



Newsletter

Fall 2009

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Reflections from the Executive Director

I'd like to begin our Fall newsletter with a note of thanks to the people TWI is honored to collaborate with and support. The passion, vision, and ideas they bring to their work are an inspiration to me and to all the people whose lives they touch. I am deeply grateful to have a job that brings me into contact with so many caring, smart, and dedicated individuals.

The lingering economic downturn, however, has presented a challenging reality for those committed to making the world a better place. For many, it has been a time of churning ideas and strategies, plans and possibilities as they grapple with how best to move forward. Conversations I've heard seem to follow two main lines of thought, although they sometimes overlap. One is focused primarily on how to do things differently. Running through these conversations is the theme of seeing opportunities in crises; collaboration, breaking out of silos, and thinking systemically are some of the watchwords. The other is

concerned with how to survive and move forward in a period of shrinking resources and serious cutbacks.

As a foundation working to promote dialogue and critical thinking, we're heartened to see a growing awareness of the need for new conversations and new ways of thinking about problems and decisions. Yet, the argument for devoting significant resources to enabling these kinds of discussions remains a tough sell. Many organizations still view dialogue and reflection as a bonus--a luxury to indulge in when times are good. When times are hard, people too often regard these "soft skills" as expendable.

TWI's position is that dialogue and reflection are essential parts of the engine driving organizations. Integrating them into organizational cultures requires cultivating the habits of curiosity, empathy, and deep listening and of nurturing and valuing the relationships that spring from them. We believe that the grantee stories featured in this newsletter exemplify those cultures and what they can accomplish when these skills are put into practice.

A related topic is an arena where my learning is steep and my feelings are ambivalent: social media and how it's transforming how we communicate, work and collaborate. The 2.0 train has left the station, and we're either riding on it or running to catch up. My preference is still for in-person interaction. I'm sometimes tempted to watch the train fade into the distance, but then I think about the consequences of being left behind (and, more important, TWI), I pick up just enough speed to keep the train in view (or so I like to think). That's a roundabout way of inviting you to visit our TWI blog. We've re-dedicated ourselves to updating it and keeping it fresh, so please check it out.

My ambivalence about social media stems from recognizing their transformative power (in a good way), while wondering about their effects (in bad ways) on users' attention spans and social skills. I have many unanswered questions, particularly around how social media can best be used to promote dialogue, enhance critical thinking, and tell compelling stories. In asking them, I have to guard against thinking in "either/or" frames or making uninformed judgments about how technology is being used. Come to think of it, I often have to remind myself not to do those things, period. Revisiting assumptions is, after all, a lifelong practice.

Finally, I note with sadness and respect the recent death of TWI's first director, Laurel Cook. She helped birth the Institute in 1985 and was a key force in its early development. Laurel was a talented writer and superb editor. In the years we worked together, I learned more about writing from her red pen than I did in school (although no doubt she'd have a field day with what I'm writing here). She had a keen mind, a sharp wit, and a great laugh. She loved to talk ideas and play with language. She hired me in 1988, for which I'll always be grateful. I will miss her.

As we look ahead to the coming year, I suspect that the churning I referred to earlier will intensify as the economy struggles to right itself. We can't know what's ahead, but do know what's needed now: a willingness to question assumptions and openness to listening and learning.

Let's hope for better times next year. Meanwhile, I wish all of you and your families all the best in 2010.

Enjoy the holidays!

John

Real Democracy in Action

By Deanne Stone

How does a modest proposal to start an afterschool program at a Napa elementary school turn into an ambitious plan to revitalize a neighborhood? By saying “yes” to what’s offered to you,” says Leslie Medine, executive director of On The Move. “I said “yes” to the Napa County Office of Education, the principal of McPherson Elementary School I called said, “yes,” and a third-grade teacher said “yes” to running the program. And that’s how the ball got rolling.”

Rolling it did, and it hasn’t stopped. Like all the projects On the Move takes on, this one keeps on expanding. The afterschool program highlighted the need for more community programs in the poor, primarily Latino neighborhood housing 4,000 residents, half of them under the age of 16. A neighborhood survey revealed the residents wanted community meeting places. Once the elementary school offered the use of two classrooms and the city donated property adjoining the school, On the Move’s idea of turning the neighborhood into a model “Democracy Zone” took off. “We wanted to give everyone in the neighborhood, from kindergarteners to adults, a chance to be involved in the planning,” says Leslie.

This past October, On The Move, organized a charrette that included 65 multigenerational residents and seven architects and designers to decide on how the spaces would be used and what the design would look like. In case you’re not familiar with the term, charrette refers to the cart that was used to carry architectural students’ drawings in France in the 18th century. Today it is used to describe a collaborative session in which groups of designers draft a solution to a design problem and then submit it to a larger group for approval.

The organizers divided the large group into smaller groups, each with its own designer. The designer noted the ideas generated by his or her group and sketched a design based on their input. Next, the designers presented each subgroup’s design to the whole group before tackling the final challenge: incorporating all the ideas into one design that met with the approval of the majority. “For the first vote of the Democracy Zone, we used the gradients of agreement model that gives everyone a chance to persuade others in their group to shift their positions enough to reach an agreement. And that’s how we got 65 people to agree on how to use the space for the neighborhood center and cultural plaza.”

The final design includes spaces for an outdoor kitchen, herb garden, volleyball court, dance floor, water play area, classroom, family resource center, multipurpose room, and outdoor restrooms. In mid-October students in LAYLA (Leadership Academy: Youth Leaders in Action)-- an On The Move project that gives academic credit to Napa middle school and high school students who participate in developing community programs-- presented the plan to an enthusiastic Napa City Council. Later, they

also shared the plan with the Napa Parks and Recreation Advisory commission and the Napa Valley Unified School District's board of trustees.

The excitement generated from developing the plan carried over to On The Move's November 7th meeting with one of its major funders, The S. H. Cowell Foundation. As a change from the standard site visit, the foundation had asked On the Move for an experiential and interactive presentation of the Democracy Zone project. What they got was a full-scale production of a neighborhood in action. Forty students joined by a group of moms, teachers, school administrators and even the chief of police came on stage to tell the story of the McPherson neighborhood. Later, they divided into stations to brief the Cowell trustees on different neighborhood programs. The meeting ending with the whole group coming together to discuss the next steps in realizing its plan. This was one "site visit" the Cowell trustees are unlikely to ever forget.

Commenting on the success of the project, Leslie says, "People can talk forever about what they'd like to be different, but unless they take action to make it happen, nothing's going to change." Spoken like a true community organizer.

VOICES' New Home is Turning "Green"

Good fortune shined on VOICES not once, but twice this year. The agency, a project of On The Move, helps emancipated youth between the ages of 16 and 24 find housing and work, develop life skills, and maneuver through public agencies. This coming January VOICES will move into a new home in Napa purchased by the Gasser Foundation. The building will also house a new project of On the Move, a college career center to be called Explorations.

In a second stroke of luck, a retired software entrepreneur looking for a demonstration project to promote "green" buildings in Napa will finance the renovation of VOICES new home. Five green architects and engineers have volunteered to participate in a charette to develop a design with green features such as solar lights and recycled rainwater.

The project has the added bonus of introducing neighborhood youth to the green industry. "About 80 percent of the people living here are poor and Latino," says Leslie Medine. "Getting these students involved in this project can open doors for them after they graduate."

Prenups for Filmmakers and Funders

By Deanne Stone

Filmmakers and funders may be equally enthusiastic about producing a documentary on important social issues, but they rarely start off as equals. Many creative people have no business background or knowledge of how foundations work or what they need. Similarly, many funders don't understand how the creative process evolves or why the finished product may look different from the original proposal. Looming over the negotiations are the inevitable power dynamics. Filmmakers scrambling for funding

may be tempted to ask for less and promise too much, while funders may have unrealistic expectations about how much control they can exert over a media project or of the guarantees filmmakers can give them.

“Over the past 10 years, we’ve heard some painful stories of projects running into trouble because communication broke down,” says Ellen Schneider, executive director of Active Voice. “It doesn’t happen often, but it wouldn’t have to happen at all if people would talk openly about what they need and want right from the start.”

Two years ago, Active Voice began an inquiry into the experiences of filmmakers and media grantmakers as they navigated the various stages of media production. The question driving their investigation was: “Why do some funder/filmmaker relationships thrive while others have decidedly mixed results?”

The Active Voice team conducted focus groups, in-depth interviews, and off-the-record conversations with funders and filmmakers. The best of the anecdotes, lessons, and advice they collected is contained in an attractive and indispensable guidebook, *Prenups: What Filmmakers and Funders Should Talk About Before Tying the Knot*. Besides providing archetypal profiles of filmmakers and funders to help them understand themselves and one another better, Active Voice identified three key areas that require clear and transparent communication to ensure a successful partnership: visions and expectations, roles and participation, and business and legal. The guide can be downloaded free at <http://www.theprenups.org/>.

“Filmmakers and funders can’t assume that everything will work out,” says Ellen. “Grants are contracts, and they can get complicated. Until now, conversations have taken place behind close doors. We wanted to bring them to light so that both parties could be informed of the risks and prepared to talk candidly about their needs and expectations. The more filmmakers and funders can anticipate what’s ahead, the better their chances of building productive working relationships.”

"Town Brawls" or "Town Halls"

By Sandra Heierbacher

Director, National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD)

Citizens attended August's town hall meetings en masse to speak out about health care legislation and dozens of other topics. Unfortunately, the louder voices got, the less citizens and public officials heard one another. To members of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), the meetings aired on television demonstrated why outdated engagement formats don't cut it in today's democracy.

NCDD believes citizens can have authentic, civil, productive discussions at public meetings, and it responded quickly by creating and distributing tools to help public officials and community leaders hold more effective and engaging public meetings about contentious issues like health care reform. Based on a rich and active conversation on the NCDD listserv about the August town hall meetings, we developed a one-page flyer to share at meetings, post in community centers and libraries, and hand to legislators.

We also created three versions of an article, *Upgrading the Way We Do Politics*, and a longer version published in the magazine, *YES!* To access these resources, visit www.thataway.org/?p=1644. You'll also find links to blog posts, articles, radio shows and statements issued by other leaders in the public engagement community in response to the volatile town hall meetings.

Here are a few of the tips for legislators we included in the flyer and articles:

- Provide balanced and detailed information about the issue at hand, and put a fairly framed spectrum of possible policy choices on the table for attendees to discuss. Consider co-hosting with a legislator from another party.
- Use a facilitator. Skilled facilitators are neutral and know how to translate conflict and anger into specific interests, needs and concerns so that what's behind the emotion can be understood and addressed.
- Establish ground rules or agreements that serve as a golden rule for everyone present. With these agreements, participants are more likely to be heard and to hear one another.
- Diligently record what citizens say, and be clear about how you plan to use their input. Throughout the meeting, reflect back the concerns, values and desires you are hearing.

We encouraged NCDD members to use and build on the articles and flyer for their own op-eds, letters and hand-outs, and dozens of them did. You're welcome to use them as well to help leaders engage the public more effectively in the future. Citizens have higher expectations than ever for a government that is of, by and for the people, and it's high time for an upgrade in the way we do politics.

TWI Grantees in the Spotlight

Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of Interfaith Youth Core, was named one of "America's Best Leaders of 2009" by U.S. News & World Report in association with the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy's School of Government.

<http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/best-leaders/2009/10/22/eboo-patel-obama-faith-adviser-preaches-religious-tolerance.html>

Maya Enista, CEO of Mobilize.org, was named one of "50 Visionaries Who are Changing the World" by Utne magazine.

<http://www.utne.com/print-article.aspx?id=214748547>

Mobilize.org's leadership was honored by the San Francisco Bay Area and Washington, DC chapters of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (YNPN).

It's Our Democracy, and It's Time to Act

By Ian Storrar

Chief Operating Officer, Mobilize.org

Thanks to the support of the Whitman Institute, our CEO, Maya Enista, and I have been developing Mobilize.org as a center for thought leadership on how the Millennial Generation, born between 1976 and 1996, can upgrade our democracy. We've seen young leaders across our nation taking their entrepreneurial spirit to the social sector and forging innovative pathways to solve the problems of today and build the democracy of tomorrow. We are about to hold our 6th Democracy 2.0 Summit in Chicago to address the systemic barriers to our generation's fiscal health, where we will invest in Millennial-led solutions to upgrade the way our democracy works. It's an exciting time for Mobilize.org and Millennials. As we enter the second decade of the millennium, Mobilize.org and Millennials everywhere look forward to doing more to improve our communities in ways we may not have imagined before.

Below is the text of the testimony Ian Storrar gave at a recent meeting of the YNPN (Young Nonprofit Professionals Network), held in Washington, DC and hosted by the White House in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. The subject was "Serving Today and Shaping Tomorrow".

"I am a Millennial. Like so many of my peers committed to serving others, in their communities or in unknown corners of the world, I feel called to the life of public service. In my daily work I have the great privilege to continue the struggle for a fairer and more just society that includes all voices and serves all people. I am fortunate to have been able to create a vision for that society in a unique and modern way. In the first few years of my working life, I have been part of the movement to develop and achieve this vision. Through the tools of the Internet and participatory decision-making I've joined others from across the country to craft the Democracy 2.0 Declaration based on the input and ideas of thousands of Millennials. In the declaration, our generation states, "We realize that as young people we are expected to be the leaders of tomorrow, but we understand that as citizens we are called to be the leaders of today." This signals the kind of work we do today to change – indeed, upgrade - the way our democracy works, which is essential to the success of our hopes for tomorrow. The leaders who meet at the White House today are already building that vision. As we gather in celebration of our work to address the systemic barriers facing tomorrow's generation of leaders, I am proud to be among their company."

PACE Announces New Publication

PACE has just released its latest white paper, *An Inequitable Invitation to Citizenship: Non-College Bound Youth and Civic Engagement*, an examination of the gap in public and civic involvement between college-bound youth and non-college-bound youth. The philanthropic community has invested huge resources in trying to understand what motivates college-bound youth to become more involved in public life, but it has not had a similar conversation about how to engage the 50 percent of youth who

don't go to college. The publication is aimed not only at funders, but also at federal and state governments, schools and school systems, higher education, the military, political/advocacy organizations, community institutions, and businesses. A pdf version of the white paper is available at: <http://www.pacefunders.org/publications/NCBY.pdf>. Check PACE's Web site for the date of its upcoming Webnair on which the authors will discuss their research and findings.

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