

Chapter Three:

The IAF, Valley Interfaith, and Individual Development



"This organization is admirable because it prepares you. So that you aren't any longer a person that is ignored, or, as they say, that struggles along blindly. No, we don't struggle along blindly now, now we are organized. We are a well-prepared group. It develops and prepares leaders, it's fantastic."

- Valley Interfaith Leader, 2000

"What does the Radical want? He wants a world in which the worth of the individual is recognized. He wants the creation of a kind of society where all of man's potentialities could be realized; a world where man could live in dignity, security, happiness and peace—a world based on a morality of mankind."

- Saul Alinsky
Reveille for Radicals

Chapter Three:

The Industrial Areas Foundation, or IAF, grew out of the work of the late sociologist and activist Saul Alinsky. Beginning in Chicago in the 1940's, the Alinsky model of teaching citizens about self-interest and power was subsequently replicated throughout the country. Alinsky advocated for "people's organizations" committed to training "ordinary people" to take charge of their own neighborhoods (Alinsky, 1945). He envisioned a national network of community organizations, a dream that was realized only after his death in 1972. The modern day IAF consists of more than sixty organizations throughout the country, with fifteen active in Texas. Their goal, "building power for long term social, economic, and political community revitalization through institution based leadership development and action" (Valley Interfaith, 1999)

The IAF, like most organizations, has developed both a language and a methodology of its own. These can at times be confusing to the outsider and merit a brief explanation. "Members" of the Industrial Areas Foundation are not individuals. Rather, membership in organizations is by institution. Churches and other faith based organizations make up the vast majority of IAF members, although schools, unions, and other secular groups have played an increasing role in recent years (Warren, 2001). As an interfaith organization, the IAF is not affiliated with any one organized religion. Their work is based on what they refer to as the Judeo-Christian and democratic ethic, "...The institutions of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim congregations, school and unions, bring together a rich diversity of poor and middle class, liberals and conservatives, across ethnic and racial lines who can struggle with one another around the decisions that affect their families." (Sanchez, 2000, p.8)

Individuals who belong to these institutions and are active in the organization are referred to as leaders. While the IAF differentiates between

primary, secondary, and tertiary leaders, *all* active members are considered leaders.¹ I therefore use the term “individual development” in this thesis interchangeably with what is referred to as “leadership development” in the IAF terminology. While “leader” is an appropriate term in that it highlights the connectedness of the individual to the community, it can be confusing since traditional notions of leadership development suggest the teaching of specific civic skills to a limited number of individuals. I therefore choose the term “individual” to highlight that although change occurs on numerous levels, it is the level of the individual which is the focus of this research.

While maintaining true to its vision of “people’s organizations”, the IAF itself has changed and developed organizationally since its beginnings in Chicago. The rebirth of the IAF is in large part credited to the organizing of Ernesto Cortes, who founded the organization C.O.P.S., Communities Organized for Public Service, in San Antonio in 1974. Mr. Cortes left San Antonio to continue his organizing work in several cities throughout the Southwest including one of the most impoverished areas of our country, the U.S./Mexican border.

The Rio Grande Valley and Valley Interfaith:

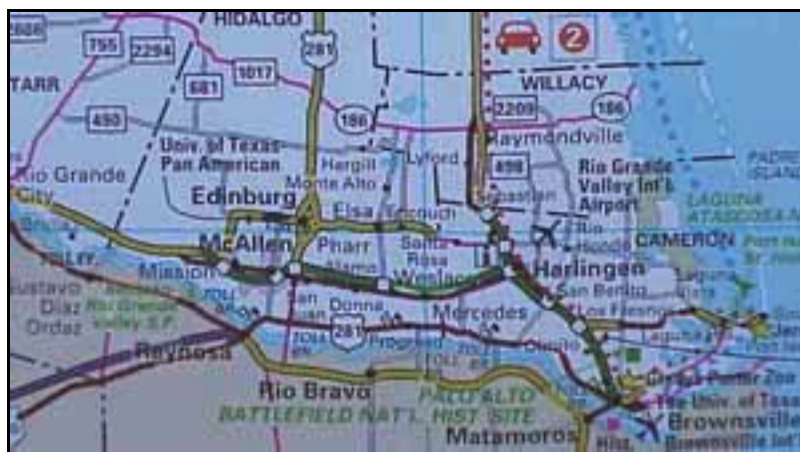


Figure A: The Rio Grande Valley of South Texas

¹ According to the IAF, tertiary leaders are those people interested and active in specific tasks related to their own interests. Secondary leaders have a larger interest in the political power of their institution.

The Rio Grande Valley of Texas is off the map, in every sense of the word. These four counties, nested in the Southernmost tip of the state, are bounded by the international border and the Gulf of Mexico. Unlike California, where the chain link fence between Tijuana and San Diego marks the extreme contrast between rich and poor, between first and third worlds, in the Valley poverty is embedded along both sides of the river. Of the Valley's population of over 900,000, almost forty percent live in poverty. This is more than twice the percentage of individuals living in poverty in the state of Texas, and more than three times the percentage in the entire United States. News of the recent U.S. economic boom seems distant and irrelevant in the Valley, where unemployment is as high as 12.2 percent. The median family income is \$25,538, again half of the median income of the state of Texas and less than half of the United States. Trends in health care and education are also dismal— forty percent of working age persons and thirty two percent of children went without health insurance in 1999. The dropout rate in 1998 was sixteen percent, as opposed to nine percent in the country (Valley Interfaith, 2000).

Angry and ready to take action on these conditions, local Catholic leadership invited the Industrial Areas Foundation into the Valley in 1983. The subsequent formation of a sponsoring committee marked the beginning of Valley Interfaith. Valley Interfaith is currently made up of forty-three institutions, primarily Catholic churches with an increasing number of schools. Situated in a bilingual and bicultural region, Valley Interfaith's leaders are almost exclusively Mexican-American and Mexican immigrants. Local IAF organizations typically have anywhere from one to six paid organizers on staff who guide and work with an executive committee of active leaders. Ernesto Cortés, Jim Drake, and Sister Christine Stevens served as the Valley Interfaith's first organizers. Under their tutelage, subsequent organizers have included some of the most experienced in the network. Currently, Sister Judy

Primary leaders are interested in the growth and development of the organization, as well as their personal growth and development. (Training notes, 2000)

Donovan is the “lead organizer” of Valley Interfaith, supervising an organizing staff of four.

The IAF in Texas has created some of the most powerful community organizations in the country. Valley Interfaith is no exception to this rule. They, in conjunction with other Texas IAF organizations, have called national attention to the problem of the *colonias* along the border; they have leveraged over 450 million dollars in state and federal funds to bring water and sewer services to over 160,000 Valley residents. Other successful efforts include bills supporting indigent health care, a collaborative parent-school-community school reform effort (Alliance Schools), a job training and labor market intermediary known as VIDA, and a living wage ordinance that has increased the salaries of over 8,500 workers. The current power of the organization is a direct testimony to the almost twenty years of creating what the IAF refers to as “a culture of conversation”, a culture based on building relationships and cultivating leadership.

Individual Development in the IAF:

In the previous chapter I argued that individual development is often overlooked in the field of community development. In this next section, I present the model of the IAF as a means to highlight both specific techniques and rationales for exploring the relationship between individual and community. This analysis considers how the IAF facilitates and stimulates changes within the individual as a tool to build power. My premise here is that IAF does in fact emphasize this level of development-- the first underlying question I explore is “Why does the IAF engage in individual development?” From the “why”, I turn to the “how” and look at how the theory plays out in the context of local organizations. This analysis serves to both underscore the complexity of individual development, and the potential tools community development efforts can employ in working with individuals.

Why the individual?

The personal growth and development of people is why we do what we do. . . That's what broad-based organizations do for people—change their lives and integrate their values and vision. The first revolution is internal. It requires a commitment to operate on your center.

Ed Chambers
(Rogers, 1990, p.61)

According to the IAF, the careful attention to leadership development is precisely what distinguishes it from “civic organizations” or “social movements”.² The push for individual development emerges both from the top, at the national level, as well as from the bottom, with the day to day teachings of local organizers. Ed Chambers, director of the national IAF, is extremely explicit about the role of the IAF as a teaching institution. “The mistake of the first forty years of Alinsky organizing was the absence of political education. We were very good at the action, very clever and imaginative, but we didn’t make a commitment to the growth process of the people. We never forced people to reflect. We never took retreats, or did extensive evaluation.” (Rogers, 1984 p. 9) Chambers’ message is born out by the IAF staff throughout the country; On the grassroots level, organizers repeatedly emphasize that identifying and developing leaders is the foundation of their work. Sister Judy Donovan, lead organizer of Valley Interfaith explains, “ Our only purpose is leadership development, and when we stray too much the ranks thin out.... it’s the bread and butter of what we do.” (Personal Interview, 1/01)

² A central piece of IAF training is a workshop outlining the differences between broad-based organizing, social movements, and civic organizations. In this workshop it is emphasized that broad-based organizing emphasizes leadership development as a means to building power over any other area. (Training notes, 12/00)

There are two fundamental reasons that the IAF focuses on this level of leadership development. The first—a deep belief in democracy, that people are capable of governing themselves. The second—an acknowledgement that while people possess this potential, there has been a breakdown in the institutions that teach the skills of politics. Leadership, therefore, needs to be cultivated within existing institutions in order for citizens to realize their potential. Leadership development, individual development, is the foundation upon which the organization builds power.

In developing his vision of “people’s organizations”, Saul Alinsky built on historical arguments for participation. In Reveille for Radicals, Alinsky claims: “After all, the real democratic program is a democratically minded people. It is a healthy, active, participating, interested, self-confident people who, through their participation and interest, become informed, educated and above all develop faith in themselves, their fellow men, and the future.” (1945, p.79) The benefits of democracy, therefore, extend beyond specific policies or decisions to foster the potential of an engaged citizenry. The inverse is also true: without citizens capable of making decisions, democracy ceases to exist. Ernesto Cortés, in a speech to the fifteen hundred leaders throughout the Southwest underscored this last point, “Democracy only exists to the extent that there are active citizens.” (Austin, 3/5/01) Investment in individuals is an acknowledgment of the reciprocal relationship and mutual dependence between citizenship and democracy.

While the IAF believes in people’s *potential* to make the decisions that affect them, they also acknowledge the weakening of community institutions, schools, churches, unions, that traditionally provided a forum for citizenship. Community organizations thus exist to develop leadership and power within existing institutions---to teach the skills of public life. The IAF conceives of itself precisely as a “university of public skills”; a university that cultivates leadership in individuals as a means to building institutional and community power. Organizer Ernesto Cortés describes the San Antonio-based Communities Allied for Public Service as following: “In short, C.O.P.S.

provides a civic education, as well as a philosophic one, enabling people to conduct their lives effectively and to build and sustain their communities.” (1995, p. 2)

Cortés highlights the complexity of citizenship when he refers to both the civic *and* philosophic nature of the IAF education. Civic development, therefore, is not reduced to an understanding of accountability, or the basics of public speaking. Rather, in the context of the IAF, the development of an individual involves a reawakening, a renewed sense of self that comes about through the process of learning one’s story. The remaining section of this chapter describes how the IAF provides a training that embraces the depth and holistic nature of human development through the interrelated elements of story, relationship-building, action, reflection, and faith.

Learning to tell your story—The public processing of private pain:

“To get them in contact with their stories, to make them realize that they have richness of experiences that have formed them... And that story has not ended. It has not ended. Those stories are used so that you can connect and listen to other people ...so they realize we’re in the same boat. So we begin to share the pain and make the pain public and say, “OK, now what are we going to do with the pain?”

- Valley Interfaith Clergy, 2001

Luz, a petite woman in her fifties, counts off on her fingers the three impediments that the Texas public health care system currently imposes on all applicants. Her voice trembles as she describes the humiliating experience of having her social worker tell her to “dress down” for her appointment. Luz’s anger overpowers her nervousness at speaking to the crowd of hundreds from all parts of the state. Throughout the audience, people nod and bristle at Luz’s story. A young student walks up to the microphone and shares how she was forced to cross the border to find a doctor when denied services. A mother describes waiting for months and months to hear from the system while her daughter grew progressively sicker.

Central to the relationship between individual and community development is the understanding that one’s experiences are connected to larger structures, that there is a relationship between the individual and the collective. Underlying all the specific strategies the IAF employs to develop

leadership is the theme of story as a means to drawing this connection. “Story” in this sense refers to the culmination of experiences and relationships that make one unique. (Bruner, 1990, Nager and Shapiro, 2000) In concordance with Freirian pedagogy, which views the public telling of one’s story as a stepping stone to a political consciousness the IAF believe that individuals develop as they learn their own story and in turn learn to share that story publicly. Sister Judy Donovan explains,

“A lot of people have been taught, and through their experience have learned that their story is meaningless, that nobody’s interested in their story, or that they better do the best they can to hide their story. I think that one of the things that’s attractive to people is that we see the story as a primary resource. That is the resource that people bring, their experience, their relationships. How to use that story publicly, how to develop it, how to create a new story.... So their own little experience, their pain, their failure, doesn’t remain just their little experience that nobody cares about, it becomes public, it creates something new.”

In teaching individuals to recognize and honor their own stories, the IAF draws on the work of the theologian Walter Brueggeman. In Hope Within History, Brueggeman outlines three distinct moves of the faith dynamic as told through the story of Exodus. The first, the *critique of ideology*, rests upon the individual or community recognizing their oppression, it involves being able to name and understand power. The second, the *articulation and embrace of pain*, refers to what Brueggeman describes as the public processing of private pain. He believes that “Hope emerges among those who publicly articulate and process their grief.” (1987, p.84) The last move, that which stems out of the second, is the *practice of social imagination*. Again, this work parallels Freire’s articulation of a belief in an alternative to one’s reality—a belief based upon a transition of atomized individuals to connection through community. It is specifically through the concept of publicly processing one’s pain that the IAF teaches its leaders the power of story.

Any IAF organizer will explain that one of the main attractions of this type of work is the opportunity to develop and work on his or her own story. Joaquin Sanchez describes his experience: *“The way I see it is that this is the*

first place I've worked at where I've seen people challenge me around my story...as I've gone through that process it gives me the context and challenges me to do it with other people." He proceeds to describe the role of story in this work:

"If you want to build anything long-term that means that you have to invest something of yourself. In the same way, if I'm meeting with a group of people and I'm trying to teach anything- I can teach it through my head, or I can teach it through a story that I've been through. What that means that the leaders don't just talk about the problem or the issue, they're connecting with it—they aren't just dealing with private pain, they're changing the conditions that caused the pain to exist."

Joaquin has learned his story in order to be a more effective organizer, in order to connect with the stories of the leaders he is developing. His telling of that story serves to train others to recognize their own anger, their own potential.

Training:

Twenty-two adults from across the Rio Grande Valley crowd into the "Ceramics Room" at the Howard Johnsons in Donna, Texas. They are here for a three day training conducted by IAF organizers throughout the Southwest. The clay they are molding is themselves. Sister Judy Donovan begins the session with the following, "This weekend is not a "how-to" session, it's really about you. It's an opportunity to think about your own development . . . "

- Field notes, 2000

The concept of story, often abstract, is taught by the IAF through a variety of tools and strategies. For many individuals, one of the first entry points to learning the collective power of story is formal training. The death of Saul Alinsky and the subsequent revival of the Industrial Areas Foundation under Ed Chambers marked the beginning of a systematic and professional approach to training. Chambers envisioned the professionalization of community organizing through guided development (Robinson and Hanna, 1994). This vision has become a reality; the IAF currently sponsors four

annual national trainings of over a week, and numerous condensed regional three-day trainings. Contrary to expectations, these trainings do not focus on lobbying tactics or issue campaigns. Rather, the centerpiece of these trainings is the development of participants' story through workshops on power and self interest. Experienced organizers probe individuals to reveal their influences, their ambitions, and their values. Extended trainings typically begin with "rounds" in which participants are asked to share an experience in which they took a risk to "make something happen". Organizers teach off of these experiences, highlighting issues such as anger, leadership, and tension. Later sessions emphasize that the first step of organizing is understanding one's own self-interest, one's own motivations. While the specifics of IAF training are not relevant here, it is important to bear in mind that these workshops lay the groundwork for understanding the key elements of organizing: relationship building, action, and reflection---all entry points for beginning to learn to tell one's story.

Building relationships:

At five p.m. on a Monday in January there is a knock on the door of Stacy's apartment in Port Isabel, Texas. Organizer Joaquin Sanchez enters and accepts a glass of water as the two sit facing each other on the living room couches. "I wanted to follow up with you to see how you reacted to three day training," Joaquin begins. The two proceed to talk for forty minutes, sharing pieces of who they are, of what's important to them, of where they want to go.

Learning your story does not take place in isolation. Rather, it is through the development of what the IAF refers to as "public relationships" that individuals engage in a dialogue that agitates, that stimulates, and that challenges people to reflect upon and share their stories. This process takes place through the deliberate building of relationships in two specific forms: individual and house meetings. Through these conversations, people not only build the relationships that are required for organizational power, they become enmeshed in a process of reflection that often forces individuals to grow and learn in ways fundamental to their sense of self. Development and

change take place through conversation and discourse with others. Typical questions an organizer or experienced leader might ask include the following: “How are you thinking about your own story? About your own development? In what ways are you developing? What part of your story are you working on?” House meetings in which groups of people come together to identify common issues and concerns get at the same questions of identity. These conversations are traditionally conceived of as a means to building relational power, a means to building social capital. I suggest here that as Ernesto Cortes writes, “Relational power is both collectively effective and individually transformative.” (1995, p.2) Therefore, as two people learn each other’s story, the line between social and individual power is blurred. The relationship between individuals provides them with the ability to act in a new way. Such a relationship can also lead each individual to independently reconceptualize his or her sense of self, providing him or her with a new sense of capacity.

In this way, as organizers challenge individuals to process their story publicly, they serve as mentors. Frank Pierson, the supervisor of Arizona and New Mexico IAF, repeatedly refers to the IAF as a “mentoring organization”. Mentoring takes place on all levels, beginning with the training of organizers and carrying down to leaders in institutions throughout the country. In this sense, mentoring is a dual process through which individuals are challenged to mentor others as they themselves are being mentored. For example, in an individual meeting with Martha, Sister Judy Donovan questioned her, *“I see you growing, I seeing you taking on roles you didn’t take on before. Who are you developing? Who are you working with in the same way that Ms. Figueroa worked with you?”* Just a few days later, Sister Judy spoke in detail about her first years organizing, and the mentoring she had received from Sister Pearl Ceasar. Thus, a central component of relationship building becomes challenging others to reach their potential. Or, in the words of one of Valley Interfaith’s leading clergy, *“Mentoring is trying to bring people to a level where they can walk on their own. Where they can be masters themselves in their own right.”*

Action:

"We believe that development really happens out of action, not just talking about it. Putting your story out there publicly, taking risks... I remember one woman with very little formal education who was asked to co-chair a meeting. Seeing this woman, she just transformed, as you watched her in that action you watched someone develop before your eyes, she stood differently, she spoke differently, she was absolutely radiant. . . she had been recognized by others, others saw something in herself that she did not see. After that action she could see it."

- Sister Judy Donovan

As individuals begin to "walk on their own", they take on public roles they would never have anticipated: posing difficult questions to public representatives, speaking to the press, telling pieces of their experiences in large forums. Public action is, in fact, the stage upon which the IAF classroom rests. Oftentimes local organizations "create" actions in order to provide opportunities for learning and growth. While these actions are essential to bringing about changes in local policies, they are also essential to bringing about changes in individuals. Rogers writes, *"People's experience of 'transformation' comes most directly from public roles, connected to feelings of power which result from lessening dependence on experts, professionals, and even organizers themselves."* (1990, p.92) The education of the IAF is an experiential one—people learn by doing. The learning, however, does not occur solely through the "performance"; just as critical is the reflection that takes place after the applause has subsided.

. . . and reflection:

"I think the victories of course give a boost, but then always after the victories comes the reflection. And it makes people think about themselves about their self worth and about who they really are."

- Valley Interfaith Clergy

I spent the morning of January sixth videotaping a Valley-wide action in preparation for the statewide legislative agenda. I caught individuals speaking publicly about a variety issues, I ran from workgroup to workgroup to capture their action plans, I gathered scene after scene of people cheering, of laughter, of clapping and energy. As I moved to pack up my camera after

the closing prayer, Valley Interfaith worker Alicia Sanchez stopped me. "You have to tape the evaluation. That's the most important part."

In her urging me to document the morning's evaluation, Alicia echoed the teachings of Saul Alinsky who wrote, "Happenings become experiences when they are digested, when they are reflected on, related to general patterns, and synthesized." (1971, p.69) The IAF model of action-reflection also echoes the work of Don Schön, who explains how doing and thinking are mutually reinforcing, "Each feeds the other, and each sets boundaries for the other." (1983, p.290) After all actions, be they small meetings with local officials or statewide rallies, all participants come together to evaluate the day. For example, after the action described above, Sister Donovan asked the leaders, "Did the day help us move forward? How?" In the weeks following large actions, organizers meet with both new and experienced leaders in individual meetings and group meetings. In these conversations, organizers encourage leaders to reflect on the action, how they understood the action, and their own development. The model of action-reflection provides another opportunity for individual development within the context of a community.

While organizers encourage reflection on the role of individual and community power, reflection takes on a spiritual tone within the context of specific institutions. In this sense, reflection becomes an opportunity to connect not only with oneself or with community, but with a greater sense of meaning in one's life.

The role of faith:

Luz runs back and forth from the dining room to the living room carrying stools and chairs to accommodate the group of women that is beginning to overflow the couch space. As the meeting is called to order, heads are bowed, hands are held, and voices murmur the Lord's Prayer. They sit, they sing, they discuss the sweatshop labor that went into the scooters sold at the local Wal-Mart. A grey haired woman reads a section from the Bible about Jesus' love for the poor. She asks the group, "Do you think that God favors the poor over the rich?" A lively discussion ensues.

Perhaps one of the greatest impediments to political participation in the United States is a lack of faith in the ability to effect change. While religion is a common denominator for IAF organizations, Ernesto Cortés explains, “In this context, “faith” does not mean a particular system of religious beliefs, but a deep and profound affirmation that life, and the human condition in particular, have meaning and significance which transcends death.” (Cortés, personal conversation, 3/5) Local organizations challenge religious leaders to be facilitators of citizenship. Trainings and issues are reinforced through religious services, through mentorship of clergy, and throughout all aspects of the church. According to local clergy in the Rio Grande Valley, teaching the tenets of Catholicism goes hand in hand with good citizenship. Thus spiritual development is in fact a political process, and the development of faith is intimately tied to community. Faith based institutions reinforce faith in one’s self, in one’s community, and in one’s God,.

Faith based organizations have been influenced by a wide range of theologians examining the relationship between faith and social justice. In the Rio Grande Valley, where Catholicism is the dominant religion, the IAF has built on the Latin American model of liberation theology. Deeply affected by Freire’s work in Brazil, liberation theologians have long argued that liberation of society will come about as individuals undergo spiritual and political transformation. In A Theology of Liberation, Gustavo Gutierrez demands that the Catholic Church take a leadership role raising consciousness among the poor in Latin America. He emphasizes that social change will come about as individuals experience liberation one by one, “. . . conversion means a radical transformation of ourselves; it mean thinking, feeling and living as Christ-present in exploited and alienated man.” (1971, p.205)

Faith grows as individuals begin to see the possibility of change within their own community. The IAF targets issues that are “winnable” in order for individuals , often people who have never experienced victory in the political arena, to gain a taste for political power. It is through directly experiencing and seeing the changes in their communities that individuals who never

before thought that they could effect change, begin to see the potential of the “social imagination” to which Brueggeman refers (Brueggeman, 1984).

The results of this attention to individual development through dialogue, action, reflection, and faith are not only “civic skills” in the traditional sense, but profound intrapersonal, cognitive, and behavioral changes. These changes in individuals strengthen their institutions, their organization, and their community. Chapter four will consider these changes, using individuals from Valley Interfaith as a case study.