

## The New Same Old Story

By Nichole Maher, executive director of the Native American Youth and Family Center, with support, input, and guidance from Urban Indian Community members from Oregon to Minnesota

## The Northwest Area Foundation's Urban Indian Experience

By Karl N. Stauber, President and CEO, Northwest Area Foundation

About 60 percent of the nation's American Indians/Alaskan Natives (AI/AN), or about 2.5 million, live in urban areas. Of that total, about 262,000 live in 30 cities in the northwest quadrant of the nation, with an estimated 135,000 residing in four metropolitan areas: Seattle; Portland, Ore.; Billings, Mont.; and Rapid City, S.D. About 40 percent of these citizens live at or below the poverty line.

In 2003, the Northwest Area Foundation (NWA) approached Native American leaders in each of these four cities and asked if they would be willing to work on a process to reduce poverty for their American Indian communities. The four cities then launched into a strategic planning process with a large philanthropic organization that would prove disastrous.

After two agonizing years of planning, NWA on December 12, 2005, informed urban Indian coalitions from the four cities that a community-driven plan to reduce poverty was denied. *(continued on page 11)*



The issues that follow are not extraordinary. They happen consistently within every grantmaking organization. Many good ideas are brought to these organizations. Some of these good ideas receive support. In practice, many do not.

What we at Northwest Area Foundation are sharing with *Responsive Philanthropy* readers is the account of our decision not to support a community partnership proposal. What is different about this story is our approach: the level of investment and the amount of time and resources we committed to support the attempt of several community organizations to work together to translate community need into a multifaceted strategic plan for poverty reduction. Unfortunately, the proposed plan did not meet our standards for funding, and we did not invest in it. We hope that our account of this experience will convey the lesson that good efforts do not always lead to fundable outcomes.

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Illustration by Rachael Swierzevski, NCRP staff

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# Defining Poverty on Our Own Terms

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The denial sent an unequivocal message to our communities that “your solution to your problem doesn’t work for us.” This article will discuss the underlying issues that led to this project’s demise, of which one or more are probably present in any current foundation-grantee relationship or project on grassroots poverty reduction. What follows are some of the more salient points and overarching themes as they relate to the questionable philanthropic practice of one foundation engaged in vaguely defined poverty reduction work.

It is important to note that the decision to write this article was not taken lightly, and it is not free of anxiety. As one community member said, “I’m not sure if we should write an article like this; they might take away the funding they promised us.” What this dialogue most importantly highlights are the simple power dynamics inherent in philanthropy. We openly discussed the possible fallout, including punitive repercussions, that might result from this article. The potential for negative consequences is real—not just for our communities but for all of Indian country.

Why then would we write an article that could be characterized as sour grapes? The answer is simple, if its deliberation was not: The story needs to be told. One community member put it this way, “What are we going to do to make sure that no other community has to go through this?” We offer reflections on our relationship with the Northwest Area Foundation in the hopes that the lessons learned are valuable to other communities and social funding organizations. Creating social change is incredibly difficult and requires integrity, respect, and trust when communities seek support from those who have resources reserved for the common good.

## **The Relationship: Misunderstandings from the Beginning**

The exact beginnings of the NWAFF Urban Indian Community (UIC) Ventures project are still a bit hazy to those of us on the grantee side. During the autumn and winter of 2003 and 2004, the NWAFF sponsored community forums for urban Indians in several cities in its service region and awarded small contracts to five communities to do some initial organizing work. Local leaders representing youth and elders were identified by the NWAFF and presented with information to deliver to their respective communities. The NWAFF was interested in

working with urban Indian groups with the potential of issuing long-term high-dollar grants. The specifics are still a matter of contention.

Leaders from Portland, Ore., returned home from a meeting in St. Paul with the understanding that there was potential to bring \$20 million to Native Americans in Portland alone. Other community groups felt the same—each believed there was a “mythical pot of gold” at the end of this strategic planning process. NWAFF representatives now indicate that this was a misunderstanding.

Leaders from the cities of Billings, Seattle, Rapid City, and Bismarck (who would later be removed from the project by NWAFF), like those from Portland, gathered stakeholders together and explained what NWAFF was, what the stakes were, and what the initial deliverable

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was (evidence of an active and inclusive community group discussing issues related to poverty reduction). Some elders in several of the cities warned that they had been doing this since the 1950s; furthermore, they knew how the story, *the same old story*, would end: An outside intervener dangles rewards while promising nothing and leads a community through a demeaning and data-mining process, but ultimately to unacceptable results—all while our people remain steeped in poverty. However, the leaders put their personal reputations and relationships on the line in an effort to bring this potentially huge sum of money to their communities. Sufficient support was achieved to warrant continuing on, and the UIC Ventures project began.

The biggest reason for NWAFF not funding the UIC strategic plan may have been the definition of poverty. Ironically, it stems from an occasion when authority was released by NWAFF to arrive at a community-created definition of poverty. Most Native Americans do not define poverty in dollars and cents. Poverty is measured by one’s ability to exist. To practice your culture. To speak your language. To get a fair and quality education. To be sufficiently housed. To not have to choose between medicine and food. And that was how we defined poverty for the UIC Ventures project.

The proposed strategic plan efforts to reduce poverty then emanated from this definition. The plan we produced included efforts to improve education, health, and



### **The Ethics of Intervention: Acknowledging Community Power and Capacity**

Authentic awareness of the power dynamics between the moneyed intervener (a foundation or other donor who intends to have a hands-on relationship) and the communities subject to the intervener's help is paramount to successful grantor-grantee relationships. The ethics of inter-

vention—what an outside entity has to be aware of and responsible for as an intervener—are certainly called into question in the experience of the UIC Ventures project.

When examining the ethics of the intervener, it is important to examine the history and collective experience of any cultural group with whom they may work. For American Indians, this history is steeped in paternalism. There is a very real legacy of historical trauma—and repercussions based on interveners' actions—in the experience of American Indians. Some of the more abhorrent examples include allotment of reservation lands, federal relocation policy, the boarding school system, and tribal termination—all of which constitute an important backdrop for any discussion of our experience.

The overall relationship between a foundation, government body, or other grantor and a community is to some degree a sum of the individual relationships between members of both sides of the partnership. Strains in these relationships can potentially paralyze the larger relationship. A response by some foundations is to reframe the role of its grant officers as community liaisons. This is the case with the Ventures program of NNAF. The intentions are admirable, but they are successful only when the institution is prepared to make the accompanying transfer of authority.

housing, as well as employment and economic development. In hindsight, it is possible to conclude that all NNAF really wanted was the economic development component. One is left to wonder if an assumption had been made by NNAF that everyone interpreted poverty in pretty much the same way and that the remedies were equally as obvious.

However, many still believe a plan containing only economic development strategies (even powerful ones) would have gone unfunded. While the foundation likely began with good intentions, many feel that we were determined to be too difficult and inadequately grateful. This belief gains support from an e-mail from the foundation project lead, who indicated that a “cleansing” was needed, and perhaps the best thing for the project would be to find all new community participants.

Two themes in particular stand out when analyzing the relationship between NNAF and our urban Indian communities: the ethics of intervention and cross-cultural relations. We cannot say that these are problematic issues throughout NNAF, an organization that, in fact, has made sizable contributions to Indian country—even through the Ventures program. What we can testify to, however, is the catastrophic depths to which our project sank under NNAF's sponsorship. The errors observed and offenses incurred were such that sharing their details offers an opportunity to glean additional learning and attempt to answer the community member's question: What are we going to do to make sure that this doesn't happen to another community?

In the UIC project, the confusion over changed titles manifested itself in the “it's up to you” fallacy. In NNAF's Ventures program, the strategic plan essentially replaces the grant proposal. Approved strategic plans move communities into full partnership with the foundation, and communities receive long term multimillion-dollar fund-

ing. In efforts to liaise, the staff did not provide clear and specific expectations from the foundation regarding strategic plans (it was up to us to decide). The staff, acting more like the typical grant officer, was supposed to notify us when we chose an “it’s up to us” direction that the foundation would not approve. The result was a two-year tug of war that included only about three months of actual work on a plan to reduce urban Indian poverty in 30 urban centers spanning eight states.

Though communication had been challenging from the very beginning, and expectations remained undefined, NWAf refused to supply any information regarding specific granting or evaluation standards. To suggest we were trying to track a moving target would be to assume that a target existed at all. We knew that the strategic plan (here usurping the grant proposal) had to focus on poverty reduction and contain some sustainable economic development mechanisms, and not much else. Copies of previously funded plans were provided; however, they were provided with the caveat that we needed to do more, as the bar had been raised due to our benefit of learning from prior Ventures projects. The only other insights we were given were value guidelines and principles ranging from maintaining inclusive community groups to the incomprehensible foundation mantra of “do no harm.” This is an impossibly prescient value that was pressed upon us, at the same time that substantial harm was being done to our communities.

Realistically, the “it’s up to you” fallacy was sufficient to derail the project. However, there were other strains in distinguishing grant officers from community liaisons. One was the apparent need for staff to protect their own organizational interests. At least three consultants hired to assist with the development of the project were requested to change evaluations so that they did not reflect negatively on staff, the disastrously poor planning process, the misconceived regional scope, bad communications, etc. The self-interested edits did little to assist our group in explaining to the top tier decision makers that the process was so bad as to preclude success.

An additional strain was the matter of authority. The extent to which a project is community driven is the litmus for members of the school of social change philanthropy. Sadly, authority became an all too common struggle in the UIC project. Having three different staff

lead persons over the two-year period was not helpful. Interpersonal issues came into play as well when a staff person warned that the plug could be pulled on the project or lashed out when the partner cities began to seek answers from each other rather than the staff or had the audacity to question staff direction of the project.

Reflecting on the grant officer/community liaison policy shift in social change organizations may tempt one toward surrender—damned if we do, damned if we don’t. This may be true to the extent that there will always be power dynamics at play when haves are doling out dollars to have-nots, especially in the case of institutionalized haves like governments and philanthropic foundations. The dilemma can be mitigated, however, by sharing of ownership. We commend those who are looking for permanent solutions to social issues by empowering the underresourced populations they serve, but success will come in instances when the intervener can let go of authority. It is not enough to say that you are empowering communities; you must also follow through with the empowerment.

#### **Cross-cultural Relations: Lessons Learned and Yet to Be Learned**

Issues of cross-cultural relations, or levels of cultural competency, were also factors in the project’s demise. There were instances of blatant as well as more subtle institutional racism, from comments about the American Indians in Portland being white, to the questioning of participants’ abilities to read, to a top-level executive (who is nonnative) commenting that the plan is not “Indian enough,” to the foundation’s out-of-touch conceptualization of poverty. The blatant instances did nothing to promote the success of the project or trust between the communities and NWAf. However, the institutional

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racism woven through the “it’s up to you” fallacy may have been more detrimental. You can choose to ignore a racist or otherwise offensive comment or person for the good of your people, especially with the potential of millions of dollars coming into your community. In fact, this potential funding created tremendous pressure on leaders to continue to suffer the insults, as well as the

process, despite their tremendous concerns. But the institutional assumption—NWAf's conception—of urban Indian poverty was a deal breaker.

Another assumption that set the stage for a difficult experience was the definition of regional. This was the source of much confusion. The pilot sites went from understanding that each city would design its own project while sharing best practices and lessons learned, to understanding that one project would cover all four pilot sites (Bismarck had been removed from the project by this point as the mostly youth-led group was not professional enough for NWAf), and finally to the notion that one plan would cover 30 urban areas in eight states. The final understanding of what regional meant in terms of this project was not entirely clear until three months before the plan was to be submitted, if it was ever clear at all.

Obviously poor communication is paramount in this case, but the assumption that these 30 urban Indian sites were sufficiently similar to warrant this definition of regionalism was equally dangerous (i.e., all urban Indians and the areas where they have similar status and experiences). The Native American populations in these cities ranged from some 80,000 to a few hundred. Federal relocation cities such as Portland and Seattle are home to members of 200 to 300 different tribes. The propensity over time in these larger urban centers for Natives to intermarry with people from other races and tribes creates lower numbers of tribally enrolled constituents. Cities like Billings and Rapid City, in close proximity to the Crow and Lakota reservations, respectively, offer different demographics.

In the course of two rounds of community-based research and several regional meetings, the pilot sites did find much in common. Additionally, combining networks from these different cities did prove empowering, and the relationship building was one of the several positive results of the project. Yet assuming that the poverty systems in these diverse locations would respond to one strategic plan was an unreasonable leap, especially



Photo Courtesy of the NAVA Family Center

since the magic number had now been dropped to \$14 million for the entire region to be awarded over the course of 10 years. This is an impressive number to be sure, but not what we had envisioned and certainly not for 30 cities.

If we stop to consider the funding, the difficulty in completing a comprehensive strategic plan comes to light. Dividing the total of \$14 million by 30 cities and dividing again by the 10-year pay-

ment plan, we arrive at about \$47,000 per city per year. In a city like Seattle, that would equate to about 58 cents per AI/AN citizen per year. Although \$47,000 can be made to do a lot of good for our communities over the course of a year, it would not dent overall poverty.

The final assumption to be recounted here involves the use of local staff, experienced and well-versed in the needs and issues of our communities. What we refer to as same-race or culturally specific delivery systems make sense for our population—Native Americans prefer to receive services from other Native Americans. The foundation did employ two Native staff people for the lead positions of this project. But here we teeter on the same assumption as the regional issue; urban Indians are sufficiently similar to make some key generalizations. One must still have some knowledge of the local community and still must build a trusting relationship with that community. Some communities may allow time for a learning curve, but if mutual trust and respect does not follow, communication will break down.

A last note on cultural relations stems from a lack of historical understanding and appreciation for the community. The altruistic sounding foundation value “do no harm” was violently shattered, as were our communities. The inability of NWAf to step back and imagine what this project might look like from the perspective of the participants has in some ways set cultural relations back a decade or more, and demonstrated considerable harm. Bear in mind the early message of several elders that “this is the same old [racist] story.” Presumably that was not the intention of the foundation, yet that enduring message was reinforced. The process from the elders’

eyes was age-old. An outside intervener comes to the community and mines the community for deeply personal cultural information while guardedly offering large pools of money, only to disappear when the community is not good enough in the eyes of the intervener.

### Conclusion

That the elders' message was reinforced to them is sorrowful; that this belief was passed on to a new generation of youth participants is tragic. How many of these youth will dare to hope when future projects come along and the elders remind them of the pattern? How will trust possibly be built when another entity has a brilliant notion of how to solve the "Indian problem?" One young teenage woman who had attended every local meeting and several regional ones over the two-year life of the project may have summed up the problem, if not the solution, when she said, "I never want another white organization to come in and tell us how to solve our problems."

As we continue to work on the social issues of our respective urban Indian communities, we will certainly continue to look for partnerships with those whose hands can reach the purse strings. There are also amazing partnerships happening in all kinds of communities spanning the nation and the world. Foundations can play an important part in sharing those successes and best prac-

deliver what the carrot holder desires. Social change foundations then have a choice to make. Either the intervener must convey its expectations, or it must let go of them and trust that the community has the capacity to think through and carry out what is in the community's best interest. This is not to say that the learning achieved in foundations is not relevant and valuable, but if expression of this learning does not come in true partnership, it will look pedantic and paternalistic. Furthermore it will give the impression that the intervener has its own solutions and is incorporating the community only as a process piece.

The sharing of authority and ownership is paramount to successful community empowerment. The silencing of criticism prohibits partnership. For those experiencing historical trauma or the poverty mind-set, the reluctance to question authority is at times a pre-existing condition, especially where money is involved. When questioning is summarily shut down, there is no hope for honest dialogue. The acute difficulty in creating community-driven ideas in this scenario, especially when those ideas conflict with what the foundation is willing to fund, categorically limits potential.

Native Americans are not opposed to working with other groups. The predominant relational worldview rests on the interconnectedness of all things and all peoples.

What we ask is that other communities be willing to earn trust and respect, not demand it. We ask that assumptions be checked at

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tices. However, it must be said that these successes are correlative to the degree that a true partnership can exist.

Like the fostering of relationships among northwest urban Indian communities, other successes did occur in this process. New relationships were seeded in our individual communities, as well. Core groups in each of the cities continue to communicate and gather around the goal of reducing poverty and building community. But other goods must come, too.

Our UIC Ventures experience must serve to educate, to close the old circle and begin a new one. Questions must be asked. What can legitimately be expected of community groups in terms of planning and process by a foundation, with the promise of grant money at the end of the process? In other words, when a carrot is dangled, especially a very large one, the natural preoccupation of the community will be to

the door. We ask that history be understood as continuous, in that actions in the past affect current conditions and that new instances of racism, blatant and embedded, occur regularly.

In closing, we share the five principles of planning of the Indigenous Peoples Network;

1. People thrive in community;
2. Ordinary people have all the answers;
3. People have a basic right to determine their own future;
4. Oppression continues to be a force that devastates people; and
5. The people are beautiful, already.