

TRUE SOLE STORIES

How real grassroots organizations

SHIFTED

income from grants to individual donations

CREATED and
sustained an effective and
diverse coalition

MOVED

from an all-volunteer to
a staffed organization

TRANSFORMED

an issue-oriented board into a
governing board of directors

told by the leaders who made the changes.



ENVIRONMENTAL
SUPPORT CENTER

www.envsc.org



INSTITUTE
FOR CONSERVATION
LEADERSHIP

www.icl.org

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This publication was written and edited by Beth Waterhouse and the SOLE-SE team.

BETH WATERHOUSE is a writer, editor, and teacher whose mission is to bring wholeheartedness and the power of story and poetry to environmental issues.

SOLE-SE Team:

Jim Abernathy, Environmental Support Center

Ana Arriaza, Environmental Support Center

Courtney Carlson, Institute for Conservation Leadership

Judy Hatcher, Environmental Support Center

Dianne Russell, Institute for Conservation Leadership

Baird Straughan, Institute for Conservation Leadership

Copyright © 2006 by the Institute for Conservation Leadership and the Environmental Support Center. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Upon appropriate request, we typically grant permission to use materials for non-remunerated purposes. Please direct your written requests to us via email or fax. No permission to use is hereby granted by this notice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION *PAGE 2*

Proven Results

SHIFTING *PAGE 5*

income from grants to individual donations: Appalachian Voices

CREATING *PAGE 10*

and sustaining an effective and diverse coalition: ADEM Reform Coalition

MOVING *PAGE 15*

from an all-volunteer to a staffed organization: West Atlanta Watershed Alliance

TRANSFORMING *PAGE 20*

an issue-oriented board into a governing board of directors: Dogwood Alliance

PROVEN RESULTS

from Strengthening Organizations and Leaders for the Environment – Southeast (SOLE-SE)

In 2002, Jack Vanderryn was Program Officer for the Environment at the Moriah Fund, and a leader of foundation representatives working to protect the environment in the Southeastern United States. One of his

SOLE-SE HELPED BUILD THEIR INTERNAL OPERATIONS AND INCREASE THEIR IMPACT ON THE GROUND. THESE STORIES SHOW THE POWER OF STRENGTHENING LEADERS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND COALITIONS.

main concerns was the viability of environmental organizations there.

"Here was this region with the greatest biodiversity in the nation...but with some of the least foundation and other financial support for environmental groups...and with many small, somewhat unsophisticated organizations which were overstretched. They needed a program to build themselves into sustainable organizations."

Jack and other foundation representatives, including the Merck Family Fund and the Town Creek Foundation, addressed the issue. They turned to Dianne Russell at the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) and Jim Abernathy at the Environmental Support Center (ESC), and asked them to put together a program which would produce measurably stronger organizations. The two organizations created Strengthening

Organizations and Leaders for the Environment – Southeast (SOLE-SE).

"We were excited about the possibility of creating a regional program that offered a wide range of support, from short turnaround grants for grassroots groups to full-year intensive programs for larger ones," says Jim Abernathy, of the Environmental Support Center. "We wanted to broaden coalitions to include communities of color and other constituencies. And we saw real value in using ICL's Benchmarking Workbook and a joint evaluation approach to measure the impact of our efforts."

After a year of exploration and trial programming, SOLE-SE launched its first programs in 2003. Over the next four years, it provided:

- * 75 grants from ESC's Training and Organizational Assistance program for individual organizations, group training, and coalition building
- * Grants from ESC's two-year Leadership and Enhanced Assistance Program (LEAP) for six organizations
- * ICL's yearlong Complete Fundraiser Program for 18 organizations
- * ICL's seven-month Executive Director Leadership Program for 16 groups
- * ICL's Complete Organizer Program for 16 organizations
- * 18 ICL one-day workshops or outreach sessions attended by more than 100 organizations
- * ICL custom-designed consulting services to ten organizations
- * ICL facilitation of two coalition efforts.

WE WERE EXCITED ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATING A REGIONAL PROGRAM THAT OFFERED A WIDE RANGE OF SUPPORT, FROM SHORT TURNAROUND GRANTS FOR GRASSROOTS GROUPS TO FULL-YEAR INTENSIVE PROGRAMS FOR LARGER ONES.

All in all, SOLE-SE provided over 290 different services to more than 130 organizations, touching more than 800

IN ITS FIRST FOUR YEARS, SOLE-SE WAS GENEROUSLY SUPPORTED BY:

- *THE EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION OF AMERICA*
- *FRED STANBACK*
- *THE CURTIS AND EDITH MUNSON FOUNDATION*
- *THE MARY REYNOLDS BABCOCK FOUNDATION*
- *THE MERCK FAMILY FUND*
- *THE MORJAH FUND*
- *THE OAK HILL FUND*
- *THE TOWN CREEK FOUNDATION*
- *THE Z. SMITH REYNOLDS FOUNDATION*

leaders working to protect the health of communities and ecosystems in the Southeast.

And the results? Those are best illustrated by the organizations themselves. In this publication, we highlight four organizations which used SOLE-SE services. The stories show how SOLE-SE helped build their internal operations and increase their impact on the ground. They show the power of strengthening leaders, organizations, and coalitions – for this and future generations.

For more information, contact Judy Hatcher at the Environmental Support Center (202) 331-9700 or Baird Straughan at the Institute for Conservation Leadership (301) 270-2900. We'd love to see similar results in your organization. ■

FROM FUNDRAISING CRISIS TO STABILITY

Regional Organization Shifts from Grants to Individual Donations

Most nonprofits try to diversify their revenue. Few have succeeded so dramatically, or so quickly, as Appalachian Voices, an organization which empowers people to protect the region's rich natural and cultural heritage. Driven by cutbacks in foundation support, Appalachian Voices more than doubled its individual donor income in the space of two years, while maintaining its existing staff, and proving that individual donors offer the biggest fundraising opportunity for environmental nonprofits.

Formed in 1997, Appalachian Voices was in the midst of rapid growth when the economic contraction hit. Mary Anne Hitt, the organization's first development director, remembers it well.

"Right about 2002, when we had a \$300,000 budget, four of our five foundation supporters suddenly stopped funding us. Three closed down

Appalachian Voices Founded in 1997

Mission: A regional organization protecting the natural and cultural heritage of the Appalachian Mountains by addressing air pollution, mountaintop removal coal mining, and forest management.

Results: Appalachian Voices was a leader in the coalition that passed the North Carolina Clean Smokestacks Act in 2002 – cleaning up emissions from coal-fired power plants.

SOLE-SE services used:

- * ESC Loan Fund
- * ESC TOA grants
- * ICL Complete Fundraiser Program
- * ICL Executive Director Leadership Program

altogether or eliminated the entire program on which we'd relied. When the budget mostly pays staff and you suddenly lose a large percentage of projected income, your only options are to lay off staff or very quickly raise revenue.

"We took austerity measures," recalls Mary Anne. "All employees took unpaid leave and all went to 3/4 pay. I encouraged people to find other work in their open times. That was the price of those months."



Mary Anne Hitt and prominent NC business leader Philip Blumenthal, at an AV press conference in Raleigh in March 2005.

And how does an organization go through this kind of turnaround and still hold its staff together? "Part of it," recalls Mary Anne, "is having a plan, a light at the end of the tunnel. You go with honesty, leave no one in the dark. Keep good communication with the staff and board, and compile the information they need. Have a small group make the plan together so they are vested in it."

During this time, Appalachian Voices took out a low-interest loan from the Environmental Support Center (ESC) to hire its first Development Director.

Once hired, Mary Anne attended the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) Complete Fundraiser Program, at low cost thanks to a Training and Organizational Assistance (TOA) grant from ESC.

"The Complete Fundraiser put forth the idea of raising money from individual donors. It is a stable strategy, and reliable, and we also came to understand that it could enhance our political power. We realized that if you profess to be truly grassroots, you must have people behind you financially... it's one measure of representing the public interest."

Fundraising became a major focus. "I did a couple of things," Mary Anne remembers. "I kept the grant proposals going out, yet I focused more of my time on individuals —

major donors. Getting more members and taking better care of them became a priority; we bought a better database to track renewals and appeals. We also focused on individual donors who have family foundations.

"In 2002, foundation support was 56% of our revenue, and by 2005, that figure was down to 29%," Hitt explains. How does an organization survive such a decrease? "The biggest leap in the revenue mix came from major donors, whose contributions grew from 32% of the budget in 2002 to 58% in 2005. Meanwhile, the total budget grew from \$300,000 to \$500,000."

Those involved in Appalachian Voices believe that this shift to a broader membership base improved their advocacy work. Mary Anne describes this ripple effect. "We've been calling those who support us financially and asking, 'Can you act?' and they're excited to do so. This, in turn, sometimes helps them grow from members to major donors."

APPALACHIAN VOICES MORE THAN DOUBLED ITS INDIVIDUAL DONOR INCOME IN THE SPACE OF TWO YEARS, WHILE MAINTAINING ITS EXISTING STAFF, AND PROVING THAT INDIVIDUAL DONORS OFFER THE BIGGEST FUNDRAISING OPPORTUNITY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL NONPROFITS.

A base of major donors and a better financial management system also gives Mary Anne a feeling of financial stability. "There is not the daily worry. So many non-profits just cross their fingers and hold their breath until the grants come in. Financial management and personnel planning make a huge difference, because you see changes from a lot farther out. You can set benchmarks such as 'this donor has to come through by this time,' and you can make corrections.

Appalachian Voices Income Sources



"One turning point came near the end of 2003, when we realized we were in trouble. Our austerity measures went for about six months that year. Then about November or December of 2004, a couple of significantly large individual donations came through, and I felt we had pulled out of that very scary place. Meanwhile, I felt that individual gifts were more reliable—sustainable—and I was much more confident about my projections. It's also important to note that we did get a couple of formal foundation grants in at that time. By 2005, we had increased our major donor percentage to 58%. I think you could say we then made a philosophical shift about the fundraising direction."

THE COMPLETE FUNDRAISER PUT FORTH THE IDEA OF RAISING MONEY FROM INDIVIDUAL DONORS... IT COULD ENHANCE OUR POLITICAL POWER WE REALIZED THAT IF YOU PROFESS TO BE TRULY GRASSROOTS, YOU MUST HAVE PEOPLE BEHIND YOU FINANCIALLY... IT'S ONE MEASURE OF REPRESENTING THE PUBLIC INTEREST.

In 2004, Mary Anne became executive director. "I'd have to say that in my whole nonprofit environmental career, the SOLE-SE trainings—ICL's

Executive Director Leadership Program and the Complete Fundraiser Program—were two of the most influential and helpful experiences. We go into these positions of responsibility as well-meaning activists, but likely with no training in the specific aspects of the job. You think of financial management as 'this mysterious realm.' But I found I could learn strategies and tools, and suddenly it was much less overwhelming, much more manageable. I wish everyone could go through these programs. Leaders should plan for this kind of training in their budgets."

Mary Anne herself was able to attend these SOLE-SE trainings because of Training and Organizational Assistance (TOA) grants from ESC. It was this combination of services that helped Appalachian Voices.



Appalachian Voices mobilizes donors and activists for its volunteer nights.

"One of the reasons that SOLE-SE is such a success is its three-part focus: on the environment, the grassroots, and the South," says Mary Anne. "In SOLE-SE, we are all in the same boat and there's no waste of time on irrelevant ideas. Plus ESC makes it affordable. I honestly don't know where I would be today without these programs."

Mary Anne sees a stronger Appalachian Voices now. "When you come out of an organizational turnaround time like that and you're all still standing—well, it forces you to focus on what you contributed and what you have to contribute. Looking back, I can see that this shift to individual donors was parallel to our grassroots mission all along, and now, in all ways, Appalachian Voices asks, 'How are we engaging individuals, members and volunteers to achieve our mission?'"

IN SOLE-SE, WE ARE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT AND THERE'S NO WASTE OF TIME ON IRRELEVANT IDEAS. PLUS ESC MAKES IT AFFORDABLE. I HONESTLY DON'T KNOW WHERE I WOULD BE TODAY WITHOUT THESE PROGRAMS.

COALITION TO REFORM STATE GOVERNMENT

Alabama Organizations Unite and Succeed

Since 1982, Alabama's citizens and its environment have suffered at the hands of the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM), an agency which has often appeared to put economic interests above protection of the environment and public health. ADEM's negligence was well-documented; in one case, its employees learned that the groundwater under a community was contaminated with the carcinogen benzene, but because of "lack of resources" they didn't notify the homeowners until one child developed leukemia.

ADEM Reform Coalition Founded in 2002

Mission: To reform the Alabama Department of Environmental Management.

Membership: 45 organizations, including anti-poverty, inner-city, and rural farm groups.

Results to date: Numerous rule and regulatory changes, increased citizen access to the regulatory process, removal of the state agency's director, and reform of its strategic plan.

SOLE-SE services used:

- * ESC TOA grants for coalition work
- * ICL facilitation and consulting for coalitions

Citizens and environmental organizations complained regularly about ADEM's decisions, but the problems continued. "Environmental groups in Alabama had been reactive for a long time against pollution from a toxic well site, or a strip mine, or a particular hog farm," said Mark Johnston, Board President of the Alabama Rivers Alliance. "Folks here would

react to individual problems, but it used to stop there. I felt they needed to be proactive."

As a young man Mark had attended a two-week camp led by the legendary Chicago community organizer Saul Alinsky. In the summer of 2002, Mark took the bull by the horns and convened environmental leaders to discuss the need to fundamentally reform ADEM.

"How you begin is the most important thing you can do," comments Mark, and it helped that he had brought together "bright, sharp people who live their spirituality." That first summer weekend, Mark set forth "norms" that were important for building trust. These included operating by consensus, keeping internal discussions confidential, and "acting as one" when before the public. By the end of that first meeting they had drafted a blueprint for their vision of the future "Alabama Department of Environmental Protection."

The newly formed ADEM Reform Coalition (ARC) made use of the SOLE-SE program's support. Beth Stewart, executive director of the Cahaba River Society, identified three critical moments of SOLE-SE assistance.



Laying out the campaign calendar at the ARC 2004 campaign planning retreat.

The first occurred at the initial "summit," in the summer of 2002. The Environmental Support Center (ESC) provided funding for the direct expenses of the coalition event, and the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) furnished a facilitator. "Our facilitator from ICL probably puts in twice as much time before a big meeting as during the event itself," Beth explained. "He's good at focusing on what it is that we're trying to accomplish, then has great exercises for getting a group toward the end result. In just 2¹/₂ days that fall, we left with a common sense of purpose, tons of materials in our position statement, a plan for how to flesh out

and draft the blueprint, volunteers for specific actions, and a governing structure for the Coalition. I'd say that summit launched us.

"Another major turning point was some months later. By then, we were coordinating this diverse coalition by phone and e-mail, and personality conflicts naturally arose. I mean, you have Executive Directors who are all

strong people and in charge, and suddenly they have to make joint decisions. Again, SOLE-SE was instrumental in our getting past this and showed us that if we had a good process in place for making decisions, it would take care of the conflicts. Our consultant then helped us by facilitating a few conference calls to get over that hump.

"For example, silence on the phone can mean acceptance or dissent. We made the rule that silence did not necessarily mean consent and we started polling each other in the calls. Everyone had to take a turn and speak. That smoked out the various opinions and helped keep ideas out in the open.

"A third turning point for the ARC was a spring meeting when we again met at Camp McDowell. By this time, we wanted to do campaign planning for the next 18 months, and we had an incredibly productive weekend. It was un-

real! Looking back, this session led us deeply into the environmental justice work.

"Our facilitator took us down by Clear Creek and taught us power mapping. There we were on a sandy beach under the sycamore trees. He hung up a tarp and gave us different colored pieces of paper to create our power map. We 'put' the Governor of Alabama in the middle of the 'map' and tried to figure out who were our allies, undecideds, or opponents in influencing him, and then a strategy for getting to each person. Meanwhile, the creek running by reminded us why we were doing all of this.

"Then we all went back up to Mark Johnston's cabin and each took one goal and came up with detailed strategies. We made a timeline and worked together until it was one manageable 18-month timeline of strategies. The SOLE-SE support helped us use our best thinking."

One Blueprint strategy of the ADEM Reform Coalition is to get ADEM to increase (and welcome) public involvement.

*BEFORE, INDIVIDUALS
MIGHT TELL THEIR
STORIES BUT JUST RANT
AND RAVE NOW, WHEN
WE CAN POINT TO
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
REFORM, IT'S MORE
EFFECTIVE. THE MEDIA
LOVES US.*



ARC leaders map out the environmental justice sub-campaign.

*SOLE-SE... SHOWED US
THAT IF WE HAD A GOOD
PROCESS IN PLACE FOR
MAKING DECISIONS, IT
WOULD TAKE CARE OF
THE CONFLICTS.*

Alabama appoints members to the Environmental Management Commission, which used to mean seven men appointed by the governor and what Mark refers to as the "regulated community," while the public could not speak. Now, ARC has won the right for the public to be heard.

"Each time, we use one issue," explains Mark, "and we do an outstanding presentation on it from a local group's perspective. Then we address specifically how that problem points to reform at ADEM. Before, individuals might tell their stories but just rant and rave. Now, when we can point to recommendations for reform, it's more effective. The media loves us."

ARC'S LEADERS HAVE LEARNED THAT SHARING THE CREDIT IS CRUCIAL. THEY NOTE THAT ARC'S SUCCESS COMES FROM MANY ORGANIZATIONS... AND THEY CONTINUE TO BROADEN ITS MEMBERSHIP, AND TO GIVE INDIVIDUALS A VOICE.

ARC's successes caused industries to push back. "They make plenty of money from the system and don't want to lose it. Last year, ARC got the Alabama Legislature to consider a bill to protect environmental justice—ensuring that poor or African American communities did not receive a disproportionate amount of pollution. It scared the industries, and they formed an army of lobbyists. We learned later that they raised \$4 million to lobby against it."

ARC's leaders have learned that sharing the credit is crucial. They note that ARC's success comes from many organizations, such as the Alabama Environmental Council, Alabama Arise, Mobile Bay Watch/Baykeeper, Sierra Club, Friends of Rural Alabama, the Alabama chapter of the African-American Environmental Justice Action Network and its many grassroots groups, among many others.

And they continue to broaden its membership, and to give individuals a voice. Mark says, "What's really true is that it does come down to that Margaret Mead quote—believing that a few dedicated people can honestly make all the difference." ■

MOVING FROM AN ALL-VOLUNTEER TO A STAFFED ORGANIZATION

Atlanta Alliance Uses SOLE-SE to Go to the Next Level

Not all volunteer organizations professionalize, and many who try it stumble. The West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA) had more than ten years of volunteer success behind it when its leaders decided to make the leap. "I guess we form organizations to carry the work beyond the original group—to begin a legacy," says Na'Taki Osborne, WAWA's chairperson. At that moment, WAWA's leaders also came across SOLE-SE and used its consulting support and workshops to help it through the transition.

Founded informally by experienced organizers in the early 1990s, the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance was a true grassroots alliance with decisions by consensus and with leaders ensuring that every voice is heard. That organizational style worked well in the beginning. "At first," says Na'Taki, "WAWA was entirely volunteer. Although we had no formal structure, we called ourselves a

West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA)

Founded in 1995

Mission: An African American-led organization that works to protect greenspace, water, and other quality of life resources in southwest Atlanta.

Results: WAWA has acquired and now stewards 350 acres of green space, all as undeveloped urban forest. It has educated Atlanta residents about watershed issues such as sewer separation, clean streams, and invasive plant species, and to be watchdogs of their community.

SOLE-SE services used:

- * ESC LEAP Program
- * ESC Technology Resources Program
- * ICL Board University

board. We shared all the work and just pitched in, whether something was our strength or not."

"WAWA was different from other groups," says Bruce Morton, who joined as a volunteer before becoming the first executive director. "And this is important because it's holistic and based in a smaller locale. We relate as humans to a watershed, and we see how our lives impact it. Birders, bikers, hikers—a broad base—all come together with the watershed in mind."

"As volunteers, we were successful," Na'Taki continues. "We created community education and conservation initiatives and raised a million dollars before we were even incorporated! That money was used to save some park space in our community."

AT FIRST, WAWA WAS ENTIRELY VOLUNTEER ALTHOUGH WE HAD NO FORMAL STRUCTURE, WE CALLED OURSELVES A BOARD. WE SHARED ALL THE WORK AND JUST PITCHED IN, WHETHER SOMETHING WAS OUR STRENGTH OR NOT.

Louversia Wiggins, one of the Alliance's long-time leaders, adds her memory of the time WAWA campaigned on the issue of sewer water separation. "The City of Atlanta didn't want to spend the money to separate wastewater from storm water. We argued, and finally the citizens won. Schools were involved—children—all of us."

WAWA's early success attracted community attention. "People were calling and trying to replicate what we were doing," Bruce remembers. "A call might come from a neighborhood group within the watershed where a small creek runs through their yards and causes stream bank erosion." Or even from the City of Atlanta. "They'd let WAWA know of some sewer work and we would inform the community. We'd broker, city to community or back and forth, being a bridge. Our challenge," he says, "was to build capacity and still address all stakeholders."

Louversia remembers a transition in WAWA's thinking. "We had an informal way of working and, for me, everything seemed to work well. But we realized that if the organization was going to go forward, we needed more of a structure. Just because we jelled as a group doesn't mean that the next group will work well together."

Bruce and Louversia were in Washington, DC lobbying for the National Wildlife Federation—to protect caribou in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Here they learned about the Environmental Support Center (ESC) and its leadership program—LEAP (Leadership and Enhanced Assistance Program)—a part of SOLE-SE. ESC's LEAP team came to take a closer look at the Alliance and made some suggestions. Bruce says it was a pleasant surprise to also receive an ESC technology grant that enabled them to create a computer network.

WE HAD AN INFORMAL WAY OF WORKING AND EVERYTHING SEEMED TO WORK WELL BUT WE REALIZED THAT IF THE ORGANIZATION WAS GOING TO GO FORWARD, WE NEEDED MORE OF A STRUCTURE



WAWA board members, family and volunteers attended multiple workshops at River Rally 2005.

Na'Taki recalls that the contact with ESC moved WAWA into leadership development work. "LEAP funded a strategic planning process that summer (2004) and we were able to create a three-month, six-month, and then a one-year plan. A year later, we were able to attend the Board University workshop put on by the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) when they were in Atlanta. "All this happened at absolutely the right time for WAWA. We wanted to expand our impact. We'd had a good track record of engaging the community, but now as we bring other volunteers in we are more set up to receive them."

"We wanted to be able to pass the baton," Louversia adds, "and for that you need structure. If there are no building blocks in place, new people have to re-invent the wheel and start all over."

WE WANTED TO BE ABLE TO PASS THE BATON, AND FOR THAT YOU NEED STRUCTURE. IF THERE ARE NO BUILDING BLOCKS IN PLACE, NEW PEOPLE HAVE TO RE-INVENT THE WHEEL AND START ALL OVER.

Louversia can recall a time when ideas started to change. "It was during our strategic planning process. We were creating a timeline of all we had accomplished, and the consultant was amazed. We hadn't realized how much we had done as a group until it was reflected back to us. We thought, 'Wow, we've done all of that?'"

"There came a point," recalls Na'Taki, "where we had to move forward because of the momentum behind us. With the right structure, it started to work. People were out there working on tasks and they began returning with their work done. We started to hear, 'We're not meeting often enough,' and we realized that we could be even more effective. I've been in a number of organizations and roles, and you never hear that there are not enough meetings!"

"What finally made the difference," Na'Taki continues, "was focusing on the development of an annual plan. Now that idea is engrained in us as an organization and we're work-

ing on a two- to three-year plan. We are clearer and more deliberate in teasing out our ideas. Our last planning retreat was even facilitated by our own members and it worked really well. We left happy about our vision for the organization."

These WAWA leaders agree that outside guidance has been essential. "Without LEAP," remarks Louversia Wiggins, "without the financial support and all, we would not have done organizational development work or planning. LEAP gave us good guidelines and we're still getting training. Now we seek it out." Na'Taki adds, "With this initial leap in organizational development, we learned that capacity building is ongoing work—that it has to continue for the strength of the organization."

"The future is what is important," Louversia continues. "In a city like Atlanta—basically a concrete inner city—you want to preserve things. We're doing so much tearing down of Mother Nature that it's important to have places to congregate, to get out and walk. It is crucial to have green spaces. What's most important? Always being a steward of the community, that's important." ■

WHAT FINALLY MADE THE DIFFERENCE WAS FOCUSING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ANNUAL PLAN. NOW THAT IDEA IS ENGRAINED IN US AS AN ORGANIZATION AND WE'RE WORKING ON A TWO- TO THREE-YEAR PLAN. WE ARE CLEARER AND MORE DELIBERATE IN TEASING OUT OUR IDEAS.

FROM AN ACTIVIST-LED TO A GOVERNING BOARD

Amid Turmoil, Forest Activist Organization Uses SOLE-SE to Transform Its Board

In 2003, the Dogwood Alliance was immersed in a ground-breaking campaign. The small organization aimed to force office giant Staples to stop buying from timber companies that destroyed Southern forests.

At the same time, inside, the organization was in turmoil – its budget in deficit, its staff stretched to the limit, its board in passionate disagreement over strategy. There was no way to postpone either the external or the internal issues. As the campaign whirred to a climax, the Alliance board and staff made critical strategic choices and re-crafted the board.

Today, Dogwood's board governance is lean, focused and surprisingly effective, like the corporate accountability campaigns the organization runs. This story describes how Dogwood's leaders brought about that change, with assistance from SOLE-SE.

By the late 1980s in the southeastern United States, forests began to disappear to feed chip mills – massive sawmills that turn whole logs into wood chips. One chip mill is capable of processing millions of acres of trees, and around the chip mills mature forests



Ginger Dollar became board chair and provided strong leadership during a period of transition.

were being decimated and turned into monoculture tree farms.

Dogwood Alliance arose to support the local grassroots groups fighting the chip mills. In the late 1990s it grew quickly to ten staff positions, and added a new strategic focus on markets – pressuring retailers not to buy unsustainably harvested wood products.

But after 9/11 and the resulting stock market decline, foundations pulled back, and grant funding was tough to find. Dogwood Alliance lost four of five of their top funders in one year. The organization cut back to six staff people on 60% salary. The financial crisis caught board members off guard and generated hard feelings.

Ginger Dollar was Board Chair. She remembers the early meetings of the Dogwood Alliance Board of Directors as "kind of painful meetings where they seldom stayed on the agenda. They went off on tangents, but no one fully understood why."

"About then," she remembers, "Sarah Hodgdon went to an Executive Director Leadership Program for advocacy organizations led by the Institute for Conservation Leadership (ICL) and she realized that focus was necessary, above all. It was decided that the focus should be on the market campaign work, reducing work on community organizing and other policy work."

After a passionate battle, the majority of the board decided to make a strategic choice and deemphasize their support

Dogwood Alliance
Founded in 1996

Mission: To defend Southern forests, through market campaigns that hold producers and retailers accountable.

Results: With its partners, Dogwood has forced Staples and Office Depot to sign agreements to phase out products originating from endangered forests, commit to at least 30% post-consumer recycled content on all products, and work with suppliers to end unsustainable forestry practices. Recently, it reached an industry-leading agreement with the Bowater timber company over its practices on the ground.

SOLE-SE services used:

- * ESC TOA grants
- * ICL Complete Fundraiser Program
- * ICL Executive Director Leadership Program
- * ICL Board University

for grassroots groups, concentrating resources instead on market campaigns. The decision to focus the program left scars – several of the dissenters left the organization, and Ginger learned some hard lessons about being a board leader.

"I had to understand my role as Chair of the Board and Sarah in her role," Ginger recalls. "Where I was once supervised by Sarah, now I was Sarah's supervisor. Where I had had open friendships with staff, now I had to compartmentalize myself and not be around staff socially, certainly not to talk about work problems. It was weird, and hard, yet it was one of the best life-learning experiences I've had."

At the same time, the board transformed itself. "Our program-focusing decision," recalls Sarah Hodgdon, "made us look at the whole organization. It also required us to change

from a grassroots activist sort of board. Prior to 2002, the board meetings had been energetic, contentious, and mostly focused on program work. Our Board Chair was doing most of the work, but now we needed a board that could build an organization strong enough to negotiate with multi-million dollar companies."

Ginger and Sarah began to suggest changes in the board structure. The board itself drafted operating principles and named four committees to meet quarterly. They revised the by-laws to be clear about board term limits. This created a number of openings, and the members devised a board assessment to identify skills

needed. They wanted fundraising ability, connections to funders, someone with a corporate background, financial management skills, legal expertise, but also grassroots rep-

resentation. They recruited members based on these needs. After six months, they had their first new board members, and kept plowing forward.

"Now, I'm pleased to say that we have a very functional board that uses the shared governance approach. This includes rotating leadership, operating principles, working committees, and careful financial review," explains Sarah.

They came to call shared governance the "no surprise" model of board management, and initiated detailed board member orientations—teaching new members about their role and the purpose of committee work. It also became a fundraising board, where members were expected to make personal donations as well as help find other revenue sources.

Getting to this new model of governance was not without its rough spots. "In the process of change," remembers Hodgdon, "some staff, some board members, and some core volunteers left the Dogwood Alliance." She remembers those as "exciting times but hard times," and reflects on a lot of trial and error. "The board moved away from working with the whole staff to working with me. It took a time for staff people to understand shared governance, to give up this board connection directly and see the benefits of a more sophisticated system with really big goals. For such a system, you need structure. It's a leap from being one kind of organization to another."

NOW WE HAVE A VERY FUNCTIONAL BOARD THAT USES THE SHARED GOVERNANCE APPROACH. THIS INCLUDES ROTATING LEADERSHIP, OPERATING PRINCIPLES, WORKING COMMITTEES, AND CAREFUL FINANCIAL REVIEW.



*OUR PROGRAM-
FOCUSING DECISION
MADE US LOOK AT THE
WHOLE ORGANIZATION. IT
ALSO REQUIRED US TO
CHANGE FROM A
GRASSROOTS ACTIVIST SORT
OF BOARD. ...WE NEEDED
A BOARD THAT COULD
BUILD AN ORGANIZATION
STRONG ENOUGH TO
NEGOTIATE WITH MULTI-
MILLION DOLLAR
COMPANIES.*

A HUGE PART OF OUR SUCCESS (WAS) HAVING OUTSIDE SUPPORT PRECISELY WHEN WE NEEDED IT. AND ICL IS SO GOOD AT MATCHING UP THE TRAINING TO ORGANIZATIONS WHICH ARE OUR SIZE.

For such a transition to work, both women agree that outside assistance is important. Ginger calls it "essential," saying, "You can be too close to all of it. And no pun intended, but you really can't see the forest for the trees." Sarah adds, "That was a huge part of our success—having outside support precisely when we needed it. And ICL is so good at matching up the training to organizations which are our size. This seems to be because they at ICL study the pulse

of the region and know the groups well." Sarah also felt that follow-up was crucial. "I was on the phone all the time with ICL. This was huge for me, personally."

Ginger believes that the effort to strengthen the board benefits the organization's work, and ultimately the forest itself. "It has allowed our staff to focus, to work more effectively, both because they know where the next paycheck is coming from and they trust the Board behind them. We laid the foundation for the staff to do what they can do, and they seem to be really happy." ■



The Cumberland Plateau, where the Dogwood Alliance's market campaigns have resulted in better management practices in the forests.



ENVIRONMENTAL
SUPPORT CENTER

(202) 331-9700
www.envsc.org



INSTITUTE
FOR CONSERVATION
LEADERSHIP

Eastern Office:
(301) 270-2900

Western Office:
(406) 582-1838
www.icl.org