NAOMI ISHISAKA

Giving Project facilitators discuss best practices at our gathering in Seattle.

Growing Donor Organizers Through Giving Projects: Four Years Later

By Zeke Spier and Allison Johnson Heist

"Everyone needs community (Common Unity). The Giving Project Learning Community provides Headwaters Foundation for Justice a place of learning, leadership and an environment of transformation. We are stronger together."

~David Nicholson, Headwaters Foundation

IN AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN THIS JOURNAL four years ago, we shared our excitement about a new model of fundraising and grantmaking we call "Giving Projects." Created by Social Justice Fund Northwest (SJF) in Seattle, Giving Projects engage about 20 people in a deep process of community building, learning, developing analysis, and action. Participants give, engage in grassroots fundraising, and use a consensus-based process to fund grassroots, social justice organizations. So far, this model has raised more than $5 million from 8,000 people.

When the article was published in 2014, Giving Projects had already transformed SJF. Since then, the model has continued to fuel growth and sustainability within the organization. Even more exciting, five other aligned funds across the country have now launched their own Giving Projects. Through this process of replication, we've learned a lot about the model, about replicating models in different organizations, and about what it takes to build a successful national collaboration—all of which we touch on in this article.

Working together as six organizations has dramatically expanded our capacity to learn about what exactly makes a project successful. This is part of why we decided to call our collaboration a "Learning Community" rather than a partnership, alliance, com-

mittee, etc. Allison, one of the coauthors of this article, was able to do some focused research on a question key to the success of Giving Projects, as well as to the success of all grassroots fundraising efforts: how to best engage and support donors of color. We will be sharing the results of that research here as well.

The Model

Building a shared definition of a Giving Project was important early in our collaboration to clarify what level of alignment was necessary to join the Learning Community, differentiating ourselves from the many organizations that run giving circles or other collective giving processes. We were clear that this definition helped us focus in on a particular strategy, not to make a claim about what strategies are best in general or politically valuable. We wanted to err on the side of being focused rather than inclusive, with clear internal and external messaging that many strategies beyond ours are exciting and useful as well.

We developed these seven necessary components of what constitutes a Giving Project:

1. Each participant makes a personally meaningful financial contribution, with no set minimum amount.
2. The group is cross-class and cross-race (with an openness to explore people of color-only projects).
3. Each participant fundraises using a grassroots fundraising/ donor organizing framework.
4. A social justice and movement building analysis is at the core of the process and grantmaking.
5. The process contains a strong political education component, including a workshop on race and class.
6. Money raised is distributed through a democratic grantmaking process.
7. A value and practice of community building is held throughout the project.

The Collaboration

As the Giving Project model took off at SJF, people started reaching out to learn more. Some of these calls came from aligned organizations attracted to the core values of Giving Projects, and some came from those simply looking for strategies to raise more money. Two things quickly became clear: SJF was only interested in replicating the model with organizations that were fully invested in the work (both a shared social justice analysis and willingness to put in significant organizational resources), and that if SJF was going to be working with peer organizations, they wanted to do so as partners. This meant that to the extent that the Giving Project model is "owned," it would be owned collectively by the collaboration.

The current Giving Project Learning Community emerged organically from organizations that were willing to invest in the model, and is now made up of six partners: Social Justice Fund Northwest, Chinook Fund (Denver), Crossroads Fund (Chicago), Headwaters Foundation for Justice (Minneapolis), North Star Fund (New York), and Bread and Roses Community Foundation (Philadelphia). As part of an onboarding process, each new organization paid for some direct consulting support to get up to speed, but we now see ourselves as equal partners in the work.

The collaboration is staffed by Zeke, the other coauthor of this article. He stepped out of his role as executive director of SJF to do this work. Initially, this was entirely funded by the members

> **THE MODEL HAS HELPED MANY OF US DEEPEN INTERNAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE AND CLASS, AS WELL AS HELP ENGAGE A YOUNGER GENERATION OF LEADERS IN OUR WORK.**

of the Learning Community, but last year we were able to receive dedicated grant funding to underwrite and expand collaboration activities.

We have now had four annual in-person convenings as well as regular remote discussions and presentations. We have built direct relationships among staff, allowing them to reach out to each other for support across geography. We're starting to see how different organizational strengths are manifesting in the model, and the amount we're able to learn from one another continues to increase.

As of today, all of the partners have launched their own Giving Projects to widely shared success. Outside of SJF, partners have raised more than $1 million through this model from over 1,500 people in the last few years, in addition to the $4 million that SJF has raised through Giving Projects. The model has helped many of us deepen internal conversations about race and class, as well as help engage a younger generation of leaders in our work. The collaboration itself continues to go smoothly, with high investment from each partner. It's an affirming, warm space that inspires and supports each partner in doing their best work.

On a recent call, we reflected on the value of the Learning Community to our work. Some key components that we appreciate are:

- Having direct access to peers at every level of our organiza-

tions. We've built relationships ED to ED, program staff to program staff, and admin to admin.

- Lots of shared materials without having them be too prescriptive. Lots of flexibility to implement in our own way and learn from these experiments.
- Shared evaluation materials. We worked with external consultants to align all of our evaluation processes, saving each of us a lot of time and allowing ourselves to speak to our collective impact.

FOR MANY PEOPLE OF COLOR INTERVIEWED FOR THIS PROJECT, THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME THEY HAD BEEN ASKED TO GIVE A MONETARY DONATION TO ANY ORGANIZATION.

- Increased shared visibility from coordinated outreach and our shared website (givingprojects.org)
- Spirit of sharing—materials, mistakes, our time and energy.
- Strong and regularly articulated commitment to shared values around justice and equity.
- Ability to stay current to the movement and trends in philanthropy through our collective relationships.
- Flexibility, humility and willingness to learn from one another.

Engaging Donors of Color

Doing cross-class/cross-race organizing brings up so many challenges and issues, each of which deserves space for reflection. The collaboration has allowed us to examine some of these questions more deeply. Allison had the opportunity to engage in a yearlong process, interviewing 43 past participants across five organizations, about engaging donors of color.

The Giving Project engages people of color as fundraisers and donors in profound ways not seen in the broader philanthropic sector. Why has this model been so successful to date in capturing the attention, passion and resources of people of color? What are we doing right, and what might the rest of the field be able to glean from our experience? And because the Giving Project is explicit in naming and addressing dynamics around race and class, how might that impact donors of color and their giving?

To pursue these questions, I applied for and received a research grant from the Global Fund for Community Foundations. With the dual roles of researcher and program manager of the Giving Project, I knew my proximity to the core questions and my experiences as a facilitator of transformative projects would position me well to meet and interview other Giving Project participants across the country. I wanted to hear firsthand from participants from all walks of life who had a shared experience of this transformative program and who had made an incredible investment of their time, money and social capital into raising dollars for social justice work in their region.

Because of the way the model has been replicated with a uniform curriculum, ongoing conversation between foundations and a spirit of openness and transparency, I was easily able to access past participants of Giving Projects for interviews with the support of my national colleagues. My research was also an added benefit to busy program staff who shared my interest in the questions at hand but didn't have time or resources to dig in with past participants on how they now saw themselves as givers and fundraisers.

Three themes emerged from these interviews with Giving Project donors who identify as people of color:

- They are deeply affected by the curriculum around race, class and money.
- They aren't comfortable using the term "philanthropist" to describe their role in the community.
- They are an underutilized resource when it comes to raising money for social movements.

Discussing Race, Class & Money

The way in which the Giving Project curriculum addresses race, racism and white supremacy in all their forms is unique and sets the stage for participants of color to bring their whole selves to the process. Having conversations about race and class with other people of color was crucial to developing a shared social justice vision across racial and ethnic lines. Many participants reported they had never been in spaces where race was discussed exclusively among people of color as it is during the caucus sessions of the Giving Project. For example, one of the questions posed to the people of color caucus is, "How might internalized racial inferiority show up in your fundraising and grantmaking?" The personal development that takes place in discussions about the intersection of race and class was cited as an important part of the Giving Project experience. Most participants identified the content and conversations around class as being unexplored territory, and connecting their race and their class to their social identity was new work. Each Giving Project provides space and coaching for participants to explore their feelings about making a personal financial gift and asking people in their social networks for money. It's in exactly these places of exploration and tension

that important conversations within the group led to successful fundraising conversations with their donors.

Donor Organizers Not Philanthropists

It also became clear that people of color in Giving Projects see themselves as givers, but not as philanthropists. Of the 43 people interviewed for this project, most did not self-identify with the term "philanthropist" after participating in a Giving Project, even though all reported making a financial contribution that was sig-

> THE [GIVING PROJECT] PROCESS NOT ONLY SUPPORTS SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK, IT *IS* SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK.

nificant to them. Rather than using the term "philanthropist," they preferred a broader one with less baggage that encompasses both giving and taking action. Many gravitated toward the alternative term of "donor organizer," which has emerged among Giving Project vernacular to describe how participants act as financial resource-gatherers for social justice. In this way, people of color described what could be key to revitalizing traditional philanthropy—a commitment to both giving and acting on one's values in community. Several interviewees talked about a radical reinterpretation of what that word means and held a desire to transform the meaning behind the term.

An Underutilized Resource

Finally, it became clear that people of color aren't being asked enough. In a Giving Project, all participants donate from their own pockets in addition to fundraising from their networks. When participants are asked to consider a meaningful gift to the project, it often results in the largest gift they have ever given. Factors that lead to this significant contribution include being inspired to give to multiple organizations at once and seeing the value and privilege of gaining in-depth knowledge of community work through the grantmaking process. What is most striking is that for many people of color interviewed for this project, this was the first time they had been asked to give a monetary donation to any organization.

"There is work to be done on how we define centering folks of color within philanthropy, because it's less about getting folks of

color to fit into the model philanthropy, than getting philanthropy to fit into the model of how folks of color are already doing community giving." -Social Justice Fund participant

Lessons Learned

We want to emphasize some of the lessons we think are applicable beyond our network, starting with how to effectively engage donors of color. There is no magic formula to engaging and retaining a multiracial pool of donors to your work. Dealing with racism is complicated and requires deep and ongoing work, in society at large as well as in the nonprofit sector. That said, here are some things to consider as your organization begins to walk alongside donors of color:

Fundraising with donors of color should be a two-way street. Organizations need to ask themselves what they will offer to donors of color in addition to what they hope to gain from engaging them. Think about ways to incorporate an analysis around class and classism in addition to race, racism and white supremacy in your programming and communications. What will you add to communities, as opposed to extract?

To begin engaging donors of color in your work, follow the lead of those most directly involved in how giving and philanthropy works in communities of color. Listen to the cultural nuances that come up when discussing giving among and between communities. For example, you may learn that making financial donations to a dominant-culture institution may be outside of cultural norms, regardless of financial privilege.

New language will need to emerge in order to be inclusive and reflective of more communities involved in the work. For example, embracing language such as "meaningful gift" encourages all to be thoughtful and recognizes that all people are making an important contribution to an overall goal. Learn to be okay with donors defining the work in their own words, which will build ownership and trust among donors and the institution.

We know that there are many different kinds of collaboration, requiring different forms of engagement. That said, we believe these lessons will be useful to anyone considering creating a learning community or replicating a program.

- Limit the scope of the collaboration to the specific activity that everyone has in common. We can learn from one another beyond that, but keeping the core content focused on a subset of our work creates efficiency and clarity.
- To build strong organizational partnerships, make sure that relationships are built at multiple levels. This means finding ways for executive staff, program staff, fundraising staff, and admin staff to participate in collaborative activities. It is the informal relationship building more than formal or-

ganizational commitment that results in trust and mutual investment.

- There is no substitute for in-person connection. Both our national convening and ongoing peer visits have been the backbone of our collaboration.
- As much as possible, create a level playing-field for each participating organization. For us, this meant that every organization made an equitable financial contribution to the collaboration, and that we've worked to ensure that each of us comes to the work as both a teacher and learner. Social Justice Fund began as a convener and leader, but has stepped back into a peer role.

When we lead Giving Projects, we share with our participants that the process not only supports social justice work, it *is* social justice work. This means we hold ourselves to strong political values, while staying action-focused and pragmatic. This balance is sometimes difficult to achieve, but the Giving Project content ensures that we are focused on both sides. We've kept this mindset for our collaboration as a whole, and are thrilled with how it's going so far. We're proud of the thousands of donors we've engaged, as well as the more than $4 million that has been granted out to community-led social justice organizing.

We're optimistic about the future, even as we are coming to terms with what the current political moment means for us. We are seeing greater need than ever among grassroots organizations, but also seeing increased interest from regular people who want to get involved with social justice work for the first time. Our collaboration is helping us rise to this challenge, as we strengthen our work and look towards further replication of the Giving Project model in new areas. We know we have a lot more to learn, and look forward to continuing to share our lessons. ∎

Zeke Spier is the former executive director of Social Justice Fund Northwest and is working on a consulting project to expand the Giving Project model nationwide. Allison Johnson Heist is senior program officer for learning and leadership at Headwaters Foundation for Justice based in Minneapolis.