The Grassroots Connection: A Key Ingredient in Building a Democratic Public

By Maxine S. Thomas

Grassroots organizations are natural places for people to come together to talk about community problems. Whether these groups see themselves as representatives of underserved parts of the community or advocates for the interests of a particular constituency, they are often the ones who serve as a bridge between the problems of individual segments of the community and those of the community at large.

The Kettering Foundation (KF) understands the importance of such groups to the building of a democracy. A number of these groups have been involved in NIF forums, Public Policy Institutes, and elsewhere in KF's work. Participants have learned moderating skills, developed programs within their own constituent groups, and otherwise adapted what they have learned about deliberation to meet the needs of their particular communities. There have been benefits and drawbacks to the way these groups have interacted with the foundation's work but, on the whole, both KF and the many groups have recognized the importance of our common work.

Last November, for example, a group of people gathered at the foundation to talk about leadership but, more importantly, about what they saw as the way they give back to their communities. These were folks from communities across the country who did not necessarily see themselves as leaders but who felt called to do specific work. They were almost evangelical in their zeal, talking passionately about being connected to "real people," unencumbered by organizational structures, chairmen, associations, or rules and by-laws.

One participant began her story by telling how she had become involved in a group that was formed to commemorate the lives of two young black couples who were lynching victims. She told about the "massacre" in 1946 of the two couples, who were killed by a white mob. "This was done in broad daylight, in front of eyewitnesses, and no one was ever brought to justice," she said. Subsequently, the community divided itself into two groups, one called the Circle of Fear, the other, the Code of Silence. Race relations have been strained ever since. "Our group was formed to facilitate racial healing and reconciliation," she said.

Another woman talked about her work with young people through her organization, Turning on Youth with Gospel Music. One of the projects her organization sponsored was a live recording with young people throughout the state "who had never recorded before but who are multitalented. And why are we doing it? Because we believe ... we can stop the negative behavior that we see in our schools, in our communities, in our neighborhoods and turn them around utilizing gospel music. Now, you might utilize something else, but my specialty is gospel music. I've been a radio announcer for some 25 years, and I've seen the effect music has on children."
When people from grassroots organizations participate in deliberative forums ... they confirm what they have already realized through their grassroots efforts: that they are responsible for solving their communities' problems.

Others told stories about moving from welfare to work or mobilizing low-income nursing-home workers as well as voters. But they all had one thing in common. They were grassroots folks who cared about their communities, saw problems that needed attention, and simply didn’t want to wait for governmental and organized groups to form committees and hold meetings in order to address them. They just joined with their friends and neighbors and did what they thought needed to be done.

This is the kind of grassroots energy that all communities need, for it helps shape individuals into a democratic public. It involves them in making choices about what kind of communities they want. People from these organizations bring to the table voices that might otherwise go unheard. When people from grassroots organizations participate in deliberative forums, the learning that takes place is more authentic than that produced by outside experts or officeholders. They learn with others to speak
Grassroots organizations are complicated. They create their own ad hoc structures and are not bound by the way others see things. Even deciding who leads and who speaks for the groups is complicated.

But if a democracy is to work as it should, all voices should be included in the deliberative conversations held in communities. While there are certainly some people who are predisposed to joining deliberative conversations, the voices of those who are not so predisposed, those like the people the foundation connected with that day last November, must also be included.

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The Diamond Spotter

A young woman who attended the meeting on leadership last November at the Kettering Foundation told this story about her entry into the world of grassroots organizing:

We lived in a community that our city had decided was a lost cause, that they would just let it die on its own. [Then] someone came to me that I refer to as my bulldozer. At that time, I was a mother who did absolutely nothing. [She] said, "The neighborhood is dying; we need people to save it; we see you as one of those people." [I thought], "My life is dying. You're asking me to save a neighborhood? I don't get it."

I may have seen this person as a bulldozer, but she was actually a diamond spotter. And that [is what] I try to encourage in other people. And become one myself. There are so many diamonds— in-the-rough out there, we have to be able to spot those diamonds and just rub off that top so that their brilliance can shine through.

We saw vacant lots just continually crop up in our community. And of course, vacant lots become dumping sites. Don't want the washing machine anymore; put it on that vacant lot. Don't want these car tires anymore; put them on that vacant lot. Don't want this bag that I just finished potato chips from; toss it on that vacant lot. And pretty soon, those are eyesores in our neighborhood.

But I thought, "Well, if we're going to change the neighborhood, at least we could do something about how it looks." And so I organized my neighbors into clean-up committees on Saturdays. And that's what we did. We took on those vacant lots. We got rid of all that stuff. Got introduced to government in that way by saying, "We need help." If you're going to keep these lots clean, we need you to provide the trucks and whatever other materials we can utilize that the city has. And we started to receive those things.

Then we started to take on more. We saw crime in our community — organized a neighborhood watch group to monitor that. Folks started to talk about unemployment being a problem in our community. As folks would say, there's only one person on our block who actually gets up to go to work. So that certainly told us that unemployment was one of those issues in our community.

So we started to get persons in a position to gain work. Now, I'll tell you, in our neighborhood we didn't have people who had a lot of skills so we started to be creative and started to create our own jobs. We had someone who owned a building. And most of us were pretty poor. [But] we all thought it would be nice to go out to eat, so we created our own community restaurant. And the folks in the community actually ran the restaurant. Lots of women who wanted to display their culinary skills would take a day and prepare the meal. And then that kind of created a little competition between them. Who could put on the best meal that day?

Then that took away a lot of the time from our cleaning up the vacant lots. So we turned our vacant lots into community gardens. And now our community gardens provide the vegetables for the meals in the restaurant.

— Maxine S. Thomas
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