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The Power of an Intergenerational Movement
An adult reflects on organizing together with youth against militarism

By Susan Quinlan

Most social change work will only be effective if young people are involved. While there are many reasons why an adult community organizer might want to work with youth, I believe this is the most important one. And it’s especially true when the issues we are organizing around directly impact youth. Youth are the leaders of tomorrow, but they are often the most effective leaders of today as well.

There are lots of reasons why adults might want to work with youth; not least among them is that young people tend to be energetic, creative and fun. Adults may also feel a sense of satisfaction when given the opportunity to share the skills they’ve developed over the years with the next generation. And any adult who is open to learning is guaranteed to receive countless invaluable lessons from young people.

Over the last several years I have had the privilege of working with an amazing succession of young leaders who have been part of BAY-Peace: Better Alternatives for Youth, a RESIST grantee. BAY-Peace is an organization dedicated to developing the leadership of young people of color to resist militarism in general and aggressive military recruiting in our schools in particular.

Because BAY-Peace works in collaboration with a wide range of truly outstanding youth-based organizations in and around Oakland, California, I have been able to learn about effective youth organizing from some of the most inspiring adults in the business—many of whom have grown up in the very organizations they now facilitate.

As a middle class, middle-aged white woman, my own experience combines intergenerational and cross-cultural challenges that are my constant companions as I struggle to work effectively with working class youth of color. In this article I will try to touch on some of the keys to successful youth organizing I have witnessed among the movement leaders I’ve had the joy of working with. For the most part, I believe that the practices that lead to successful intergenerational continued on page two
organizing would greatly strengthen adult-based organizing efforts as well.

Come from a place of love

One of the qualities that is most apparent among adults who work successfully with youth is that they truly love the young people they are organizing, teaching and facilitating. Loving someone means affirming who they are, regardless of how they may be performing at any given moment. This love can be expressed with a smile, with words or with actions that show we are there for them through all the ups and downs they are experiencing.

“It’s the best feeling in the world,” says Luis Montoya, a BAY-Peace Youth Leader, “when love, rather than authority, motivates the relationships between an adult activist and the youth they work with.”

Love also compels us to connect with the whole person, with their culture, family and school. Young people are far more than individuals; they are usually integral parts of their families, they are often students and they are members of cultures that may be disrespected by the dominant society.

Youth organizers who are most successful build bridges with students’ families and schools, and they take every opportunity to connect with and affirm the cultures that young people are a part of. For adults working across cultural differences, this is particularly important. The more we know about, and show respect for, the cultures of the youth we work with, the more trust we can build with them.

Create true power sharing

In intergenerational organizing work, it’s important to struggle with adultism to create accountable systems of genuine power sharing.

“ Youth step into intergenerational spaces with a sense that adults have the power, are in charge, will have their ideas listened to more readily, will be believed over the word or perspective of youth,” says Pablo Paredes, who works with the American Friends Service Committee and runs a migrant youth organizing project called 67 Sueños.

“The level of disparity in privilege and authority should be acknowledged by adult allies if the space is going to radically differ from the disempowering experiences that youth are accustomed to having with adults.”

BAY-Peace Youth Organizer Phuong Thao Vuong says that to truly develop youth power, adults need to invest energy in the success of youth.

“True power-sharing might look like co-facilitating workshops or even handing the reins to youth to present or lead meetings,” says Phuong. “It can be tough and require more time and..."
preparation to build up to that, yet it's the point of being an adult ally.”

One way of countering this “disparity in privilege” is to provide logistical support for youth activism. In order for young people to fit activism into the many challenging realities that already crowd their lives, they need support that may differ from the kind of support needed by adults.

When I think of logistical support I picture organizers from the California youth organization Youth Together with cars full of laughing high school students who build community on the way to and from meetings or actions. I picture the East Bay organization Homies Empowerment Program building their weekly meetings around a shared meal. I picture stipends and bus passes and rolling coolers stocked with water for marches.

**Having fun as a winning strategy**

Years of movement organizing can accustom the seasoned activist to a sense of drudgery that young people are not likely to put up with. In fact, we all think better, get along better and work more effectively when our meetings are livened up with icebreakers and social time. Getting outside, moving our bodies and connecting on a personal level are essential ingredients to engaging youth and adults in social change work. A quick game of “Ninja” can bring even our lowest energy group to hysterical laughter in minutes.

“Positive relationships with peers and adults are a reason why youth stay engaged,” says Phuong Thao Vuong. “Unfortunately, there aren’t that many spaces for youth to just enjoy each other’s company and contribute to their community. Organizing work provides that option.”

Young people, by definition, are on an exponential learning curve. Their skills and maturity level can change radically from one year to the next. If adults are to engage young people over the long haul, we need to nurture growth by creating organizational structures that provide increasing responsibilities over time.

AYPAL, an enormously effective community organizing project dedicated to building the grassroots leadership of low-income Asian/Pacific Islander youth in Oakland, offers several tiers of involvement that range from drop-in to membership, to internship to staff. This kind of structure can be formal or informal, but the important thing is that young people are able to grow into greater leadership positions from year to year.

**Giving and getting inspiration**

I will end with what may be the most important feature of effective intergenerational organizing — inspiration. When young people can feel the passion of someone who is dedicated to a cause over the long haul, they are much more likely to catch the spark themselves. Sometimes an adult’s personal charisma shines strong enough to capture the attention of youth. Other times it will be visual art or spoken word that will awaken a young person’s imagination.

We are nurturing the leaders who will make all the difference in the coming years. Affirming their power out loud and holding up a mirror for them to see the true strength that they possess may be the greatest gift that intergenerational organizers can offer the next generation of activists.

Forming a powerful connection is always a lot easier if young people can identify with their adult allies, or perhaps if they can feel the adult allies identifying with them. The important thing is for adults to let young people know that they can make a difference, that the world will be better as a result of their collective and individual actions.

I remain inspired and challenged by a quote from an Australian aboriginal woman, who said, “If you are coming to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you are coming because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Adults who have struggled in social justice movements for years or decades may become discouraged and need to be reminded of this themselves. Sometimes working with youth can be the best antidote to despair.

Susan Quinlan is the Coordinator of BAY-Peace (Better Alternatives for Youth), a RESIST grantee in Oakland, California. Learn more at www.baypeace.org.
Intergenerational Work in Hmong Communities
Taking the long view of community-based LGBTQ organizing

By Oskar Ly and Chong Moua

The Hmong community is made up of a complex and beautiful connection of culture, traditions and respect for elders and clan leaders. Hmong elders and clan leaders are the keepers of our community and have the responsibility of ensuring our culture and traditions live on through new generations. Because homosexuality and gender nonconformity do not fit the constrictions of our cultural norms, many members of the Hmong community have perceived anything LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer) to be nonexistent, extremely offensive or taboo.

Several LGBTQ Hmong community members started Shades of Yellow (SOY) in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 2003 as a social gathering and safe space for Hmong LGBTQ people. We used the safe spaces to hold deep conversations about issues LGBTQ Hmong face at home, school, work and in the community—and to socialize and build solidarity. These informal conversations typically took place over potluck dinners, at volleyball picnics and during casual meetings over coffee. We wanted to support one another to better understand cultural assumptions within our own complicated personal identities.

As more and more Hmong LGBTQ people were coming to the SOY space, the conversation shifted from creating a safe space to discussing how to create lasting change within our community. Intergenerational organizing work around LGBTQ issues within our community soon became one of our most important areas—and it has also been our most difficult challenge yet.

In 2006, SOY transitioned from an informal group to a formal organization. We work now to support a community of empowered Hmong LGBTQ people to create positive cultural and social changes that enhance our lives and communities. To do this, we know we need to build bridges across generational lines.

Interconnection

Mainstream society in the US tends to place a big emphasis on individualism, whereas the Hmong view our communities as existing as a whole. One act by a single person is reflected on his or her family, clan and entire community.

As a Hmong person, it is very important to have a respectable and honorable role and place in our community. Respect is gained by upholding the traditions and norms of the culture. This unique cultural difference has kept our communities strong, but at the same time it has caused fear for those who do not and cannot follow traditions because of who they are.

To come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, Hmong people face the potential of intense rejection. They may be disowned, not just by family but by their clan and entire community. As you can imagine, coming out is extremely difficult among a people who value culture and community so much. And so is intergenerational organizing.

Gaining the support and understanding of our elders is the most difficult challenge we still face. To challenge Hmong traditions and gender norms also means challenging our very own culture and the most respected people in our communities: our elders and clan leaders.

"With elders, it's hard for them to understand us youth," says Huey Lee, a Shades of Yellow youth member. "We would be challenging our culture if we talked about LGBTQ issues."

Parents of LGBTQ Hmong youth are primarily fearful of "losing face" and being pegged as disgraces. Parents are also concerned with the safety and future of their LGBTQ children if those sons and daughters are unable to have a genetic family of their own to care for them once they age.

Through conversations with elders, we've learned that there were Hmong individuals in villages in Laos and Thailand who never married and lived alone, away from the main village. Common perception of these people was that they were transsexual and or asexual—but continued on page five
not lesbian, gay or bisexual because they did not have relationships or behaviors that outwardly displayed such identities. Many Hmong elders today believe that the LGBTQ identity is nonexistent within our traditions.

Encouraging an LGBTQ-inclusive lens among other Hmong or Southeast Asian community organizations has also been a challenge. The pace of these conversations depends greatly on the generation of that organization’s leadership as well as the organizational direction. This is work that has never been deeply and intentionally explored by any of the organizations within these discussions but has begun happening slowly.

We know that being fully integrated in our community will be a long-term effort that needs to be collective. Recognition and inclusion as a Hmong LGBTQ organization may be a far and distant reach, but it remains one of the most important things we hope to accomplish through our work.

Transitions and growth

At first, intergenerational organizing was not the focus of our work. Just finding safe space for queer Hmong to socialize was the challenge. As SOY grew as an organization and more Hmong queer people and allies started to come out, the need for intergenerational work emerged.

We knew it would be a big challenge to start a conversation with the older generations. SOY still faces much rejection from the community, and it was not until individuals struggling with family asked for SOY’s assistance and support that we had willing elders and parents to participate in these difficult conversations.

Intergenerational work is happening on a small scale with individuals who are coming out to their families and relatives. Not every situation has been a success story—some youth have faced extreme isolation and have even taken their own lives—but these small ripples are slowly creating awareness among immediate families and friends.

“SOY has established a steppingstone for other Hmong LGBTQ [youth] by opening hearts and minds about awareness and acceptance,” says Sao Mee Xiong, mother of a Hmong gay son. “Our children are still very afraid to come out. Parents have had extremely harsh responses to LGBTQ children coming out.”

When it comes to family, the greatest challenge comes with intergenerational communication. There is a clear language barrier and a lack of LGBTQ linguistic context within the Hmong language.

“I was emotionally destroyed [when my son came out], but I realized this was my son, and I still loved him,” continues Sao Mee. “It is true, we have LGBTQ Hmong, but it is because of our extremely strict traditions that we have not opened up to accepting it.”

SOY’s approach emphasizes strengthening and empowering Hmong LGBTQ youth, especially as we’ve seen parents pulling youth out of our programs. This year we are also beginning to engage older LGBTQ adults who have left the Hmong community because of homophobia and disownment. Reconnecting Hmong LGBTQ generations among us in a positive way will open doors for the healing and rebuilding needed within our community.

Taking the long view

Traditionally, Hmong people have passed on history through oral storytelling and story cloths, and so it should come as no surprise that Hmong LGBTQ today connect and organize through the very same ways. Sharing personal stories and experiences through storytelling and artistic expressions have allowed us to share our stories and build more understanding. We try to be patient, knowing that each segment of the community we want to reach will require different approaches and support.

As a marginalized community, our LGBTQ constituency can be viewed with significant respect if we invest in other movements that our elders are concerned with. Advocating for our own causes cannot be our only concern, as we are all ultimately affected by the issues that affect our elders.

When intergenerational work involves a culture that is deeply rooted in traditions and cultural norms, change takes much more time. Hearts and minds take time to open and accept new ideas—especially ones that for centuries have been believed to be nonexistent or unacceptable. As young Hmong LGBTQ people, we organize with the knowledge that we have a shared stake in our entire community’s needs, vision and concerns—and we continue to be willing and ready to do hands-on work to make connections and support these causes.

Oskar Ly is the Interim Executive Director of Shades of Yellow, and Chong Moua works as Program Coordinator. Shades of Yellow, a RESIST grantee, is the first and only known Hmong LGBTQ organization. Visit them online at www.shadesofyellow.org.
We Aren’t Done and We’re in This Together
When we’re in for the long haul, no generation should exist in a vacuum

By Dan Berger and Andy Cornell

Editor’s Note: For five weeks in 2006, authors Dan Berger and Andy Cornell toured the eastern half of the United States to promote two books - Letters From Young Activists: Today’s Rebels Speak Out and Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity - and to get at least a cursory impression of sectors of the movement in this country. They synthesized some of their thoughts into an article that is published in full on the Left Turn website, www.left-turn.org. Read an excerpt of their thoughts on intergenerational organizing below.

Most people we met do not work in intergenerational groups or live intergenerational lives outside of tightly prescribed roles (such as teacher-student). This presents a challenge for activists and organizers of all ages, who constantly need to be looking to work with those older and younger.

Recognizing that the struggle is for the long haul means that no generation can or should exist in a political vacuum. While both younger and older folks bear the responsibility for this, the onus may indeed rest on older people to make themselves available; most young people we met were excited by the prospect of intergenerational discussions and groups but didn’t know where to find the older radicals in their area.

Intergenerational movements are not simply about people of various ages being in the same room. Instead, they are about building respectful relationships of mutual learning and teaching based on a long-haul approach to movement building.

In raising this issue, we saw three typical responses that are generally unhelpful to building intergenerational movements:

• The Nike Approach (Just Do It!): Older activists tell young people to just go out there, change the world and stop looking for validation from older people. But young folks aren’t looking for a go-ahead; we are out there, doing our best. Validation and encouragement from people we respect can bolster our resolve, but what we’re really looking for is mentorship, multigenerational commitment and solidarity.

• The Retired Approach: Several older activists echoed the sentiment that they did their best and now it was up to us. This abandonment masquerading as support is unhelpful in actually learning from the past and moving forward together because it serves to enforce a generational separation.

• The Obstructionist Approach: People with this position demand adherence to the politics and vision of the older generation as the prerequisite for any working relationship. This is where older allies committed to collaboration could be potentially helpful, proving that political divides are not inherently generational gaps.

A lack of intergenerational relationships and groups is apparent nationally and locally. In one town we visited, for instance, the “peace community” seemed to lack any relationship to anyone under 50 or to impoverished communities of color that are most directly affected by the war machine.

Yet when the younger folks went out by themselves to picket the recruiting station, they were able to successfully shut it down on two separate occasions.

Intergenerational movement building could be useful not only in expanding the base of people willing to engage in such confrontational tactics (and thereby hopefully contributing to hastening the war’s end) but also in trying to push other older people to work with and support youth leadership.

Young people, for our part, make it difficult for movement veterans to find us and assess our work when we organize only as temporary affinity groups that usually lack office space and sometimes even contact information. Expressing interest in building such ties is also important. When one of us off-handedly commented to a Students for a Democratic Society veteran and radical historian that many younger activists would appreciate being asked by organizers of his generation to have coffee or lunch and talk shop, he seemed genuinely surprised.

What young people don’t want to deal with is patronization or abandonment, continued on page seven
people who focus on their glory days or on lecturing "the young'uns." What young folks do want are older activists who remain steadfast in their resolve and organizing, who seek to draw out the lessons from their years in the struggle, who look to younger activists for inspiration and guidance while providing the same and who are focused on movement building.

Building on the more multigenerational roots of Southern organizing, two older organizers in Greensboro beautifully summed this up at an event in saying, "We aren't done, we're not leaving and we're in this together."


### Intergenerational Think Tank

In the summer of 2006, the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee held an Intergenerational Think Tank to explore how young people and adults can work together more effectively for social justice. At the Think Tank, a multiracial group of 27 people ranging in age from 15 to 65 discussed the need to develop new models to enhance intergenerational organizing, to create more space for young people doing the work now and to prepare young leaders to replace older adults as they move on or retire.

Some of the action steps for social justice groups trying to incorporate intergenerational organizing that Think Tank participants came up with are:

- Create a shared democratic space—shared power and decision-making.
- Do more skill-sharing and training in our work, especially across generations.
- Develop cross-generational co-mentorship programs.
- Do listening circles in our organizations about intergenerational tensions.
- Give people responsibility—expect truth from people and have systems of accountability.
- Do consciousness-raising—making folks aware of the need for intergenerational work through articles, conversations, letters, etc.
- Be intentional and speak about it when we are doing intergenerational work to make working this way the norm.
- Develop organizational structures that move towards equality in how we deal with pay, development and decision-making.
- Be clear about how organizational decisions get made, and at what level.

Excerpted from the report of the Highlander Research and Education Center Intergenerational Think Tank, 2006. Find out more: www.highlandercenter.org.

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RESIST awards grants six times a year to groups throughout the United States engaged in organizing for social, economic and environmental justice. Below we list a few grant recipients from our most recent allocation cycle in February of 2011, the first cycle with our new maximum grant award of $4,000. For more information, visit the RESIST website at www.resistinc.org or contact these groups directly.

**New York State Prisoner Justice Network**
33 Central Ave, Albany, New York 12210. www.nysprisonerjustice.org

Built out of a successful 2010 statewide conference, the New York State Prisoner Justice Network brings collective strength to bear on changing a system of mass incarceration, injustice and disrespect for the lives of loved ones that now prevails in New York. Fighting for the survival of families and communities, the Network facilitates communication between activists.

RESIST’s “Hell Yes!” grant of $4,000 will help the Network build individual and collective strength to challenge and change New York’s criminal legal system.

**Youth Art and Self-Empowerment Project**
PO Box 7691, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19101. www.yasproject.com

An organization led by young people who experienced life inside an adult jail and who are now leaders in their communities, the Youth Art and Self-Empowerment Project is building a youth-led movement to stop the trend of incarcerating youth under age 18 in adult jails. They organize to end the practice of automatically trying and incarcerating young people as adults.

A $4,000 “Hell Yes!” grant from RESIST will help YASP continue to reach out and work with youth locked up in Philadelphia jails—and to create new possibilities for youth around the city.

**Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice**
122 State Street, #405A, Madison, Wisconsin 53703. www.wnpj.org

The Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice facilitates activities, cooperation and communication among Wisconsin organizations and individuals working toward the creation of a sustainable world, free from violence and injustice. The Network concentrates on counter-recruitment work with youth, supporting immigrant rights and organizing for prison reform among other important antiwar and justice work.

RESIST’s $4,000 grant to WNPJ will allow the Network to continue supporting critical organizing in Wisconsin, as they’ve done recently with the occupation of the state capitol.

**Citizens for Alternatives to Radioactive Dumping**
144 Harvard SE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87106. www.cardnm.org

Citizens for Alternatives to Radioactive Dumping (CARD) works to educate and organize around issues of radioactive contamination. Founded in 1978, CARD expanded its work in the 1990s to include halting the widespread practice of dumping toxic and radioactive waste along the US/Mexico border.

RESIST’s grant of $3,000 will allow CARD to continue their scientific, community-based and legal work.