DEMOCRATIZING CLEVELAND
CHAPTER 4: BUILDING THE GROUPS

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Chapter 4

Building the Groups

Within five years of Buckeye Woodland Community Congress's (BWCC) founding, community organizations had formed throughout Cleveland. One important factor behind this phenomenal growth was the friendship and alliance between Harry Fagan, and Henry "Hank" Doll, program officer of the George Gund Foundation.

Doll was a Presbyterian minister who worked in a wide range of positions in Cleveland at the Cleveland Foundation, in the administration of Mayor Carl Stokes, and for the Greater Cleveland Interchurch Council. His specialty was working both sides of the street: for foundations and for the non-profit organizations. He was interested in pursuing the community organizing ideas of Saul Alinsky that he had been introduced to at the University of Pittsburgh.

He found the opportunity to put those ideas into action when he was hired by the Gund Foundation and began his association with Fagan. As Doll recalled, they had a meeting of the minds about the about the possible uses of organizing:

I think both Harry and I agreed that there was a need for community organizing prior to doing development work. You had to have the neighborhood people coalesce around issues and ideas; therefore, you had to have community organizing activities going on.

The primary vehicle of the Catholic Commission's work in the neighborhoods was the Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) program funded by the Gund Foundation. The program began in 1978 and provided consultants, trainers, and outside experts to help the neighborhood movement grow and develop.

The agenda for the first year of the T & TA program was building the groups through individual consultations among trainers, leaders, and organizers in city-wide...
training sessions. Much of the work was dedicated to building block clubs, recruiting members, running meetings, and developing issues.

One of the most important trainers in Cleveland was Karen Nielson, who began to work at the commission when she and Joe Mariano left BWCC in 1978. Working with consultants such as Shel Trapp, Nielson trained a generation of organizers who had had little to no exposure to the organizing experiences of the 1960s. Bob Pollack of Near West Neighbors called his generation “the little brothers and sisters of the New Left” who had missed out on all the action. It was the trainer’s job to launch these novices into a very tough field. Linda Hudecek described her baptism by fire, presided over by Nielson:

I can remember a blizzard, and she dropped me off on the street and said, ‘I’ll pick you up in an hour and you’d better have ten names.’ I was door knocking during the middle of a blizzard and she was just really very focused about the steps and stages you go through to do block clubs. Karen was very committed to block club organizing. She was very, very good at teaching me how to go through those steps and holding my hand through each phase.  

Nielson’s memory of dumping Linda on the street was a little different:

They came in and said ‘We’re not dressed.’ I said, ‘Good God, you’re all supposed to have long underwear, rubber boots, and mittens and I am not your mother!’ There was no excuse. You were supposed to be out there. We were ruthless.

One concern expressed by the trainers was the culture of organizing in Cleveland and whether the staff and leadership of the groups really knew what the movement was all about. In order to meet this challenge, the T&TA program sponsored a weekend retreat at Punderson State Park. The workshop was led by an experienced organizer, Tom Gaudette, who had been trained by Alinsky. It was not only a training session; it was a process of group bonding.

The groups were growing with twelve separate groups reported in the 1979 T & TA proposal. They hosted a meeting of the National Commission on Neighborhoods and the first of several citywide neighborhoods conferences.

**The Community Organizations of Cleveland**

The best way to get an accurate picture of the process of organizing in Cleveland is to look at the history and development of some of the most important groups of the time.
The St. Clair Superior Coalition

One of the commission's first successes in organizing after BWCC was the St. Clair Superior Coalition (SCSC). The coalition began in January 1976, when four of its future leaders attended a seminar on housing issues and community organizing at Cleveland State University. At the same seminar was Tom Gannon, recently from BWCC. Taking note of what other neighborhoods, particularly Buckeye, were doing, these leaders decided that the way to go to address their neighborhood's problems was to organize a group, as well.

The spring of 1976 was a period of building. The organizers of St. Clair met with representatives of BWCC. They had much in common, with both groups working in racially conflicted neighborhoods on such issues as housing and crime.

A name was chosen, the St. Clair-Superior Coalition (SCSC), boundaries were established, and work began to bring in members and to form block clubs. The infant organization decided on its top three priorities: housing, youth, and crime. Gannon was assigned by the commission to work with the coalition.

Sr. Clair's application to the Campaign for Human Development was approved. A $3,000 grant enabled SCSC to hire its first organizer. The summer saw victories with improved police services, the demolition of several problem properties, and the founding of more block clubs.

One of the basics of community organizing as promoted by National People's Action (NPA) and practiced in Cleveland was a heavy emphasis on block club organizing. Bill Gruber, one of the early organizers of SCSC, described the dynamics of "door knocking" and the hard work of building block clubs:

We were taught to knock on doors and say, 'Let's get together with neighbors.' Some people would slam the door in our faces and some people would have us in for lunch. I'd go out on the street and think, 'Look at the horrible house at the end of the street. It must be a big problem.' Then you'd talk to people and they would say, 'The sidewalks are bad and the fire hydrants are broken.' When you'd ask about the house down the street, they would say, 'Yeah, that is a problem, but the fire hydrant in front of my house...'

Gruber added:

You had to start out with what was the most immediate concern. Our second job was to nurture leadership. We didn't create leaders. All we would ever do is give people the opportunity to become the leader that was inside them all along.
An example of this work can be seen in the individual block club reports compiled in a three year report written by Gruber.

Ida, Crumb, Maud (Avenues): In August, 1977, thirty five people met with city safety officials about the problem with youth curfew violations. In October 1977, fifty people met with Community Development Dept. representatives to hear a description of the city’s 3% Loan Program.

Addison, Hecker, Schaeffer, East 71st: In 1977, this club was able to get a vacant house demolished, improved youth curfew enforcement, and a four-family house repaired. During the winter of 1977-78, the residents picketed a slum landlord’s church in the suburbs after repeated attempts to gain his cooperation failed. This action jarred him into serious consideration of action on the group’s demands.

As with so many other organizations in Cleveland, St. Clair’s most important issue was housing. It joined BWCC in fighting FHA over its foreclosure policies and its 518 (b) program that reimbursed home buyers for repairing defects in their houses that should have been caught by FHA inspectors.

The neighborhood not only faced problems with FHA and VA policies, but also with city policies dealing with open, vacant, and vandalized houses. SCSC did a survey of the neighborhood and found 141 vacant houses, many of which had been boarded up in a slipshod manner by the city.

Because the time was around Easter, St. Clair decided on a hit appropriate to the season. They arrived at the offices of the Community Development Department on Rockwell Ave. with a float featuring an Easter bunny and 141 Easter eggs, one for every vacant house in the neighborhood.

St. Clair’s frustration with housing problems propelled it, along with groups such as Near West Neighbors in Action (NWNIA) and Citizens to Bring Broadway Back (CBBB), into leading the drive to create a housing court for Cleveland. Housing cases up to that time were handled on a rotating docket divided among the municipal court judges. Judges had no opportunity to develop an expertise on housing issues or to follow particular cases through the judicial process.

Kathy Jaksic, an activist and leader of St. Clair, described the campaign as one of educating and persuading the public and politicians that Cleveland needed a housing court. It was after the enabling legislation passed the state legislature that the campaign ran into its greatest opposition: from a municipal court that resented this invasion of its traditional jurisdiction.

St. Clair was one of the few groups to see real material benefit from the insurance redline fight. Like bank redlining, insurance redlining denied insurance to
selected neighborhoods. Residents of neighborhoods denied insurance could not get mortgage financing or even auto insurance without paying exorbitant rates. Ending insurance redlining was a campaign that was otherwise considered a wash by other groups.

Through its research, St. Clair focused on one prime culprit, the Aetna Insurance Company, and targeted the company’s insurance underwriting practices as part of a national campaign led by National People’s Action (NPA). The campaign boxed Aetna in with enough damning evidence to finally compel a national agreement, establishing an Aetna-financed national fund for housing rehab to be shared by six cities, with Cleveland and, specifically, the St. Clair neighborhood as target areas. The financing provided by the Aetna settlement, resulted in formation of a non-profit housing corporation, COHAB.

COHAB’s first house became an infamous albatross around COHAB’s neck, and a harsh initial lesson in the hazards of the field, with problems with contractors and finding suitable homebuyers for the rehabbed house. However, it was successfully sold, and proved a valuable learning experience, in spite of all the tribulations it brought to the group.

Across town another organization was being started by two veterans of SCSC, Tom Gannon and Linda Hudecek. That organization was Citizens to Bring Broadway Back.

Citizens to Bring Broadway Back

Citizens to Bring Broadway Back (CBBB) started in the spring of 1977 when Joanne Roberts had her home insurance canceled because of inadequate water lines and fire protection in her neighborhood. Joanne had noticed the organizing going on in the Buckeye-Woodland neighborhood, and, with her sisters, began to contact friends and neighbors. In May 1977, they held an informal community meeting at the Boys’ Club and drew a crowd of about 100 people. They turned to the Catholic Commission for assistance.

The assistance came in the form of Tom Gannon and organizer trainee Linda Hudecek, who met with Joanne Roberts and other leaders around Roberts’s kitchen table. Gannon and Hudecek found a nucleus of residents who were passionate about saving their neighborhood and who had the time and energy to devote to the task.

What followed was a step-by-step lesson in how to establish a community organization. Hudecek and Gannon advised the group that it had to have an office and a paid staff to organize block clubs and its first convention. Hudecek was hired as a part-time organizer for what began as the Committee to Bring Broadway Back. Organizational help came not only from commission organizers, but also from veterans of an effort at organizing fifteen years earlier called The North Broadway Community Group, who formed an advisory group for the new committee and gave the group credibility in the neighborhood.

During the summer and fall of 1977, the group developed issues, started block
clubs, won initial victories, held a neighborhood clean-up, and developed leadership. In February 1978, the group was incorporated, and in June, it received its 501(c) 3 status as a non-profit organization and a grant from the Gund Foundation. In July, it changed its name to Citizens to Bring Broadway Back to shed its ad hoc committee status. With funding secured and the organization legally established, CBBB held its first convention on October 14, 1978.

A number of issues shaped Citizens to Bring Broadway Back. One of the more unique issues was the Olympia Theatre.

The Olympia Theatre was a quality-of-life issue for the neighborhood. Residents remembered a time when their children could go to nearby stores or to the movies at the theatre without worrying about their safety. With the decline of the business district, there were fewer places than before for residents of any age to go to.

The final straw was when the Olympia Theatre on Broadway began to show adult films. For neighborhood residents, it was the final humiliation. Denise Gordeev, a leader of CBBB, spoke of the neighborhood’s reaction:

This was a beautiful neighborhood. We had the grocery, the bank, the bowling alley, everything you needed within walking distance. Whatever the problem, the show [the Olympia Theatre] wasn’t making enough money, and the show was closed. Then they opened up and put the porno in there. Of all things, a porno place in a neighborhood like ours! This is a religious area. It’s bad enough we do all this work, and we have this thrown in our faces.7

Adding insult to injury was the identity of the owner of the Olympia. Tom Olivio was considered one of the worst slumlords in the Broadway area, with almost 20 properties, none of which were up to code. The residents of Broadway were his victims twice over. First, he helped destroy the community through his real estate practices, then he assaulted the values of the neighborhood by bringing in an adult theater.

The issue caught many of Broadway’s staff and leadership unaware of the intensity of local feelings about the issue. Paul Buccino of University Settlement House was at first skeptical:

I went to a meeting where people felt degraded by this. When I went to join the picket line, I saw that, gee, they really cared about this issue. Then it became important. When you get people out there, it doesn’t matter what the issue is.8

Daily demonstrations began in March 1981 to shut down the Olympia. Customers not only had to run a gantlet in front of the theater, but CBBB activists took pictures of them as they entered. None of the cameras had film, but it was an effective means of harassment.
The demonstrations escalated and targeted Olivio's home in the affluent suburb of University Heights. Another action was to picket the headquarters of the Laborers' Union where Tom Olivio's son, Dominic, was a business agent. Olivio retaliated by filing suit against CBBB for more than $5 million for harassment. The Catholic Commission provided legal defense, and the suit was dismissed. Within a month, the Olympia Theatre went out of the adult film business. Olivio sold the building to a group of investors. With the help of CBBB and Broadway Area Housing Coalition (BAHC), it was redeveloped for apartments, offices, and commercial storefronts.

**Union Miles Community Coalition**

As Broadway was winning its first victories, groundwork was being laid for the founding of another of the major community organizations, the Union Miles Community Coalition (UMCC).

The roots of Union Miles were in two parent organizations, the Union Area Concerned Citizens and the Miles Area Congress, that merged after more than two years of working together.

Hugh Kidd, an early leader in local organizing, lived on Gibson Avenue and had started talking with his neighbors about common problems, such as low water pressure, stray dogs, and vacant houses. Then an organizer for one of the groups, Ken Esposito, came by hoping to organize a block club. Kidd described turning talk into action, and action into organization:

Ken Esposito started to visit. He was looking to do some organizing in the street, in the neighborhood. As we started to complain about these kinds of things, he said, 'Well, have you ever decided to come together as a street club and do something about it? It's very easy to get the city to come and snake out the storm sewers or clean the basements on the street.' We had never thought of that, but we came together and we did that, and it worked effectively.

Kidd and his neighbors recognized the need to band together with other street clubs:

As we started to talk about it, there seemed to be a need to have more than just a street club. That's how we started to talk about forming a group to work through a lot of the problems that seemed to not only be a problem for Gibson, but for Anderson, Bentham, East 103 Street, and a number of the streets in that area.

Esposito was surprised at the receptivity of the neighborhood. Residents were primed and ready to form block clubs and work on issues. Esposito gave several
reasons for this. First, the residents were working class and lower-middle-class African-Americans who had moved into the area after it had been block-busted in the previous decade.

It was not a poor neighborhood, and it did not present the monumental difficulties that occur in organizing the poor. These people were homeowners, expecting to receive city services and prepared to do something about it if they didn’t. The area also had just escaped having the I-490 innerbelt extension pushed through it. Residents had ferociously resisted the proposed throughway, and had gained organizational experience through successfully battling it.¹⁰

The groups became active on housing issues. The usual culprits were active in destroying the housing stock of the neighborhood: bank and insurance redlining, lack of money to finance home maintenance, racial discrimination. What set Union Miles off from the rest was that the biggest culprit of all was the federal government: not the Federal Home Administration (FHA), as in Buckeye-Woodland, but the Veterans Administration (VA).

The neighborhood had been hit with massive foreclosures of VA-insured houses. The campaign in Union Miles aimed to embarrass the VA into taking action on the problem. Organizer and future director of Union Miles, Marita Kavalec, described the campaign:

Somehow, it seemed to have an impact, some sort of special significance to the community. These eyesores and safety hazards were there because of the VA. People automatically equated the VA with housing opportunities for those who had served their country...

Research revealed VA mismanagement of the properties on which it had foreclosed. Properties were not maintained, sat vacant for months, and were not effectively marketed. Kavalec described what happened when Union Miles invited a representative of the VA to tour the neighborhood to see the problems in person:

We had hundreds of people waiting for him. Some of the guys came in their military attire. We really played it up so that the government military thing was there. Somehow, we were able to find a jeep, a real, true military jeep. One of the things we did was to take this guy on a tour to point out where the houses were, and he rode in this jeep with these American flags. We got a police escort to go around with him. The committee decided to serve him dinner in one of the vacant houses, rations or something for dinner.¹¹

Besides being great fun and seizing media attention, the campaign met its goal for at least a while. Properties were cleaned up or boarded up and realtors were contacted to market them. Properties were turned over faster, as they hadn’t in the past.
Early on, the Miles Area Congress and the Union Area Concerned Citizens began to work closely together. The final merger that created the Union Miles Community Coalition was a formality for what had already existed. The groups shared office space, initially at the offices of BWCC. They worked together on the same issues, and visitors could not tell their staffs apart. Furthermore, the very boundaries and names of the two groups were arbitrary, and did not reflect how residents looked upon their neighborhood.

Union Miles Community Coalition (UMCC) finally came together in 1979. By this time, it had become one of the leading organizations in the National People's Action (NPA) network on VA housing abuses. It was also second only to BWCC in confronting the issue of redlining. It was heavily involved in the organizing against Standard Oil of Ohio (SOHIO). UMCC merged with its spinoff development corporation, the Union Miles Development Corporation (UMDC) in 1985; however, the organizing ethos of UMCC continued to live on in the Union Miles Development Corporation, whose bylaws mandated an organizing program.

Near West Neighbors in Action

Near West Neighbors in Action (NWNIA) did not develop under the tutelage of the Catholic Commission. It began as the Ohio City Block Club Association (OCBCA) in 1977, in one of the most organized, contentious, diverse neighborhoods in Cleveland. The neighborhood included Puerto Ricans, Appalachians, African-Americans, young urban professionals restoring Victorian homes and retail spaces, and survivors of the left and counterculture of the 1960s. The neighborhood previously had undergone organizing by Dorothy Day's Catholic Workers movement, and the Communist Party had been active in the area. Gus Hall, its long-time leader, had lived in the neighborhood. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had organized in the area in the mid-1960s through the Education Research and Action Program (ERAP). Welfare rights organizing took place in the area, and an early rival of the commission groups, Active Clevelanders Together (ACT), had organized in the area and was fading from the scene as OCBCA was getting started.

Ohio City Block Club Association was formed from an uneasy alliance between newcomers who were renovating old houses in the neighborhood and poorer residents and the descendants of the political and cultural activism of the previous decade, who championed the interests of poorer residents. Polarization of the neighborhood was reflected in how residents referred to their neighborhood. Renovators called it "Ohio City". Their rivals called it "the Near West Side". Signs installed at entrances to the neighborhood by the city announcing the boundaries of Ohio City were defaced to read "Chic City". A popular poster displayed by the Near West Side partisans read, "Cleveland is an Ohio city. This is a neighborhood."

One of the founding block clubs of the Ohio City Block Club Association was begun on Carroll Avenue. It began to campaign against truck traffic and pollution
from a local moving company. Tom Wagner, described the problem:

These enormous moving vans ... would come in from all over the country or wherever they moved people, sit on Carroll Avenue, and idle their engines until dawn. This was really bad because in the wintertime, it was noisy. In the summertime, it was noisy and smelly. We didn’t think they ought to be able to do that on a residential street. So Carroll Avenue’s first block club issue was an attempt to get them to change their practice.12

The block club visited the zoning commission and other agencies downtown. The moving company was ordered out of the area, and left.

The defining issue in the neighborhood was arson. The epicenter of arson in Cleveland was the Near West Side neighborhood. The neighborhood is composed for the most part of small frame “workmen’s cottages” built during the early part of the twentieth century when Cleveland was a manufacturing boomtown. What made arson so terrifying in this neighborhood was that houses were packed in so closely that, in many areas, neighbors could shake hands by reaching out of their side windows. Any large vacant lot usually meant that a house had burned down along with the houses on either side.

The Carroll Avenue block club waged one of the earliest campaigns against arson. At the time, the area that is now the track field of St. Ignatius High School was packed with buildings, including apartment buildings, an old brewery, and small frame houses. St. Ignatius had quietly acquired most of the property in anticipation of building the track field. The high school drew fire from the block club for not securing the properties that it had acquired. The predictable result was a series of terrifying fires that threatened the lives and property of the Carroll Avenue residents living just across a narrow street from the fires.

The block club confronted St. Ignatius with two demands. First, that the houses it had purchased be secured and maintained until they were demolished to prevent arson. The second was to level with the community about its development plans.

St. Ignatius boarded up and secured its vacant properties and began to change its attitude about the neighborhood. Wagner said: "I think they began to realize that the neighborhood was not something that was to be ignored. They could not appear to be an entity that was opposed to the local residents.”13

Arson was symptomatic of the problems that plagued neighborhoods such as the Near West Side. Redlining and disinvestment led to the deterioration of housing, which resulted in foreclosures in which the financial institutions did not monitor the condition of the foreclosed property, or the outright abandonment of houses by landlords who simply walked away from them. The result were “OVV” houses: open, vacant, and vandalized structures that were prime targets for arson.

Arson was motivated in part by racial fears that a vacant house might be rented
or purchased by Puerto Rican or African-American families. Arson was a profitable undertaking for unscrupulous landlords who wanted to collect insurance money. The usual thinking was that arson of multifamily buildings was for profit, and arson of single-family or two-family homes was motivated by thrill seekers or people motivated by racial prejudice or grudges against the targeted property owners or tenants. The extent of the problem was described in an early history of NWNIA written by Peggy Drury, a Catholic nun, in July 1980:

The fire department believes that the Near West Side has been the target for most arsons for profit in the late 1970s. About 25% of the arson crimes in Cleveland took place in three wards in the Near West Side. This area is the focus because of deteriorating buildings that can be bought cheaply and insured for more than they are worth. 

The history documented one eleven day period in which fifty-five arson fires hit the Near West Side. Between April 1 and December 31, 1979, 100 units of housing were torched in just one ward of the neighborhood.

The Cleveland Press, in a January 15, 1979, article by Tony Natale, described the activities of three landlords active on the Near West Side. One landlord mentioned in the January 1979 Cleveland Press article was Joe Nader.

Nader became the poster child and arch villain of the anti-arson campaign launched by Near West Neighbors in Action (NWNIA). He owned a grocery on Scranton Road and fifty-four other properties throughout the west side. The Cleveland Fire Department stated that those properties had had forty suspicious fires in the 1970s when Nader was active. The Ohio Fair Plan, a state insurer of last resort, became suspicious of Nader's activities and complained to the FBI, which launched an investigation.

Near West Neighbors in Action declared Nader slumlord of the year and went to his house with a huge papier-mâché boot coming down on a firebug emblazoned with the logo “Help Stamp Out Arson!” to present the award. Nader was not at home, and the delegation was run off the property by his wife who, ironically, threw a boot at them!

The FBI investigation showed a pattern of over-insured buildings that were then the sites of suspicious fires. Arsonists hired by Nader testified to being ordered to torch two of his houses, one of which was burned twice to make sure the job was done. Tenants stated that Nader had jacked up the rent in one building in order to clear them out so it would be empty. Nader’s former workmen testified that he had told them to make only the most cosmetic repairs because the building would soon be burned. Finally, Nader was convicted of trying to bribe a city inspector. That sent him to prison.

Near West Neighbors raised reward money and set up a tip line through which
suspected arsonists could be turned in. Near West Neighbors in Action helped obtain grants that funded Project Secure. Project Secure boarded up vacant buildings in the neighborhood, using Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) money. They lobbied the city safety department to beef up the arson unit of the Cleveland police department and to put more investigators on the street to solve arson crimes.

Securing a mobile arson investigation lab was the crusade of Lenny Strimpel, who lived in the neighborhood of St. Coleman's parish near West 65th Street. Strimpel had long been zealous in fighting arson in his neighborhood, and had acquired a wealth of information about the details of arson incidents, who might be behind them, and what the neighborhood could do to fight the problem. Near West, along with other groups in the nearby Tremont and the Broadway areas lobbied city hall for a mobile arson unit, and the city finally purchased one for the fire department.

One casualty of the polarization that was always beneath the surface on the Near West Side was the Ohio City Block Club Association as a name and as an alliance between competing factions.

A flash point was a proposal to use Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) money to close off streets and install ersatz gaslights. The Near West Side partisans hit the roof. It represented to them all the snobbery of Ohio City, particularly the idea of CDBG money being spent on gaslights when there were so many unmet needs in the neighborhood. The proposal met its swift demise.

The dynamic of the issue continued into the 1979 convention of the Ohio City Block Club Association. By the time the convention closed, OCBCA had passed into history and Near West Neighbors In Action was born. The name represented both the victory of the Near West Side partisans and a focus on a militant activism much more in line with the overall movement in Cleveland.

Organizing the Organizations

The Cleveland groups were supported in their work by a number of organizations: National People's Action, the Center for Community Change, the Catholic Commission, and the Gund Foundation.

One of the most important organizations was the Ohio Action Training Center, better known as the Ohio Training Center. Its goal was to provide the groups with their own training center and a common strategic forum that was not restricted by the priorities of the larger institutions that had been so influential in the movement's start. It was to prove to be a daunting task.

The Ohio Training Center

The Ohio Training Center (OTC) was an attempt to replace the Catholic Commission as the institutional organizer of Cleveland's community groups. The name of the center was changed early in its existence to the Ohio Action Training
Center when it was discovered that the same name was being used by another organization. (Both names were commonly used during the time. For the convenience of the reader, the author will use Ohio Training Center)

The guiding presence behind the center was Joe Mariano, former head organizer of the Buckeye Woodland Community Congress, and later a trainer at the Catholic Commission. Mariano remembers how OTC began:

I saw an opportunity around the state to do something. At that time (Bishop) Hickey was leaving for Washington, DC; and (Bishop) Pilla was coming in. Harry (Fagan) said, ‘Things are going to change. Pilla is more into control.’ I said to Harry, ‘We’ve got to talk about spinning this thing off or there is going to be hell to pay.’

The training center was not only a response to changes in the top of the diocese, it also reflected the growing restlessness of many organizers with the overbearing dominance of Fagan and a desire for a truly autonomous training center that could serve not only the Cleveland groups, but the entire state.

Dan Berry of the Gund Foundation, which funded the center, felt it held promise in raising the level of sophistication of the neighborhood groups. He described that promise:

(It) was supposed to help the groups move to the next phase of what it means once you got the community’s attention. OTC was supposed to be working with the groups to help them develop that next generation of community organizing strategies. I think it had built into it the notion (that) we need to develop more negotiating skills and all that underlies.

On November 19, 1979, Fagan wrote to Doll detailing the premise that was to guide the Training & Technical Assistance (T&TA) program for 1980. Often, such letters are much more valuable than the founding proposals in explaining the thinking at the Catholic Commission. Doll thought the T&TA program merited special attention from his colleagues at Gund because the Gund archives contain at least a dozen copies of this letter.

Despite being one of the reasons that Mariano wanted to found the center, Fagan ends the letter with a strong statement in support of the Ohio Training Center as the future and hope of the commission in carrying on its work in community organizing. Fagan also saw a need to put some distance between the groups and the powerful diocese:

While the Catholic Diocese has provided us with ‘institutional
cover', it has produced a few constraints The tensions between the probability of future technical and financial resources and the eventual neighborhood autonomy of this program need to be seriously explored. To this exploratory end, we have begun the Ohio Training Center as an outgrowth of our neighborhood training and technical assistance program.\(^7\)

Fagan also recognized the inherent tensions between the priorities of the organizing groups and the new development corporations rising to prominence. He wrote:

Realizing the attractiveness of physical development and housing rehabilitation programs, OTC has provided technical assistance to these organizations in order to insure that the 'people development' component and the 'neighborhood development' component co-exist and complement, rather than conflict with each other. Too often in the past, we have watched staff and leadership energies totally usurped by a brand new development program.\(^8\)

The Ohio Training Center (OTC) never really succeeded in fulfilling the hopes of the Catholic Commission. Probably the first blow that hit the OTC was the departure of Mariano, who followed his wife Karen Nielson to Chicago, where she had found a new organizing job. Most projects, such as the center, require the presence of a strong founding director or leader to launch it. Mariano left in 1981. Replacing him was George Barany, formerly of BWCC and, most recently, from the Senior Citizens Coalition.

While Ohio Training Center worked on developing issues, training organizers, and building coalitions, it never seemed to win the same loyalty from the groups as the old Catholic Commission and NPA had done. It should have easily claimed that loyalty. The staff at OTC were experienced organizers, well known to their peers. The center, according to veteran organizer Frank Ford, was essential in helping develop campaigns that otherwise would not have happened. Mike O'Brien, a long-time activist and board member of Near West Neighbors In Action, felt it played an irreplaceable role as a forum for the groups to come together to discuss strategies, issues, and future work.

But many groups were suspicious of the center. Their discontent was fueled by the failings of the SOHIO campaign to fight deregulation of natural gas in the early 1980s. Another problem was the passage of time. Acting as a coordinating body in the early 1980s was not as easy as it has been in the days of Project Interface and the founding of the groups. OTC found itself in the same crosshairs as Fagan had been.

The end of Ohio Training Center came in the campaign against Standard Oil of
Ohio (SOHIO), to be covered later. The OTC became the whipping boy for all the weaknesses of the campaign. Especially in the aftermath of a demonstration at the Chagrin Valley Hunt Club, everything came apart for the center. Its funding was cut, and by the summer of 1983 it was out of business.

The Cultures of Organizing in Cleveland

At first glance, the community organizations of this era appear almost identical. Most had been started with the help of the Catholic Commission. Many shared the same founding organizers. The start-up money for your group probably came from the Campaign for Human Development. The manual on getting the community group up and running was the same one that had launched BWCC. Groups went to the annual National People's Action convention in Washington, DC, and everyone had a different story to tell about Shel Trapp.

Underneath the veneer of unity were diverse neighborhoods with equally diverse organizations representing them. We will now turn to what united and divided the groups, and how they developed their own unique cultures of organizing within the broader unity.

Points of Unity

Whether you visited Buckeye Woodland Community Congress, or Near West Neighbors in Action, you could expect to find the same general characteristics.

- An aversion to politics

The most common reason given for the groups’ aversion to politics, was their 501(c)3 tax status, but the real reasons behind their refusal to become involved in politics ran deeper.

There are many ways to become involved in politics. Legalistic niceties, such as a tax status, are routinely and continuously sidestepped or subverted in the real world. Holding leadership and staff positions in 501(c)3 organizations did not stop a Who’s Who of neighborhood luminaries from openly supporting Mike White in his successful 1989 campaign for mayor. Tax status is a convenient excuse, not a convincing explanation.

A more compelling reason was the groups’ desire to maintain their independence and credibility in communities that looked upon politics and politicians with withering cynicism. Shel Trapp said that the attitude of National People’s Action towards politicians was that, “you may be our friend today, but tomorrow is another day.” Remaining independent of politics gave the groups the ability to use city hall as a target for their campaigns.

The goal of the groups was for residents of the neighborhood to run their community from the grassroots. This was in complete contrast to the dynamics of electing a candidate who uses their power to serve the constituency. It was a clash between direct and representative democracy.
The groups also had to work constantly to maintain at least a show of unity within neighborhoods fragmented by class, race, ethnicity, religion, and politics. To take political stands or to develop a political arm of the neighborhood movement would have dried up any support at city hall, raised the ire of the supporting foundations, and divided the neighborhoods further. Another example of this caution was how the groups avoided any stand on the issue of school busing to desegregate Cleveland schools.

- The One True Church: National People’s Action

If any national organization could claim to have had the organizing franchise in Cleveland, it was National People’s Action (NPA) and its education and research arm, the National Training and Information Center (NTIC). With the exception of Citizen Action, which really occupied an entirely different niche, no other organizing network or organizer training center had a presence in Cleveland. As Ann Pratt of Union Miles said: “Different training center! Are you kidding? That’d be like Pat Robertson going to seek help from the Buddha!”

NPA provided the fledgling groups with a vast store of organizing experience from which to draw. NPA got its start working on the same set of issues in Chicago that were central to the Cleveland groups: housing, redlining, destructive federal policies, insensitive and unresponsive local governments. In Shel Trapp, NTIC’s lead organizer, the staff of the groups found their hero. In NPA leader Gail Cincotta, the rank and file and leadership found a hero who shared their background and values, and who had come from a community similar to theirs.

The annual NPA convention in Washington, D.C., was an opportunity for leaders and staff to network, exchange information about their local organizing, and get an overview of national campaigns. In addition, the convention featured a combined hit on some targeted institution or agency in the nation’s capitol.

Gail Long, former director of Merrick House, whose involvement in neighborhood issues began in the mid-1960s, felt that the Catholic Commission organizers, under the tutelage of NPA, were better trained than any previous class of organizers. The groups knew how to produce leaders who would otherwise have never been found. Basic skills for running meetings, setting agendas and strategic thinking also were developed. On certain issues, such as Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) organizing, their contribution was beyond dispute.

The downside was a rigid, dogmatic style of organizing that made alliances and coalitions with other groups difficult, if not impossible, and narrowed the range of issues on which the groups would work. The NPA groups had the answer, period. No other viewpoints were solicited. George Barany was critical of NPA for its lack of democracy, its domination by Gail Cincotta, and its lack of training opportunities in development for leaders.

- Direct action

All of the groups confronted their opponents with direct-action tactics of
demonstrations and civil disobedience. This style had its origins in National People's Action. According to Trapp, what distinguished NPA from other organizing networks was its willingness to use direct action. NPA's maxim was, "If you aren't ready to fight, you aren't ready to win." 12

The Cleveland groups differed widely on their willingness to "hit" their foes. Some groups, such as Buckeye, positively gloried in using these tactics; other groups used them only when all else failed. For the targets of these hits, it was never a pleasant experience, but it always got their attention. The best description of direct action as used by the groups was provided by George Barany:

We would send a letter to invite an official out. If the official didn't respond, you'd take a group of people down to his office, uninvited. If the official sent a letter and said I'm sorry I can't come, you took a group of people down to his office and made him respond, right then and there. If the official responded and said he was sending a representative, the first attempt over the phone was to negotiate: No representative, you come yourself. But, ultimately, if the representative came and if the representative said at any point during the meeting, I can't answer that; I don't have the authority, that representative was thrown out of the meeting. We'd say: 'You've wasted people's time here, we don't have time to waste. We asked for someone in authority to come. We're sorry that you came, but you now have to leave.' Right then and there, an action would be planned for either that evening, depending on the issue, depending on how much work had been done on that issue, in a sense, what level it was, because we certainly weren't above taking people to some official's house in the evening to confront him over the lack of responsiveness. That was our style, to force people to the negotiating table so that negotiations would be serious. 23

Points of Division

There were differences between organizations and organizers in how they operated within the larger unity. The differences fell into different traditions and cultures of organizing.

- The Buckeye Tradition

Buckeye Woodland Community Congress (BWCC), Union Miles Community Coalition (UMCC), and the Senior Citizens Coalition (SCC) and, especially BWCC, helped blaze the trail in community organizing in Cleveland. They inspired the formation of other organizations and supplied valuable information on how to get started, select issues, and develop leaders. People who were with these groups or who had passed through them in their careers were the organ-
izing establishment in Cleveland.

The Buckeye tradition also gave community organizing in Cleveland its fierce reputation. There was an aura of braggadocio with these organizations, where the toughness of the leadership, the ability to “produce” bodies to an action or convention, and the militancy of tactics were a source of pride, and even arrogance. Other organizations in Cleveland compared themselves to the Buckeye tradition, both in what they admired and in what repelled them.

- **The Broadway Tradition**

Citizens to Bring Broadway Back (CBBB), and Southeast Clevelanders Together (SECT) were in this style. CBBB was a haven for those who were turned off by the machismo of other groups. One organizer who found refuge in CBBB was Judy Opalach, who was told by Joe Mariano that she wasn’t mean enough to be an organizer when she worked for SCSC. They were willing to confront if driven to it, without turning it into a fetish. They were attracted to consensus-based decision making. They were more insular in their focus, but had a solid track record for working on citywide issues, as well.

The Broadway tradition was heavily influenced by the experience of many of the women from Broadway at the Seneca Peace Encampment in the early 1980s that protested against the deployment of Pershing missiles to Europe. The result was a critique of the super-macho, super-confrontational style of organizing prevalent at the time. Bobbi Reichtell of Broadway described this experience and its influence:

> The quality about the organizing that took place at the peace camp that was not prevalent in neighborhood organizing at the time was a sense of empowerment and self-directedness. The thing that was really impressive about the women’s peace camp was that it was not a patriarchal system at all, but more egalitarian: building consensus, not the majority rule system.  

Reichtell soon realized that this learning experience clashed with the organizing status quo back in Cleveland:

> Coming back to Cleveland then, there was a lull where here we are and we’re stuck in these patterns and ways of doing business, which has a very macho air to it. You know, throwing your weight around. It’s almost no different than the people you are dealing with, with corporations and city hall.

Those local organizers who went through the Seneca Peace Camp experience came to favor consensus-style decision-making. They developed new ways people could empower themselves, instead of being empowered by someone else. They came to look upon theirs as a feminist school of organizing. It was not welcomed
by the organizing establishment of NPA. They came back to preach the word to an
organizers' conference in Chicago, and were ridiculed by the male organizers.

- The Back-to-Basics Tradition

Near West Neighbors in Action (NWNIA), and St. Clair Superior Coalition
(SCSC) represented this tradition which reacted against the heavy emphasis on big
citywide and national issues. They felt that they had to concentrate their attention
on neighborhood, block club issues, however important the larger issues might be.
The main representatives of this tendency were Renee Berry and Kathy Jaksic
(SCSC), Maggie Britton (Ohio Training Center, formerly SCSC), Gloria Aron,
and Eileen Kelly (NWNIA). They felt that they had been burned and misadvised
on such citywide issues as the Standard Oil of Ohio (SOHIO) campaign. They
favored a back-to-basics approach that prioritized the unglamorous tasks of tackling
everyday problems in their neighborhoods.

The most eloquent spokesperson for this was Eileen Kelly, who came to the
staff of Near West during the summer of 1982, when such campaigns as natural
gas deregulation and rising sewer rates were top priorities for many of the older
organizers in the group. As a result of her experience with her block club on West
47th Street, Kelly felt that the issues, while perhaps important, did not resonate
with the people she was working with. She said:

I mean, there are hundreds of things you could involve people in,
the things that were really affecting them and making them afraid,
making them worry about their kids ...Those were the things
immediately on their street, and each street was different. The fear
in that neighborhood was huge at the time. People felt so helpless,
and most people that were renters felt helpless because they were
renters. Most people were on welfare. They felt hopeless because
they had no money.

Issues such as sewer or gas rates did not resonate with the people on West
47th Street, according to Kelly, who continued:

So you pay five dollars less on gas? That's not going to make a
lot of difference, but if you get rid of that house next door that
catches on fire every other night, that makes a lot of difference.\textsuperscript{26}

The back-to-basics school gained credibility with the blowback from the
SOHIO campaign. Kelly, as director, went so far as to win board approval to
withdraw from citywide coalitions. After a very rough period of financial troubles,
focusing on neighborhood issues stabilized NWNIA and extended its life as an
organization.
A Movement Organized

By the close of 1979, the community organizing movement in Cleveland was an established, flourishing force in the city's neighborhoods. It had a cadre of experienced organizers who trained new organizers and consulted with new groups. The groups developed their own distinct identities and areas of expertise. Leaders from the block clubs and neighborhoods were, day by day and issue by issue, becoming more sophisticated, knowledgeable organizers in their own right. The movement had institutional cover, research resources, and fundraising aid from the Catholic Commission and the George Gund Foundation. Cleveland groups had sealed an alliance with National People's Action and other national organizations. They were in the national forefront of such issues as bank and insurance redlining, arson, the use of Community Development Block Grant money, and the reform of Veterans Administration and Federal Home Administration policies. The usual movers and shakers in Cleveland could no longer make policies for the neighborhoods by fiat. There was a new voice demanding to be heard: the voice of the organized neighborhoods of Cleveland.