

THE NORTHWEST NEIGHBORHOOD FEDERATION: The Beginning

On a warm and muggy June evening in 1976, eleven members of the Organizing Committee for the Northwest Side met in the Logan Square home of Dave and Carole Creason and embarked on an odyssey fraught with unforeseen obstacles that was to lead to the eventual realization of each of their dreams – the building of a Northwest Neighborhood Federation.

What set the June evening apart from so many other discussions and planning sessions held by this same group during the previous three years was the responsibility resting on each members' shoulders as to whether to hire Mike Smith as their first lead organizer. To take this giant step of hiring their first staff person would require raising the money to pay him. Were people prepared that three years of talk should so suddenly gave way to the reality of meeting next week's payroll?

To be sure, looking around the Creason's living room that evening there were ample grounds for optimism. Joe Crutchfield, former treasurer of the Citizens Action Program (CAP) and recognized city leader of the Crosstown Expressway foes, exuded confidence. The hosts, Dave and Carole Creason, were leaders in the Logan Concerned Citizens and the citywide anti-redlining fight. Judy Stickney and Priscilla Hallberg had provided energetic leadership to the North Avondale Organization throughout the Avondale Savings and Loan tussle. Joyce Zick, co-chair of CAP's Anti-Crosstown Coalition, had helped lead one of Mayor Daley's few defeats. Barb Schalk, another Crosstown fighter who was soon to be elected president of the Cragin Community Association, was present, as was Bernie Willow, member of the Logan Concerned Citizens and soon-to-be-named chairman of the fledging Illinois Public Action Council. Mayfair was represented by Barb Dougan, a member of the North Mayfair Improvement Association and longtime Crosstown opponent, and by Dolores Kruz, another Crosstown foe and president of the Mayfair Civic Association. Finally, Ray Sweitzer, president of the Logan Concerned Citizens, added his quotient of strong-willed determination to the already high-powered gathering. Several other northwest side leaders, including Bill Michalski, June Swanson and Les Killips, were unable to be present but sent their expressions of support.

Confident that funds would come from the many churches that benefited from the work of those in the room and that of the Citizens Action Program, the group took stock of Mike, liked what they saw . . . and made the commitment to hire him.

THE CAP EXPERIENCE

No other community organization in the history of Chicago touched as many lives nor achieved such tangible results as the Citizens Action Program in its Crosstown Expressway fight in 1973. For years, Mayor Richard Daley has ruled the city he loved with his legendary smile and fist. The Crosstown Expressway was his “pet project,” the one he hoped would someday bear his name and serve as a lasting monument to his ability to get things done in the “city that worked.”

What Daley hadn’t bargained on was the fierce opposition he would receive from ordinary Chicagoans – businessmen, carpenters, factory workers, telephone operators, salesmen and housewives – who looked at the Crosstown in a different way. “Daley’s Ditch,” as they irreverently dubbed it, would have torn down 10,400 homes, displaced 33,300 people, destroyed 18,000 jobs, and reduced numerous neighborhoods to rubble and memories.

Did this crew of political amateurs, working through the Citizens Action Program, really have a chance? Well, history indeed shows that Daley died frustrated that Chicago citizens, bullied and pushed around for years by his precinct captains, revolted and won. Out of this experience, led by the northwest side, came a zeal for community organization and an object lesson that Chicagoans could take control of their communities and their lives. This zeal was the enduring legacy of CAP.

The original members of the Organizing Committee for the Northwest Side who assembled in the Creasons’ living room that historic June night emerged from this and other CAP battles. One could say that the birthright of CAP – the promise and hope this organization had given to literally thousands of Chicagoans – had been passed to this group. By the time they grabbed it, however, it was badly tarnished. CAP, founded in 1972 and built upon an incredible string of headlines and successes, resembled by the spring of 1975 a scene straight from Dante’s Inferno.

The factory pollution tackled by CAP as its first issue, the fight against the Expressway, and the “redlining” battle against the Savings and Loan industry were now just memories. Instead, a fierce struggle was taking place between neighborhood leaders and CAP’s staff and mentors from the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) about the future direction of the organization.

In retrospect, there were two clear mistakes which CAP made after the Crosstown issue faded that led inevitably to conflict with the group and its eventual splitting apart and demise:

1. CAP rejected local autonomy whereby organizations could decide the issues of local concern for their own residents; and
2. CAP refused to provide local staff to the neighborhood groups that were requesting it. Staff availability was reserved exclusively for the central city-wide operation.

In a nutshell, CAP focused on issues, not organization-building. Through its issues, CAP succeeded in mobilizing thousands of Chicagoans to voice their anger and take the power to change the course of events. But once the issues were resolved, CAP pulled out the staff from the local

neighborhoods, skimmed off the leadership and turned them into fund-raisers, and skipped off to repeat this process in new communities.

By 1975, there was an unsettling feeling that something was drastically wrong. A gulf was widening between the central organization and its satellites, with a leadership core growing more frustrated by the day. True, CAP still enjoyed the sympathetic reporting by the press which helped it to solicit monies through its canvassing operation. But a trend had developed which crystallized on a momentous June night in 1975 when the Board was confronted with and asked to approve a scheme to ship 10% of the gross proceeds from its canvass to IAF operations, such as the one in New York City. The subsequent fiery debate over this so-called “Links” project, fueled by the efforts of CAP’s president to pack the Board on the deciding vote as well as by the revelation that he had already secretly signed a contract with IAF to supply the disputed monies, was the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back” and signaled the end of CAP.

Northwestsiders knew from this day forward that they had to take the initiative to establish a project which more faithfully represented their hopes and dreams for effective local community organization.

Having found a staff person, the Organizing Committee felt confident that the second part of the equation – money – would be forthcoming from the pastors whose parishes had benefited from organizing efforts in the past and with whom Committee members had personal relationships. However, from “day one” things did not go as planned. Resistance from the pastors was quick, no money was collected...and a first “business” meeting of the Committee was convened to discuss what to do next.

Aware that without money the dream of a northwest federation of community groups would soon evaporate, the group took steps to institutionalize itself and develop new plans. Joyce Zick was elected chairman of the Committee and Joe Crutchfield, its treasurer. With elections aside, a fundraising strategy was agreed upon whereby area Protestant and Catholic pastors would be invited to attend a meeting so the Committee’s plan for organizing northwest side neighborhoods could be presented and financial assistance sought.

To the Committee’s dismay, with the meeting arranged for the end of July at Our Lady of Grace Church in Logan Square, another example of CAP’s and IAF’s deceit was unearthed.

Unknown to the northwest side leadership, immediately following the 1975 uproar caused by the “Links” controversy, a covert organizing strategy was hatched by the IAF with the blessings of a few “trusted” CAP leadership and staff. Pastors throughout the northwest side were contacted and invited to participate in a “new” organization with would be known as TON (The Organization of the Northwest). This subterfuge accounted for the fact that when the meeting date arrived at Our Lady of Grace Church, only three Catholic parishes and four Protestant congregations were represented. While the attendance was disappointing, the word that not one of these churches was willing to provide financial assistance was crushing.

An analysis of what went wrong in the Organizing Committee’s first month is instructive. First, the confusion and competition for “Church” money seriously eroded the Committee’s chances of gaining the necessary financial support. With TON a full year ahead, whatever Church support

was available went to TON. Secondly, the Churches most apt to give financial support to the Organizing Committee found the competition from the two groups a handy excuse not to donate to either. Thirdly, the archdiocese through Msgr. Francis Brackin had entered the picture, instructing pastors not to donate to any community organization as a result of a lawsuit brought against the Southwest Parish and Neighborhood Federation in which the archdiocese was named.

While the Organizing Committee was frustrated, it remained undaunted. With money nowhere to be found and the future of the project in jeopardy, two steps were taken. First, every pastor who was invited but did not attend the meeting at Our Lady of Grace was called and an appointment made to seek support. Secondly, a businessmen's Ad Book was immediately begun to see the Committee through the next several months.

The most unlikely turned out to be the most successful. Where the Churches proved to be stubborn, the businesses opened up their pocketbooks. Within a month's time nearly \$4,000 was raised. But while Committee members were buoyed by the Ad Book's successes and prepared to meet with more than 30 Church pastors, Mike was uncovering more bad news from the interviews he was conducting.

The interviews in those early months were designed to uncover the special history of the people and neighborhoods on the northwest side, with Mike asking background information in three areas in particular:

1. Religious and ethnic history of each neighborhood;
2. Presence and impact of community, church and political organizations in each area; and
3. The social and economic forces at work in each neighborhood.

The people who were first selected to be interviewed fell into four categories: Organizing Committee members, former CAP members, religious and political leaders, and random neighborhood residents. Before too long it was apparent that the enthusiasm and commitment of Organizing Committee members was not shared by any of the other groups.

Throughout the interviews with institutional leaders, it was clear that many harbored latent hostility towards CAP. One interviewee captured this uneasy feeling when he said, "Thank God it's dead; leave it alone!" One Protestant minister offered his assessment by saying, "CAP promised a lot but didn't follow through. As far as I am concerned, organizing this neighborhood is useless and I predict you and your group will fail." Others were still more brutal: "I want nothing to do with that group." Even those who were sympathetic hastened to add they didn't have the time to devote to "another" organizing effort.

Interviewing neighborhood people who had been active with CAP turned up two common observations. For the most part all expressed some satisfaction and attachment to the work they were involved in, but in the same breath most complained of being "burned out" and added they were unavailable for consideration in future organizational work. The second disconcerting reaction that surfaced on a number of occasions was the confessions that people were embarrassed by some of the

tactics employed by CAP in its fights with City Hall and others. This admission by former CAP members simply underscored one of the many criticisms leveled at IAF and its training program. In this case, while employment of specific tactics was useful in a strategic sense, understanding and respect for neighborhood sensibilities were often ignored. In short, a few guffawed at what they pulled off at City Hall, but the majority left with a lasting sense of shame.

For those interviewed randomly, few seemed to have heard of CAP. This seemed surprising since the organization had made significant progress in stopping the Crosstown Expressway and challenging the banking industry for its redlining practices. For those who were aware of CAP, the reactions were mixed. While appreciative and admiring of its successes for the neighborhood, there remained a lack of loyalty and a hesitancy to admit that CAP was “their” organization.

With the neighborhood interviews continuing, Committee members remained hopeful that individual sessions with pastors would prove productive. Almost to a pastor, meetings were arranged. The bottom line of financial support, however, never materialized from any of the Church leaders.

Thought to be a sure thing in June, the repeated pastoral rejections in September and October brought the Organizing Committee to a crisis of confidence. One by one, doubting Committee members fell by the wayside. With membership once a high of 17, it soon dropped to 11. As one interview after another resulted in rejection, the personal commitment to launch this ambitious organizing effort and the confidence to see it through waned. One Committee member, after still another disappointing session with a pastor, stated emphatically that she would “never meet with another church leader again!” With money from the Ad Book running low and in light of what seemed to be growing support from some Churches for TON, the Committee was in a gloomy mood.

In the face of what seemed to be certain failure, an inner source of strength was tapped and, reminiscent of the Greek mythological character Sisyphus, the group kept pushing its efforts relentlessly forward. Almost out of money? The Committee threw a cocktail party and rented a table at a flea market. Pastors scoffed at “the dream?” Then work on issues to demonstrate that this was not a CAP carbon copy. In short, the Committee refused to give up!

Then in its bleakest hour came salvation – Bingo. In mid-October the Organizing Committee opened up its Bingo at Logan Square Hall. Much to the Committee’s delight, the first night netted \$500. It soon dawned on everyone that this could be repeated week after week and the financial crisis, which seemed ready to snuff out the Committee’s existence, was averted.

But the heady confidence which marked the Committee’s early beginnings had become a casualty. Because of the disappointments of the previous three and a half months, the direction in which the Organizing Committee should be heading was now foggy. No one felt sure of what steps to take next.

When Mike was hired, it was also decided that he represented one-half of the lead organizing team. Given the size of the territory being “eyed” by the Committee and the commitment to pursue an organizing strategy based on the “federation model”, two staff people were essential. Bob Gannett, it had been agreed upon, would be brought on later in the fall. After the Committee pulled

itself through what seemed inevitable bankruptcy, the group faltered and wanted to see tangible results before plunging deeper into this venture.

November 30, 1976 was set for the decision – should Bob be hired or should that move be delayed indefinitely? After meeting Bob, listening to a detailed analysis by Mike of his interviews, and scrutinizing a proposed set of short-term goals to be carried out over the next six months, the Committee regained its adventuresome spirit of five months previously and unanimously gave the nod to Bob.

With Bob hired, the Committee moved quickly to develop a plan of action. Undaunted by the odds it faced, it set out to accomplish what many outside observers by now regarded as an “impossible dream.” After all, no community group in the city had ever established itself as a significant force without either a pool of “seed money” or hefty support from local institutions.

But the Organizing Committee was unimpressed by the oddsmakers. It soon found an office at 4957 ½ West Diversey Avenue and members painstakingly refurbished and equipped it with materials donated by local businessmen. The Committee drew up By-laws, incorporated, and registered with the State and IRS. Planning for the future, it established an educational arm –the Northwest Communities Education Fund – which successfully secured a 501(c)(3) tax status from the IRS and a reduced mailing rate from the Post Office; it then typed onto a computer a mailing list of 25,000 northwest side households so that a majority of residents could be informed and encouraged to participate in the new organizing efforts soon to commence.

While this was a time for “getting down to basics,” it was also a period of philosophical sifting and winnowing. Two key philosophies emerged with Mike and Bob’s encouragement that guided the Committee well in the years to come.

The first defined the Organizing Committee as a “funding and support” group for local organization-building, totally divorced from the realm of issues.

Initially this was a foreign concept to many Committee members since CAP had catapulted them into the forefront of northwest side affairs. As some of CAP’s strongest leaders and most articulate and effective spokespeople, they assumed they would continue to be out in front on issues with the Organizing Committee.

Bob and Mike argued against this. What the northwest side needed most was effective organization. The talents of CAP’s leaders could best be used to help develop the resources for staff and information that would allow a majority of local residents to shape organizational policy and direction with new leaders emerging to articulate this majority viewpoint.

Since these were precisely the resources that CAP had failed to provide for local organization-building, it didn’t take long for most Organizing Committee members to see the wisdom of their serving as a sponsoring committee. Those members who did not wish to relinquish the public spotlight fought to retain their personal prominence, lost, and soon resigned.

The second major philosophy that came to guide the Committee’s work was that the interests of the long run should always take precedence over those of the short run.

TON's parallel organizing efforts in the area presented the crucible in which this principle was forged. For TON was still contacting local pastors and church leaders, pushing successfully for money from local financial institutions (\$5,000 from Unity Savings alone), and dominating the local headlines (though often with mixed reviews).

Mike and Bob counseled the Committee to avoid a short-term "glamour contest" with TON. They argued that the era of "smoke and mirrors" organizing was over. "Hot" issues, inflated turnout, and flashy press clippings were not enough to legitimize an organization. Enemies of community groups had become far more sophisticated so that even blustering "Windy City" tactics of the past no longer worked – take, for example, the inability of CAP's greenlining program to carry out its threat when the Savings and Loan Associations called its bluff.

The Committee should instead look to the future, build for the future, and take whatever time was necessary to develop the solid organizational base needed for the future. Avoid the battle of press clippings and win the war of building legitimate organizations.

Again, Committee members came to heartily endorse this strategy because they had experienced too personally the shortcomings of CAP's headlong rush for an "idea-of-the-month" to maintain its public visibility.

It was the spring of 1977. Vital components were falling into place. Money was gradually coming in. Staff was on board. A consensus was emerging as to the Committee's philosophy and goals. The time for implementation of the Committee's new dream was at hand.

For the next six months, Mike and Bob laid the groundwork through their continuing intensive research of the northwest side and adjacent communities.

Over 1,000 interviews were conducted. Bob alone walked through a 600 block area from Western to Cicero, North to Irving Park, interviewing residents on every block. Savings and Loan lending disclosure information was obtained. Old Crosstown files were scrutinized. Census data was culled so that demographic trends could be identified. Real estate agents were tested. Surveys of new homeowners were conducted.

On October 7th and 14th, 1977, the results of these research efforts were presented to Committee members in a two-part retreat.

On the 7th, after dinner at Maxine's Restaurant, Committee members and their spouses gathered to hear "The Real Story of Chicago's Northwest Side." They were treated to a slide show which told the story of the dramatic changes taking place in many of the communities impacting on the northwest side. The effects of the City's highly touted and heavily financed "Chicago 21 Plan" on surrounding communities were demonstrated; the displacement of lower-income residents by rehabilitation of lakefront communities such as Lincoln Park, Lakeview and Uptown was documented; the continuing devastation of the Humboldt Park, Garfield Park and Austin communities through overcrowding and city neglect was graphically unveiled. Not a single slide showed the northwest side, but participants could see all too clearly the toll that the dual trends of

concentrated lakefront and Loop development and neglect of inner-city communities would inevitably take on the area.

A far-reaching discussion then took place about neighborhood change and decay and the scars this insidious process had left on city neighborhoods and their residents. Chicagoans' concerns about neighborhood change were likened to the presence of small internalized computers with which people constantly assimilate new information about the changes they see taking place in the neighborhood. As evidence of deterioration mounts, as unusual and frightening occurrences (such as home invasions, abandoned storefronts, gang activity, and intimidation of children on the way to school) more frequently interrupt the regular flow of neighborhood life that people have become accustomed to over the years, as the values of homes in the area level off or even drop, pressure on the computer builds. Eventually some incident, often a tragic one, triggers an overload, causing people to uproot and leave the neighborhood. This decision is often spontaneous, emotional, irrational and unsound economically . . . after all, new mortgages come at high interest rates. People sacrifice friendships, church relationships, and neighborhood ties of many years. But these losses obviously assume less importance in the face of the jarring reality that the neighborhood is declining and there is no way to control this process. When residents sense that they have lost control, nothing else matters. Leave. Run. Go anywhere. Whatever the cost, get out.

The Committee then talked about what it would take to reverse this process on the northwest side. The bottom line was that people would have to have an organization through which they could decide what they wanted the future to be for their area. A "Northwest Neighborhood Federation" would have to be created to give people alternatives to the future that developers and city power brokers assumed to be inevitable for the northwest side. People could work through such an organization to challenge the prevailing plan and assumptions for their area. They could fight unjust real estate practices and city housing programs and financial lending practices which hurt their area. At the same time, they could develop their own plans that would re-direct the countless millions of city dollars to the northwest side that would be crucial if the area was to protect itself from deterioration. In a word, the organization would give people power, not the smoke and mirrors of CAP, but true power where people could work to fundamentally realign the northwest side's relationship with the central city.

Sobered by the unexpected and unprecedented frankness of this discussion, Committee members reconvened on October 14th on the top floor of the Holiday Inn's Lake Shore Drive complex. That night Committee members approved an organizing strategy that was to change the face of the northwest side within two years by leading to the formation of the Northwest Neighborhood Federation. The irony of developing such a strategy while looking up and down the lakefront at the sparkling core of the emerald city – whose glitter and green had proven irresistible to developers in cahoots with City Hall to the detriment of the neighborhoods - was enjoyed by all.

The plan that emerged that night called for the development of new groups in the North Avondale, West Cragin and Hanson-Riis Park neighborhoods, the revitalization of the existing group in the Cragin area, and the drawing together of all four groups in a federation with two years. The three local areas selected by the Committee for its initial organizing efforts were chosen based on need, interest expressed by local residents, and absence of strong parallel organizing efforts. In each of the areas, TON had made overtures to the Churches for financial support but had been rejected. True to its "church-based model," it had then chosen to ignore the communities.

NORTH AVONDALE

The North Avondale community, a closely knit, predominantly Polish area of 35 blocks bounded by the Kennedy expressway, Pulaski, Belmont, and Addison Avenues, had had a mixed organizing experience with CAP. On the one hand, it had been a CAP “stronghold” on the northwest side with an extremely talented and dedicated leadership core (headed by Judy Stickney and Priscilla Hallberg, both subsequent founding members of the Organizing Committee) who had been in the forefront of the “redlining” campaign against Avondale Savings and Loan on Milwaukee Avenue. On the other hand, the “redlining” fight had left residents frustrated, confused and even resentful, and the lack of follow-up on this and other local issues left even CAP’s most loyal supporters feeling abandoned and “used.”

CAP’s two most glaring shortcomings in North Avondale -- “no communication and no follow-through,” as one resident aptly put it -- became the two principal challenges faced by the new organizing effort. A new group would have to demonstrate to a doubting community its commitment to involve a majority of local residents in its efforts and its determination to persevere on the issues it took on. If one or both of these commitments were ignored, residents would most likely discount the organization entirely and close their door for good in its face.

Where to start? Bob listened closely to what people were saying to him in his interviews. On the one hand, in spite of CAP’s efforts to catapult people to the “cutting edge” of the flashy city wide issues like taxes, redlining and judicial reform, what people often mentioned as most significant was CAP’s effort to get improvements at a local fieldhouse -- the one local issue CAP had supported to get the organization started. In other words, people wanted an organization that addressed local concerns, no matter how much IAF mentor, Ed Chambers, ridiculed such efforts as “too civic-y” and inappropriate for serious attention.

Residents also expressed considerable concern about the deteriorating condition of neighborhoods to the south and east of them, especially Logan Square. This was reflected in the decline of the once-proud major retail shopping strip which intersected the southwest corner of the neighborhood – Milwaukee Avenue. Many perceived Milwaukee Avenue as a barometer of the neighborhood’s fortunes . . . and a steadily dropping one at that. The departure of Klaus’s popular department store, leaving only an abandoned storefront in the place of this once thriving business, cropped up again and again in people’s conversations.

Within their own community, residents viewed with dismay the blighted condition of the Parkview Playlot, a playground facility with a small fieldhouse and supervisor at Avers and School Streets. The dusty, dirty, dilapidated appearance of the lot turned residents’ stomachs every time they walked by. Residents never saw the park supervisor who was rumored to have a drinking problem and to have cut a deal not to bother the rowdy teen groups who abused passers-by and engaged in illicit behavior within the “sanctuary” of the park’s grounds. The few pieces of play equipment at the park had been broken down for years. There was no day camp and few recreation programs. The most commonly heard reaction of parents to the park was a negative one – “I don’t allow my child to go anywhere near there.”

Years before, residents had attempted to do something to clean up the playlot. Mothers approached the police and Ward office, but little came of their efforts – unless you count Committeeman Marcin’s annual Easter Egg Hunt at the playlot and Alderman Laskowski’s whimperings about installing new curbs in the area. By 1978, total resignation had set in among most community residents.

Bob encountered a few brave people who fumed about the playlot and wanted to tackle those responsible for this chronic eye-sore and hang-out. In April of 1978, at Bob’s urging, they decided to send a letter to everyone in the community soliciting their ideas and support as to what steps needed to be taken to fix up the park.

Community response was immediate and overwhelmingly favorable to this new initiative. More than 750 residents, pleased to have the opportunity to express years of pent-up frustration, returned surveys in the mail or to block-workers in the weeks ahead.

This community mandate expressed in the surveys provided the basis for all future work on the issue. The group met with the Park District. Correspondence went back and forth. A community-wide meeting was held at which Park District officials claimed they had no funds for Parkview improvements. A busload of residents headed downtown to argue their case. A commitment for \$35,000 suddenly materialized in the face of this evidence of community determination. The Park District finally drew up plans for improvements. 750 community members again voted on a preferred plan. As efforts continued to snowball, the Park District found more and more monies for the project. By the time plans were incorporated into the 1979 fiscal budget, \$66,300 was allocated for construction of a separate children’s play facility with brand-new equipment and complete re-landscaping of the lot.

At all points in this five-month fight, North Avondale residents were intimately involved. It was therefore no surprise that when improvements were finally implemented by the Park District in the spring of 1977, a tremendous outpouring of pride and joy took place. The NAO sponsored a Grand Opening celebration for the playlot on July 21 which 400 parents and children participated in. When Committeeman Marcin sponsored his own Grand Opening a week later and attempted to take personal credit for the playlot improvements, his grandstanding was evident and greeted with derision on all sides. People had been part of the process and in fact “transformed” by it. By persevering, they now reaped the rewards of a beautiful new facility for their efforts. No one was going to take that – nor indeed the organization, that made it all possible by “communication” and “follow-through” – away from them!

CHICAGO NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZING PROJECT

Mike Smith and Bob Gannett-- 1983