Something Rotten in the Supermarket

The Interns

Sumaiya Olatunde Gilliam
Rafael Medina
Hong Luu
Ng'ethe Maina

The Campaign

Sprucing up the Supermarket

Most Memorable Moment

"We knew the community was into the action we staged at the ALMACS corporate headquarters when a community member's eleven-year old boy told two ALMACS vice-presidents that 'we ain't leavin' till you bring us the president.'"

The smell of the food in there was so bad that it almost knocked me out." This statement came from a resident of South Providence in reference to to the local ALMACS supermarket on Elmwood Avenue. Residents have complained for years about the quality of the food and the cleanliness of the store, but until now nothing has ever been done to pressure the managers to clean it up.

MAAP interns Hong Luu, Sumaiya Olatunde Gilliam, Ng'ethe Maina and Rafael Medina — working with Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE) — spent the summer of '92 organizing in Providence to do something about this smelly supermarket.

DAREing to Organize

DARE is a 500-member community organization that has been around for about six years. Most of the members are people of color, and about 60% of them receive AFDC. This organization was started as a result of the complete lack of interest in the welfare of the residents of South Providence shown by city and state officials. The MAAP interns this year, however, weren't targeting government officials, but corporate executives. The campaign centered on pressuring the ALMACS supermarket chain to improve the conditions and the quality of one of their stores located in South Providence.

Hong Luu came from Vietnam in 1982. College, she says, has been a frustrating experience because it is so abstract. On the other hand, organizing is just what she wants to do because it means mobilizing and agitating people to fight for their basic needs and rights. Rafael Medina comes from an Mexican immigrant family, and has experience working with the UFW (United Farm Workers) in California.

Work to be Done

Like Luu, being involved in the community is a very important objective for Oakland, California resident Sumaiya Olatunde Gilliam. A plant genetics major at the University of California, Berkeley, she joined the MAAP program as a step on the path to becoming an organizer.

Ng'ethe Maina is currently working towards a degree in Mechanical Engineering, but he believes that he will probably end up doing organizing work for a large part of his life. "There is just too much social change work to be done out there for me to want to put my energies into engineering," he stated.

The interns with site coordinator Libero

Talking with the Community

Since their arrival in Providence, the MAAP interns have been involved in all phases of the ALMACS campaign. The first stage was probably the most physically demanding. They had to generate interest in the campaign by going through the community with DARE members and staff to find out what people's concerns and issues were.

This meant spending several hours each day walking through the neighborhoods of South Providence, knocking on doors, and talking to people about ALMACS. The interns found that a huge percentage of the community was disgusted and fed up with the store, but residents felt that there was nothing they could do about it in terms of long-lasting change. It is the only large grocery store in the area, and

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Host Organization Profile

Direct Action for Rights and Equality

There are two things that distinguish Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE) from other community-based organizations, according to director Mark Toney.

The first is a strong commitment to building for the future. The way this is carried out in practice is through various means of involving the membership in the daily life of the organization. The most important of these methods, says Toney, is raising money.

"Fundraising is built into everything we do," he explains. "When people feel that they have raised money for DARE, then they also feel that this gives them the right to call the shots. I'd be willing to bet that anyone who raises a lot of money for DARE now will be a leader in the organization at some point."

The second distinguishing characteristic is a willingness on the part of the group's leadership to engage in direct action, and to use the tactics of confrontation as a conscious strategy to build power in low-income communities. DARE's goal is to redefine the relations of power between the community and the institutions that affect the residents' lives.

Many groups decide on tactics for a given campaign based on their analysis of which will be most effective in achieving the "win," Toney explains. The usual strategy is to first ask for something, and then escalate to more militant tactics if the requests are not answered. DARE, on the other hand, "does not believe in begging.'

"When you go in and ask somebody for something, whether you get it or not is dependent on their good will. That's charity," says Toney. "We don't do that. We lead off with an action, and make demands."

Since actions have the potential to disrupt business as usual, or embarrass the targeted institution, DARE feels that it has something to trade in return for having the demands met. "Basically, what we offer is something they want — cooperation," says Toney. "This changes the power relationship. Our power is in disruption. We have the ability to mess with them, and so it is in their best interest" to meet the demands DARE makes.

DARE got its start from a small number of activists who met in 1986 to figure out a way to create an effective voice for low-income people of color in South Providence. The fledgling group was aided by a salary supplementary grant provided through the Center for Third World Organizing, which also helped with training under its Minority Organizer Training program (MOT).

The 500 dues-paying members of DARE are tied into the organization in a number of ways. These include the fundraising activities, actions and campaigns mentioned above, but also certain direct, individual benefits.

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One situation faced by all social change organizations is that the benefits they win for their communities are available to all members of the community, regardless of whether they participate in the organization or not. For example, if a community group forces the local hospital to stay open longer hours, anyone who wants to can go the hospital during those hours, not only those who pay dues and who spent weeks and months working on the campaign.

DARE members and organizers feel it is important that members receive benefits by virtue of being dues-paying members, and thus the organization is constantly looking for in-kind donations to distribute. These include summer camp scholarships for kids, individual advocacy for legal or other problems, and Christmas and Thanksgiving food baskets. "It's a constant challenge, but we have make it clear that being a member of DARE gets you something," explains Toney.

Of course, where DARE has really built its reputation in Providence is through the campaigns it conducts. The recent campaign to improve conditions at the local ALMACS supermarket, say DARE organizers, is a prime example of a good campaign. It included a few militant actions, was based on solid community research, and dealt with an issue of major concern to the community. Politically, it also highlighted the connections between conditions in low-income communities and the decisions made by downtown executives.

Perhaps best of all, the demands were met with immediate action. One of the complaints of community residents was that the floor of the store was filthy and broken up, and DARE demanded that the floor be fixed. Within a week, the entire floor was replaced with a brand-new linoleum surface. "Now that," says Toney with evident satisfaction, "is a change that people can see and touch."