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Point of View

Passing the Torch

Baby boomers face the future, and it's not us

by Pamela David

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Passing the Torch

Baby boomers face the future, and it's not us

I admit it – I'm an unrepentant child of the '60s. I was just 14 when I began working with local civil rights groups in 1966. In short order, I became deeply involved in the antiwar movement, student rights, and the struggle to lower the voting age to match the draft age. In college, I continued my activism against the war, organizing sit-ins, teach-ins, and getting arrested for peacefully blocking a local military recruiting center.

But what made my activism a permanent part of my life was spending a semester in Harlan County, Ky., in 1972. There, at the height of the Vietnam War, I saw firsthand the harsh realities of poverty and racism in rural America, and began to grasp the connections between a wide variety of domestic and international social issues. Nowhere was it made clearer than by the group of ex-nuns I met who, while leading anti-strip mining efforts, also managed to introduce me to the modern feminist movement.

Civil rights, Vietnam, the women's movement – my political bearings developed in a period in which everything was being questioned, and none too politely. I was not alone. Thousands of young Americans developed their political hearts and souls in the crucible of the 1960s and '70s. It was not just the arrogance of youth that led us to believe that we could change the world. It was the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the ending of the Vietnam War, the launching of the War on Poverty – concrete changes that happened in our lifetime, in part because of our actions.

Against this backdrop, many young activists, using time-honored community-organizing skills, launched thousands of community-based organizations. Our impetus was one of social change; our demand was for community control. At the outset, we intertwined the provision of services and programs with an explicit social change agenda.

Time and circumstances, however, have taken their toll. Many organizations – including those with leadership forged in

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the civil rights and other social movements – have had difficulty maintaining an active commitment to social justice. I worry that the ties to social change will weaken further when my contemporaries and I pass on the torch to the next generation

of nonprofit leaders, who are coming of age in a markedly different era. At the same time, I believe that this inevitable generational shift is an opportunity to address some of the critical weaknesses of the nonprofit sector.

The High Cost of Professionalization

For many leaders of community organizations, the pressure to keep their operations afloat has moved them away from a social change agenda. Both public and private sector funders, in their drive to make nonprofits more businesslike, have increasingly favored short-term programmatic funding, which has forced many organizations to focus narrowly on specific deliverables at the expense of ongoing community organizing. Without resources for organizing and advocacy, in turn, many community-based organizations have lost touch with their communities – a process hastened by the fact that their communities have become more diverse and complex. The push to professionalize has also led nonprofit leaders to recruit board members based on the material resources they can bring to the organization, rather than on how well they represent the communities they serve. And organizations have found little support for general operations, limiting their ability to strengthen their infrastructures and decreasing their agility in responding to community needs and changes.

This is not to say that it hasn't been a good thing to require more financial discipline; nor has it been wrong to demand more accountability from those who use public and charitable resources. But funders in both the public and private sectors have not necessarily understood how their practices impact the social change missions that are at the heart of many community-based organizations. As a result, much of the nonprofit sector has become unmoored from its social change roots.

Bridging the Generation Gap

The next generation of nonprofit leaders will inherit these problems. And unlike my generation, which rode in on a wave of broad social movements, prosperity, and unbounded optimism, we are now in an era of shrinking government, widening inequality, and deepening cynicism. I wonder whether the new leadership will be able to reenergize the social sector's commitment to social justice, and have been thinking about the role my generation can play during this transition.

A first thought is that my generation can't be of much help



The author as activist.

unless we're willing to strip away some of the nostalgia about our own role in social change. Sure, we did a lot of great things. But we made tons of mistakes, too, particularly in letting government off the hook for not meeting our communities' basic needs. We need to find the space to be frank and self-critical, and then figure out how to share what we've learned. We have to be honest about the choices and concessions we've made – to examine, for example, how well we've balanced funding and political realities with maintaining ties with the communities that spawned us.

And given that some of us have moved into influential positions, not just in community organizations, but also in government, philanthropy, and the private sector, we have to figure out how to use our individual and collective clout to strengthen the nonprofit sector's social change bearings. From redirecting funding so that it adequately addresses core operating needs, to providing greater support for advocacy and organizing, there's much we can do to challenge the status quo.

We also need to extend ourselves, professionally and personally, to the next generation of leaders. That includes creating a lot more opportunities for cross-generational exchanges. Yes,

we're concerned that nonprofit management programs may have replaced our learn-it-on-the-fly organizing experience. But what are the strengths these next generations bring to the table? It would be the height of arrogance, and would be turning our back on our own history, to think that our younger colleagues don't have as much to teach us as we have to teach them.

How we handle this transitional period is the real test of our commitment to community and to social change.

A number of us in philanthropy have begun to support "next generation" leadership programs. While varying in form, they commonly provide management training and peer support to the Gen X and Y'ers in leadership positions. We've also begun to assist critical community institutions (community centers and the like) with their generational changes in leadership. In both these efforts, I am

struck by how important it is to prioritize and make explicit the building of intergenerational ties.

Finally, we have to learn when and how to exit gracefully. While we're worried that some of our younger colleagues may lack our commitment to social change, they're probably worried that we'll never step aside. Each of us may need a different path, but at some point we have to let those who follow take the reins and lead us into the future. If we fail to do so, the next generation may well get tired of waiting for leadership opportunities, and turn away from the nonprofit sector. That is a risk none of us can afford.

At the same time, many of my contemporaries have never made much in salary, and lack resources for retirement. Philanthropy must help craft thoughtful transition strategies and support for these longtime leaders, who can still contribute for many years to come.

It is too early to write my generation's epitaph, but it's not too early to care about what our enduring legacy might be. How we handle this transitional period is the real test of our commitment to community and to social change. □