

An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely New York City, with a teal color overlay. The image shows a dense cluster of skyscrapers and buildings, with a river visible in the background. The text is overlaid on the image in white boxes.

# Neighborhood Power

How some neighborhoods beat the odds

2018-2019  
Reading and Research  
Phil Berkaw, MPP '19

## Personal

### **“How will I create community after HKS?”**

What will my ‘public self’ be?” I have thought about these questions a lot while at HKS and in my previous life as a teacher in New Orleans. I wanted to explore how civically engaged people balance their “community life” with their professional life.

## Academic

Research on the self-organizing potential of neighborhoods is limited. **Much of the current research is focused on “community engagement”** rather than the ability of individual communities to effect real and lasting change.

## Public

**By highlighting and codifying the guiding principles of well-organized neighborhoods**, I hope to provide current and aspiring leaders with the tools they need to accelerate positive social change.

**Neighborhoods, especially poorer ones, rarely have a voice in the economic and political processes that impact the lives of their residents.**

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- **However**, a handful of less-advantaged community organizations have seemingly gained influence and decision-making power in these processes.
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- **Neigh·bor·hood** |n|  
A geographically proximate constituency exposed to similar public policy and with similar resource limitations.
- **Or·ga·nizing** |verb|  
To cultivate activism by transforming people's beliefs about themselves, their groups, and their work.  
To engage people in interdependent work, provide them with strategic autonomy, and sequence their work within larger campaigns.





**How do some neighborhoods, against the odds, organize themselves to achieve small, but measurable improvements in the daily lives of residents?**

How do these neighborhood organizations gain economic and political influence?  
How do they maintain momentum and sustain their results?  
What lessons can be applied to other neighborhoods?

**Three neighborhood organizations** (unit of analysis) were selected to investigate these questions



**Neighborhood**



**Organization**



**Primary Contact**

**Case Studies**

East Boston



Roxbury



Grove Hall



Centro Presente



St. Stephen's Youth Programs



Project R.I.G.H.T. Inc.



Patricia Montes, Exec. Dir.



Ariel Branz, Sr. Organizer



Michael Kuzo, Co-Director



**Research Question and Case Study Design**

What the org. does

Neighborhood-  
based

Track record of  
success

Non-profit

Mobilizes n'hood  
residents



Centro Presente

Addresses legal needs of Boston's Central American immigrant community and organizes to strengthen their protection.



St. Stephens

Provides after-school services to neighborhood kids and organizes their parents around local education issues.



Project R.I.G.H.T.

Creates regular forums for resident input and organizes around local neighborhood issues, from zoning to education



Case Study Selection Criteria

# A literature review was undertaken to better understand 1) organizing theory & movements 2) social innovation and 3) political sociology

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Clavel, Pierre. *Activists in City Hall: The Progressive Response to the Reagan Era in Boston and Chicago*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.

Marwell, Nicole P. *Bargaining for Brooklyn*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Pacewicz, Josh. *Partisans and Partners: The Politics of the Post-Keynesian Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

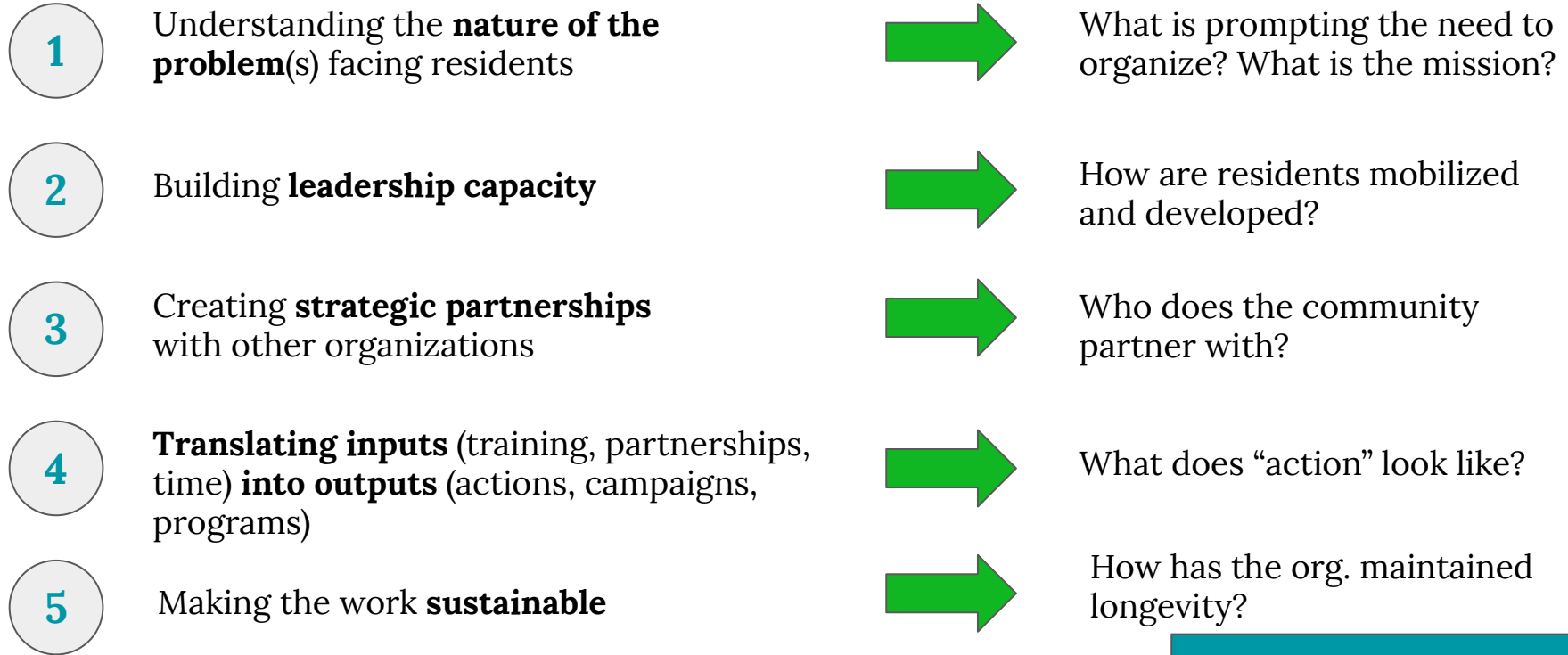
“The Leftmost City : Power and Progressive Politics in Santa Cruz - Harvard University.” Accessed October 11, 2018.

Andrews, Kenneth T., Marshall Ganz, Matthew Baggetta, Hahrie Han, and Chaeyoon Lim. “Leadership, Membership, and Voice: Civic Associations That Work.” *American Journal of Sociology* 115, no. 4 (2010): 1191–1242.

Ganz, Marshall. *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Han, Hahrie. *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

## Each organization possesses a theory of change that relies on at least **5** distinct activities



	Description	Indicators
<b>Training</b>	Developing leaders from within the community	Systems for ID'ing potential leaders, leadership development training
<b>Partnerships</b>	Cultivating relationships with other organizations	Communication between organizations, multiple organizations “show up/show out” at events
<b>Collective Action</b>	Executing campaigns that increase economic and/or political influence	Strategic planning with stakeholders, observable action that evokes a response from the system
<b>Sustainability</b>	Fighting for today while planning for the future	Evidence of long-term planning, attempts to make gains permanent



# Each interview began with five questions

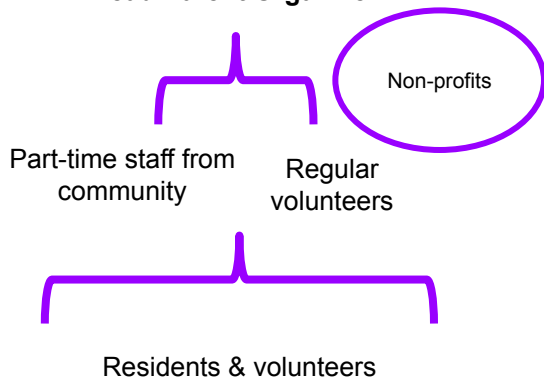
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## Interview Protocol

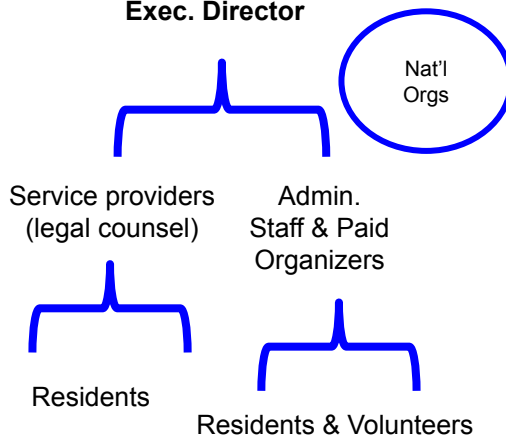
1. Can you start by telling me about the mission of your organization?
2. How has the organization defined success?
3. What does the organization look like when it's at its best?
4. When the organization is struggling, what is it usually due to?
5. What has the organization learned about its work? About what works and what doesn't?



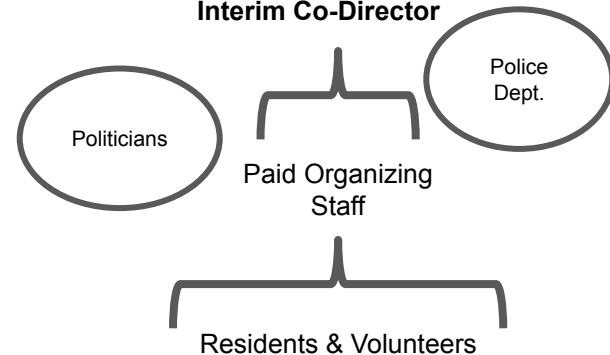
Ariel Branz  
**Lead Parent Organizer**



Patricia Montes  
**Exec. Director**



Michael Kuzo  
**Interim Co-Director**



Problem and Mission	SSYP combines after-school service provision with community organizing to address the underlying causes of institutional racism and inequality, particularly in the education system.
Training	Parent leaders are identified through a combination of serendipity and intentional outreach. Candidates in this pipeline are given opportunities to both lead and reflect on their leadership.
Partnerships	SSYP relies on a significant number of local non-profits to show up at their events, and SSYP shows up at theirs in return. Co-planning with these organizations occurs on a regular basis.
Collective Action	The organization adapts its tactics to the situation. They organize letter-writing campaigns, rallies, marches, sit-ins, and other “mass actions” to draw attention to the problems facing residents.
Sustainability	SSYP is concerned about burn-out. Representatives acknowledge that this work can be more emotionally draining than other kinds of work. They focus on creating supportive relationships with other orgs.






Problem and Mission	East Boston has a significant population of Central American immigrants whose citizenship status puts them at risk of abuse and/or deportation. Their mission to organize this community so they can better advocate for themselves and achieve policy changes.
Training	Centro Presente uses language and leadership development courses as a tool for identifying potential leaders. These leaders often start as volunteer tutors and then transition into organizing.
Partnerships	Because the issues that Centro Presente organizes around, many of the partners it works with are national in scope. For example, they are part of the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities.
Collective Action	The education and leadership development initiatives Centro Presente runs are leveraged when their members are called on to participate in and lead campaigns. These campaigns often culminate in a “mass action”.
Sustainability	Whereas other orgs focus on short-term, dynamic problems, Centro Presente focuses much of its efforts on long-term policy change. It more easily sustains itself by maintaining this perspective.



Problem and Mission	Project R.I.G.H.T. Inc. (PRI) addresses the unequal levels of service that its residents receive from the City of Boston relative to wealthier neighborhoods. It leverages the political influence it has garnered in order to make the voices of its residents heard.
Training	Many of PRI's organizers began as participants in its youth programs. These young adults are supported by PRI, then are given opportunities to volunteer and eventually to take on leadership roles.
Partnerships	Many of PRI's organizers began as participants in its youth programs. These young adults are supported by PRI, then are given opportunities to volunteer and eventually to take on leadership roles.
Collective Action	PRI has significant convening power. It spends a lot of time getting the "right people in the room," including politicians, developers, and law enforcement. Much of their action takes the form of "testifying."
Sustainability	Leaders within PRI acknowledge that "mass actions" are not sustainable. They say their long-term success has hinged on their ability to convene others and to influence the political system.






	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>19 full-time staff</li> <li>Overhead</li> <li>Curricular materials for youth programs</li> <li>Volunteer hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership development courses for adults</li> <li>After-school services for youth</li> <li>Parent engagement (phone calls, home visits, etc.)</li> <li>Strategic planning meetings w/ members and other orgs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resident/parent leadership of organizing activities</li> <li>Youth involvement in after-school programs</li> <li>"Mass actions" and other campaigns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political pressure applied to local leaders</li> <li>Changes in budget policy, more support for high-needs students.</li> <li>Residents empowered.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Neighborhoods use their organizing capacity to achieve a degree of political influence and power in order improve the daily lives of residents.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>? full-time staff</li> <li>Overhead</li> <li>Volunteer hours</li> <li>Fees for legal counsel</li> <li>English and leadership development curriculum.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership development and literacy courses</li> <li>Home visits</li> <li>Strategic planning meetings with members</li> <li>Participation in "umbrella group"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legal services provided to new immigrants</li> <li>New immigrants become civically engaged</li> <li>Politicians and general public learn more about immigrant communities.</li> <li>Campaigns, "mass act"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political pressure applied on regional/national leaders</li> <li>Legislation favorable to migrants passed</li> <li>Residents empowered.</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10 full-time staff</li> <li>Overhead</li> <li>Volunteer hours</li> <li>Space at Grove Hall Community Center</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>After-school programs for at-risk youth</li> <li>Monthly community meetings</li> <li>Regular meetings with policy makers</li> <li>Community outreach (door-knocking)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resident input provided on wide range of issues</li> <li>Policy makers and civil servants engage with residents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships strengthened between local leaders and residents</li> <li>Improved services in Grove Hall neighborhood</li> <li>Stronger sense of community.</li> </ul>	

## Logic Model

## Building leadership capacity

- Each organization emphasized that ultimate decision-making power is derived from their members. **They knew they had failed when members didn't show up to meetings or actions.**
- Programming (leadership development courses, exercise classes, after-school care) is used to build relationships with and between potential neighborhood leaders. **As residents become more invested, they are given more and more responsibility.**

## Creating strategic partnerships

- **Boston has a high density of nonprofits, community-based organizations, and foundations.** The three organizations highlighted are highly effective at leveraging the cumulative knowledge, relationships, and humanpower of this extensive network.
  - **Partnerships were also used to sustain the organization.** Especially in the case of St. Stephens, partnerships with other organizations represented a strong emotional support network.
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## Translating inputs into action

- **"Actions", and their goals, were highly varied across organizations.** Some neighborhoods organized for national legislative change. Others for more regular trash collection. Still others for fairer-seeming funding for the local school.
- **Tactics depended on the age of the organization.** Project R.I.G.H.T. has deep connections with local leaders. It organizes fewer mass actions and relies more heavily on resident testimony, whereas St. Stephens relies more on mass action.

## Making the work sustainable

- **Experienced community leaders acknowledged the slow pace of change.** Decade-long campaigns are not uncommon in the Boston organizing space.
- **Organizations transition tactics over time.** The older the average member of an organization becomes, the less likely they are to attend rallies or go door-knocking. Letter-writing campaigns or testimonials are more feasible.

What can be learned from these 3 organizations by neighborhood leaders in other cities?

Provide a benefit to residents other than community organizing to capture their interest and to build relationships

Start with small campaigns to identify potential leaders

Celebrate small wins in order to build momentum

Create a regular channel of communication between residents, policy makers, and civil servants.

Conclusion & Key Findings

As my research progressed, numerous questions arose regarding organizational change, political movements, and what it means to be a “neighborhood resident”

Is there a difference between *empowering* residents and *organizing* them?

How can organizations capture the enthusiasm of young organizers without burning them out?

What does it mean to truly participate in the life of your neighborhood? What should our expectations be for ourselves and others?

Conclusion & Key Findings

Over the course of the last 8 months, I have built relationships with and interviewed 10+ community organizers in the Boston area representing 5 distinct neighborhoods. It has simultaneously been one of the most rewarding and challenging academic endeavours of my life.

- Constructing video essays, much like organizing, takes tremendous patience and perseverance. Inspiration comes in fits and starts. It's easy to lose focus or to lose faith that the story you are trying to tell is worthwhile. **I learned the power of “holding steady.”** Just because I hit a roadblock doesn't mean that I need to change course.
- **I learned to negotiate trust with my partner organizations.** I had to demonstrate that I didn't want to merely “use” them, both through my words and through my actions. Sometimes this meant sending them an exciting clip of a rally I had recorded, or following up to let them know how well an interview went with a resident they introduced me to. **I also had to learn how to walk away when my interests and theirs didn't align.**
- **Creating a video essay is an excellent way to identify deeper meaning in the words of your interview subjects.** Listening to my subjects back-to-back helped me identify patterns in the characteristics of their organizations. I was surprised at how easy it was to construct a narrative from their testimony.



# Appendix

In the video companion to this research deck, I propose a framework for empowering neighborhood residents.

## **GET THEM IN THE DOOR**

- Some residents join for the mission, but many join to take advantage of a service.
- St. Stephens offers after-school youth programs; Centro Presente provides legal services and professional development.

## **REFLECT!**

- Reflect with new leaders on their practice and begin to codify what works and what doesn't.

## **LET THEM LEAD**

- Provide residents with opportunities to lead in big ways and small.
- Project R.I.G.H.T. and Centro Presente use their youth programs and language classes, respectively, as an opportunity for residents to take on volunteer leadership roles.

## **BUILD TRUST**

- Provide time for residents to build relationships with each other and the organization.