

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 23

Issue 1 *Social Change & Nonprofits: Learning beyond
Borders*

Article 9

3-21-2010

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Fannette Modek

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Recommended Citation

Modek, Fannette (2010) "The Power of Peer Learning," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol23/iss1/9>

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The Power of Peer Learning

Fannette Modek

My contact with the Boston–Haifa Project started at about the same time that the Seniors Lobby–Haifa saw the light of day. I was fortunate to have participated in the very first Seminar for NGOs in Haifa, held in January 2005. Several representatives of Haifa’s NGOs joined a group of leaders of Boston NGOs for a three-day seminar that put social-change issues on the table: Leadership, Organization, the Social Sector, Advocacy, and Conflict Management. The Power of Vision closing session generated a statement that by 2015, fifteen groups of U.S. social workers and gerontologists would visit Israel to study community-based services for the elderly. “This is recommended as it would raise the visibility of the Seniors Lobby of Haifa!”

The Seniors Lobby of Haifa formally became a participating NGO in the Learning Exchange Project in 2008. The visits and meetings in Boston had by far the biggest learning impact on me, in terms of conceptualizing and concretizing why, what, and how the third sector is capable of contributing to social change and social justice. More specifically, I have taken away with me a professional plan, an itinerary, and a guide for my fellow board members on the Seniors Lobby as they aspire to serve as a voice for Haifa’s elderly. But I faced a complex dilemma as the only representative of the Seniors Lobby with the Learning Exchange: How can I present these learnings to very competent board members who, fired with a righteous goal, are very sure of what they are doing? This question haunted me as we visited very impressive and competent NGOs whose counselors, for example, had themselves been the clients of the program (Project Hope) or where a scale of five steps was used by counselors and teens to measure teenagers’ ascents from “social alienation” to steady employment

Before her retirement thirteen years ago, Fannette Modek was the Director of the Golda Meir–Mount Carmel International Training Center, a branch of Israel’s Agency for International Development Cooperation in Haifa. Since immigrating to Israel from the United States in 1964, she has served at the Center as a course coordinator and instructor in Community Development and Gender studies. She was the assistant director in charge of Training Programs from 1971 to 1987, before moving into the position of Director. She has continued to take on short-term assignments for the Center in Haifa and on-site in developing countries. She has a Bachelor’s Degree from Syracuse University, a Master’s in Adult Education and Community Development from New York University, and a Certificate in Sociological and Anthropological Aspects of Developing Countries from the Institute of Political Science in Paris.

(ROCA). I wondered how I could effectively transmit insights I gained as I listened to two pastors, one a Nigerian Muslim and the other a Christian, share their profound experiences of laying down their weapons and working together to lead peace-making and conflict resolution with their own and other warring communities.

When the Seniors Lobby began, we, retired professionals, community leaders, and business people, all volunteer board members of the Lobby, found ourselves unexpectedly starting from zero: forming working relationships, giving space to one another, defining rules of procedure, facilitating agreement, designing pathways to action, seeking maximum appropriate involvement, and advancing haltingly trying to apply what is called “facilitative leadership.”

I was happy when the Lobby’s agenda made room for my biannual reports on the Haifa–Boston Project, but sad when a very active colleague didn’t recognize himself as an actor in the “Third Sector.” I also learned to ask “The Right Question” from a Boston NGO with that name, as a means of getting my colleagues to reflect on our decisions and activities during board meetings.

The Seniors Lobby–Haifa is an advocacy agency, created as a result of a survey conducted by the Social Services of Haifa that identified the need for an organization that would speak in the name of the elderly. We learned much from the seven Core Elements for a Successful Organization presented by Susanne Beaton, the Boston-based Campaign Director for One Family, Inc., a project of the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation. We had the organizing elements needed to mount what she identified as a successful social-change effort: (1) sound data and solutions; (2) a clear task; (3) a record of success in mobilizing our constituents and developing constituent leadership; (4) the organizational capacity of a nonprofit executive board; (5) a shared division of committee responsibilities; (6) a means for raising public awareness, including publishing a magazine in Hebrew two to three times a year, with summary translations in Russian and Arabic (for two large cultural groups in Haifa); (7) a Web site; and (8) success in building partnerships inside and outside the system.

The Lobby successfully mobilized elderly constituents raising the membership rolls from 2000 to 3,500 between 2006 and 2008. This success gave the organization a certain prestige and power especially in the period before local municipal elections of February 2008. Many members pondered whether the Lobby should run in the city elections; were the Lobby to attract sufficient votes, it could advantageously place two persons on the City Council. Actually penniless, the Lobby would have had to partner with an existing party in order to run in the elections. The board decided to partner with Gil — a relatively new party for the elderly that in previous national elections won five seats in the Knesset, Israel’s Parliament. Since Gil did not have a strong representation in Haifa, a bargain was struck: Gil would provide the cash and the banner would bear the name “Seniors Lobby–Haifa/Gil.” This development touched the core values of a few members of the Board who, facing the dilemma of voting either for their political party of choice or for Seniors Lobby–

Haifa/Gil, resigned from the board to vote for their political party of choice.

Even though the platform of Seniors Lobby–Haifa/Gil was uniquely local, its creation put in clear perspective the value conflicts and compromises inherent in forming partnerships outside the nonprofit circle. I remember walking through the Boston Hyde Park neighborhood in May 2009, debating with Alex, a Haifa colleague from SELAH, the wisdom of the Lobby going into politics and having to compromise its ideals. It seemed so abhorrent to him. Alex was right! Though the Seniors Lobby–Haifa/Gil has been successful in achieving some of its goals, for example, reducing city taxes for the elderly, as is the case in other towns, on many issues our representative, who joined the ruling coalition, must vote as the coalition decides, even though a no-vote would better represent the position of the Seniors Lobby–Haifa. This realization brought to mind as well the 2008 Haifa workshop jointly led by Boston’s Nancy Kaufman and Haifa’s Yael Abada on the advantages and disadvantages of linking with the government and/or the business sector on projects.

In the beginning, what we were seeing and hearing through the Learning Exchange Project seemed to be a fantasy — beyond our reach. I shifted my assumptions about what could be applied in the Lobby’s work in Haifa through conversations that took place during the 2009 exchange visit in Boston. Specifically, a colleague and I met a lawyer working for the Elder Law Unit of Greater Boston Legal Services and the Director for Outreach and Recruitment of the Harvard Cooperative Program on Aging–Multicultural Coalition on Aging. Naturally, the sophistication and level of their activities were far more developed than what we have in Israel. But the idea that one’s activity or program can serve as a research theme for University students was an idea that I was ready to buy. Again, I would have to be patient about applying this learning back home. The visit brought Carmit Shai, my Haifa colleague, and me closer together, and on our return, the Seniors Lobby–Haifa, my women’s organization, Soroptimist International, and the Golda Meir – Mount Carmel International Training Center, and Israel’s Program of International Cooperation organized a Study Day on The Involvement of the Elderly in the Community, where Carmit Shai and Arlette Adler, founder of the Lobby, made presentations.

It is interesting to note that I was the oldest person in the Learning Exchange representing the youngest Haifa NGO. Having been involved professionally in the community and having been a longtime acquaintance with some of my Haifa colleagues facilitated both the formal and informal exchanges among us. On another note, those of us of different cultural and religious backgrounds became closer on a personal level, discovering interests and preferences we had not known in our previous contacts. I believe that my participation in the Learning Exchange served to introduce the Seniors Lobby to the wider Haifa community, a point I stressed forcefully to my colleague board members who tended to remain insular vis-à-vis relations with other NGOs. I continue to wonder if insularity is characteristic of new organizations that are unsure of themselves.

Solidarity across borders also developed. In March 2008, the Haifa NGOs hosted the Boston NGOs; at one of the sessions, the topic was the role of NGOs in times of crisis. Never short of crisis, two Haifa NGOs, one being the Seniors Lobby, presented a report of their efforts to assist on the home front during the Second Lebanese War — delivering food to the elderly and to single parents afraid to leave their homes for fear of an air raid, baby-sitting where necessary, bringing medications to the bedridden, and so on. We Israelis are uniquely aware that a war is never without fatalities and resulting pain. With empathy and feeling for their Haifa hosts, one of the Bostonians reflected for a minute and yes, told about the loss of lives in his town due to crime and violence. Different but the same. Solidarity was established.

Another realization that emerged from the learning exchange was the value of making connections with similar bodies, exchanging experiences, and looking for common goals and objectives. The force that can be achieved when organizations serving the same client population, discuss and identify common goals is irreplaceable. It can change the atmosphere and priorities for the benefit of the elderly. But not only for the elderly! Many of the needs and rights of the elderly are those of other age groups as well. This conclusion or learning was probably lodged in a faraway corner of my mind for a long time, but it was thanks to the Learning Exchange, not only with Bostonians but also with my Haifa colleagues, each struggling to satisfy the needs of his/her client population — poor women, minority groups, disconnected teenagers, emigrants, the disabled, the uninvolved citizens — that the learning crystallized. The Seniors Lobby–Haifa must not only be a voice for the elderly, but a voice for social action and social justice for the whole Haifa community.

A moment came in May 2009 when all the participants of the Learning Exchange asked themselves, “Where is this experience leading?” I had been asking myself all along how I might transmit the stimulating learning experiences of the Project to my fellow board members. With maturity, the Seniors Lobby has become more relaxed, open, confident, and eager to strengthen its internal organization and external partnerships, giving me considerable satisfaction. As for my fellow Exchange Learners, the fellowship, cooperation, and personal commitment of the Haifa NGO representatives must be maintained and nourished. We look forward to regular meetings to keep up to date with each NGO’s progress and to cooperating on projects of mutual interest. This is our challenge for the future!

In summary and thinking back on two years of Learning Exchange, more often than not we found that Bostonians and Haifaim could end each other’s sentences. We found that we possessed some common basic human qualities or frailties that led us to positions and activities: a sense of justice that transcends race, religion, and class. And we are very, very grateful for the opportunity that was given us to participate in this project that will leave, I am sure, its unique mark in both cities.

