

**DEMOCRATIZING CLEVELAND
CHAPTER 3: ESTABLISHING A MODEL: THE BUCKEYE WOODLAND
COMMUNITY CONGRESS**

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Chapter 3

ESTABLISHING A MODEL: THE BUCKEYE WOODLAND COMMUNITY CONGRESS.

We were making history. We were going to make a revolution in Cleveland. People on a staff level believed the mythology that they were part of writing history. There was a group of committed people who said 'All this is fun.' The spirit of the moment captured the imagination of other neighborhoods in Cleveland.

Joe Mariano, *Buckeye Woodland Community Congress*¹

All movements for social change are linked in the public mind to one or two prominent organizations. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) represented the civil rights movement in the South. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was synonymous with the student and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s. When people thought of the movement to organize farm workers in California, they thought of the United Farm Workers.

In a similar way, one organization represented to the public the community organizing that swept through Cleveland's neighborhoods. That organization was the Buckeye Woodland Community Congress (BWCC).

There were many organizations that survived longer than Buckeye Woodland

Community Congress, won as many victories, and produced as many activists and leaders. However, no other organization cast as large a shadow, blazed as many trails with important issues, or served as an example that inspired people to organize as BWCC did. The movement it represented rose and flourished as Buckeye rose and flourished, and declined and died, as Buckeye declined and died.

Project Interface 1973-1974

Buckeye Woodland Community Congress was an experiment that became a model. The neighborhood in which it developed was a difficult testing ground. It was famous for its Hungarian community, but included Slovaks, and Italians, as well. These competing ethnic groups were united in their animosity to the newest group to settle in the neighborhood: African-Americans. Msgr. Geno Baroni, a hero of the Catholic Commission, remembered with despair a visit he made to the Buckeye neighborhood because of the level of explicit racism and hatred he found.² If community organizing could work in the Buckeye-Woodland neighborhood, it could work anywhere. It all started with Project Interface.

Project Interface provided the commission with an opportunity to succeed in organizing in Cleveland's neighborhoods after efforts to organize African-Americans in the Glenville neighborhood and Hispanics living on the Near West Side ended in utter failure.³ The commission was accused of paternalism and a heavy handed top down approach in these failed efforts. Underlying all these efforts was the toxic racial and ethnic atmosphere of Cleveland, which was played as a zero sum game where the advance of one group, could only be purchased by harm to another.

Rev. Dan Reidy was interested in finding a neighborhood in which he could organize to unite diverse racial and ethnic groups around common problems. It was an interest shared by the rest of the commission. He termed it "urban ethnic organizing", which had been promoted on a national level by Msgr. Baroni. Reidy thought the Buckeye-Woodland neighborhood would be ideal for his experiment. He recalled:

I became intrigued by the Buckeye Woodland area. I suggested that it would be a good place to try some crossover community organizing. You had black people. It was an Italian neighborhood. It was the mother neighborhood of the Hungarians. There was an overlap of the Slovaks. It was on the edge of Ludlow, young, single professional white types who weren't ethnically based. It seemed to me it had opportunities. ⁴

One of the flash points for social conflict in Buckeye-Woodland was crime. Buckeye residents were alarmed by the rise of street crime involving young African-Americans. This heightened the already tense racial atmosphere of the neighborhood. Private militia units, such as the Buckeye Special Police, were formed. The

Catholic church was drawn into this issue because of the presence in this organization of several local priests. The city, the police, and the church were alarmed at the chaos that could result from vigilante activity. The diocese told Bishop Cosgrove to deal with this explosive situation. He investigated, and the priests who had joined the Buckeye Special Police were persuaded to resign.

Bishop Cosgrove recognized that the crisis in Buckeye-Woodland not only represented a danger, but also an opportunity. Here was a chance for the commission to redeem itself with an organizing project that could defuse the tinderbox. His entrée was that the ethnic communities of Buckeye-Woodland were overwhelmingly Catholic.⁵

The first step taken was when local parishes founded the Buckeye Woodland Catholic Community Council. The council focused on three issues. The first was conditions at Audubon Junior High School, including the maintenance of the school, unruly students at the school menacing neighbors, and inadequate educational conditions at the school, which, since the early 1960s, had been predominantly African-American. The community council established a task force on the problems of the school, and the result was the first community meeting attended by white ethnics and African-Americans. The second issue was the founding of a Catholic kindergarten to which white ethnic parents would feel comfortable sending their children. The third was housing. Housing problems in the neighborhood ran from block busting to abuses of the Federal Home Administration program. As with the Audubon issue, the housing issue drew support from both ethnic and African-American communities.⁶

A pastoral planning process surveyed the problems of the area and the state of its existing community organizations and institutions. No existing group was capable or interested in bringing the community together to deal with common problems. The Buckeye Woodland Catholic Community Council was limited by being a Catholic organization. If the goal was to create an inclusive organizing process, a broader effort was needed. The only alternative was to start a new organization to take on the task of organizing the Buckeye neighborhood. The next step for Rev. Reidy was Project Interface.

Reidy worked with Ken Kovach, an Orthodox seminarian, who had grown up in the neighborhood. Kovach and Reidy laid out a proposal to the Campaign for Human Development to fund Project Interface.

The Campaign for Human Development (CHD) was founded in 1969 as the brainchild of a leading light of liberal Catholicism during this time, Monsignor Geno Baroni. Baroni, pastor of an African-American church in Washington, DC, had courted the displeasure of the church hierarchy by marching with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, and had become an expert on the issues of the inner city and race relations. He finished his public life as an undersecretary at the Department of Housing and Urban Development under President Jimmy Carter.

In the tumultuous days after the assassination of Martin Luther King and the

resulting rioting. Baroni feared that ethnic urban Catholics could provide a mass base for a racist reactionary movement in the United States. What was needed was a campaign to work in communities that were now pitted against one another and to unite them on the basis of common problems, interests, and issues. His goal in convincing the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to start the campaign was to fund the organization of poor ethnic and minority communities to work together for economic and social power through an annual fund drive.

The Campaign for Human Development became a prime source for seed money for many organizing efforts in Cleveland and around the country. It has a special place within the philanthropic world. As Shel Trapp of National People's Action (NPA) put it, "The CHD helps to fund dreams."

Kovach wanted to build Project Interface using as a foundation the intense sense of community which nurtured him while growing up in the Buckeye-Woodland area. While this intense form of community was an asset, it was also a problem for those who wished to keep the peace when newcomers entered the neighborhood. A community may be comforting for insiders while erecting a wall of hostility to outsiders or those who do not fit in.

Project Interface began in the summer of 1973 with the formation of the sponsoring organization, the Buckeye Woodland Community Council. This council was made up of members of the Buckeye Woodland Catholic Community Council and the East End Community Development Foundation, which withdrew early from the project because of internal problems. Funding Project Interface with a Campaign for Human Development grant was no problem. Reidy was CHD's diocesan director in Cleveland.

Tom Gannon, who had worked as a full-time organizer in California and Indiana for the United Farm Workers, was hired as the project's lead organizer, along with Greg Groves, an African-American organizer. Gannon, through his work with the United Farm Workers was a direct link with people such as Caesar Chavez, Fred Ross, Delores Huerta, and Marshall Gans, who had been trained by the intellectual guru of the community organizing movement, Saul Alinsky.

Alinsky started out in the 1930s in Chicago as an organizer for the Packinghouse Workers of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). He took the lessons learned from that experience to organize the neighborhood so many packing house workers lived in, the Back of the Yards. In the following years, he helped organize migrant farm workers in California, where his influence was seminal for the young Caesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers (UFW).

Alinsky was also instrumental in organizing against racism in Rochester, New York. He founded the Industrial Areas Foundation that carried on his philosophy of organizing after his death in 1972. That philosophy was based on mobilizing the powerless around issues of self interest. It took the old bare-knuckles style of union organizing he learned in the CIO and applied it to communities. His books, *Rules for Radicals* and *Reveille for Radicals*, were required reading in community organiz-

ing circles in Cleveland and throughout the country.

In the first quarterly report to the Campaign for Human Development, Project Interface laid out its organizing strategy, which emphasized mass-based, multi-issue organizing for basic social change. It would strive to preserve the distinctiveness of existing communities and organizations, and to be sensitive to ethnic and cultural issues. Underlying all activity would be a commitment to the values of human dignity, liberation, and social justice.⁷

The goal of Project Interface was to form a community congress to incorporate and unite the myriad organizations, street clubs, nationality groups, and churches in the Buckeye-Woodland neighborhood.

The first step of Project Interface was to send its organizers to undergo training with the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs (NCUEA), the National Housing Training Center (later the National Training and Information Center of National People's Action), and the Movement for Economic Justice.

The second step was a series of interviews and meetings with established agencies and organizations by Gannon and Groves to introduce Project Interface and to find out what these groups were up to. They were not warmly greeted. First, there was the traditional paranoia that sets in with established groups when they feel they must defend their turf against an interloper. Then there was the traditional hostility that existed between traditional social work and community organizing.

The organizers did not just interview existing groups; they also targeted the unorganized part of the Buckeye-Woodland community, and sought to start new organizations. The initial issues developed by Gannon and Groves in this first period were tenant issues at the Woodhill Homes and neighboring Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) estates and dilapidated structures that were being ignored by the city. Groves canvassed 400 units in the Woodhill Homes housing project of CMHA and organized a tenants' organization that took on CMHA over issues of mismanagement, maintenance, and other failings.

Project Interface dealt with issues that were classics in the field and usually centered on the failure of city hall to provide public services, such as animal control, slow police response time, failure to inspect dilapidated houses and buildings, and traffic control. When city hall fell down on these duties, the community organizations had issues around which to mobilize.

Project Interface also encountered new, more difficult issues. In 1974, the issue of panic peddling of homes became a concern, with realtors using racial fears to stimulate home sales. It was one of the early instances when Project Interface had to deal with a racially divisive issue. Gannon described the problem in his February 12-28, 1974, report to Rev. Reidy:

I've been checking out the reports of questionable real estate practices in the area. I have two examples of real estate letters distributed in the community.

I am attempting to organize some blacks in the upper end to

approach these realtors and I want to avoid any racial confrontation. I don't want to have whites screaming at blacks.⁸

Gannon began to research the issue and the behavior of real estate agents in the area. The neighborhood at the time was being canvassed by real estate brokers who would leave leaflets and business cards at houses, soliciting business. Real estate agents even called Barb Pertz, a future leader of Buckeye Woodland Community Congress, who was renting an apartment at the time.

They wanted to know if I wanted to sell my home. They would use words like, 'The neighborhood is changing.' This is how cocky they were at the time: 'You want to get money, the value of your house now before something happens,' 'If you wait, you might not get what your house is worth.' 'We've got a buyer for your home.' It was unbelievable.⁹

Pertz credited the African-American residents of Buckeye-Woodland for joining the effort.

It wasn't just white people going to the agents; it was black people, too. I have a feeling black people were saying, 'We don't want this. We want a mixed neighborhood, an interracial neighborhood. We don't want this white flight.' I have to give a lot of credit to the blacks in Buckeye-Woodland because they stood up and said, 'We want you to stop this, too.'¹⁰

With publicity and visits by community delegations to the realtors responsible, the level of panic peddling fell off to the point where it was no longer a burning issue. Probably the greatest accomplishment of the campaign was how it demonstrated African-American and white cooperation on an issue that could have very easily gone the other way.

Public transportation issues were also central to the neighborhood. The Buckeye-Woodland neighborhood had a high concentration of the elderly poor. This led to one of the most significant campaigns for organizers of this period: transportation services for the elderly. The strategic opportunity was the creation of the new Regional Transit Authority in 1975. How this new transit system was organized would establish public transportation policy for decades. Key demands were fares for the elderly and disabled and the preservation of the dial-a-bus system that picked up passengers at their homes when called. The dial-a-bus system had been a victory for senior citizen activists in 1974.

The campaign founded the city-wide Senior Citizens Transportation Coalition, which, in turn, became the Senior Citizens Coalition (SCC). This campaign

demonstrated a behind-the-scenes alliance between the City Planning Commission under planning director Norm Krumholz, and groups such as the future Buckeye Woodland Community Congress. As Krumholz described it:

Over the years, a symbiotic relationship had developed: The senior coalition had learned to trust us, and we had learned to use their organizational power to achieve common objectives. Calls to the Senior Citizens Coalition to inform them of transit meetings, to lay out the issues, to advise them on strategy, and to coordinate their transportation to meetings were undoubtedly worth more in Cleveland than [were] invitations to Planning Commission meetings and discussions of general, unfocused objectives.¹¹

The activism of the seniors disturbed the technocrats, politicians, and representatives of such elite institutions as the Growth Association and law firms such as Squire Sanders and Dempsey. They were accustomed to meeting behind closed doors with their peers to set the course of events for the city. They were not prepared, for example, for the seniors to attend a December meeting of the RTA board and hold an impromptu Christmas party. Gannon, lead organizer for the future Buckeye Woodland Community Congress, described the action:

They were in a meeting in a closed door session, and one of the organizers had rewritten some of the Christmas carols with RTA and dial-a-bus lyrics. We were serenading RTA board members with "Dial-a-bus, dial-a-bus, coming down the street, - RTA is stopping you because they are too cheap." You know, to "Jingle Bells." Then we had Christmas cookies that we wanted to present to the board, baked in the shape of a dial-a-bus. They went nuts, but we finally won.¹²

The City Planning Commission, in alliance with such groups as the Senior Citizens Coalition, won a great deal of what they wanted in the policies of the new transit system. These included the preservation of the old dial-a-bus, to be renamed Community Responsive Transit (CRT).¹³

To Gannon, the CRT buses are an enduring legacy of this campaign:

I think that was one of the more successful campaigns. Your grandmother or aunt could call and get a ride. Every time I see those buses and I see senior citizens get off, it makes me feel pretty good about organizing because that was a long-term victory that we won. We always dream about those kind of victories.¹⁴

Groves left Project Interface, and Gannon called on Joe Mariano. Mariano had

worked with Gannon during his days with the United Farm Workers Union. Mariano was still working in California, but he was restless and wanted to move on to other organizing work. He described Gannon's enticements to come east from San Francisco:

He told me that they were doing this project on the southeast side of Cleveland: 'There's blacks, Hungarians, and Italians; we're bringing people together around issues.' I grew up in Newark, and if that's the case, I want to see it. I knew all the tensions that had existed in Newark with the ethnics and blacks. The icing on the cake was, we got this guy coming out who knew Saul Alinsky. I said, 'I'll be there October 23, 1974.'¹⁵

Two of the people to whom Gannon introduced Mariano were Shel Trapp, lead organizer for National People's Action, and Harry Fagan. Mariano and his wife, Karen Nielson, were introduced to Trapp at the airport before he caught a flight:

It was a balding guy in a 1950s suit. He (Trapp) said, 'Do you have any organizing experience?' Karen Nielson was with me at the time.

I said that I was with the UFW. Then Karen said, 'No.' He [Trapp] told Gannon to get the map out. He said to me; 'You got any problems working with white racists? You work over here with the Italians.'

He said to Karen, 'You got any problems working with blacks?' Before she could answer, he said, 'You work over here. I'll be back in two weeks to tell you exactly what you're going to do.'

The next day they were introduced to Harry Fagan. Mariano described the meeting:

The next day, we talked to Harry Fagan, who was a breeze compared to Trapp. Gannon said, 'Tell him you like building coalitions.' I didn't know what that was about. I said, 'I want to find out about building coalitions.' Harry said, 'You're the man.'¹⁶

Everything Trapp had promised to Mariano and Nielson was true, and then some. The area that Mariano was organizing was wracked by white flight, racial tensions and suspicions, and a perception of being forgotten by the city.

I found that the people were bailing out of the neighborhood. I did a lot of door knocking. The folks in Mt. Carmel would literally be

packing up their belongings, saying 'You're five years too late. Where the hell were you?' 'The neighborhood is changing, and I am getting out.' That was a lot of the attitude. Those folks who wanted to stay did for two reasons. One, they had no choice. Two, they were determined to stay and fight, see their neighborhood resurge.¹⁷

Buckeye Woodland Community Congress was sold as an organization that could maximize the power of the constituent groups without destroying their autonomy. United in the form of a congress, they would be taken much more seriously by foundations, corporations, and government.

The kickoff event for the public drive for a congress was a speech that future congresswoman Barbara Milkulski gave to an audience of 150 in the Buckeye Woodland neighborhood on June 14, 1974. Most of the audience were activists with Project Interface, but representatives from other neighborhoods were present, as well.

Milkulski was a representative with the South East Community Organization of Baltimore, and spoke about the experiences of community congresses in Baltimore, Chicago, Milwaukee, and in Cleveland with the Heights Community Congress. She was from a neighborhood very much like Buckeye-Woodland. She had instant legitimacy with those attending.

The campaign for a community congress was on. By October 1974, a call to found a congress had been issued to the community at large, complete with a set of letters and leaflets explaining the rationale for founding the Buckeye Woodland Community Congress.

Racial divisions and politics not only presented a challenge to organizing the congress; they were also used to get people organized for the founding convention in February 1975. Joe Mariano described what he used to turn people out:

I was having problems getting the Fairwood neighborhood excited. They could have had a delegation of thirty; I had maybe fifteen people signed up. Trapp said, 'I'll be in for the last meeting; do a little rah-rah talk about the convention. Have the meeting at the East End Community House: the whites will feel safe there. Have it in a small room, a basement, ...'

There were a shitload of black folks in the room, at least fifty black and twenty-five white. The reason they [whites] turned out more people was they realized they weren't going to get anyone elected to the board. The Hungarians went crazy and started turning people out.

The result of the mobilization of the white ethnic residents was a board that was

dominated by them. Example is a great teacher, however, and soon the African-American residents became skilled at internal organization politics. Mariano described their education:

People like to get elected and control things. Two years down the road, the blacks realized how they could take over. They were clearly more than fifty per cent; somehow, the organization didn't represent them equally. They made their deals. Some of the white ethnics would tell the blacks, 'I want you on my ticket for vice-president.' All these deals were being cut.¹⁸

The founding convention of the Buckeye Woodland Community Congress was held on February 15, 1975, at Benedictine High School. The convention was a rousing success, with 700 delegates representing 105 organizations in attendance and numerous politicians and other community leaders present to wish them well. The convention passed bylaws, and elected an initial slate of leaders to serve in a congress senate and executive board.

Buckeye Woodland's founding attracted the attention of the city and sparked the imagination of activists everywhere. Ken Kovach described its importance:

We were actually the first coalition of community groups in the city of Cleveland to be established. I think the Catholic Commission was looking for a model. Buckeye Woodland was a good model because, subsequently, the commission helped support the development of many other community congresses in the St. Clair-Superior area and in the Broadway area.¹⁹

Not only was Buckeye Woodland Community Congress (BWCC) one of the first community coalitions to form and to get the attention of the city, but was also noted for the quality of its activism. BWCC was known for its ability to focus, its militancy, its skill at getting publicity, and the fact that it was absolutely relentless once it had targeted an issue or a foe. Gannon commented on its uniqueness:

It was one of the few neighborhoods, at that time, where blacks and whites actually did come together and network together in an organization. It wasn't tied to existing institutions like Neighborhood Centers Association or United Areas Citizens Agencies and some of those groups.

We could afford to be a lot more...militant. We had a reputation as a group that could pull people together, that was hard-nosed, that meant business, that we would come after you, that would not be

satisfied, but knew what they wanted and had well-focused issues.²⁰

Sharon Bryant, another leader, described BWCC's expertise:

We were good at what we did; and we shared it. It wasn't a big-headed mess of just a few people. Everybody did something. If it was just something geared to the street corner, we celebrated. Everybody celebrated, working together and we shared the victories. That's the most important thing.²¹

Buckeye Woodland Community Congress focused on issues that all the other groups would deal with. It was one of the first community organizations in the country to file a Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) complaint. It was influential in shaping the Regional Transit Authority (RTA) by helping organize the Senior Citizens Coalition.

Buckeye focused attention on the abuse of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) moneys, when it opposed the sale of the old Arena in 1975. Buckeye, working with National People's Action (NPA), forced revisions in Federal Home Administration (FHA) policies concerning the reimbursement of homeowners who had bought FHA houses thinking they were up to code when they were not.

There were two other areas in which BWCC's influence dominated. First, veterans of the group went on to become trainers and staff people for the Catholic Commission, and helped found and develop new community organizations throughout the city. Gannon was instrumental in launching the St. Clair Superior Coalition (SCSC) and Citizens to Bring Broadway Back (CBBB). Other veterans of BWCC such as George Barany, went on to staff the Senior Citizen Coalition and the Ohio Training Center.

The second area in which BWCC was influential was in providing a ready-made manual for other groups on how to get started. Barany described BWCC's example:

All these groups basically copied the Campaign for Human Development proposal that Buckeye first put in. Here was the Buckeye model, and if you want to do something in your neighborhood, here's how you do it, and then it gave very direct assistance. Here's a file that says, here's how you get money, here's how you get people, here are flyers, this is how you organize a street club...²²

There was a downside to Buckeye's reputation. It had a spirit that went beyond esprit de corps, into an arrogant, overbearing attitude of superiority that many other groups found alienating. BWCC portrayed itself as the roughest and the toughest group in town, the group that produced the greatest number of people for hits, (as

acts of civil disobedience were called). It positively gloried in the recklessness of its confrontational style.

Inez Killingsworth of Union Miles Community Coalition (UMCC) commented that BWCC knew no fear, and that a frequent comment in the aftermath of an action was that the group had once again done something crazy.²³

Barany and fellow BWCC veteran Pat Kinney, commented on Buckeye's spirit run amok. Barany recalled one event, in particular:

I can remember, one planning meeting where we walked in with sixty leaders. Harry Fagan, chaired the meeting, and got very nervous because of our demand that the first neighborhood conference be held at Buckeye. He basically got the body to vote that each organization would have one vote. He was determined that the first neighborhood conference would not be at Buckeye. It was actually held down at the office of the Catholic Diocese.²⁴

To Kinney, Buckeye was cocky:

We produced a lot of people, did a lot of things, but we kind of lived and breathed that. If you were an organization of twenty people and you only brought twenty people to everything and it doesn't matter if it was the biggest issue in the world, a medium issue, then the response was, 'What's going on? Why can't you get more people in your neighborhood to come to things?' If you were always there and you brought 200 people and you were thinking, 'Well, we're the big producers.' That's what I mean by 'cocky'.²⁵

Arrogance and cockiness have their places at times. Buckeye could not have launched the community organizing movement in Cleveland had it been humble and polite. Such efforts require a certain level of brazenness and even, as Killingsworth commented, craziness to break through the suffocating inertia of the status quo. However it may have grated on some, there was no doubt that Buckeye did launch the movement.