

“On the **BIG BATTLES**, we were getting our butts kicked.”

A Reflection by Mike Kromrey, Director of Metro Organization for People

- About why his organizing group became deeply involved in *Making Connections* Denver.
- How this involvement has helped change Denver’s understanding of — and support for — organizing.
- And why any initiative that wants to build the voice of residents needs to use organizers and organizing principles.



When he first came to Denver in 1999 to try to jumpstart a movement for change in a few struggling neighborhoods, the Casey Foundation’s Garland Yates was clear about one thing: he needed to engage local organizers. He was also clear that the *Making Connections* initiative needed to “use some of the understandings about how to engage and empower communities that come out of organizing.”

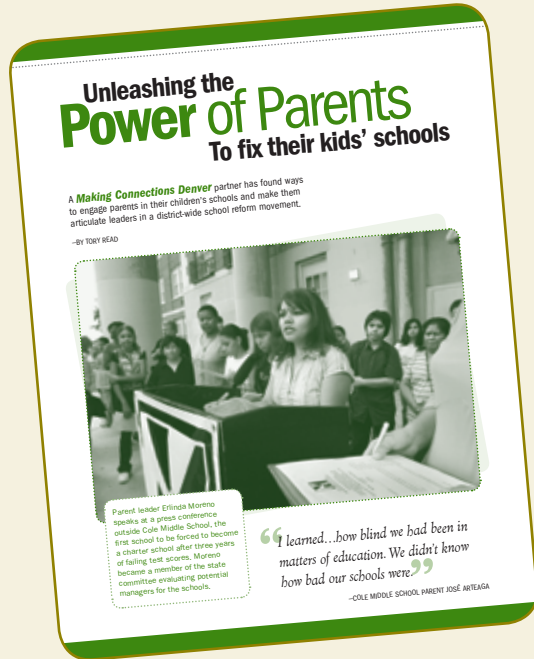
To do this, he asked a range of organizers and groups in Denver to begin meeting to explore how they and *Making Connections* might work together to strengthen organizing in this city and build a movement of residents and other “stakeholders” that could actually achieve long-term change in these neighborhoods.

The results of this have been quite interesting. One result has been some significant organizing success stories:

- A large group of parents have been organized and trained to create an impressive

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effort to reform Denver’s struggling school system (see *Unleashing the Power of Parents to fix their kids’ schools*; page 13).

- A broad coalition has helped convince the developer of a massive project near downtown Denver to agree to a long list of commitments, including jobs for neighborhood residents and environmental clean-up (see *The Gates Cherokee Redevelopment Project: “A huge step forward for low-income people in Denver”*).

A second result has been a dramatic change in the capacity of organizing groups in Denver and in the understanding and acceptance of organizing by several local funders and government agencies.

There are now 11 local funders that are supporting organizing. These 11 funders are working in a collaborative with seven organizing groups. The local funding plus support from a few national foundations adds up to well over \$2 million a year going into organizing in Denver.

“This is big money,” notes Terri Bailey, the Senior Research Officer of the Piton Foundation, a *Making Connections* partner and a supporter of organizing in Denver. “For organizing, it is enormous.” She adds that the organizing groups are now working together, running joint campaigns and “doing much more sophisticated analysis and organizing.”

Bailey adds that, “All of this has happened over the last five years because of *Making Connections*’ vision and *Making Connections*’ investments. It is just a different time in Denver. Organizing has become part of the DNA of Denver.”

“The work that is going on in Denver is fundamentally different now,” adds Peg Logan, director of the Chinook Fund, which has long supported organizing groups and which has been a close *Making Connections* partner. “The conversations that the foundations are having and that the organizers are having is completely different because of *Making Connections*.”

Logan believes the key is that, “We had an opportunity to educate the people who work for foundations and agencies.

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I still carry these elements of organizing with me.”

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“I totally caught the bug.”

A profile of Mike Kromrey

A summer job for which he didn’t even get paid got Mike Kromrey in trouble. Or at least that job got him started down the road to a career that often hasn’t been easy but has at least sometimes been “a lot of fun” and given him a sense that he has been working on issues that matter for lower-income people.

That job during the summer of 1979 was doing organizing in Colorado Springs with ACORN, a long-established community organizing “network” with affiliates in cities and towns across the country. This job followed an experience working with Catholic Charities helping residents of a housing project get a community center.

“I almost quit school,” Kromrey remembers. “I got totally captured by what [organizers] do.” At the time Kromrey was studying social work in graduate school at the University of Denver. “Some of my friends from school still say that Mike was going to be a therapist but ended up an organizer.”

“I grew up with school teacher parents but not around activism. I came at it more from a caring perspective. I was like a lot of us in this work: do-gooders doing the right thing in the community. I never knew what organizing was, just like my young staff here now. I’d never heard of it before. I didn’t know it existed.”

Kromrey’s first paid organizing job was with Catholic Charities. He then began to work with a new group in Denver that Catholic Charities was supporting called Metropolitan Organization for People, or MOP. He says he did the “door-knocking” style of organizing in Commerce City, a community north of Denver.

Kromrey continued doing organizing throughout the 1980s, learning from long-time organizers like Mike Miller, Don Elmer and Shel Trap.

Eventually he became the director of a new organizing group that was working in Northern Colorado called Congregations Building Community. He says

the group’s work in this very rural, pretty conservative part of the state was very successful. “We were having the time of our lives.”

He became connected to the PICO network, which works with some 55 local federations throughout the US, most of which work through churches. In the mid-1990s, PICO asked him to consult with MOP, which had experienced impressive success on a range of specific issues such as utility reform, but had been struggling to build its base of leaders. Eventually MOP’s board asked Kromrey to move back to Denver and become MOP’s new director, helping rebuild the organization. He agreed to do so.

Working closely with his board and PICO, Kromrey was slowly able to rebuild MOP’s base in Denver-area churches and begin to realize the board’s vision of a powerful regional organization that could transcend individual issues.

“You get out on a big issue and it’s fun,” Kromrey explains. “After awhile, people forget where they came from. They become experts on a specific issue and forget that they don’t have a following anymore. They haven’t been back to talk to anyone in their church for 10 years.

“As an organization, you can look really hot. You are leading the work on an important issue. But it’s very shallow underneath. We constantly deal with that tension.”

Despite his willingness to be critical of some aspects of community organizing, Kromrey certainly has never come close to questioning its importance and its guiding principles. “All of the training I have had – the tactics, the strategy work around issues, how to identify an issue, how you train people to pin officials at public meetings, how to run a good public meeting – all of that has remained essential. I learned a lot. These things didn’t shift. I still carry these elements of organizing with me.”

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“People began to see that the missing ingredient of all the work that all of us had been trying to do for years was the organized voice of people who are the most affected.”

—Terri Bailey



Chinook Fund Director Peg Logan says there is now “much more flexibility in the way people are thinking in the organizing world.”

Garland and the Casey Foundation had the cachet to bring the systems people to the table and give us the opportunity to educate them about organizing. To help them change the way they thought about the work they were doing.

“It didn’t mean that they completely got it. It took time. But that didn’t matter. The conversation was on the table for the first time. That was huge.”

“Over time,” adds Bailey, “people became less uncomfortable with organizing. They became a lot more knowledgeable about it. They entered into relationships with organizers.

“And they began to see not just the power of organizing, but also that the missing ingredient of all the work that all of us had been trying to do for years was the organized voice of people who are the most affected.”

Just as important, Logan adds, is that the conversations that organizers are having are also very different. She says that most organizers were very wary of working with *Making Connections* when it first came to Denver. “They said, ‘We have nothing in common with them. It would be completely impossible to work with them.’ But now they are saying that, ‘This has worked for MOP (Metro Organization for People) and maybe we could do this as well.’”

“What’s happening now — organizers working together — is what we’ve been trying to do all this time. *Making Connections* broke all this open.... There’s much more flexibility in the way people are thinking in the organizing world.”

Several people helped make this happen in Denver. In addition to Logan, one of the most critical was Mike Kromrey, the director of MOP. In part because the timing was right for his organization, Kromrey got deeply engaged in the development of *Making Connections* in Denver. He became part of a small group of people who met constantly during the first three years, helping design and build *Making Connections* locally.

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This deep engagement eventually paid off for his organization, which grew from one half-time organizer to 10 full-time organizers, in part as a result of support from *Making Connections*, in part as a result of support from other funders and even the city of Denver itself.

“The great thing about Mike’s role in this is his unbelievable vision,” says Logan. “His intellectual openness...that’s why MOP is the organization it is.”

In three interviews over the past two years, Kromrey explained why he and his organization decided to get so deeply involved in a long-term, foundation-supported initiative like *Making Connections*, an opportunity that many organizers would avoid.

One reason he invested so deeply in *Making Connections* is that he had become a little frustrated with the limited impact that many organizing groups have had on the reality of poverty. “We haven’t gotten as far as we would have liked. The scale is small. We’ve lost a lot of battles. We’ve won some too. But the significant, big battles...we were getting our butts kicked.”

In these interviews, which were done by Diarist Project Coordinator (and former Denver diarist) Tim Saasta, Kromrey also reflects on the impact that getting involved in an initiative like *Making Connections*

has had on his organization and on his own thinking.

And he discusses why any long-term, change-oriented initiative that wants to engage residents and insert their voice into the conversation must seek out organizers and employ some of the basic principles of organizing.

► Why did you and your organization get so involved in *Making Connections*?

Kromrey says that timing was crucial to the decision to get engaged with *Making Connections*. MOP, which was begun in the late 1970s, was struggling. Its board decided that it had to rebuild its base and expand its impact. Kromrey was hired to do just that.

“We did a pretty serious examination of where we were at the time. On one level you could say, ‘My God, we were incredibly successful. MOP had won \$20 million in bank loans, a \$25 million water treatment plant, drug-free zones for the whole state, we helped get an Office of Consumer Counsel. We had a lot of pretty good trophies on the wall. It was good stuff.’”

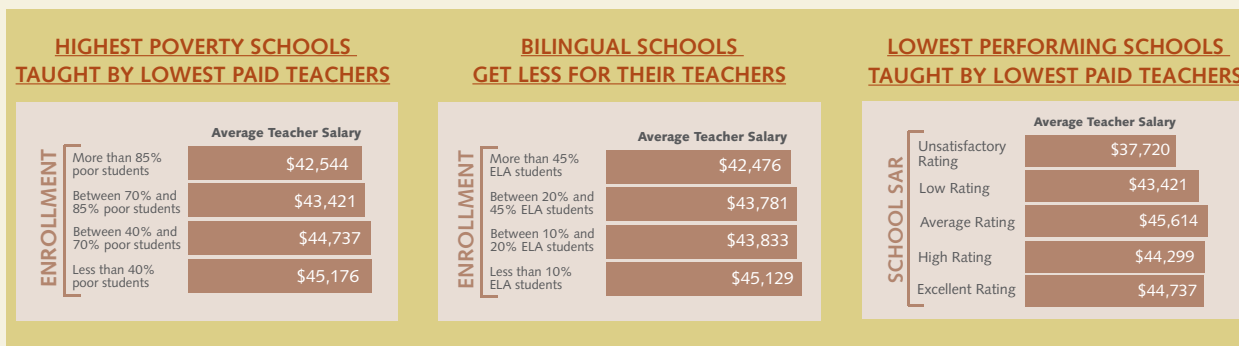
But most of MOP’s work focused on specific issues. Kromrey and Lead Organizer Ana Garcia saw that working on these issues hadn’t allowed MOP to become a strong organization that could have a

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The Piton Foundation’s Terri Bailey says that Denver’s organizing groups are now “doing much more sophisticated analysis and organizing.” These charts are from a MOP study of the Denver schools’ budget.

broader impact on low-income communities in Denver. Indeed, in focusing so much on issues, MOP and many of its leaders had lost touch with many of the residents of these communities.

“Our leaders started saying things like, ‘Why don’t those people – other residents of their communities — appreciate what we’ve done FOR them?’ I knew then that we were in very, very deep trouble. We had developed very good people who had done tremendous things in the community but who weren’t really very much in touch with their communities anymore. They were in love with the issue, not the people anymore. And I think our staff was too.”

Kromrey came to believe that, while organizing people around issues “was not a bad way of getting to people, it didn’t have the glue. We won issues, but we didn’t build community....”

“MOP could turn out a 1,000 people for a meeting. But it was always around a crisis. It was mobilization.

“People got involved around a particular self-interest issue. They would put enormous amounts of time into this issue. I’ll never forget my first issue in Commerce City, a stoplight near a school. It was a HUGE amount of work. But then we never saw these people again. They never made the transfer from the issue to the broader organization, plus the staff had to do all the work.

“I remember an article by an early organizer that was called, ‘Why am I doing all the work around here?’ That’s exactly what it was. We were the central hub of the relational work. The social capital was primarily about us.”

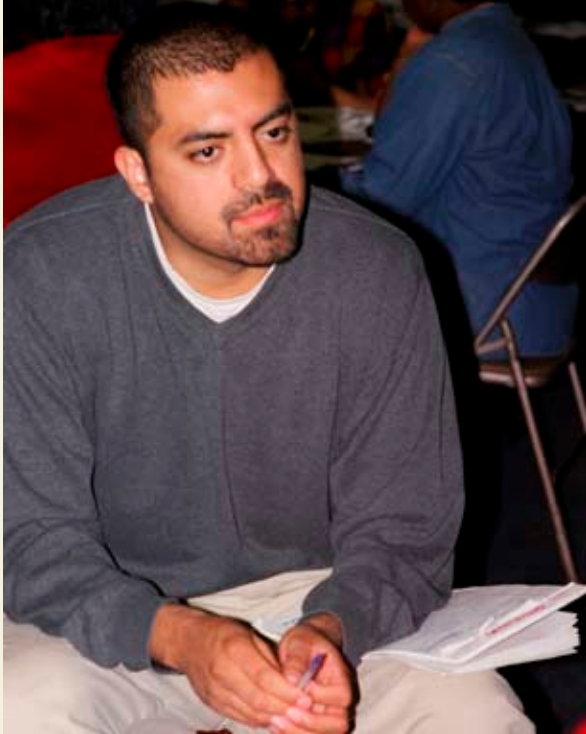
Kromrey came to see the staff-driven nature of many organizing groups as “the

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Mike Kromrey says that, when he was young, he “never knew what organizing was, just like my young staff here now.” This is MOP organizer Mateos Alvarez.

central weakness of what we were doing, of our model. Because when we had less staff, the organizations just all died. That’s what happened around the country.

“We preached the principle that leaders should have followings and we preached the ‘iron rule’: never do for others what they can do for themselves. But we violated that a lot. We still do. It’s very tough to do. Short cuts are so easy when you’re full-time professionals. That’s what social services is all about. Do for. Do for. But organizers can do the same things.”

MOP had developed a base of churches, but even there, Kromrey says, “*The churches viewed MOP as an organization that did something for them in the neighborhood. We had failed in The Catholic Vatican II language of making justice continuative to church life.*”

MOP began working with an organizing network called PICO (People Improving Communities Through Organizing), which encouraged MOP to start building stronger ties to churches and potential community leaders. Kromrey was hired to do a series of one-on-one meetings with churches to talk with them about organizing and to find out what their interests were.

“It was a total rebuilding process. But all organizing is rebuilding, so MOP’s story is not that different from many others. That’s the nature of this stuff.”

Through this process, MOP began to build a broader base of churches that crossed over income, race, neighborhood and denominational differences. The hope was to build an organization that could tackle larger, region-wide issues like housing and healthcare, issues that transcend individual neighborhoods or even cities.

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to be able to solve these problems. They won't be able to overcome their isolation.”

By connecting churches and people in low-income neighborhoods with churches and people in middle-income neighborhoods, groups like MOP hope to increase their impact. “*I think scale has been a tremendous problem around the country. Tremendous stuff has been done, but we still lack scale....*”

This period of introspection and rebuilding at MOP occurred at nearly the same time that the Annie E. Casey Foundation was beginning its *Making Connections* (MC) initiative in Denver and many other cities. Because Denver's long-time Site Team Leader Garland Yates has a long history working with organizers, he wanted to engage organizers in this new, long-term, community-change initiative.

Yates invited several organizing groups to discuss ways that MC could help organizing in Denver and how organizers could help MC achieve its goal of engaging residents and helping them find a voice. Kromrey and MOP became part of this informal group. Over time, Kromrey and the Chinook Fund's Peg Logan became key partners of MC Denver.

The question is why? “*We saw an opportunity early on to engage with power institutions in a different way. A way to build community,*” Kromrey

explains. MOP didn't see its role as an “irritant,” which Kromrey thinks is how organizing often gets marginalized. “*People say, ‘Oh, that's picketing. That's the sixties.’*”



“*I saw the opportunity to be part of something and that there was an openness by the initiative to be shaped by organizing. It was already using the right kind of language. Hearing it through my filter it seemed like, ‘Wow, they're talking organizing.’*”

“*There was an opportunity to not just help the narrow self-interests of organizers but also to engage with people who could be influential in looking at transforming communities and could credential community organizing as a legitimate partner.*”

“*When I came back to MOP as director, we were marginalized in the city. I was being paid to help bring this organization to its vision of a really broad organization. I believed that to do this we needed to look for opportunities to change our reputation. And it wasn't just MOP: we needed to change the way people in Denver viewed who and what organizing is.*”

Not only did Kromrey and MOP see *Making Connections* as an opportunity, they also saw that it could be a threat. “*Early on we were hearing that they were thinking that, ‘Maybe we should just do*

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“I wondered if it would work to be at a different table with a Myrna Hipp [above].”

our own thing.’ I thought, ‘Why would you start over when you have the groups you need here already?’ I hoped that they didn’t just go out and hire their own organizers – that would have been a disaster. So there was self-interest in participating.”

There was also a personal interest in being part of this initiative, Kromrey adds. *“I like to try new things, things that work. I had the same core values and interests, which is transforming communities. I’m intrigued by what works. I wondered if it would work to be at a different table, sitting at the table with a Myrna Hipp [then the director of the Mayor’s office of neighborhood initiatives].”*

“Organizers tend to be insular at times. We talk to everybody, but sometimes because of power issues, because we’re trying to put leaders at the forefront, we get rightfully nervous about the staff sitting at power tables without leaders.”

“So we saw a lot of opportunity but at the same time a lot of risk. Getting involved with this came with a price, a quid pro quo. There were a lot of elements in this initiative that weren’t organizing. I knew it was going to require some changes on our part if we wanted to play the game.”

“I also knew it would take a lot of my time. The question was, would it be worth it for the organization? But overall, the language, the long-term perspective, the chance to be a part of something that could more fundamentally transform these neighborhoods, the chance to show the incredible value of organizing – those things were all very attractive to me and fit nicely with what we were trying to do, which was to reframe what organizing was.... So it was timely.”

► **Has it been worth it? If so, how so?**

Asked whether it has been useful to become so involved in *Making Connections*, Kromrey answers *“absolutely.... Making Connections has played a very key role in our growth.”*

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It has been worth it for the obvious reasons, such as the growth in MOP’s size and impact. It has also been worth it for the dramatic change in how other funders and government officials understand and embrace organizing. “Some doors opened up for us,” explains Kromrey. “And not just on funding, though that’s very critical. People who either didn’t know anything about us or who didn’t like us began to open their doors to us and to organizing in general.”

It was also worth it on a personal level, Kromrey adds. “There was a lot of personal self-interest because I ended up working with a group of people who were stimulating personally, intellectually, politically.” He says that on one level this personal satisfaction isn’t as important as all the organizational and political changes that have happened. But, he adds, “My self-interest is important, too, for me to stay in this work for 25 years.

“The team was awfully intriguing to me. When we started out, we didn’t know each other so we didn’t know if we could depend on and trust each other. We came from very different worlds.” But trust developed fairly quickly, Kromrey says.

“It challenged us, pushed us, opened us up. It did a lot of the things I was interested in. We got to be part of helping craft it. Each side brought different interests to the table that they had to have met to stay in.

“For us, we wouldn’t be here today if the initiative hadn’t moved in the direction it did, toward embracing organizing.” He adds that the initiative “takes seriously the need for residents to develop their own voice.

“The fact that what we brought to the table was taken seriously and embraced by the initiative allowed us to be open. We were willing to try things.” One was doing workshops on organizing for city bureaucrats and funders. Another was to accept a grant from the city to do organizing.

“This tested some of our ideological assumptions. It’s been really interesting. It’s pushed some envelopes. Every profession has its assumptions. They are usually based on a lot of experience and good thinking, but if you don’t change, you’ll die.”

One downside has been the amount of his time that the initiative has required and the number of requirements it has imposed. “I find myself asking, ‘How much of this is outside my organization and our interests. You’ve got to weigh the benefits with the things that are not in the interest of your organization.

“But what’s been interesting are some of the other doors that have gotten opened because of the stuff we’ve done. Specifically, the city of Denver. It’s been just fascinating.”

The city has not only developed a much better understanding of organizing and

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“The city is referring groups to us to do organizing. They’re sending their own people to organizing workshops and telling people that, ‘You need to talk to MOP because you don’t know how to engage people.’ That’s just mind-blowing.”

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its potential value, it has also embraced MOP. “They’re referring groups to us to do organizing. They’re sending their own people to organizing workshops and telling people that, ‘You need to talk to MOP because you don’t know how to engage people.’ That’s just mind-blowing.”

► **Could this work for other organizing groups?**

Kromrey does not believe that every organizing group could embrace something like *Making Connections*; indeed, several Denver organizing groups that had been engaged early in the process dropped out. “It stretched their ideologies too much. In their view it required too much compromise.

“The other thing is capacity. If you’re too small you just can’t get into this arena because it requires some infrastructure. That’s the other side: to work with the city you have to have a fairly sophisticated infrastructure: a payroll company, little things like that. You have to have enough money to cover your costs until you get reimbursed.

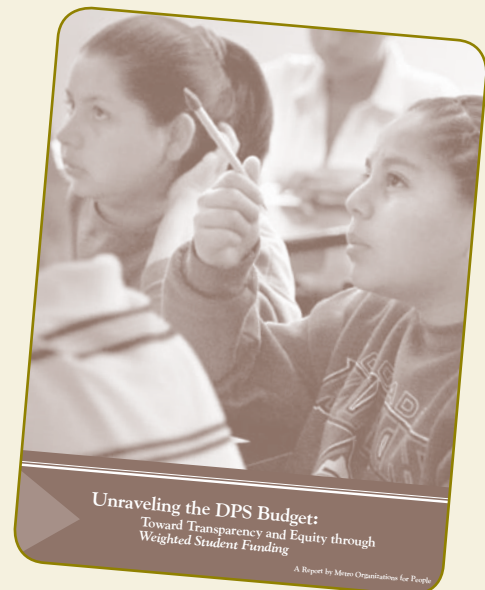
“If you are really small you couldn’t be doing this. You’d have to be out organizing.”

At the other end of the spectrum, long-established, relatively powerful organizing groups probably wouldn’t be interested in becoming part of something like MC

either, Kromrey thinks. “We didn’t think we were powerful enough to ignore it. We were starting up again so we didn’t have the impression of ourselves that we could get everything done by ourselves.

“If MOP had been the power organization in the city, if we had been an organization of 80 churches and had always been in the paper and everybody knew us and we already had a five-year agenda for change, it might have been a different story. It may not have been in our self-interest to join. I don’t know because we weren’t those things.

“And for some groups, this is just way too out of their ideological spheres. They just think it’s corrupt. In relation to our school organizing, for example, that is very suspect with some folks in town.



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For them, the system is completely bad and the principals are the enemy. They would never do an inside game.

“For some, the fact that we have as big a budget as we do means we are already corrupt because we took money from large sources. For some people, big is bad, so taking money from UPS [the Casey Foundation’s money came from one of the founders of UPS, Jim Casey] would probably be out.”

► **What’s been the reaction from PICO, MOP’s organizing network?**

“I think people are intrigued. ‘Good Lord, what are you doing here,’ is one reaction. We’ve stretched some stuff. Some of my colleagues would question us getting out of the faith context. They would question our school work: we’re not the only PICO organizing group that does schools, but we’re the vast minority.

“People are more intrigued by what we did. They want to know how it worked here in Denver when it didn’t work for them in some other city. Casey isn’t the only foundation doing these long-term initiatives.”

“There’s very creative work going on around the country. I believe the major national networks like PICO are really learning organizations, even though at times we all have our blind spots and we may miss

opportunities. But overall, people who get into organizing and stay in it are looking for opportunities.

“But you will absolutely find big differences in the way networks and community organizations relate to power institutions. Are they collaborative or combative? Do you really embrace ‘No permanent enemies; No permanent allies?’

“It varies dramatically. It’s very much influenced by the lead organizers and directors. Despite our work being bottom up, staff influence things that organizations do.

“If you look around the country you’ll see tremendous innovation in some places. You look elsewhere and see people doing the exact same thing that they were doing 40 years ago. They use the same language. The training is the same. I would say those are probably stuck organizations.

“It’s a very broad little world that I’m in. The spectrum of what people are trying and doing is large. But in general, people are really serious about how we transform our communities for the better. In our network here, people have done plenty of programmatic responses to problems. They’ve done after-school programs. We’ve brought in someone from PICO to train teachers to do home visiting because we felt it would work to build relationships. There’s a lot of breadth. There’s a lot of interest.”

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“If you believe that socially engaged communities create better [outcomes], you have to ask who’s been devoting most of their professional lives to figuring out how to engage communities? That is the primary concern of all community organizing groups.”

—Mike Kromrey

Why was it important for Making Connections to engage organizers?

“I’ve read and heard Doug Nelson [the president of the Casey Foundation] and the language he uses and that the foundation uses shows that they have come to the realization that you can’t just ‘do for’ a community. You can’t just turn people into clients. There is a recognition that turning a community into clients has destroyed communities in many ways. People lost their sense of being ‘active citizens.’ Their language really resonates with everything I believe.

“So why community organizing? If you believe that socially engaged communities create better health, better jobs, better economic futures, all that stuff, then you have to ask, who’s been devoting most of their professional lives to figuring out how to engage communities? That is the primary concern of all community organizing groups, whatever their methodologies. It’s not advocating for people or serving people. It’s how do you get people engaged on their own behalf. That is the entire business of community organizing.

“There are some fundamental things that organizers have learned over time about what works. To ignore that you ba-

sically won’t have this as part of your initiative. You might have it for a little while. You can pay people to come to meetings and they’ll show up. But when the money runs out, they’ll stop coming.

“How do you mobilize people when it’s not a crisis? How do you systematically get people engaged in a disciplined way over time? The world of organizing just has the corner on that market. Period.

“But it’s not the corner on everything. It’s the corner on one part of this initiative. Where we can grow is how you tie this knowledge to getting a reading program at a school. Or tie it to getting people connected to the EITC.

“If you really do value residents, if you really want their voices at the table and not just in an advisory committee way, I don’t know anybody else in the country who has figured out how to engage people than organizers. Organizing has an understanding of how you develop grassroots leaders and help people develop their own voices.”

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Photos by Mary Ann Dolcemascolo

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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