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A Reflection by Garland Yates about why and how he engaged organizers in *Making Connections* Denver

When he first came to Denver in 1999 to help start the *Making Connections* process, the Casey Foundation’s Garland Yates was asked what he most hoped to achieve. His answer: strengthening this city’s community organizing infrastructure and changing the way community organizing was viewed.

If this happened, Yates thought it would allow residents of *Making Connections*’ four target neighborhoods to develop a strong voice and help lead a long-term movement for change.

As the amount of money now being invested in organizing by a range of funders and city agencies demonstrates — more than \$2 million in 2006 — Yates more than achieved his vision for Denver.

The question is: what did he do both to engage several organizers very deeply in the *Making Connections* work and to convince funders that organizing was a tool they should embrace, not fear?

The first step was to embrace Denver’s organizers, even if they were “very weak and very undersupported.

“They have skills, history, relationships and track records. All the prerequisites for being successful. We started with the assumption that there was an infrastructure

in place that has developed over several decades.

“I think a major shortcoming of most comprehensive community initiatives was that they tried to build something new.... You have to provide an opportunity for the existing resources to become a part of what you’re doing. Our role is helping those folks create a framework for working together and thinking together as opposed to creating something new.”

Yates believes that all organizers want to increase their impact but they have limited capacity, mainly because they have few resources. Early on, Yates could direct some of *Making Connections*’ resources to support organizing, but he knew that *Making Connections*’ resources by themselves were not enough.

“We didn’t have enough money to significantly enhance the capacity of organizing groups or to sustain that capacity. So there had to be a local commitment to seeing organizing as a fundamental part of the change process.”

Part of this entailed educating people about the history, accomplishments and principles of organizing. Yates’ early organizer allies did exactly this, doing a session on organizing for a large group of Denver *Making Connections*’ partners as well as having individuals from other institutions attend formal organizer training.

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But Yates knew that education by itself was not enough: people also need to experience the potential of organizing. “We had to get people involved in relationships with organizing groups early on.”

To do this, *Making Connections* engaged organizers to help it pull together a series of “summits” in its target neighborhoods. The number of residents that the organizers helped turn out for these summit meetings – and the depth of the discussion – impressed many partners. They began to see that organizers could be very useful for them to achieve their goals – both their institutional goals and their goals as individuals.

“Some people went into this work to help communities turn themselves around, but the institutions and systems they got connected with never lived up to that. At an individual level, a lot of people saw this as an opportunity to do what they came into this work to do.”

The other important impact of these summits was that they gave people an opportunity to build relationships and trust, Yates believes. “The summits turned out to be something everybody felt good about and they got everybody’s attention.

“Organizers showed their stuff and people benefited from it. In a matter of a few weeks, we were able to put on four or five meetings in neighborhoods that were turning out 200 to 300 people. Working

together on events like these is what really built relationships.” This in turn led to more acceptance of organizing and a sense that organizing was “part of the solution.”

But getting funders to be willing to work with organizers was just half the battle. The other side was getting organizers comfortable working with funders, city agencies and other institutional partners. Many organizers are very uneasy with these kinds of alliances. They often see city agencies as targets, not allies.

How did Yates overcome this uneasiness? Part of it was his conviction that helping build a strong community organizing infrastructure was essential to *Making Connections*’ ultimate success. “Framing it like this piqued the interest of the organizers. They know better than anyone that it is a constant struggle to find the resources to pay for enough organizers and enough infrastructure to really have an impact.”

Another challenge was getting the organizers to work together. When *Making Connections* did its initial scan of Denver, it found six or seven organizing approaches.

“The scan helped us understand the different approaches in Denver and allowed us to talk about it in a way that everyone could see their self-interest. Our strategy was to get these organizing approaches to work together to build a power base

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among families in the neighborhoods, a base that could have influence and that would be intelligent.

“MOP could still be MOP, but what we wanted MOP to do was help build this powerful constituency. That might mean working with city government and others they hadn’t worked with in the past, who they may have seen as a target.

“We thought about how to carry out an organizing process that protects the integrity of what each group is doing but expands on what they are doing. So rather than just focus on churches, MOP looked at public housing complexes.

“We tried to work with them – not work for them or dictate to them – and engage them in a thinking process that would get them invested because they see it as in their self-interest, but which also expands their notions a little.”

Yates also pushed the organizers a little “to examine the power dimensions more closely. How much power did they really have? How much had they improved the lives of the people they were trying to empower? Now, I didn’t talk to them about power in that way. But I did talk to them about the importance of having families as a powerful constituency.”

Not every organizer who was engaged at the beginning of *Making Connections* bought all this. Several groups dropped out along the way. But enough stayed to have a big impact on how *Making Connections* developed in Denver.

The organizers who did stay were able to overcome a common expectation of organizers: that they will always be confrontational. Yates thinks this is a myth. While some individual organizers can be confrontational, most residents “don’t like putting themselves out like that. They don’t like being angry. They don’t like exposing themselves as rabble-rousers. When people do that, it’s usually about some pent-up emotion that can’t be expressed in any other way.

“When you have a process where people are thinking and working collectively and constantly talking to each other, you minimize that potential.

“What we’ve done is create an environment where organizing means the solidifying of relationships and a commitment to something that can outweigh disagreements. This is critical. When there are disagreements, people tend to focus on working them out, not walking out.”

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This is one of a series of reflections and reports about the work of Making Connections, a long-term community change initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. These reflections are available at: www.DiaristProject.org. For more information, contact Tim@CharityChoices.com.

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