



NORTH STAR *News*

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IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN ONE ELECTION



MinKwon Center for Community Action registers Asian immigrants to vote in Flushing, Queens as part of a long-term strategy for community empowerment.

North Star Fund Grantees Combine Civic Engagement with Grassroots Community Organizing to Build Long-term Power

Most people are familiar with voting and elections. Fewer people know what community organizing is, notwithstanding its regular mention in the last Presidential election.

In the non-profit activist world that North Star Fund supports, reaching out to and getting people to vote is called 'civic engagement' or 'civic participation.' Community organizing, meanwhile, is what happens after the election, when activist groups reach out to their neighbors and allies as part of an advocacy campaign to get elected officials to deliver on their promises, or to stop a potentially damaging policy. The combination of these two strategies—civic engagement and community organizing—has an effect that goes way beyond electing individual candidates for single elections. It's a long-term strategy for building community power, one that North Star Fund has a long-

standing commitment to support.

New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE), a North Star grantee since 2008, is based in the strongly Latino neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens. The organization's members are recent immigrants; most do not have documentation. According to its Director, Valeria Treves, "NICE focuses on people who aren't likely to achieve citizenship without comprehensive immigration reform."

The need for immigration reform strikes deep in the heart of Latino communities. Even if a community member has a green card, even if they're a citizen, they probably have a family member or a friend who is undocumented. As part of a long-term strategy to achieve reform, NICE mobilizes undocumented immigrants to do the legwork of its get-out-the vote efforts. Says Valeria, "Our members knock on doors and

"Our members knock on doors and say, 'Hey, I can't vote. You can. Will you represent my issues at the polls?'"

*- Valeria Treves,
Director, New
Immigrant Community
Empowerment (NICE)*

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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (CONTINUED)

say, ‘Hey, I can’t vote. You can. Will you represent my issues at the polls?’ That’s very powerful.”

Henry Serrano is the Lead Organizer at Community Voices Heard (CVH), which organizes low-income people to fight poverty and lack of opportunity. CVH members identified the need for civic engagement in their work in 2003. In 2006, CVH was among the first Civic Engagement grantees of the Johnson Family Fund, which is a donor-advised fund at North Star. According to Henry, “Civic engagement and electoral work have the capacity to engage many people in a short period of time. For instance, in our public housing campaign, we use the opportunity of an electoral cycle to talk to people living in projects about public housing policies. Then post-election, we engage them in a plan to achieve reforms that won’t happen without holding policymakers accountable.”

One such change happened in 2007, while Eliot Spitzer was a new governor.

CVH worked in coalition with other groups to get New York’s Human Resources Administration (HRA) to fund public housing at the same rate as it did private buildings. According to Henry, “We got the state legislature to sign on, but it didn’t look likely that Spitzer would. Going door-to-door in public housing as part of our electoral work, we asked people to sign cards urging the governor—whoever won—to support the initiative. As soon as Spitzer was elected, we dropped off the cards at his office. He signed the legislation.”

Getting out the Vote

Hugh Hogan, North Star Fund’s Executive Director, refers to the work that NICE and CVH do as ‘integrated voter empowerment.’ According to Hugh, “Integrated voter empowerment is a civic participation strategy that is connected to ongoing community organizing campaigns. People in the most disenfranchised communities know about voting and elections, even if turnouts are low.”

MinKwon Center for Community Action organizes people primarily in Asian communities, with a particular focus on youth, the elderly, recent immigrants, low-income residents, and English language learners. According to James Hong, Civic Participation Coordinator, “Participation in the electoral process is one aspect of the greater empowerment that we want to see for the community.” MinKwon’s program includes voter registration, education, and get-out-the-vote mobilizations. MinKwon also partners with Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund to do ‘voter protection’ at the polls, making sure the polls are safe and voters get the assistance they need, and that the vote is accurately counted.

The Numbers

Community organizing groups tend to focus on local races, where, according to Valeria, “Winners are decided by very slim margins.”

For the fall 2010 elections, NICE was

NORTH STAR NEWS: NEW BOARD MEMBERS



Solangel Cubas Minotta
Content Licensor

Solangel Cubas Minotta is excited to contribute her expertise in organizational development to the North Star board of directors. She grew up in Washington Heights, where, according to Solangel, “I saw adversity and lack of opportunity all around me. North Star empowers visionary leaders from within these communities to rise up as champions and help create a more equitable environment.”

More at northstarfund.org/Cubas_Minotta



Michael Waterman
Co-founder, Olo Acupuncture

Michael Waterman came to North Star Fund as a donor advised fund partner. His service on North Star Fund’s board grew from his family’s dedication to social change efforts. His mother emigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines as a political activist fighting the Marcos regime, and his father, an immigration attorney, started a family foundation which supported groups working on social and economic justice issues.

More at northstarfund.org/Waterman



Maggie Williams
Lawyer

Maggie Williams brings to North Star Fund’s board extensive experience in grassroots community organizing to ensure that all communities have their voices heard in the legislative process. Over the past two years, Maggie has applied her experience of collaborating with grassroots communities to her work analyzing and drafting legislation in the New York State Senate.

More at northstarfund.org/Williams

very involved in the District 25 City Council primary race, in which Daniel Dromm, a progressive school teacher, outspoken about his identity as a gay man, ran against Helen Sears, the entrenched favorite of Democratic Party. Sears had been behind several measures that had been perceived as being against the interests of her immigrant constituents, including efforts to ban street vending. District 25 is 53% first generation immigrants. Dromm won by a margin of 600 votes. NICE's get-out-the-vote effort touched 1000 people.

A similar story played out in 2010 State Senate District 11, in which MinKwon was very involved. The race was between Frank Padavan, a Republican who had represented the district since 1972, and Tony Avella, his Democratic challenger.

Padavan had led two anti-immigrant efforts: In 2007, he spearheaded the opposition to issuing driver's licenses to all qualified drivers, regardless of immigration status. Then in 2009, Padavan introduced a bill that would have barred public hospitals from treating undocumented immigrants.

According to James at Minkwon, "In Senate District 11, there are 7,400 registered Korean-American voters. We know that turnout was at least 40%, compared

to 32% for the rest of the city. According to our exit polling, 89% voted for Avella, the challenger. That's more than 2,600 votes—in a race that was decided by 3,000."

Long-Term Change

Follow-up after the election is crucial. Says Valeria at NICE, "Part of making elected officials accountable is just maintaining the conversation. They pay attention to us once they understand that we're a player in the community."

Through our partnership with the Johnson Family Fund, North Star has also been able to fund a national network working on integrated voter empowerment. Pushback Network forms state-based alliances to increase voter participation in low-income and other marginalized communities.

According to Brigid Flaherty, Pushback's Director of Resource and Organizational Development, "We're the opposite of the 'parachuting model,' where people from outside the community come in for, say, six weeks and work the doors. People trust our organizations because they've seen them around before—and as a consequence, they vote in higher numbers. And that leads to real, lasting on-the-ground change in people's lives."



Lina Perez, a member of New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE), knocks on a door of a registered voter in Jackson Heights, Queens on election day to remind the resident to vote.



GENE CARROLL: WHY I GIVE

MY CORE VALUES

When I was approached by North Star Fund to serve on their Advisory Board I didn't play hard to get. Simply put, North Star is a serious operation devoted to, at its core, a deeply held value of my own: building a more democratic nation and world.

I've been engaged in grassroots activism and organizing since my student days in the 1970s. After many years working in the labor movement, I came back to New York City in 1991 to serve as the founding executive director of New York Jobs With Justice—which has been funded by North Star Fund. In 1997, I became Director of the Union Leadership Program at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations—where I remain today.

All my experiences have brought me back to the importance of getting resources to the leaders of people pushed to the margins. That's why I give to North Star, so that they can continue to give a hand up to groups that aren't on anybody else's radar.

Yet.

*More at
northstarfund.org/GeneCarroll*

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**NORTH
STAR
FUND**

520 EIGHTH AVENUE, Suite 2203
NEW YORK, NY 10018-6656

(212) 620-9110
(212) 620-8178 *fax*

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