ACORN Sells Clout To 'Little People'

Citizen Groups Give PAT Run For Money

By KATHY KIELY

IT BEGAN 11 years ago with a handful of salesmen peddling their product from door to door in Little Rock, Ark.

The business has grown, acquiring characteristics of an established corporation.

It has branch offices in 23 states, including Pennsylvania. It recruits every spring on campuses of the nation's top colleges. Salesmen attend refresher courses and training seminars.

When a new office is opened, the experienced ones receive marching orders. Sometimes the transfers take them thousands of miles.

Another sign of success came recently, when part of the corporate headquarters moved to New Orleans, so the national staff could take advantage of a larger city's better airline service for their frequent trips to the North and East.

If the moral seems to be that enterprise, dedication and old-fashioned hustle always produces a winner, it's because the story behind the rise of ACORN Inc. has all the elements of a classic story of all-American business success.

Oh, there have been problems. Like a persistent whisper campaign about ACORN being a Communist front.

And there are a few enemies out there. It is unlikely, for instance, that any politicians, Chambers of Commerce or, for that matter, Allegheny County's Port Authority Transit, will be inspired to honor ACORN with any awards.

But the modest venture started in 1970 by a Williams College dropout has come a long, long way — especially for an outfit that is trying to market an unusual product to a group that has never been known as especially conspicuous consumers.

The product is clout. The people ACORN is trying to persuade to buy it are the poor and middle classes of America. And everywhere ACORN goes, it seems the people are buying — including Pittsburgh.

In neighborhoods as different as the South Side, Hill District, Garfield and Beltzhoover, people have bought the ACORN line from an unlikely band of salesmen — mostly young, mostly white, mostly college-educated idealists who didn't even live in the neighborhood.

The first ACORN organizers showed up here in late 1979 and began knocking on doors of the South Side.

Genial out-of-towners, they politely talked their way into house after house, telling the story of ACORN, asking people to name some of the problems in their neighborhoods and suggesting that a group effort could go farther toward solving them than individuals could.

Today there are ACORN chapters in 10 city neighborhoods, and two more are being established.

Jeff Elmer, the ACORN organizer who oversees citywide activities from a ramshackle office above an East Carson Street storefront, says nearly 2,000 Pittsburgh families now pay $16-a-year dues to belong.

But those numbers are not a full measure of ACORN's strength.

Less than two years after it came to town, ACORN managed to turn it upside down.

As far as officials of the Port Authority were concerned, that's what happened May 26 when, in response to a suit filed by ACORN, Common Pleas Judge Silvestri Silvestri ordered PAT to roll back bus fares, reshape its fare zones and eliminate bus passes.

The case is in appeal, but no matter what the final ruling is, there doesn't seem to be any way ACORN can lose.

The headlines have brought new interest — Elmer says he is getting calls from people who want to know how they can join — and new respect from the powers-that-be.

That has been ACORN's goal and trademark all along. The ability to gain the respect — or even arouse the fear — of a community's establishment has been a key to attracting members.

One of them, Joann Brooks, said she was never able to persuade the landlords of her Homewood housing project to meet with tenants until a number of them joined ACORN.

"When ACORN came in, we started to get attention," she said. "It was really weird."

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The name ACORN is an acronym for Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. It also is a political symbol.

Members like to remind you that "out of a little acorn, a mighty oak tree grows," and that is what Wade Rathke had in mind in 1970 when he quit as an organizer with the National Welfare Rights Organization to found a similar group with a broader constituency.

The idea, according to veteran ACORN organizer John Kest, was to "give some power back to low- and moderate-income people" and to do so by building "a national organization based on decisions made at a neighborhood level."

Kest has worked six years for ACORN. Chief organizer for Pennsylvania, he was sent to Philadelphia in 1977 when the ACORN national board — two elected officials from each city with an ACORN chapter — decided it was time to expand.

Though the group first took hold in the South, Kest said, Rathke had always envisioned ACORN as national in scope.

Pennsylvania was the first state north of the Mason-Dixon Line targeted for an organizing effort, but ACORN since has moved into Ohio, New Jersey, Michigan, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

The organizers come from different places and different backgrounds, but there are certain common themes in the stories of how they came to ACORN.

Rathke, chief organizer and trouble-shooter, dropped out of Williams College, Williamstown, Mass. His main job experience had been working with the Welfare Rights Organization when, at age 28, he founded ACORN.

Kest traveled to Arkansas to become an ACORN trainee after hearing about the group while working on the grape and lettuce boycotts in Brooklyn.

Elmer, who runs the Pittsburgh office, was recruited from an Indiana college, where he majored in sociology and anthropology.

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Association of Community Organizations For Reform Now
117 Spring Street, Syracuse, New York 13208

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