they were planning to go to the county supervisors meeting and asked if he wanted to come. The pastor said he and his wife and a few other people from the church planned to go, too. He suggested they meet at the coffee shop near the courthouse after the meeting to talk about how things went. "You know, the Baptist ministers from around here meet for lunch once a month," said Rev. Kendall. "I'll call one of the ministers down at the county seat and see what he's heard there, and I'll check with the minister in town, too."

Al asked if the pastor knew the Methodist minister in the congregation nearby.

"We've met a few times. Why? Do you want me to call him, too?"

"I think that would be a good idea," said Bob. "Most people who live around here who are not Baptists are Methodists."

### **The County Board of Supervisors meeting**

Al and Maggie arrived at Bob and Catherine's right at six o'clock to pick them up for the 45-minute ride over to the county seat. As Al drove along the quiet, winding road he said to Bob, "You know, in all the years I've lived here, I've never been to a county supervisors meeting. The only times I've been in the courthouse were to register to vote and to pay my taxes."

Bob had never been to a county supervisors meeting either. When he was in high school, his class had taken a trip to the courthouse, and the civics teacher explained how county government worked while the students sat crowded at wooden tables in the large room where the supervisors met. Later, they visited one of the courtrooms where a trial of a drunk driver was going on. Then the county clerk showed them around some of the offices, pointed out where they could register to vote when they were old enough, and treated them to cokes in the basement lunchroom. Other than registering to vote, Bob had never returned to the courthouse; he paid his taxes by mail.

When they got to the courthouse, the small parking lot was filled with cars. As they went into the building a young woman asked if they were there for the supervisors meeting, and told them the meeting had been moved to the lunchroom in the basement to accommodate the large number of people who had already arrived. The lunchroom tables had been moved back against the walls, and rows of metal chairs, filled with familiar folks from home, were lined up facing a big table where the supervisors were milling around. A large television and video player were set up off to the side of the big table, and a display board was set up on the other side.

Bob, Catherine, Al and Maggie noticed that they would have to walk up to the front row in order to find open seats, but just then Bob saw two middle-aged men setting up more chairs at the back of the room, and went over to help them. After arranging two more rows, Bob waved to the others to take seats in the back of the room with him. He figured there were about a 100 people in the room already, with more still coming in, and he began to feel uneasy in the crowded space buzzing with conversation as people greeted one another and traded bits of information about the proposed landfill.

Just then, one of the supervisors, a man in his 60s who had been on the county board for at least 20 years, called the meeting to order. He greeted the crowd and said he was happy to see so many people tonight. He explained that this was a regular meeting of the county board, and not a public hearing, but that the public was most welcome to observe the board in action. Given the large number of people interested in the landfill, he asked for a motion to suspend approval of the minutes of the last meeting and move directly to the next item on the agenda, which was the presentation by Evergreen Environmental. Bill Meyers said, "So moved," and another supervisor seconded. The Chair then asked the representatives from Evergreen to make their presentation.

Two neatly-dressed men approached the supervisors' table. The first apologized for not bringing a larger projection screen for the videotape he planned to show, then stood sideways and smiled at the crowd. He said he was going to show a 20-minute video with general information about Evergreen Environmental, and then his associate would present drawings of the proposed improvements to the military base site and surrounding roads.

Bob watched the video with everyone else. Upbeat music played while an announcer described Evergreen's state-of-the-art technology for handling every conceivable kind of waste. The video flashed from rows of shiny green garbage trucks to the smiling faces of drivers and technicians wearing clean, pressed green uniforms at the largest sanitary landfill in the United States, operated by Evergreen in a rural county in Delaware. Then the picture changed to a shot of a new, nicely landscaped school building. The folks in Delaware were able to build a new school with the tax revenues from Evergreen, and the company donated the books and computers for the library. Evergreen was a high-tech, good corporate citizen.

The video ended and the second man from the company put a big glossy drawing up on the display board. Bob recognized it as a map of the old military base and surrounding area. He could even pick out his own five-acre parcel at the bottom left-hand corner of the map. The man from the company had a pointer the size of a pencil with a light in it that he beamed on to various areas of the map as he talked. Evergreen would create a 100-acre sanitary landfill facility at the south end of the military base, and plant a border of pine trees around the entire installation to screen the landfill from view. At full capacity, the site would be able to handle 250 trucks of waste a day.

Then the man put up another glossy map on the display board, this one showing the state road from the Interstate to town as a four-lane road, and the winding county road that ran from town out past Bob's house to the site as a straight road widened by a total of two feet along each side. The man said the state planned to widen the road from the Interstate into a four-lane within the next year, using state and federal funds, and that all the county had to do was improve about 12 miles of road from town out to the site. The county would gain about 20 jobs and \$200,000 a year in tax revenues, which would totally pay for the road construction within five years, not to mention the possibility that state funds could be available to pay for up to 30 percent of the county's road construction costs.

The supervisors asked a few polite questions of the Evergreen men; it seemed to Bob they already knew the answers to their questions and were just asking for the benefit of the crowd. Mabel Johnson, the librarian from town, stood up and asked if she could ask a question. The Chair of the supervisors politely told her that this was a board meeting and not a public hearing, but that the board would consider holding a public hearing at a later date. Mabel said, "I think you better hold a hearing before you vote on widening that road." There was a murmur of agreement from the audience, and the Chair rapped a gavel on the table for the first time. He said the supervisors would discuss holding a public hearing before voting on the matter

within 30 days, and notify the public as soon as possible. He then said that the board had two other items of business on the agenda that night and invited the public to stay.

Bob stood up to leave immediately, as did most of the people, and he looked around for Rev. Kendall, but didn't see him. Bob, Catherine, Al and Maggie, along with a few other people, decided to go over to the coffee shop anyway to talk things over.

### **At the coffee shop**

Rev. Kendall, his wife, and a few other members of the church were already at the coffee shop when Bob got there. The small place was filled with people from the commission meeting, all engaged in conversations about the landfill. Some talked of stopping the project; others said there didn't seem to be much use and talked about moving away.

Bob pulled up a chair near the table with people from his church, just as one of the church members said, "The first thing we need to do is hire a lawyer," Catherine said, "I don't think the lawyers around here would know how to handle this." Someone else said, "Maybe we should call the Bar Association."

Just then Mabel came in and said the commission voted to schedule a hearing three weeks from tonight. She said, "I don't believe that Evergreen video. Truck drivers don't drive for hundreds of miles and arrive at a landfill in starched, pressed uniforms. We need to find out more about this company."

One of the teachers from the grade school piped in, "They sure seem to know what the state is planning for road construction; I think we should talk to our state representatives." Another one of the teachers said, "I think we better make a list of everybody we need to talk to and get this done before the public hearing." Rev. Kendall's wife pulled out a piece of paper and said, "You talk, I'll make the list."

About an hour later, the crowd had thinned out, but a dozen people were still around two tables pushed together in the coffee shop making a list. Mabel said she would look up phone numbers for people, and make as many calls as she could, but said she couldn't make calls from work. Bob said that it was going to cost money to make long-distance phone calls, and took five dollars out of his wallet and put it on the table. The others put money on top of Bob's five, and Mabel scooped it up and handed it to Bob, saying, "You're treasurer."

Mrs. Kendall and Mabel agreed to write up the list and make copies of it for everyone the next day. The other people agreed to pick up their lists at the library, make their phone calls, and meet again in a week. Rev. Kendall said they could meet in the church social room.

### **Let your fingers do the walking**

Catherine picked up the list at the library on her way home from work from Tuesday and gave it to Bob when he came in from work. Each of them had two calls to make; Bob had their state senator and representative. He gulped when he saw his name written in next to theirs, and said to Catherine, "I thought I was supposed to be treasurer."

Catherine smiled and sighed at the same time. "Come on Bob, this is a long list, and everybody has to help. Besides, you went to high school with Homer Treat, didn't you?"

Homer Treat was the state senator, and Bob and Homer had been in the same high school class. They had gotten along okay in high school, but they hadn't been friends. Homer was a star on the football team and went to college in Charlottesville after graduation; Bob had been a loner who didn't go out for sports and clubs, and had gone straight into house painting after a stint in the army. Bob hadn't seen or talked to Homer in more than 20 years.

The next morning, Bob sat down and thought about what he wanted to say to Homer. He wanted to ask him what he knew about the state road improvement plan to widen the road from the Interstate to town into a four-lane. Actually, Bob had heard talk of the road improvement for years, but it had never entered his mind that the development the new road might bring would be 250 trucks full of garbage a day. Bob also wanted to know if Homer knew anything about Evergreen's plans for the landfill. He rehearsed in his mind what he was going to say. If Homer remembered him, they'd probably have to catch up a bit on all those years since high school. It would be easier if Homer didn't remember him. Then Bob could just be a voter and a tax-payer calling his senator for information, although he'd never done anything like that before, either.

Finally, Bob felt ready to pick up the phone. He dialed the long-distance number Mabel had given him for Homer's office at the Capitol in Richmond. The legislature was in session, so Bob figured Homer would be there, another good excuse, Bob thought, for not calling Homer at home the night before. A woman answered the phone, "Good morning, Senator Treat's office." Bob was surprised not to hear Homer's voice at first, then realized a state senator might be too busy to answer his phone.

"This is Bob Martin. May I speak to Homer Treat, please?"

"The senator is in a committee meeting this morning, is there any way I can help you?"

"Well, I live down in Homer's district, and I want to talk to him about some highway construction the state is doing down here."

There was a pause, and then the woman on the phone said, "The senator is scheduled for meetings most of the day. Would you like me to tell him you called, or would you like me to transfer you to the Chair of the Transportation Committee? Someone there might be able to help you."

Bob thought for a minute. He needed to talk to Homer before the meeting at church on Monday, and he needed to talk to his state representative, Joe Bagley, whom he didn't know at all, too. "I'd really like to talk to Homer before Monday," said Bob, but I'll talk to the transportation people, too. Do you know if Homer stays in Richmond for the weekend or if he comes home?"

The woman said the senator would be back home this weekend. Bob left his number and asked that Homer try to call him during the evenings or over the weekend. Then the woman transferred his call to the Chair of the Transportation Committee.

Another woman answered, and Homer explained why he was calling again. She switched his call to a man named Josh, an aide who handled road construction. Josh seemed to be a very competent and gracious young man. He chatted with Homer about Senator Treat while he looked up information on a computer. "Yes, the appropriation for that stretch of highway passed in the last session. Senator Treat really went to bat for you folks to move that appropriation, as I remember. It will help open up that whole section of his district for new economic development. Construction should start soon, if it hasn't already. Do you want a copy of the legislation, or do you want more information on the construction? I can give you the number for the Highway Department for that."

Bob paused to think again. He didn't now if he really needed a copy of the legislation, but figured he might as well get one. He didn't know if he really needed to call the Highway Department, either, but he took the number anyway, and asked Josh to send a copy of the legislation to him. Josh asked for Bob's fax number, and said he'd have someone fax it down to him that morning. Bob told Josh he didn't have a fax, and asked him to mail it to his home address.

After Bob hung up the phone, he felt exhausted. He looked out the window and noticed that the light drizzle outside was clearing, and he decided he better take advantage of the weather and get to work. He'd

try calling his state representative the next morning. He glanced back at the list and noticed Al was supposed to call the state Highway Department; Mabel had listed the same telephone number for Al that Josh had given to Bob. "I'll let Al figure out the road construction, then," thought Bob, "and concentrate on seeing if the politicians know anything about Evergreen."

### **Bits and pieces come together**

That evening, the phone at Bob's house rang, and Catherine, as usual, answered. It was Al, calling for Bob. As Bob took the receiver, he realized that in all the years they'd been neighbors, Al had never called for Bob before. Catherine and Maggie often talked, but Al and Bob had never had a telephone conversation. Now, Al wanted to talk about his call to the state Highway Department.

"Well, I sure had a time getting through to somebody who could give me some answers about the highway construction," said Al. "I got put on hold about four times while people transferred me around from one office to another."

Bob told Al that he hadn't reached Homer Treat, but did find out that the state road construction was about to start, if it hadn't already. Al said he had found out the construction was slated to start next month. All the surveying was done and rights of way in place. Evidently there had been a public hearing about it months ago. Neither Bob nor Al remembered seeing a notice of a hearing, but both admitted they wouldn't have gone anyway.

"I'm not opposed to making a four-lane out of that road, are you?" asked Bob. "No," said Al. "I think it will be a good thing for the county, and the businesses in town. I just never imagined that it would attract a big garbage company to haul all that out-of-state trash through town right into our backyard."

"Same here," said Bob. "I thought it might help the few farmers still around here to move their crops more easily, maybe attract some small industry, and it would sure make it easier to get to the Interstate. I never realized it might attract something like this."

The two men talked a little longer, compared notes about the calls their wives had made to the editor of the county paper and a reporter in Richmond. "Poor Rev. Kendall," said Al. "He's on the list to call the Department of Defense to see if Evergreen bought or leased the land at the base. Mabel's supposed to check on the deed with the county tax assessor."

"This sure is a lot of work," said Bob. "It will be interesting to see if we can put the whole story together when we meet on Monday. See you then, or I guess I'll see you in church tonight."

"Right," said Al. "See you then."

### **After the Wednesday Church Service**

Instead of standing around in the parking lot waiting for Catherine, Bob stayed on the church steps with most of the congregation talking about the landfill. The people who were making phone calls were buzzing about what they'd found out, and some of them were complaining about how hard it was to reach the people they were supposed to call.

Rev. Kendall came out and said that he still hadn't reached anyone who knew anything at the Defense Department, but that Mabel had told him no land transfer on the military base had been recorded at the courthouse. She also told him she found out there were no county zoning ordinances that would stand in Evergreen's way if they wanted to put in a mega-landfill, and now she was trying to find out if the state would require an environmental impact statement.

Bob wished he had been a little quicker in contacting his state legislators so he'd have more to say himself, and promised himself to get back on the phone first thing in the morning. On the church steps, people who had not made calls asked if it would be all right for them to come to the meeting on Monday night to find out more about what was going on. Al said he thought it would be better for the people who made calls to get together alone first, but Rev. Kendall said he thought the more people who got involved, the better chance they'd have to stop this thing before it went anywhere. Rev. Kendall suggested that they ask the people who made calls to meet Sunday afternoon to plan what to say at the meeting Monday night, and invite everyone in the area and in town who was interested to come. They could ask the ministers to announce the meeting at their Sunday services.

Bob liked this idea and surprised himself by saying so out loud so everyone could hear. "If we can stop the county supervisors from voting to improve the road, I wonder if Evergreen won't just pack up and look for another place for its landfill. We might be able to stop this just by putting pressure on the supervisors, and in that case, I think we need as many local voters calling them as we can get." Lots of people murmured in agreement and Rev. Kendall said he'd call the other ministers to ask them to announce the Monday night meeting at their Sunday services.

### **Back on the Telephone**

The next morning, Bob called the woman who owned the house he was painting and explained that he would be over later in the afternoon because he had to make some calls about the landfill. She wasn't real happy about it, but when she heard it was about the landfill, she said she was willing to wait.

Bob called his state senator first, and told his secretary he really needed to reach him. He persisted until she told him she could arrange to have the senator return his call for a few minutes around three o'clock that afternoon. Bob said he would call the senator at three, hung up, and placed a call to his representative. His secretary said the most likely time to reach him was after four that afternoon, and Bob asked her to take a message that he would be calling around four. Then he decided to go to work after all, and stop at two-thirty and go to the beauty parlor where Catherine worked to use the phone in the back room to call Senator Homer Treat back.

Bob's calls went very well. Homer remembered him and wanted to talk a little about what Bob had been doing since high school. Bob hit the highlights Ñ Catherine, the boys, his painting and carpentry business Ñ but then cut to the point and told Homer how Evergreen Environmental planned to make use of the state road improvements that Homer had been so good about getting for his district.

Homer said he had heard something about county officials trying to attract new industry, but that he didn't know the specifics about Evergreen. He asked Bob why he was opposed to the landfill if it would bring in some new jobs. Bob said he was all in favor of new jobs, but he didn't see how 250 garbage trucks a day and a million dollars in county road improvements was any fair trade off for 20 jobs. Homer said he could see Bob's point, and asked what he planned to do. Bob told him about the meeting at his church on Monday night, and told him he was welcome to come.

The call to his state representative went about the same way. His representative didn't know much about Evergreen at all, and said it was a county matter. He said he'd be willing to help work something out between the county and the local people if they wanted him to, but that he couldn't attend the meeting Monday night because he had a late committee meeting in Richmond.

As long as he was on the phone, anyway, Bob decided to call Bill Meyers, the county supervisor, at his auto dealership. After Bob waited on hold for a few minutes, Bill picked up and asked Bob how he was doing. Bob said he was not happy with Evergreen's plans for the landfill, and asked Bill where the Board of Supervisors was on it.

Bill answered in a careful tone of voice, "We were a little surprised by the big turnout at the supervisors' meeting last week, and of course we've scheduled a public hearing so that people can get their fears out in the open. But I think we should consider the advantages as well as the disadvantages. Evergreen is a good company, and they would bring 20 new jobs into the county. Taxpayers always react when we need to raise taxes, and this would increase the tax base by putting a new corporate taxpayer on the county rolls. It would keep taxes down, and what are we going to do with all that land sitting idle at the military base, anyway? It might as well be put to some use."

Bob thanked Bill for his time, and said that people in the community were planning to get together before the public hearing to sort out the advantages and disadvantages, as Bill called them. He told Bill he'd see him at the public hearing.

### **Sunday Afternoon**

About 20 people met in the social room at Bob's church, a few more than had made phone calls. The extra people were mostly relatives or neighbors of people who had made calls. The Methodist minister and the head of the Methodist Church council, as well as the Baptist minister from town, had come as well.

Mrs. Kendall was passing a pitcher of iced tea when Bob got there with Catherine, Al and Maggie. Rev. Kendall asked them to take a seat and said he wanted to wait a few minutes for Mabel, who arrived just then carrying a videotape machine. She asked Bob and Al to go get a television set she had on the back seat of her car, since she had a video tape she wanted everyone to see.

Rev. Kendall thanked everyone for coming and said he thought it would be a good idea to compare notes on what people had found out, and then talk about how to run the meeting on Monday night.

One by one, people told the stories of the calls they had made. One person had called the State Bar Association and was referred to the state Trial Lawyers Association, which referred her to an environmental organization in Richmond. They referred her to another lawyer, whom she talked to for quite awhile. The lawyer told her she might be able to file an temporary injunction to prevent Evergreen from beginning work at the site, but she needed a lot more information before she could tell if there was any way to fight the landfill in court. The lawyer said she would be willing to attend the Monday night meeting at no charge, but would need to have a definite client and a financial arrangement in place before doing any work. People thought it would be good to have a lawyer who knew something about these things come to the meeting, but hoped there would be some way to stop Evergreen without going to court.

The people who called county supervisors all told pretty much the same story. The landfill would put land at the base back on the tax rolls and bring new jobs into the county. The supervisors encouraged everyone to come to the public hearing to air their feelings, and the supervisors would try to do what was in the best interest of the whole county while not ignoring the concerns of the communities close to the landfill site. "What does that mean?" asked Maggie.

The Methodist minister spoke up next. He said he had called one of the Methodist Church offices in Nashville that prepares educational materials on social action for the church. They sent him some materials and suggested he call a community group in rural west Tennessee that had been fighting a landfill for more than two years.

The minister said that the group was made up of Black people who were fighting another company. He talked to the president of the group, who said it was important to keep people in the community together as much as possible. He said the company they were fighting tried to split the community on the jobs issue and the issue of needing some kind of economic development in the community.

The president also gave him the number of another group in Washington, D.C. that serves as a clearinghouse for local groups fighting landfills all over the country. The minister talked to the director there, who said it sounded like they were off to a good start, and they needed to keep the community together as much as possible. She knew quite a bit about Evergreen, and said they were very slick, but that they also had many environmental violations filed against them in other states.

Rev. Kendall said he had quite a time trying to find out what was going on between Evergreen and the Department of Defense, and even finding the right office in the Defense Department that handled the military base land. From what he could find out, Evergreen had signed a 10-year lease option on a 100 acres of land at the base, but did not intend to buy the land outright.

"What is a lease option?" asked Bob.

"I suppose we could ask that lawyer in Richmond to find out for sure, but what the Defense Department told me was that Evergreen has an option to lease the land pending obtaining all the required permits and road improvements. It seems to mean no one else can lease the land unless Evergreen drops their option, and Evergreen will lease it if they can get all the other pieces to fall into place."

Mabel spoke up. "That sounds about right. The county tax assessor said that Evergreen doesn't plan to buy the land, but to lease it from the Army."

"So if they lease the land, they'll pay the Army for the lease. And the Army doesn't pay taxes to the county on the land, so what are the supervisors talking about when they say it will put land back on the tax rolls?" asked Rev. Kendall.

Mabel said the county assessor told her that Evergreen proposes to make payments to the county "in lieu of" taxes. That means they will sign an agreement to make payments to the county even though they don't have to. "

"Why would they do that?"

"I guess to get the county to pay for the road improvements, and to cover costs for fire and police protection, and things like that," said Mabel.

Bob said that it didn't sound like such a good financial deal for the county. Basically, the county would widen the road for Evergreen, and Evergreen would pay the county back over 10 years. He also said he wondered what would happen if Evergreen didn't renew its lease on the land after. "If they shut down the landfill after 10 years and it leaks, who will have to clean it up Ñ the Army?"

Mabel said she didn't know the answer to that question. She also said she called the Virginia Organizing Project, and they gave her the name of another group in southern Virginia that had been fighting a landfill for out-of-state garbage for more than a year. That site was in a rural Black community, just like the one in Tennessee.

Mabel talked to a young woman who was a leader of that group, who sounded surprised that Evergreen had picked a site in an all-white area like theirs. The woman told her that the company they were fighting had a habit of picking isolated rural areas, mostly Black, as far as she knew, because they assumed the people there wouldn't have much political clout.

"You mean there's a pattern of putting these things in Black people's neighborhoods?" said Al.

"Seems so," said Mabel. "It made me sick when I heard it. I guess Evergreen doesn't care what color we are, as long as they can talk the county into putting it here. Maybe the lease deal with the military just



seems so good it's worth a try. But another thing I got from Virginia Organizing Project is a videotape from another community in Kentucky that fought a toxic chemical plant for years. I brought it with me and want to show it to you."

Mabel played the tape, this one about an isolated rural community that was mostly white. A factory had polluted the water for years, local people got sick, and yet the community was divided about the loss of jobs if the plant closed. Just as other people had said earlier, the people on the videotape kept saying how important it was to talk to everyone in the community and keep people together as much as possible.

When the tape ended, Bob spoke again. "Mabel, I want to say how much I respect all the work you've done, and how much everyone else has done, to figure out what's been going on here. I've had my head in the sand, I think, not paying much attention to what's going on around me outside my own family and job. I think we better use the meeting Monday night to figure out how to stop the county board of supervisors from going any farther with this."

Rev. Kendall spoke up. "We might have a good chance of stopping them if we can get people from all over the county, not just local people, to the public hearing saying they don't want county money going into widening the road. But Evergreen might go ahead anyway, even if the county doesn't improve the road. The deal they get on the lease, and the state road being widened anyway might make it worth it to them to use the county road in the narrow, winding condition it's in."

Catherine spoke next. "I think we have to try to stop the supervisors anyway. We'll cross the next bridge when we have to if Evergreen doesn't give up."

"I agree we have to stop Evergreen," said the Baptist minister from town. "But I don't think it will end there. The new state road is coming through, and we're sitting on the largest tract of undeveloped land in the county. It's one thing to be against a giant landfill and hundreds of trucks coming through a day from who knows where. But I think we need to know what we want, as well as what we don't want. What would be a good use of the land at the military base, if not for tons of out-of-state garbage?"

One of the school teachers agreed. "We need to figure out how we want to develop this part of the county, or somebody else like Evergreen might come along and do it for us."

After more discussion, the group agreed to form an organization called the Morgan Creek Improvement Association. The area had long been called Morgan Creek because a family named Morgan settled there early in the nineteenth century and set up a saw mill to cut the old hardwoods into boards for local construction and shipment to the county seat.

Since no one felt comfortable being the chairperson of the group, they agreed to have a five-person steering committee: Mabel, Maggie, Rev. Kendall, Al and Bob. They decided to ask everyone at the meeting Monday night to not only call everyone on the board of supervisors before the hearing, but to call everyone they knew in all parts of the county and ask them to come to the public hearing.

### **Monday Night's Meeting**

About 80 people packed into the Baptist church social room for Monday night's meeting. Mabel said to put the chairs in curved rows like a horseshoe shape so that people could see each other.

Rev. Kendall welcomed everyone, and introduced Mabel, who gave a brief report on the facts the group had put together Sunday afternoon. Then they watched the videotape Mabel had shown on Sunday, and Al stood up to address the meeting.

"We know that some of you may have questions, and that some of you may even think that letting Evergreen develop their landfill could be a good idea. We want you to have a chance to speak first if you see some good points to this plan that we might be overlooking. We want to stick together as a community and work things through ourselves, consider all our options, before going to the public hearing in two weeks."

Howard from the hardware store stood up. He said that some of the business people in town thought the landfill might be good for business. The gas stations and cafe in particular might benefit from the increased traffic in town.

One of the gas station owners stood up. He said that while he thought the landfill traffic might be good for his business, that he had no idea until tonight what a landfill on that scale would do to a little community like Morgan Creek, and the people who lived there were his customers, too. He also said there must be some better use of county tax dollars than widening a curvy rural road that wouldn't need improvement if it weren't for Evergreen sending its trucks over it.

People talked for almost an hour about the pros and cons of the landfill, then decided they'd rather not have it if there was anything they could do about it. The lawyer from Richmond spoke briefly, said that Evergreen had not so far done anything that would be a cause of action for a lawsuit, but that she would be happy to advise the group for a reduced fee if they needed her.

Then Maggie asked everyone to pull their chairs around in little circles of eight to 10 people. She asked them to come up with the names of as many people they could who lived in other areas of the county, including the county seat. She asked people to list the names of people they would be willing to call and ask to come to the public hearing, as well as call their county supervisors to tell them not to use their tax dollars to build a road for Evergreen.

After about 20 minutes, Maggie asked each group to call out how many names they had, and Bob tallied them up as they called out. "That's 832 names," said Maggie. "It doesn't matter if some names are on the list more than once. It's good if some people get more than one call. Just be sure you do three things before the public hearing:

1. Call everyone on your list and explain what Evergreen plans to do. Ask them to call their supervisors and to come to the public hearing.
2. Call the supervisors yourself.
3. Be at the hearing two weeks from tonight at the county courthouse, and if you have something green, wear it."

The crowd laughed, then got quiet again when Bob stood up to talk. He said that there were lists on a table at the back of the room with people willing to drive others to the public hearing. He said that if anyone wanted to carpool to the hearing, to put their name on a list before leaving. He also said that there was a coffee can for donations on the table in the back of the room, and that any contribution, no matter how small, would be appreciated. Finally, he said, there were cookies and coffee and punch brought by the Methodist women's group, and he invited everyone to have some refreshments before heading home.

### **The Public Hearing**

Bill Meyers had attended the Monday night meeting at the Baptist church, and alerted the supervisors that they might want to move the public hearing from the courthouse to the school gym across the street, where there would be more room.

About 300 people from all parts of the county, mostly wearing green, showed up for the hearing. Catherine and the school teachers talked to people as they walked in, and signed up 50 people who said they wanted

to speak. Many people from other parts of the county said they wanted to speak on ideas for what the county could do with its money besides spend a million dollars trying to straighten out a 12-mile stretch of county road.

After hearing about 20 people in the first hour speak against the county building a road for Evergreen, the Chair asked if there was anyone in the hall who wanted to speak in favor of the proposal. No one spoke up. The Chair said that in the interest of everyone's time, he would like to go into executive session for about a half hour and deliberate with the supervisors on the matter.

Most people stayed in the auditorium while the supervisors talked. When they returned, the Chair called the supervisors to order for a special session on the Evergreen request for improvements to the county road. He asked for a motion, which Bill Meyers made. Bill moved to deny the allocation of county funds for improvement of the road leading to the military base. Another supervisor seconded, and after a brief discussion, the supervisors voted to deny the request.

### **Afterward**

The next Sunday afternoon, the Morgan Creek Improvement Association held a celebration on the grounds of the Methodist Church. Afterwards, the steering committee and about a dozen other people met briefly to go over what they should do next.

They said they needed to find out more about the military base land and what it might be used for.

They said they needed to get in touch with someone in authority at Evergreen to make sure they were not going to pursue their plans for a landfill.

They said they needed to hold a meeting in a month or so to ask people what kind of development they wanted to see happen in the area.

They said they needed to call back all the people who had helped them and say thank you.

They said they needed to account for the donations they had received, pay any bills they had and set up a bank account for any money that was left.

Mrs. Kendall took out a piece of paper and said, "You talk, and I'll make a list."

# Building Public Relationships: The Cornerstone of Our Approach

By Ellen S. Ryan

Many people have questions about the time and effort it takes to conduct one-to-one conversations as an approach to building a citizens' group. Wouldn't it be easier to just put a notice in the paper and see who shows up for the meeting? Wouldn't it be more efficient to just do an opinion poll or needs assessment to find out what issues people care about? Wouldn't it make more sense to just decide what we want to work on and then recruit people to work on it with us? The answers to these questions are both "yes" and "no" and depend on what it is you are trying to do.

If you are working on an immediate, "hot-button" issue in the community, like trying to stop the siting of a toxic landfill, you are likely to get a pretty big turnout at a meeting you announce in the paper, for example. But you are not likely to get from that meeting a broad base of people who are willing to work long-term on community or public issues in general. You are not likely to attract people who are in favor of the landfill, and therefore not likely to seriously consider the merits of their arguments or understand how they are interpreting information about the landfill, or even what information and point of view led them to support the landfill in the first place. You are missing an opportunity to work out divisions within the community itself, or at least have a clear assessment that they cannot be worked out, before getting into a polarized fight with local opposition you hadn't planned on.

Cultivating public relationships through general, individual conversations provides many advantages over both the short term and the long term. Most people do not have many public relationships in the civic sense, and most of those are rather shallow. In modern life, our relationships with other people tend to take one of two forms, either intimate or impersonal. Our close friends, and often our families, are the locus of our intimate relationships. In this circle, we usually find ourselves with people very much like ourselves, with similar lifestyles, attitudes, values, and points of view.

By contrast, our impersonal relationships are very fragmented. They are not characterized so much as relationships with people with whom we *disagree*, but as relationships with people we really *don't know* much about and who don't know much about us. There is nothing wrong with this. It is not necessary to share the same point of view with your doctor on anything other than how to approach your personal health care. It is not necessary to work through your different points of view on gun control, or even to be aware that you have different points of view on the issue. It is generally not necessary to invite your doctor to your child's high school graduation or celebrate holidays together, either.

While there is nothing wrong with intimate relationships *per se* or with impersonal relationships *per se*, modern life has left us with a great empty gulf between the two. Public relationships, those focused on the general needs of civic life, on determining what the common good is and how to achieve it, have withered away as the time demands of work and family, increasing geographic mobility, and increasing diversity in our society make it more and more difficult to sort out complex issues in a public forum. It is easy enough to take a position for or against a toxic waste dump in your community, but much more difficult to find a solution to toxics in general. This requires not just taking a position, but engaging with many people with various points of view long enough to reach a solution.

Building public relationships through individual conversations is one step in building, rebuilding, or cultivating a public arena. These conversations help *both* individuals in the conversation to develop themselves as *public* persons. Over time, it helps to build an appreciation for and competency in the *public* arena.

## Some "how to" steps in building public relationships

The purpose of conducting individual conversations generally is to cultivate public relationships, or public connections, among people. They may be done in connection with building a new civic organization,

increasing the membership of an existing organization, or identifying the major challenges and themes faced by a community. The conversations may lead to identifying new members or focusing the mission of a new organization, or they may result in defining a specific issue for an existing organization to work on and a plan for including people or perspectives that might otherwise have been overlooked or left out.

Almost always, no matter what the organizational reason for conducting the conversations, they result in increased leadership capacity among the people conducting the conversations, and increased credibility for the organization. They increase the number of public connections one has in the community, they widen and deepen one's perspective on public life in general and specific issues in particular. They require people to listen and think, and sometimes change or refine their own points of view in the process. Usually, the process is also enjoyable, although not in the same way that having lunch with a close friend is enjoyable, and not in the same way as getting in and out of the doctor's office without a long wait and with a clean bill of health is satisfying, if not enjoyable. Cultivating public relationships is a doorway to the arena of public life, of expanding beyond self-interest and special-interest groups to engage more and more effectively in addressing the major challenges of civic life.

It is the role of the leadership group conducting the conversations to decide how the conversations fit in with the purposes of the group. For example, as a tool in forming a new citizens' group, the conversations should fit into a general timeline for establishing the group:

#### **The first four to twelve months**

Each person in the leadership group conducts at least one conversation a week and meets with the leadership group once a month to compare notes on what the group is hearing in the conversations.

#### **The next two to three months**

People who were listened to and were interested in holding a house meeting are contacted to attend a planning meeting and set up house meetings to hear about the results of the conversation process and get commitments from people to join the new group. House meetings are scheduled and take place. The date for the first organizational meeting is announced at the house meetings.

#### **The next month**

Founding meeting takes place and first issue campaign begins.

### **Preparing to conduct the conversations**

In preparing to conduct one-to-one conversations, many people have reservations, and even fears about what they will be doing. Aside from some people's discomfort with the idea of talking to strangers or people they hardly know, there is often some confusion about what the "point" is. "What am I expected to produce?" is a common question.

The most basic "point" is simply to begin or continue to cultivate a public relationship with the person you talk to. For people who are very product-oriented, this can seem like a rather abstract "point." Therefore, it usually helps for a *group* of people to conduct the conversations over a short period of time and hold a practice session or workshop to go over why and how to do them. Actually having a one-to-one conversation is often the only way to grasp what the point is, and doing the first one during a practice session with other people who will also be conducting conversations is a good place to start.

In a practice session, ask people what they would be concerned about if someone contacted them and asked for an hour of their time to get acquainted and talk about the challenges they see in the local community.

The first concern that usually comes up, particularly in small towns and rural areas, is that of confidentiality:

"If I talk to you, what are you going to do with the information you get from me?"

"If I say the biggest problem in town is corruption on the city council, are you going to tell the city council members I said that?"

In larger cities, a common issue is credibility and security:

"Who gave you my phone number and why?"

Other common concerns are:

"Are you going to ask me for money?"

"I'm very busy. Are you going to ask me to work on a committee or come to a meeting or join an organization?"

"If this is a public opinion poll, why can't you just ask me your questions right now over the phone?"

Imagining what questions or reservations *you* would have if someone asked to have a conversation with *you* helps you think through the answers in advance and appreciate that the person you are calling might be just as nervous about being called as you are about calling them. In the context of a practice session, the group as a whole can think through the answers to questions like these and even provide an opportunity to practice answering them.

### **Setting up the conversations**

The leadership group needs to decide together how to set up and conduct the conversations. To start with, the leadership group needs to be diverse, reflecting as much as possible the diversity of the community in which the conversations will be conducted. Try to build a leadership group that reflects the diversity of age, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, newcomers and long-term residents, political points of view, family make-up, religious belief, occupation in the community. In this way, the leadership group is most likely to have contacts with the various sub-groups in the community, as well as to understand practical concerns these sub-groups might have. (Working people with young children often have little time for meetings and setting up appointments for conversations, for example, so it is often necessary to be creative about setting up times to meet with them).

There are many ways to set up the conversations, and the leadership group should decide what will work best in the local situation. In general, the group will want to talk to as broad a cross-section of people as possible if the purpose of the conversations is to establish a new citizens organization. One way to do this is to develop a list of all the types of people in the community the group wants to talk to, and then think of particular names of people to talk to in each category. This generally works if the leadership group is fairly diverse itself. If it is not, it will become obvious, as the group tries to think of names of people to talk to in each category, which sub-groups of people the leadership group has little contact with. If, for example, people cannot think of any elderly people to talk to, the group can take a step back and ask who might be able to help with suggestions of elderly people to contact. Asking help from local pastors, people who run Meals on Wheels or senior recreation programs, etc., could help fill in the blanks. You might want to ask such a person to join the leadership group, or simply help you with contacts so that you can find a few older people who would like to join the leadership group and conduct conversations themselves.

The group may also want to talk to elected officials, business leaders, and the heads of various agencies in order to get acquainted and get an overall sense of how people in positions of power in the community see themselves and the challenges in the community. The occasion of forming a new citizens group can be the best time of all to develop contacts with people in positional power. It is an opportunity to get acquainted with how they think and develop an understanding of the local power structure and how it works. While these conversations can be scheduled at the same time as conversations with citizens in general, it makes sense to have a leadership group meeting scheduled to discuss them separately so that the group can begin to develop an analysis together of the power structure in the community.

After putting together a general list of people to talk to, the next step is to decide how to contact them. Again, the best way to do this varies from place to place and person to person, and the leadership group may need to experiment a bit to find what works best. In general, contacting people by phone, letter, or in person are the usual methods of contact. If the leadership group and/or citizens organization is new in the area, the leadership group might consider getting a short article in the local newspaper that tells a bit about the group and why it intends to conduct the face-to-face conversations in the community. If people in the leadership group are members of organizations and churches, they might ask to have an announcement made at meetings or notices put in the newsletters of those groups. This does not mean that the people the group contacts to set up conversations will necessarily have seen any of these notices, although they might, but it is sometimes helpful to tell people that you did have an article in the paper or a notice in the church bulletin. It adds a little credibility to the group, especially when contacting people you do not already know.

At a practice session, it helps to role-play what contacting people to set up an appointment will be like. Members of the group can use this opportunity to practice handling difficulties that may come up. For example, if you plan to contact someone you already know fairly well, you may be concerned that they will not see any point in setting up a specific time to talk to you:

"I see you twice a week at softball games. Can't we just talk about this at batting practice?"

"It would be better if I could meet you an hour before or after the game, so that we really have a chance to talk."

"I can't. I work until just before the games start and I have to race home afterwards to watch the kids so my wife can go to work."

"What time do the kids go to bed?"

"About eight-thirty."

"What if I stopped by your house at quarter to nine and we just talked until nine-thirty or so?"

People in the leadership group should practice making appointments so that they feel confident and also understand that sometimes it just isn't possible to set up an appointment. Sometimes people just say no. Sometimes people just can't find a mutually convenient time. Sometimes people are critical of the whole idea:

"The whole world is falling apart. You're not going to do any good going around talking to people or trying to set up another group. It's a waste of time."

"Sorry you feel that way. If you change your mind, let me know."

It is important to move on to the next person on your list if someone refuses or just can't find a time to talk to you. The point is to talk to as many people as you reasonably can, not to go to great lengths trying to persuade people who are not interested.

## Conducting the conversations

As a general guideline, the conversation should not take longer than one hour, and it is important to let people you are talking to know that when you set up a time for the conversation. When you actually meet to have the conversation, it is important to restate the time limit when you begin: "As I said on the phone, this will take an hour or less of our time." Then it is important to stick to what you said. There are many reasons for having a clear time limit. The point is to build a public relationship. The conversations are not rambling chats with friends, and they are not impersonal surveys that extract information from people without revealing anything about the person asking the questions, either. In most places, an hour is ample time to actually engage in a mutual exchange, to listen to rather than quiz people, and to share a bit about your own background and concerns. Having a clear time limit allows you to show that you respect both your own time and the time of the person you are talking to.

Because the amount of time for the conversation is limited, the number of questions that you can ask is limited, too. If the group planning to conduct the conversations is convinced that it is absolutely necessary to get the answers to 15 questions from each person they talk to, the group would do better to send out a questionnaire or do a telephone poll instead. There is time to ask three or four questions at most in a one-to-one conversation, and it is a good idea to decide in advance how much time you want to allot for each question.

One standard question that should be included in any first-time conversation really isn't a question at all, but a mutual exchange of life stories in a public, rather than private sense. This does not mean sitting down and asking a relative stranger to reveal his or her life secrets, nor does it mean disclosing your own. The breakdown in the distinctions between public and private speech, with total strangers revealing the most intimate details of their lives on nationally syndicated talk shows like Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey and Geraldo, may make you feel queasy about asking people to tell you about themselves. It is important to understand that the person you are talking to may feel queasy, too, or, on the other hand, may be eager to disclose much more personal information than you would ever want to hear. Plan for either response. Our increasingly therapeutic culture has blurred the lines between what is appropriate to say in a support group and what is appropriate to say in public. Part of the "point" of cultivating public relationships is re-cultivating the distinction.

Practicing various approaches to the standard opening question in a group is helpful. One way to do it is to model what a public disclosure of one's life story is by telling your own story first. "Well, as I said on the phone, I wanted to get to know you a bit and talk to you about challenges you see facing our community. Just to let you know about me a little bit, I was born here but left with my family when I was six because my father got a job in Akron. My grandmother stayed here and I spent most of my summers here, then I went into the Army after high school. Served two years in Vietnam as a medic. Then went to pharmacy school in Norfolk and settled here because I always loved the area and wanted to come back. I work at the drugstore downtown, am married to a woman I met in college who is originally from Chicago, and I have two kids in high school. How about you, are you from here originally?"

Another way is to ask the person about herself or himself first; this is especially appropriate if you already know something about the person. "Well, as I said on the phone, I want to get to know you a little better and ask you some questions about the community. I know I've seen you every Friday at the bank when I deposit my check, and I see your name in the paper all the time about the work you do on the arts council. Did you grow up here?"

In addition to a standard get-acquainted question, you'll probably have time for two or three more, and the group conducting the conversations should discuss what those questions will be. Asking people what the biggest challenges in their own lives are often makes some patterns clear, especially if the group is able to have 30 or 40 conversations a month with a fairly diverse group of people. Asking people what they see as the biggest challenges in the community is another option. Asking them more specific questions like what the strengths and weaknesses of state government are or what they see as the most difficult issues in public



education narrows the conversation quite a bit but can be useful if the group is trying to frame an issue campaign.

In the conversations, be sure to let people know what you are planning to do and extend invitations to people who seem to have something to offer to get more involved. For example: "Well, we're in the process of talking to about 120 people over a three-month period. After that, we're writing up a report on what we've heard and we'll be holding small meetings to let people know what the outcome was. That will help us get the word out more. Then we'll convene a general meeting of everyone who's interested in forming a new citizens organization." Exercise judgment in inviting people to future events, though. If someone seems disinterested to you, or hostile, there is no need to encourage them to get involved in the group.

It is important to acknowledge and thank people for discussing their views, even if you don't agree with them. One "point" of the conversations is not to get into a heated argument over things you disagree about. Again, practice helps. "Well, it has been interesting to hear how strongly you feel about a mandatory death penalty for shoplifting. I don't share your point of view, but I had no idea how clear the statistics are you quoted about the death penalty deterring crime. In fact, I saw report the other day that said the opposite is true. Maybe you can send me a copy of your statistics and I'll send you a copy of mine, just so we each have a full picture of the debate."

After each conversation, be sure to jot down some notes about what the person said. Some leadership groups use forms with blank spaces for each question. It is okay to take notes while you are listening, especially if you have trouble remembering things, but listen attentively rather than writing the entire time the person is talking.

It is a good idea to send each person a short note thanking them for their time, and mentioning anything else that is appropriate. ("I will be sure to tell the group that you are interested in holding a house meeting in your neighborhood. We plan to start them in about two months, and you'll get an invitation to the planning session for that.") If note cards seem too formal, a follow-up phone call might do instead, although a call might be better used to actually ask the person to do something.

### **The role of the leadership group once the conversations have started**

The leadership group needs to decide how many conversations they want to have and over what period of time. For most people, one conversation per week is all they can fit into their schedules, but some people may be in a position to do several over a weekend rather than during the week. Set a group goal. For example, if 10 people agree to have one conversation a week over four weeks, that means the group can hear from 40 people in a month. Over three months, that means the group can have conversations with 120 people.

It is a good idea to set a time for the leadership group to get together about once a month to talk about what they are hearing in the conversations and to make decisions about whether they want to invite any of the people with whom they have talked to join the leadership group, be invited to the first public meeting, or be invited to hold a house meeting or help with research or another project the group is working on.

The leadership group meetings are also a time to identify problems and try to solve them as a group. For example, if the group finds after one month of conversations that no low-income women with children have agreed to talk to them, the leadership group needs to address this gap. Why are the low-income women refusing? Are they giving any particular reason? What other options do you have? Perhaps the Head Start teacher in town would be willing to invite parents to small group meetings where a couple volunteers from the leadership group could meet with them and conduct "small group conversations" instead.

In comparing notes on what they are hearing, the leadership group begins to get a picture of the concerns in the community which will aid in planning for the founding meeting for the whole group. For example, if, after the first month of conversations, 30 of the 40 people you have talked to say that public transportation

is their major concern for the community, the leadership group should consider planning a workshop on public transportation for the founding meeting.

The leadership group may also decide to schedule other events in response to what it is hearing in the conversations or simply as the result of the conversations the leadership group is having. For example, the leadership group might invite a guest from another leadership group in another community to a meeting to share what they are doing and learning in the other group. Or the leadership group might schedule a workshop on how to hold a press conference since the group wants to hold a press conference to announce the founding meeting and no one in the group has ever organized one before. While the leadership group is free to plan and schedule other events, it is important not to over-schedule. The main point is to conduct the conversations, analyze them as a group, and move toward the establishment of a new citizens group. It often makes sense to wait until the conversations are done before scheduling many events. After the conversations are done, the leadership group will have many more contacts than it did when it started, and many more people to work on planning and carrying out events.

The organizing approach of cultivating relationships leads to creativity and a continuous infusion of energy for an organization. It must be very deliberate and viewed as a long-term process. When combined with a sound analysis of the political and economic situation in a community, strategic thinking, and intentional personal growth and learning by the individuals involved, this approach leads to very informed and powerful actions.

# Why Organize?

By Ellen S. Ryan

## Meet Molly, Bob, Grace, Tom, and JoAnn

Molly Jones, a single parent with an infant son, has lived in her three-room apartment for four months. This morning, she looked out her kitchen window and saw two young men in the alley. One gave the other a small plastic bag in exchange for a handful of cash. "Drug deal," thought Molly. What Molly doesn't know is that three of her neighbors saw the deal going down from their windows, too.

Bob Smith, fishing pole in hand, walked along the creek behind his rural home. He got to his favorite spot and noticed an orange tinge in the water, then saw a dead frog at his feet on the bank. "Chemical spill?" wondered Bob, thinking of a chemical plant in a small town upstream. What Bob doesn't know yet is that his well water is polluted, too.

Grace Brown, an African-American woman, opened her mail and read a notice from her employer that she had been turned down for a promotion in her department. Grace has been with the company for six years, and for the last three years has noticed that African-Americans who apply for promotions above the level of team supervisor are consistently turned down. The company prides itself on having a diverse workforce, and uses photographs of racially diverse groups of people in its employee recruitment materials. But the fact is that no matter how hard Grace works to meet the expectations of her supervisor and receive high evaluations of her skills and work performance, she hits an invisible wall whenever she tries to move up in the company.

Tom Marcus went to see his daughter Lisa's third-grade teacher. Lisa is struggling in school, having trouble reading smoothly, and feeling lost in math class. The teacher said that maybe because of all the problems in Tom's home - he is out of work and his wife sick with a heart condition - their daughter just can't concentrate. Tom said he and his wife read to their daughter every day, play math games with her, help her with her homework and make sure she finishes it every night. "That's good," said the teacher. "Maybe you should just keep trying." "She's saying Lisa can't read because I'm unemployed and my wife's an invalid," thought Tom. What Tom doesn't know is that almost half the children in Lisa's class are reading below grade level.

JoAnn Cosby is Lisa's teacher. JoAnn has a class of 34 children, about 15 more than she can really handle at one time. A handful of the children cause discipline problems in the classroom that consume most of JoAnn's energy and patience. With so many children not meeting grade-level expectations, Lisa is the least of JoAnn's worries. Lisa is nice child who is just a little slow at catching on to things. JoAnn is glad Lisa's parents are so willing to help her, and wishes all the parents would spend more time helping their kids.

## Individuals with problems?

All of these people see themselves as individuals with problems. While this is true, they are also members of communities, and the problems they have effect other people around them. Their problems also have something to do with large public and private institutions-police departments, corporations, school systems. Let's take Molly, for example. Molly saw a drug deal in progress, and you might say that it is her civic duty to call the police. The fact is, Molly has called the police when she has seen drug dealing in the past. The police arrived each time between 10 and 20 minutes after she called. They were very professional and courteous toward her, took down the descriptions of the drug dealers and buyers, thanked her, asked her to call anytime she saw suspicious behavior, and left. Each time, the drug dealers were back a short time later.

Molly didn't call the police this time because her baby is crying and she doesn't have time. Deep down, Molly is also afraid. The police car has pulled up in front of her house so many times that it is obvious to

the drug dealers that she is reporting on them to the police. She worries that the dealers will do something to her or her son in retaliation. Molly's neighbors are afraid, too. Some of them called the police in the past, but they stopped because it didn't seem to make a difference. Instead, they avoid going into the alley. They avoid going out at night. They aren't sure if some of their neighbors are drug dealers or not.

Most people assume that if an individual has a problem, it is the responsibility of the individual to do something about it. Another way to look at it though, is that there are some problems that individuals cannot solve alone. Molly is not in a position to arrest the drug dealers or talk the purchasers into going into drug treatment. She cannot move to a drug-free neighborhood, if such a place exists, because she has little money and needs to stay in a low-rent apartment. There is an extreme shortage of low-rent housing available in her community, and she feels lucky to have a roof over her head.

Molly can't solve the problem herself, and has already taken the step of calling the police. That hasn't worked either and has made her personal problem worse because now she is afraid the drug dealers might retaliate. Molly's problem is not the type of problem that can be solved with individual initiative, and the police, the public agency with the authority to arrest drug dealers, doesn't seem to be able to solve the problem, either.

Molly, Bob, Grace, Tom, and JoAnn all have problems that are pretty much impossible to solve as individuals acting alone. The next step, of contacting another person with authority and expertise in their problems, might not solve the problems, either.

Bob might report the chemical spill to a pollution control agency, or file a lawsuit against whatever company polluted his well, if he can prove who did it. Grace could set up a meeting with her supervisor to go over the reasons her promotion was denied, but she has done that for the last two years, and has heard she just needs to try harder. Grace suspects racial discrimination, but is sure the company will deny it if she brings it up, and attack her work record in some way as an excuse. She could file a complaint with a public agency that investigates racial discrimination in employment practices, but is afraid that might hurt her chances of finding another job in the future. She could look for another job with a more racially-fair company, if she can find one.

Tom might try to find a tutor for his daughter Lisa, but it seems he and his wife have been tutoring Lisa quite a bit already. And no amount of tutoring will address Lisa's classroom environment. Sending Lisa to a private school is out of the question financially, and her low grades would make it hard to find a scholarship. JoAnn could approach the teachers' association about ideas for handling a class with almost half the students performing below grade level. But even if she gets some new ideas, JoAnn will still be on her own with a large class, discipline problems, and many poor readers.

## **Why not?**

Rather than ask the question, "Why organize?" it makes a lot more sense in the five examples above to ask, "Why not?"

In Molly's case, talking to her neighbors might at least help her feel less isolated. If she suspects that some of her neighbors are dealing drugs, she can avoid talking to them until she has found a few neighbors to check things out with. The older woman she has passed on her way to the grocery store, for example, says hello when she passes and looks as frightened as Molly does when she leaves her apartment. Molly could stop and introduce herself the next time they pass on the street. If Molly does this, she might learn that her neighbor's name is Gladys, that Gladys has lived in her apartment for four years, and she knows a few of the other neighbors.

The most basic reason to organize is to make connections with the people around you, to listen and talk about the things you care about, to have an opportunity to develop informed opinions about others in your community. Making an effort to get to know the other people around us, rather than assuming that our

problems are merely the result of our own life circumstances, bad luck, or failings, is the first step in breaking the feelings of isolation, frustration, and failure that prevent us from seeing the opportunities we have to change institutions and make life better, not only for ourselves, but for the communities in which we live as well.

### **Experts are not always effective**

There is nothing wrong with contacting experts and authorities for help with our problems. Molly did the right thing in calling the police when she saw drug deals going down. But when the police response didn't solve the problem, it became clear that just being a good citizen doesn't work in this situation. In fact, Molly continuing to act alone as a good citizen may have put her in even more danger than if she had ignored the problem.

Tom did the right thing in talking directly with Lisa's teacher, too. But focusing only on Lisa's problem without a clear picture of the classroom situation resulted in the same kind of outcome Molly experienced. Just as the police told Molly to keep calling them, Lisa's teacher told Tom to keep doing what he has been doing. Tom already feels bad that he doesn't have a job, and worries about his wife's health. Now he is worried that these problems are the cause of Lisa's problems, too. The teacher's suggestion that Tom just keep doing what he is already doing places the responsibility for Lisa's school performance on Tom's shoulders. The question of the responsibility of the classroom teacher, school, teacher's association, other parents, and the school district as a whole never comes up.

Often, focusing on individuals with problems becomes an effort to fix individuals rather than fix the institutions that are not meeting individual or community needs. For example, if 100 students in Lisa's school cannot read at grade level, the school administration, teachers, and even parents may call for an extensive volunteer tutoring program to help the children improve their reading ability. This might do some good, but it does not address the issue of what is wrong with the school itself. It does not change the discipline system in the school, it does not change the large number of students per teacher, it does not even change how reading is being taught in the classroom. All of these institutional factors, rather than the individual failings of individual students, may need to be changed in order to improve the outcome for students. Organizing seeks to change institutions for the common good rather than fix individual problems one at a time.

### **It takes organization**

Even if Molly and Gladys talk to each other and feel a little less isolated by doing so, they probably won't get very far in resolving the drug problem in the alley unless they continue to reach out to more people in their neighborhood, analyze their problem together, and take steps to do something about it. Even as few as a dozen neighbors working together have a much better chance of getting results than they would working as 12 individuals. The second reason to organize, beyond breaking through frustration, fear, and isolation, is to put enough heads, hands, eyes, ears, and feet together as a group to actually get something done. Working together in an organized way gives people more power than they have alone.

### **Personal problems are transformed into public issues**

Banding together in groups creates the opportunity to analyze a situation from many angles and sort out strategies to address it in a public way. It also spreads the work around to a number of people. Molly and Gladys and a few more of their neighbors together might come up with a plan to meet with the police at a higher level in the police department than the patrol officers who respond to individual calls. Some of the patrol officers might even support the neighbors in doing this and help them with information about the best person in the department to talk to. The group might be able to come up with a targeted plan for police patrols in the alley that would help deter drug dealing.

The group might also organize a pot luck supper or barbeque in the alley on Saturday nights to deter drug dealing at that time of day. It would provide an opportunity for people to get out of their apartments and get to know their neighbors a little better as well. The group might decide to work with local social service agencies and churches to provide street counselors and other programs to help drug users get into treatment. They might contact television and newspaper reporters to cover the story of what they are doing in order to get the word out to other neighborhoods in the city that there is something you can do about drug dealing besides locking your doors in fear. They might meet with the city council to target more resources for drug enforcement and treatment. All of these approaches stand a better chance of solving the problem than just continuing to act as individuals.

## **Rebuilding community and democracy**

Getting organized not only turns personal problems into public issues, but increases the chances that the issues can actually be resolved at an institutional level. Getting organized brings people together, not as individual victims of a situation, but as citizens who can effectively build connections with one another and work to get the larger institutions and systems in their community to work effectively. Isolated individuals thus become effective groups with the power to bring about positive changes in community life through public action.

As people work together, they discover that other personal problems are public issues as well. For example, the group in Molly's and Gladys' neighborhood might discover that many parents in the group are not satisfied with the way their children are doing in school. The group may decide to reach out and organize even more people to analyze what is going on in the schools and develop an effective plan of action for improving these institutions. They might also decide to research the issue of the shortage in low-rent housing and develop a strategy for building or converting more housing units for low-income people. By keeping in touch with one another on a regular basis, the group can address any issue that comes up. The fabric of community life and the effectiveness of citizens to actively participate in the democratic system, rather than see themselves only as individual victims, are strengthened.

Building an organization, then, is an important ingredient in developing enough power to make changes in institutions. Some community groups focus so much on issues that they become little groups of experts themselves, and lose their potential for exercising power effectively. They try to solve problems for people rather than involve increasing numbers of people in the process of developing and acting on strategies for change in public. Other community groups focus too much on building the structure of their organizations, so that the real goal of bringing about changes in public and community life gets lost in endless organizational activity, like committee meetings, board meetings, fundraising events, and annual dinners. Still other community groups become corrupt over time, as their leaders use their public positions for selfish gain, just as corrupt politicians and corporate executives do.

Effective community groups need to focus on building their organizations and resolving public issues at the same time. Striking a balance between building an organization that is powerful enough to bring about real change and keeping the action focused on winning the issues requires deliberate effort and regular adjustments in plans and activities. Maintaining genuine democratic control, by which the members of the organization choose their leaders and set the agenda for action, helps community organizations avoid corruption and remain powerful and effective in making long-term changes for the common good.

## **What's your problem? Could it be a public issue?**

Take a minute to look back at the other problems mentioned at the beginning of this article. What could Bob do about his water pollution problem beyond reporting it to a pollution control agency and hiring a lawyer to sue the chemical company for damaging his well water? Is there any way to transform Bob's personal problem into a public issue? What could Grace do to address her suspicion of racial discrimination in promotions in her company? What could Tom do to get a better picture of what is going on with the

other students in Lisa's class? Where could JoAnn find allies for changing her over-crowded, unruly classroom with so many students performing below grade level ?

Like Molly, Bob, Grace, Tom, and JoAnn, do you have a personal problem that could be transformed into a public issue? If so, why not organize? If you need some help, call the Virginia Organizing Project. But remember that the Virginia Organizing Project is not an expert agency set up to solve your problems for you. It is a democratic organization of citizens working on local issues all over the state of Virginia. It helps people like you to organize community groups. Sometimes local groups work together to take on bigger issues as well, issues that cannot be resolved at the local level alone, like welfare reform, unfair taxes, racial discrimination, and workers' compensation policies.

If you are willing to take the first step in transforming what's bothering you into a public issue, and the first step is taking the time to go out and talk to a few people in your own community about it, then call and join the Virginia Organizing Project, or one of its many chapters and affiliates around the state.

We plan to be organizing for a long time, and we hope you'll join us.