

# Case Study

## The Denver Foundation

BY MATT LEIGHNINGER

The Denver Foundation's shift, almost twenty years ago, toward a more community-focused mission emerged from a challenging period in the organization's history. In 1996, a report by the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) charged the foundation with a "lack of connection to community."

The foundation's response to this criticism was to turn to the community. The new president and chief executive, David Miller, convened a demographically representative mix of one hundred people for a four-month process that focused on the mission and role of the foundation. The project was facilitated by the late John Parr, a former director of the National Civic League who was a national leader in collaborative governance and a widely respected figure in Denver, Colorado. The participants weighed in on how they thought the foundation should use its resources to best serve the Denver community. Out of this series of conversations came a new emphasis on working in low-income neighborhoods in a very hands-on and resident-centered way.

Since then, the foundation has become a pioneer in community engagement, supporting Metro Denver residents in addressing a wide range of issues and decisions affecting their lives. The foundation has made a deep, internal commitment to the principles of engagement, which include difficult but critical work on issues of race, ethnicity, and economic difference. This commitment has translated into the investment of staff time and resources especially through the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program, Inclusiveness Project, and Holly Square redevelopment initiative. The foundation continues to apply these strategies and lessons learned to new partnerships with other local institutions.

### First Things First: Candid Work on Inclusiveness

One of the first things the foundation did after the release of the NCRP report was to work on racial and ethnic diversity within the organization. Since the late 1990s, at least half of both the board and

staff of the Denver Foundation are people of color, including senior staff and board chairs.

In addition to hiring a more representative array of people and broadening its volunteer base, Miller and foundation executive staff, including Vice President Lauren Casteel, felt that issues of race, difference, equity, and opportunity had to be addressed openly within the organization. "We felt that we needed to assume a higher level of leadership," says Casteel. "It wasn't easy, because talking candidly about these things means pushing past your comfort level sometimes." This was not limited to race; the foundation has worked on issues of ethnicity, class, disability, gender, sexual orientation, and gender expression as well.

The foundation then shared these values and practices with many of its grantees, in part through an Inclusiveness Project that supports nonprofit organizations through two-year processes, helping them become more inclusive and equitable, both internally and externally. The foundation has also funded and hosted a leadership training series for residents, established an institute for nonprofit executive directors of color, and organized leadership seminars for other community members of color. The Ford and Kellogg Foundations provided funding to support these projects. One of the most popular strands of this work has been a speaker series focused on racial equity that has brought experts such as John Powell, Rose Brewer, and Michelle Alexander to Denver for presentations that have drawn hundreds of people. The foundation now hosts a Unity Council, a diverse, multigenerational group of men of color, including visual artists, educators, spoken-word and hip-hop artists/musicians, community organizers, nonprofit leaders, gang "interrupters," and leaders from the faith community. Additionally, the foundation's Nonprofit Internship Program places and funds college students, who are traditionally underrepresented in the nonprofit sector, in paid summer internships at a wide range of organizations, including Padres Unidos and the Colorado Progressive Coalition. Three student

interns will work at the Denver Foundation itself in 2013.

As these deep investments attest, addressing issues of racial equity isn't just a short-term process but a fundamental, ongoing part of community engagement work. "This work went from being an initiative to something that clearly had a shelf life of forever," says Casteel. The board of the foundation has decided to make it an ongoing commitment; now, a minimum of 25 percent of unrestricted dollars in all "community impact" areas must go directly to racial equity, resident engagement, and capacity building. In recent years, the actual investments have significantly exceeded this goal.

Through these deep and thoughtful conversations and programs, people inside and outside the foundation have become better able to discuss things like historic discrimination and opportunity structures and have created what Casteel calls a "culture of community engagement." "We're more comfortable with resident voices," she says. This has had numerous and varied impacts, large and small. The foundation's Basic Human Needs Committee had its first meeting at the offices of a local homeless shelter rather than at the foundation. The foundation hosts dialogues with former gang members. Denver now has the first "giving circle" of African American men west of the Mississippi. To be successful at engagement, "you have to take a close look at yourself as an institution," Casteel believes. "You can't do engagement externally unless you do it internally as well."

### Strengthening Neighborhoods

As the Denver Foundation moved forward with internal and external work on diversity and inclusiveness, the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program became its main vehicle for community engagement. Christine Soto, who came on board to lead the effort, scanned the country for productive methodologies for involving residents. The foundation settled on the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, championed by John McKnight and John Kretzmann through their ABCD Institute and 1993 book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*. McKnight visited Denver to provide advice and encouragement.

The result of this planning was a nine-neighborhood project, including eight within the City/County of Denver. (In 2013, Strengthening Neighborhoods was expanded to include all neighborhoods in Metro Denver.)

The heart of Strengthening Neighborhoods has been a small grants program and an asset-based process by which residents survey their surroundings, identify strengths, brainstorm ideas to build on those strengths, and use a combination of micro-grants and sweat equity to implement the ideas. "A whole lot of community meetings went into nurturing the people and the process," remembers Patrick Horvath, who has directed Strengthening Neighborhoods since 2001.

As the program grew, residents and foundation staff grappled with challenges, such as volunteer burnout and securing financial support for residents' efforts from outside the Strengthening Neighborhoods program. The foundation added more technical assistance and capacity-building elements to the program, often in partnership with Denver's Community Resource Center. These services have helped emerging leaders plan and run projects, engage other volunteers, and manage grants.

Over the years, Strengthening Neighborhoods began working more closely with Denver-area community organizing groups and incorporating some of the tactics of national organizing networks, such as People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO), which has a strong local affiliate in Denver. "We adopted a more explicit emphasis on bringing people who are outside the power structure into local decision making," says Horvath. In partnership with several other foundations and local organizing groups, the Colorado Community Organizing Collaborative was formed to foster stronger connections between organizers and the funding community. "Ultimately, some strong relationships developed," says Horvath, "and the funders and the different organizing groups got much better at collaborating with each other." The members of the collaborative have worked together on a number of ballot initiatives and community change campaigns.

"We believe strongly in the organizing principles espoused by PICO," says Horvath. "The focus is

on building relationships at the neighborhood level, using one-to-one conversations to find out what people want, and then using that as the genesis of an organizing campaign. People set the agenda and pick their issues, and so the resources flow to what they care about.” There are now two community organizers on staff at the foundation.

Some of this organizing work has focused on school reform, through a partnership with several local foundations that are part of a national collaborative called Communities for Public Education Reform. Initially supported at the national level by foundations such as the Ford, Mott, and Kellogg Foundations, the work focuses on the use of community organizing of parents and students as a technique to raise student achievement among low-income students and students of color. This effort has helped parents navigate the Denver Public Schools’ open enrollment policy, helped establish a school innovation zone, and led to a sea change in the school system’s discipline policy, from a zero tolerance approach to a cooperative agreement between the police and schools that has become a national model. And after five tries, the organizing coalition finally saw its efforts to secure in-state tuition for undocumented students passed by the Colorado General Assembly.

### Holly Square

In the last few years, a new avenue for the Denver Foundation’s community engagement work has opened up in a six-block area in Northeast Park Hill, one of the city’s most distressed neighborhoods. The effort began in 2008, after the shopping plaza at the heart of the neighborhood burned down.

In partnership with the Urban Land Conservancy (ULC), the foundation began a community visioning and land use planning project focused on the plaza and surrounding area. The Holly Area Redevelopment Project has involved hundreds of neighborhood residents in creating a new vision for the community, anchored by the redevelopment of the three-acre parcel. Nearly \$7 million in public, private, and philanthropic funds have since been invested in the project. When completed, the new Holly Square complex will include a community center, a Boys and Girls Club, basketball courts, and community gathering space. Nobel laureate Rigoberta

Menchú Tum attended the opening of the plaza’s mural project in 2010.

“Holly Square has been a marvelous demonstration of what can happen when you have an engaged and patient landowner, a committed group of residents and stakeholders, capacity building resources, and a coordinator and holder of the value of broad inclusion in decision making,” says Horvath. The foundation is now working with the ULC on another visioning and planning process, on Denver’s west side, that will produce a community center and a variety of small business cooperatives focused on neighborhood health, local employment, and urban agriculture.

### Thinking Structurally

Thus far, the neighborhood- and school-level organizing work advanced by the Denver Foundation has had little to do with the official structures for public participation maintained by the City of Denver and the Denver Public Schools. The city has had a system for registering neighborhood associations to give them a more substantive role in decision making on zoning and land use issues, and the schools have Parent Teacher Associations and other groups designed to engage parents. But neither of these structures has been terribly inclusive, participatory, or effective. “We’ve spent more of our time navigating around those groups than working closely with them,” says Horvath. As in other cities, the neighborhood associations have mainly been dominated by property owners and higher-income residents, and the school groups have focused on fundraising and volunteering, rather than helping parents participate effectively in school quality discussions.

Furthermore, the City of Denver’s Department of Neighborhood Services has, in the past, been reluctant to embrace the kinds of strategies being developed in the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program to engage residents in the decision-making process about the most important issues in their communities.

There have been bright spots, however, including the Gang Reduction Initiative-Denver (GRID), which was established through a strong collaboration between the Denver Foundation and the administration of then-mayor John Hickenlooper.

“Our staff has served on several city boards, commissions, transition teams, and in other ways, through several administrations,” says Casteel. “We seek to cultivate our staff as residents and leaders both internally and externally.”

Under the new mayor, Michael Hancock, a former staffer of the National Civic League, there seem to be openings for more meaningful collaboration among local government, foundations, and other organizations. This may lead to more engagement opportunities for residents that are more institutionally supported and connected to the official decision-making processes of the city and the school system.

### Lessons Learned

#### **A Focus on Community Engagement Is Not at Odds with Asset Accumulation**

The Denver Foundation’s experience, in fact, has been the opposite. In the mid-1990s, before the release of the Committee for Responsive Philanthropy report, the foundation had less than \$50 million in assets. It now stewards over \$600 million in assets and 1,000 donor-advised funds.

#### **Foundations Benefit by Owning Engagement as an Organization-wide Priority**

“It is really important to think about community engagement in its broadest sense,” says Casteel. “Community foundations need to really think about how they are owning this, walking the talk, not just making up a program for it.” One measure of this commitment at the Denver Foundation is that it has a full-time community organizer on the Strengthening Neighborhoods staff, in addition to partnerships with other organizing groups in the city.

#### **Race and Difference Matter to Engagement**

When people come together to work on shared concerns, they are quickly confronted with their differences. They usually have to learn to deal with these differences, and value them, in order to succeed. Community engagement, therefore, often raises issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. By the same token, it may be that cultural identities can be adequately addressed only through community engagement: the opportunity to share personal experiences, the chance to learn by considering different arguments, and the possibility of partnering with someone from a different background in order to create tangible changes in your

community. The Denver Foundation’s willingness to raise issues of race and difference, internally and externally, seems to have helped, and been helped by, its community engagement work. (The foundation has since brought this message to the larger philanthropic community, through the establishment of the Colorado Funders for Inclusive Equity affinity group and through Casteel’s participation in the CFLeads Foundation Leadership Team and Community Engagement Panel and in the Kellogg Foundation’s “America’s Healing” initiative.)

#### **Elevate Leaders from Engaged Low-Income Communities to Leadership Positions within the Foundation**

Several members of the resident committee that drives the Strengthening Neighborhoods Program have gone on to become trustees of the Denver Foundation. One, Brother Jeff Fard, a community activist, has served as board chair. Similarly, there are residents and Inclusiveness Project members serving on all of the Community Impact area committees of the board. Board members also chair the Strengthening Neighborhoods and Inclusiveness Program committees. Three former interns in the Nonprofit Internship Program now serve on committees of the board. “All of those committees have serving on them multiple persons who have experienced the issues those committees are trying to address,” says Casteel. “We pay for child care and transportation when needed to support attendance.”

#### **Take Advantage of Partnerships**

The Denver Foundation has benefited from a range of partnerships, both local and national. Nationally, the foundation has been part of Communities for Public Education Reform, CFLeads, and Grassroots Grantmakers, a network of place-based funders and community organizations that focuses on how best to resource the civic sector. (Horvath currently serves as the board chair of Grassroots Grantmakers.) In addition to many other local partnerships, the Denver Foundation’s alliance with the Piton Foundation has catalyzed a number of projects, including a new online engagement platform called Floodlight.

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