

Civic Life Portland Oregon

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Vocations for Social Change and CETA in the 1970s

In the 1960s and early 1970s the first social activists' organizational structures were loose collectives, volunteer organizations, or experimental organizational structures that survived through passion and sweat equity. The civic infrastructure in Portland before the civic reconstruction period did not supply jobs for idealists with new civic goals. The nonprofit sector in Portland, as in the rest of America, was miniscule compared with today's. In 1969 there were about 70,000 nonprofit organizations in the entire country. In 1960 there were 31 private foundations. While the number doubled by 1972, it was miniscule compared to today (268 foundations in 1999). In 1960 the City of Portland budget (City of Portland, 1960) reflected only one position at all involved in citizen participation, an outreach worker for the newly formed Portland Development Commission. In 1960 there were fewer than 20 nonprofit (and voluntary) arts organizations in the Portland area. A study of the economic impact of the arts conducted in 1965 documented a total of 248 people employed in the arts, including individuals and artists working in the schools or public agencies. In 1960 there were only a handful of organizations that could be considered environmental; six of the 10 such groups listed in the City Directory were business associations. In the public sector the selection wasn't much better. There was an air pollution control authority with five employees, and a sanitary authority with six employees. Most of these jobs were hardly what one could call "environmental," rather hard engineering with little environmental perspective.

"Baby Boomer" activists who wanted to create social changes had two options: volunteer within existing civic organizations that tended to not be hospitable to new forms of civic actions, or create new civic organizations from scratch. The Vocations for Social Change program started in Boston in 1971 and was emulated in cities around the country, including Portland. It was a programmatic response to baby boomer activists' desire to continue their voluntary ideological work as a paid livelihood. Whereas citizens in traditional Portland could financially afford to be involved in civic life through voluntary efforts, many boomer activists sought ways to "walk their talk" either through creating their own organizations that focused on critical issues or creating workplaces that allowed them to "walk their talk" while creating positive social

change.

These activists attempted to create organizational structures that had multiple objectives. Many were created with the assumption that change needed to happen at the personal, group, community, and global levels. By comparison most traditional civic organizations had more straightforward goals. A civically minded woman providing volunteer assistance to help the needy was not expected to simultaneously confront her inner struggles, working relations, and measure actions in terms of how to create systemic change that would alter the conditions of those she was helping.

One of the more important public programs that influenced how civic activists from the 1960s were integrated into the new civic life was the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). During the late 1970s CETA supported innovative civic projects in the nonprofit and public sectors, provided staff for emergent organizations, and provided the first “real” jobs for many civic activists.

CETA was signed into law near the end of 1973 and replaced the previous federal employment and training program in July 1974. It lasted until the fall of 1983 when it was replaced by the Job Training Partnership Act. It was one of five major domestic programs loosely labeled “block grants” that emerged between 1966 and 1975. In total it was a \$55 billion federal investment in employment and training, and it was sometimes compared to the Works Progress Administration or Civilian Conservation Corps (CETA/Public service employment briefing, 1978).

There were several programs under CETA--Title I, Title II, Title VI--each one with a different focus depending on the current administration’s policies. In relation to the civic reconstruction in Portland Title II and Title VI programs, intended to create jobs in the public and nonprofit sectors, had the most impact. Title VI in particular was an innovative program. Judy Phelan, director of CETA Title I and II, during the mid 1970s, said it was “the fun program to administer (One city hiring program, 1975, p. G4). She went on to explain that Title VI did not require participants to live in areas of the city hardest hit by unemployment, so projects were granted funds on the merit of the program’s contribution to the community as much as on their contribution to lowering unemployment. CETA was not without controversy. The City of Portland and other local governments used it extensively to supplement general funding operations. Commissioner Charles Jordan, who was in charge of the early days of CETA through the Bureau of Human Resources, referred to a National League of Cities survey that found that CETA funds were being used to keep employed those who were already employed and that elected officials were using the funds for patronage.

The CETA subsidized jobs in the Portland area was a small number. Between 1978—1980 the total number of CETA subsidized jobs in Portland was about 1300. The employment base for Portland in 1979 was 294,911 (Macgregor, 1981). The program's 1979 budget was \$7.2 million. By some measure CETA did not have a large impact on the job market in Portland. However, CETA did have a large impact on new organizations and programs. During this period 134 nonprofit organizations had subsidized CETA positions. Out of that total over 90 were organizations that had formed since the late 1960s. These 90 new organizations accounted for 230 of the 1000 positions in all the nonprofit organizations with CETA employees. For organizations with mostly volunteer staff or no more than 10 paid staff, the subsidy was significant. Keep in mind that during this time the base of private foundations was small. New nonprofits had very few places to turn for funding. In many cases the new CETA positions outnumbered the existing staff at the nonprofit organizations.

One of the most innovative CETA projects, and one that characterizes the failures and successes of the CETA era, was the Northwest Revitalization Project (NRP). The NRP was the result of a planning project undertaken by the Northwest District Association, one of Portland's most active neighborhood associations, and Friendly House. Today if one walks down the trendy streets of Northwest 23 rd or 21 st avenues or past block after block of remodeled Victorian homes, it is difficult to imagine Northwest Portland in need of revitalization. However, in the 1960s this area of town was known more for its enclaves of impoverished students and its share of the homeless and the elderly poor. By the late 1970s, 23rd Avenue had a few new shops, but it was for the most part a mix of older homes in need of repair and shops, such as drug stores, shoe repair shops, and greasy spoon restaurants. Quality Pie was a notorious institution—a place where students, young hippie activists, and derelicts could hang out together in the wee hours. On the edges of northwest Portland, especially in the north, smaller homes and rundown apartment buildings looked destined to be razed.

In 1978 the Northwest District Association (NWDA) developed a Social Action Plan, a multilevel plan addressing the physical and social needs of the neighborhood. NWDA, working with Friendly House, a social service agency dating back to the settlement house movement of the 1930s, decided to implement its social action plan through a grant application to the City of Portland's CETA special projects program. The successful grant application funded 31 positions, with a total budget for one year of \$371,00. This budget far exceeded the budget of NWDA budget which at the time had one staff member, and was 1.5 times the budget of Friendly House which served as the project's fiscal agent. The objectives of the program were wide ranging, from physical

revitalization projects such as developing a bike path to developing a framework for a neighborhood development corporation, to development of a library on neighborhood self-help topics (community self-help was a federal program buzz word under the Carter Administration). The job titles also provide a sense of the scope of the project. These included graphic artist, data specialist, revitalization worker, and community developer, community involvement specialist--not exactly typical of job titles found in dictionaries of occupational titles at the time.

Where the project started with good intentions and an action plan as the driving force, was a long ways from where it finished. There were many obstacles to success, starting from the fact that the project hired 31 people in a 2 week period in order to meet the federal grant timeline. As one of two project coordinators, Christine Bauman, (Bauman, 1979) reflected,

The project was an experiment in human dynamics. We were not one or two workers in the middle of a staff of "regulars" able to fit into the continuous functioning of an agency. We were a group of approximately 30 people, housed under one roof, starting on the same day and all experiencing various individual crisis stages at approximately the same time. In addition we were also becoming an entity unto ourselves, a group, an unintentional family, experiencing the developmental stages and growth pains that any group must go through (p. 8).

As Bauman also noted, many of the new CETA employees were social activists with a strong passion for social change. At the beginning of the project, new staff were asked to reflect on how they felt coming into this new enterprise. Several of their comments are reflective of the times. One noted that "some of us were already familiar with what a CETA job entailed. Because we had friends or relatives who have had CETA jobs. I had both." Another reflected on their first day on the job, an orientation.

The day is eaten away with introductions and explanations. There are a lot of coffee breaks in between. I suppose the important looking people felt we needed time for the information to soak in. From what I could tell were going to be moving mountains, righting wrongs, and creating justice and harmony throughout. We were here to do good things.

During that year, David Dumas secured land for community gardens. A neighborhood credit union was started by Andrea Vargo, Marcia Ruff, and a neighborhood-based board of directors. Organizers sponsored cleanups, garage sales, festivals, and a bicycle rodeo. Rory Taylor ran a tool lending library and skills exchange. Other staff helped Portland Sun build a solar greenhouse and researched the feasibility of roof-top gardens on several neighborhood buildings.

A lot was accomplished during the project although probably the participants changed as much as the shape of the neighborhood. One person, at the end of the project, reflected in poetic verse what had happened to her (anonymous, 1979):

From Spring to Spring I have seen the changes in the projects like the blossoming of flowers in sunshine.

And if I could, I would build a world of sunlight where those flowers of change always grow.

Now I stand like a child before you.

I am holding out my heart for you to see.

And like the refraction. Of a single sunray through a prism.

I've come away changed.

As with many emergent civic enterprises during this period, social change took place out in the community, within the organization, and inside the participants. In a final assessment of the project, Bauman (Bauman, 1979) reflected on this process by saying

The difficulties of beginning an unintentional community are immense...We weren't all there for a common purpose. Some wanted a job for the money, some were into neighborhood development, some were interested in developing particular career skills. We came from different backgrounds and value systems including academic, social service, skilled and unskilled labor forces, promote making enterprises, communes, etc. We also had different expectations of what the work environment should be: authoritarian vs. democratic management hierarchy vs. group consensus, sharing feelings vs. keeping one's personal life separate, becoming personally committed to the task vs. working 8-5 and that's it. (p. 11)