On September 17, Occupy Wall Street began in New York City. Ten days later, Tahirih Cahill, mother of two young children here in Boise, Idaho and wife of one of my son's childhood friends, logged into Facebook, set up a page, named it OccupyBoi, and sent it to a dozen friends.

Tahirih heard about Occupy Wall Street (OWS) through a Wisconsin friend and wondered why she heard nothing about something this big and exciting in the local or national news. She decided to set up a meeting on Friday in her home. Her brother-in-law, Travis, connected with students at Boise State. Overnight 600 people had signed on. An organizer with Food Not Bombs/Snake River Alliance called, they reserved the band shell at Julia Davis Park, got together for four hours, and planned the agenda for the meeting. We borrowed ideas from OWS and tapped into classic organizing tools such as the strategy chart from the Midwest Academy. And suddenly we were off and running.

Folks showed up with blankets and chairs and we began plotting democracy right then and there in the park. We formed public education, direct action, media, legal, general assembly (GA) and other committees. On October 5, we held a march and rally on the statehouse steps, which despite the rain, out-shined events in larger cities.

Things grew quickly. One hundred fifty people joined that first General Assembly. Over 400 attended the October 5 rally & march to the Capitol steps. And we soon had over 2,000 "likes" on Facebook—and showing up to various events.

Transformational social change, what The Interfaith Alliance of Idaho has been working toward for the past 13 years, has been using all the tried and true tools of organizing: measuring progress by expanding our base of civically active folks who understand what it means to be inclusive, democratic and progressive. While OccupyBoi might have started just a few months ago and grown rapidly in that time, we know much of its energy has been built on the foundation of organizing.

Base-building work continues

In mid-September I had just finished The Interfaith Alliance's fall newsletter. The year has been filled with plenty of activity as we all scurried around hoping to transform public policy for the common good, which to us means a sane and balanced fiscal policy, safe places for children of all ages, human rights, fair employment practices, protecting the last vestiges of our public education system, protecting our First Amendment rights of freedom to worship as one wishes or not. The year has also been filled with fear: the fears of losing all the civil rights and social progress folks have made over the last 60 years, of the dismantling of democracy and of losing hope for a life that never existed.

Over the years we have traveled the state and held dozens of workshops. We have held vigils and rallies for human and civil rights. We organized local "Democracy Action Circles," hosted candidate forums, organized get out the vote efforts and held fabulous annual gatherings with great speakers and trainers.

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From the Editor's Desk:
From Occupations to Victories

By Saif Rahman

The end of the year is naturally a time to reflect, and 2011 has provided all of us in the US with much to ponder. As a movement we often focus on where we might have fallen short, but at the heart of this issue of the Newsletter are a few of our victories—and how victories come in different shapes and sizes.

What is ahead is unwritten, but what we do know is that the remarkable series of "Occupy" gatherings sparked by New York's Occupy Wall Street has captivated the world. The more than 1,400 occupations have brought together an unlikely group of people—from urban youth to farmers to unionized workers to retirees. The common sense of outrage that permeates these meet-ups stems from the reckless and irresponsible behavior of bankers, brokers and businesses in pursuit of ever higher profits. As the 99% face job loss, foreclosure, student debt and a lack of health care, the 1% have not only gone unpunished for their misdeeds, but have strengthened their grip on power.

And that's why we occupy and resist. All of us have probably participated in some way or another—by camping out in a park, voicing our frustration with the widening economic divide or by donating whatever we can in these tough economic times.

In this issue, you'll hear from organizers (and RESIST grantees) making critical connections between global and local peace and justice issues in Nebraska and activists using old and new methods to build a base of support around issues of reproductive justice in Wyoming.

As we acknowledge our inspirations and victories, all of us at RESIST are also diving a bit deeper into the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon. Many of our grantees are successfully challenging the conventional narrative about the movement. We have groups in land-locked states challenging the notion that it is just "east coast liberals banging on drums" who comprise this movement. We have indigenous groups pushing all of us to rethink the use of the the term "occupy." We have communities who have been working tirelessly reminding us that this movement was not immaculately born on September 17 in New York City, but that over the course of years a foundation was built by activists organizing in every state in this country, a foundation from which Occupy Wall Street was able to leap this fall.

As 2011 concludes and we enter a new era for the progressive movement, Noam Chomsky, one of RESIST's founders, reminds all of us that this is a marathon, not a sprint.

"If the bonds and associations that are being established at these remarkable events can be sustained through a long, hard period ahead—because victories don’t come quickly—this could turn out to be a very significant moment in American history," said Chomsky at an Occupy speech this past month.

May this issue of the Newsletter guide us as we celebrate our hard-earned victories, to sadly mourn the loss of those the system deported from their families and our lives.

We brought together 200 people from many diverse faiths for the "Healing Our Future 9/11/2011" gathering. Shortly after, we launched "Building an Inclusive Interfaith Movement for Future Generations," a program that brought together elders and young adults to discuss and plan how to strengthen the progressive interfaith movement in Idaho and to expand the

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Saif Rahman is the incoming editor of the RESIST Newsletter.
Occupy

intergenerational base and leadership.

Movement interrupts

And then it happened—in the midst of our busy schedules and continuing programs. As Naomi Klein put it in an article title, “Occupy Wall Street: The Most Important Thing in the World Now.”

I watched Occupy Idaho on Facebook as Occupy Idaho Falls, Sandpoint, Coeur d’Alene, Rexburg, Moscow, Pocatello, Sun Valley, Ketchum, Nampa began popping up. In Idaho Falls, the largest city in eastern Idaho but still a small one with a population of just over 50,000, organizers told of 150 people at their rally, General Assembly meetings, committees formed. In smaller Pocatello, as in other towns, many of the folks joining the movement haven’t been part of any organizations and have never participated in any form of direct action.

“The most inspiring, encouraging thing,” said Tahirih, one of the organizers of OccupyBoi, “is the number of my peers who had been apathetic, unaware, finally seeing the validity in being active in a social movement that will affect their lives and the lives of those around them.”

Strong foundation

The foundation Occupy Idaho stands on has been built in large part by the trained leaders we have in communities across the state who have, step by step, brick by brick, been building this new progressive movement from its amazing beginning. In Pocatello, The Interfaith Alliance had mentored students at Idaho State University, helped send them to Western States Center’s Activists Mobilizing for Power (AMP) Camp, shared in training at Camp Wellstones and United Vision for Idaho’s Camp Democracies in Idaho Falls, Nampa and Coeur d’Alene. These trained leaders then managed political campaigns, created new organizations, including Gay-Straight Alliances in high schools and 2Great4Hate when the Aryans reappeared. They reactivated the Idaho Young Democrats in a sea of ultra-conservatism. The young leaders mentored more young leaders, and the history of progressive organizing on campus and beyond exponentially expands.

I listened incredulously to talking heads on the news asking why Occupy

How will The Interfaith Alliance work with these new organizations trying on democracy and consensus? We will listen and honor the hard work they are doing as they create a new movement, offer to share skills and facilitate popular education workshops on the issues they want. We will learn from each other about creative new ways to transform our institutions, to change our world as we know it into the communities that are good and nurturing for our children, our elders, ourselves—so eager and hopeful to salvage our democracy.

As for the future? Well, we are already looking towards our annual gathering in January, “Building an Inclusive Intergenerational Movement,” and things couldn’t be coming together any better! And we will continue to support and be involved in the exciting work of OccupyBoi.

And as Tahirih, my intuitive young friend who used her social networking skills to spark the Occupy movement in the most unlikely of places puts it, “I can’t even begin to speculate where this will lead, but I feel certain this is a turning point in the landscape of the US and the world—this first global political awakening in history, which I find phenomenal.”

Pam Baldwin is the Executive Director of the Interfaith Alliance of Idaho, a RESIST grantee.
Can the #Occupy Movement Be a Turning Point?
by Doyle Canning

As the Wall Street occupation continues, many people are fighting to save their homes—and providing a lesson in how to sustain the powerful spark of the Occupy movement.

Presley Obasohan is fighting foreclosure on his home by Bank of America. Mr. Obasohan lives in Dorchester, Massachusetts—the most diverse neighborhood in Boston—where building values have sunk to half or less of mortgage loan debt. Presley is trying to save his home for his daughters. He has petitioned; he has pled. He has waited on hold and stood in line. But on Friday, Presley decided enough was enough and he joined the Right to the City Alliance in a mass action of civil disobedience.

Along with 23 other Boston residents, he was proudly arrested for sitting in at the Boston headquarters of Bank of America.

“I blocked the doors at Bank of America so that my neighbors, and me, can stay in our homes,” Presley told the press. “So many people have been thrown out of their homes or lost their jobs needlessly because of mistakes made by Wall Street banks. Yet it’s the banks who are now rewarded with billions in tax refunds. It’s time to fight back!”

Why Bank of America?

As of March 2011, Bank of America had more homes in foreclosure than any other bank in Boston, with two-thirds of these in “majority minority” neighborhoods. Sixty-one percent of Bank of America’s subprime mortgages were concentrated in these same neighborhoods, revealing a pattern of pushing bad loans on people of color and the poor.

In late September, Bank of America announced that it would begin charging customers $5 per month to use their debit cards. [Editor's note: a decision they later backed down from due to intense public pressure]. This comes after receiving a $4.2 billion dollar tax refund and ramping up foreclosures on distressed homeowners in recent weeks, according to new data from the foreclosure listing firm RealtyTrac. August 2011 saw the largest monthly increase in foreclosures since August 2007, right after the housing bubble burst.

“Across the country, we are seeing the same story: the mortgage bubble created by Wall Street pushed predatory lending on urban communities, and since the bubble burst the fallout has been catastrophic,” said Rachel LaForest, executive director of the Right to the City Alliance, which led the protests. Unemployment and foreclosure have hit communities of color first and worst. But it is urban communities who are at the forefront of the movement to fight back. We took this direct action to demand payback from Bank of America.”

Building an alliance

This confrontation with Bank of America came at the end of a raucous march of over 3,000 people carrying colorful banners and banging drums to confront the nation’s largest lender over its role in the economic crisis. The march was led by members of City Life/Vida Urbana, a former RESIST grantee, who carried signs that told their stories of predatory lending and foreclosure in Boston. As the rowdy procession snaked through downtown, they were joined by members of UNITE/HERE picketing at the Hyatt Hotel, and the Communications Workers of America picketing at Verizon Wireless.

When the march arrived at the Massachusetts headquarters of Bank of America, the crowd chanted “The banks got bailed out, we got sold out” and “Bank of America, Bad for America” as nervous bank employees peered through the glass. The civil disobedience team managed to block the entrances to the building and to occupy the lobby of the bank itself. As they were arrested one by one, they were led through rows of cheering demonstrators shouting, “We stand with you!”

The Right to the City Alliance is a national movement of urban economic and racial justice organizations, deeply rooted in the neighborhoods that have been hardest hit by the implosion of the economy, and where centuries of economic and racial oppression compound the crisis. Right to the City built an impressive coalition of over 50 organizations including the SEIU-inspired umbrella MASSUNITING, with progressive organized labor, the Green Justice Coalition, the Youth Jobs Coalition, the immigrant rights movement, and a diverse array of progressive groups. A number of Right to the City member groups are current or former RESIST grantees.

Take back the block, Occupy the Hood

On Saturday, Right to the City took their message into the neighborhood. The Four Corners area of Dorchester has been ravaged by foreclosures. Led by the community organizing powerhouse City Life/Vida Urbana, the group staged an occupation of a wrongly foreclosed home, hoping to return it from the hands of Deutsche Bank to its rightful owners—a family that was evicted and has left the area.

The action team cleaned the home, brought in donated furniture, hung art on the walls and a banner off the porch. Hundreds toured the house and cheered from the street, while music played and children danced.

Meanwhile the youth of Roxbury’s Alternatives for Community & Environment took over an abandoned lot and...
Decolonizing the 99%  
Indigenous leadership in occupy movements provides strong foundations  
By Christy Pardey

While Occupations are exploding in communities all over the country, indigenous people are both playing a critical role in the organizing efforts and also challenging underlying assumptions of what it means to "occupy." In Denver, Colorado, indigenous people have played a critical role in organizing efforts. In the lead-up to Columbus Day, a holiday which many around the country have renamed "Indigenous Peoples' Day," indigenous leaders from the Colorado American Indian Movement brought a moving proposal to Occupy Denver, which was adopted through the group's decision-making process, the General Assembly.

"As indigenous peoples, we welcome the awakening of those who are relatively new to our homeland," the statement began. "We are thankful, and rejoice, for the emergence of a movement that is mindful of its place in the environment, that seeks economic and social justice, that strives for an end to oppression in all its forms, that demands an adequate standard of food, employment, shelter and health care for all, and that calls for envisioning a new, respectful and honorable society.

"We have been waiting for 519 years for such a movement, ever since that fateful day in October, 1492 when a different worldview arrived—one of greed, hierarchy, destruction and genocide."

We recommend reading the full text at www.resistinc.org/occupyindigenous.

Under occupation for centuries  
RESIST grantee Indian People's Action in Montana brings a broad analysis to their organizing work, which focuses on building the voice of Native American people in Montana's urban areas, with a special concentration in the border towns of the seven federally recognized tribes of Montana.

Michaelynn Hawk, Program Director of Indian People's Action and a longtime organizing work, which focuses on building the voice of Native American people in Montana's urban areas, with a special concentration in the border towns of the seven federally recognized tribes of Montana. Michaelynn Hawk, Program Director of Indian People's Action and a longtime community organizer, reminds us that the issues that Indian people have been dealing with for decades—unemployment, poverty, foreclosure, homelessness and food insecurity—are the ones that the Occupy campaigns are addressing now.

"As Colorado American Indian Movement (AIM) leaders said," stated Michaelynn, "while indigenous people are supportive of the Occupy movement that is looking for social, racial and economic justice, we want to remind our allies that indigenous nations have been 'under occupation' for decades, if not centuries."

In Montana, approximately 6% of the population is Native American. And 16% of Natives formerly in reservation boundaries have moved to urban areas. In Butte, there is a 15.8% poverty rate and 20% of school-age children live in poverty, which is higher than other counties and higher than national averages.

Michaelynn tells us that as the congressional Super Committee is looking to cut $917 billion dollars of federal spending over the next ten years, indigenous people in Montana know this means that they can expect even more job loss, less access to health care and even more people losing their homes.

Indian People's Action is a part of the Occupy Butte movement.

"We know that if Indians don't speak up, we will continue to suffer at the hands of the wealthy and the United States government," says Michaelynn, "a government which acts like it helps us with their attempt to control, dominate, and exploit the human species."

"My people have a suicide rate 10 times the national average. My people make up 40% of the prisoners incarcerated and only 3% of the population in what is now called canada. Over 100 communities of my fellow Indigenous people in canada can't drink the water that comes their taps because it is toxic.

"I am subjected to racism and stereotyped as being lazy, stupid, inferior, ungrateful, hostile, drunk, don't pay taxes, and I get everything given to me.

"My lands are being occupied by a public which largely remains ignorant or silent about the injustice I live with every moment of every day. I am silenced or minimized in the "occupy" movement frequently as my issues of injustice transcend mere financial concerns.

"I am Indigenous and I am the 'un-%'."

Spreading fire  
In October, organizers of the local Occupy movement in Albuquerque, New Mexico decided to alter the "Occupy" name out of respect for the area's indigenous communities, which have been forcibly occupied by the United States for centuries. There, organizers are calling their gatherings "(Un)occupy Albuquerque" to connect economic justice and corporate accountability demands with the ongoing circulating around the internet since the beginning of Occupy Wall Street, challenging popular ideas about what occupation means and the homogeneity of the 99%.

On Facebook, Ian, who lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, posted a photo of himself, holding his typed story (see photo to the left). The text he holds reads, "I am Indigenous. My peoples' and my lands have been occupied illegally for decades by a government and society which tries to rob me of my identity and lands. They have attempted genocide on my people and culture in order to control, dominate, and exploit my lands for profit in order to fund their attempt to control, dominate, and exploit the human species.

"My people have a suicide rate 10 times the national average. My people make up 40% of the prisoners incarcerated and only 3% of the population in what is now called canada. Over 100 communities of my fellow Indigenous people in canada can't drink the water that comes their taps because it is toxic.

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"I am Indigenous and I am the 'un-%'."
Nebraska may be an agricultural state, but it's far from fertile ground for peacemaking. Trying to sustain a dissenting voice in this reddest of "red states" is a nonstop political and economic challenge. That Nebraskans for Peace (NFP) has survived 41 years to become what is now the oldest statewide peace and justice organization in the entire country can be credited to equal parts pluck and luck. We've learned to "work smart," prioritizing issues in line with changing conditions and opportunities.

Peace and justice issues are abstract and global. We're for world peace. We're for justice. We're for equality and against racism and sexism. We're pro-disarmament and anti-war. But it's not enough to merely stand for abstract principles. To be relevant and effective in peace work, it's essential to localize abstract and global concerns.

The war comes home

Our work exposing the war making role of the US Strategic Command is a case in point. This command center for waging the international "War on Terror" is headquartered in our state. It is potentially the most dangerous place on earth, charged with everything from offensively waging nuclear and cyber-warfare to coldheartedly killing human "targets" with remote-controlled drones.

Our state's preeminence in the War on Terror is a point of pride for most Nebraskans, who tend to feel underrated by the rest of the country. Located at Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, US Strategic Command (StratCom) annually pumps $2.5 billion into the local economy. Most Nebraskans wouldn't dream of badmouthing it.

Because of this support, the local hook to challenging StratCom's growing menace was not, it turns out, in mobilizing popular opposition in Nebraska, but in educating the broader national and international community to Nebraska's role in modern warfare. This community had no idea what the newly retooled and ever more deadly command in America's heartland was up to in the wake of September 11.

Most Americans are unaware that StratCom was integrally involved in planning and coordinating the assassination of Osama bin Laden. The command center has eight "missions" dedicated to high-tech and other forms of warfare: nuclear deterrence, space, cyberspace, full-spectrum global strike, intelligence/surveillance/reconnaissance, missile defense, information operations, and combating weapons of mass destruction.

Nebraskans for Peace began by jointly organizing an international conference in Omaha with the Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space in 2008, drawing participants from 12 countries and 28 states. We're presently at work on an internet documentary about StratCom to alert people around the globe of the unprecedented mandate and enhanced war-fighting prowess this command now possesses.

Sometimes finding a local hook for international peace work requires seizing opportunities at hand. In the early months of the Iraq War, for example, we stood on street corners with signs like anti-war slogans everywhere, feeling alienated and inviting abuse from hostile passers-by.

But then — right out of the blue — Republican US Senator Chuck Hagel began publicly voicing reservations about the Bush administration's war policy, virtually handing us a tangible, local strategy on which to focus our anti-war energies. Senator Hagel's outspoken comments quickly isolated him from his Republican colleagues in Nebraska's congressional delegation and infuriated the party faithful in the state. Naturally, peace activists loved it.

The last thing the embattled Senator needed at that moment was to be publicly linked to a political "fringe" group like Nebraskans for Peace. So NFP surreptitiously coordinated an "Email Hagel" campaign in which our members — without referencing their ties to us — wrote the Senator to thank him for his leadership and encouraged him to keep speaking out. A staffer subsequently told us that these messages and phone calls emboldened the Senator to continue his public criticism of the White House's war despite the wrath of the state party establishment.

Senator Hagel's relentless hounding of the Bush Administration on its war policy succeeded in fracturing the Republicans' unified stance on the war, but at great personal cost to the Senator, who retired in 2008 rather than face a bruising primary battle with the state leadership's chosen successor.

Local linkages

Other aspects of our work have a decidedly more "homegrown" quality, with a straightforward connection to local concerns.

For over a decade now, our organization has been a leading supporter of Oglala Lakota Sioux tribal leaders and activists in their ongoing efforts to end alcohol sales in the border town of Whiteclay, Nebraska. Four beer stores in this unincorporated village of 14 people sell over 11,000 cans of...
Nebraska

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beer per day to Indian residents of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, two miles away.

While the sale and possession of alcohol on the reservation itself are banned, an estimated 80 percent of the population suffers from alcoholism. Liquor industry lobbyists have opposed all legislation aimed at targeting regulatory violations in Whiteclay, which include selling alcohol to minors and to intoxicated persons, selling beer on credit and in exchange for food stamps and sexual favors and sales to bootleggers.

NFP has given sustained support over the years to the liquor license challenges, legislative initiatives, demonstrations and roadblocks mounted by Indian activists, including the production of a documentary film to raise national awareness of this ongoing struggle. Our advocacy with Nebraska's Native peoples on the Whiteclay issue ultimately earned us an Organization of the Year award at the Second Annual Chief Standing Bear Commemoration.

Another local social justice issue we’ve tackled is immigrant rights. When the town of Fremont, Nebraska held a special election in 2010 over an anti-immigrant ordinance, we waded into what has become a national showdown over federal immigration policy. The local ordinance sought to prohibit the employment and housing of undocumented workers in the community. The political momentum from the Fremont ordinance in turn spun off a number of explicitly anti-immigrant bills in the succeeding session of the Nebraska Legislature modeled on Arizona’s notorious anti-immigrant SB 1070. NFP played a leading role in defeating this hate-based legislation—for the time being, at least.

Climate change comes home

Our more recent effort to creatively localize global issues is NFP's work on climate change. For decades, NFP consciously left environmental issues to environmental organizations. But climate change is an altogether different matter—threatening as it does to undermine the very conditions necessary to preserving life on this planet. If we haven’t got a healthy planet to live on, peace and justice issues become moot. As polls repeatedly show, however, making the case for action on climate change is a tough sell. And in a red state chock full of climate skeptics that gets 65 percent of its electricity from coal and boasts the ownership of the two largest coal-hauling railroads in North America, tackling the issue of climate change is a still tougher challenge—even for environmental groups.

NFP has taken on this issue virtually by default. We’ve begun working to alert our public officials and publicly owned utilities about the science of climate change and the urgent need to get off coal, with the help of a 350.org group that we’re incubating—part of an international grassroots campaign to reduce world CO₂ emissions to 350 parts per million. It’s slow work. But then, peacemaking generally is.

There are no foolproof formulas for working smart and local. Every situation is different and circumstances change. But what we’ve found over the course of our 41-year history is that we’ve got to be willing to reinvent ourselves as an organization in response to new conditions.

The end of the Vietnam War forced an earlier generation of NFP’s leadership to adjust its goals, as did the end of Cold War 15 years later. September 11 and the War on Terror brought yet another shift in our priorities. And most recently, the economic recession and the imminent danger of climate change have prompted a further transformation of our focus. More changes are certain to come in the days ahead. But by working as smart as we can, with a little luck, we’ll continue to meet them.

Tim Rinne has served as the State Coordinator for Nebraskans for Peace, a RESIST grantee, since 1993. A native Nebraskan who has lived in the state almost all his life, he has worked as a political organizer for progressive causes for nearly three decades.
Pro-Choice Organizing in “The Equality State”
Derailing attacks on reproductive rights in Wyoming

By Sharon Breitweiser

Wyoming’s small but powerful pro-choice community is doing its best to make the state live up to its nickname. Known as the “Equality State,” Wyoming was the first state in the nation to grant women the right to vote, to serve on juries and to hold public office. In keeping with this early tradition of respect for women’s rights, pro-choice advocates have defeated every legislative attack on reproductive choice since 1990. We beat back two such attacks in the 2011 legislative session alone: House Bill 118, requiring that abortion providers offer women an ultrasound image of their “unborn child” in advance of scheduling an abortion and lecture them on “fetal pain,” and House Bill 251, a modified version of the same law. In a state with a less than 25 percent Democratic minority in both House and Senate, defeating these bills was no small task.

Don’t get me wrong, Wyoming still has plenty of anti-choice laws on the books—NARAL’s national office gives it a D+ grade for the burdens it imposes on access to reproductive healthcare. As in many states, we have laws limiting abortion access for poor women and for young women, and 96 percent of Wyoming’s counties have no abortion provider at all. But the last anti-choice bill to be signed into law in Wyoming was its onerous parental notification and consent requirement in 1989.

Since then, the Wyoming legislature has considered bills limiting reproductive rights in 20 of the last 24 years. Pro-choice advocates have battled so-called “Human Life Protection Act” bills, “partial-birth” abortion bans, “informed consent” bills mandating 24 and 48-hour waiting periods, reporting requirements and other measures to discourage women from seeking abortions. We have successfully trounced a host of proposed “fetal personhood” initiatives—laws classifying the fetus as an additional victim in violent crimes committed against pregnant women—as well as measures permitting prosecution of women who use drugs for “unborn child” abuse.

Every victory has been hard won. How do pro-choice advocates work this magic year after year? Our organizing success derives from our ability to build grassroots alliances and leverage personal relationships in a vast, sparsely-populated state where personal connections are paramount, including those among activists, everyday people and citizen legislators.

A small but mighty coalition

The 1989 US Supreme Court decision Webster v. Reproductive Health Services galvanized pro-choice activists across the nation, including Wyoming. In Webster, the Court upheld provisions of a Missouri statute prohibiting the use of “public facilities or personnel” to perform abortions and imposing viability-testing requirements on physicians treating women 20 weeks or more into their pregnancies. For the first time in the 16 years since the Court decided Roe v. Wade, only a minority of justices on the Court had voted to reaffirm Roe’s basic framework.

The Wyoming National Organization for Women (NOW) had a few hundred dollars in its checking account, the local National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) affiliate had a few hundred names on its mailing list but wasn’t very active, and members of the Wyoming American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) offered help. We pooled resources and began organizing marches, putting a new pro-choice coalition together and sending out coalition newsletters several times a year. Over time, we built a successful alliance of activists willing and able to speak out on pro-choice issues and engage local candidates and elected officials. Our informal pro-choice coalition grew to include NARAL Pro-Choice Wyoming, Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains, Wyoming ACLU and Wyoming NOW. My mantra is “small but mighty.” NARAL Pro-Choice Wyoming may be a small...
Far apart but connected

Locals describe Wyoming as “one town with one, long road.” With just 563,626 inhabitants, Wyoming is the least populous state in the country and also the tenth largest. It’s a full eight-hour drive from the southeast to northwest corners of the state. Our state legislature convenes 40 days per year in even-numbered years and just 20 days in odd-numbered years. The legislative session takes place during the worst winter months, historically the season when rancher-legislators were freed from daily tasks and could travel to Cheyenne. Road closures are common; road-closing weather has hit the state every month of the year. Even the 45-mile drive between our office in Laramie and the Capitol building in Cheyenne is frequently impassable. These conditions create unique challenges and opportunities for organizing.

For example, while geographic challenges make it difficult for constituents to get to Cheyenne, they also make it hard for the legislators to get out of Cheyenne. Legislators who live within an hour or two of the Capitol try to get home on weekends, but those who don’t generally stay in town for most of the session. This makes them more likely to read their constituents’ emails, take phone calls and meet one-on-one with activists at legislative receptions and other events.

Similarly, Wyoming’s small population creates opportunities for activists to capitalize on personal relationships, with legislators and with each other. When I moved to Wyoming as a high school junior I was stunned to discover that everyone seemed to know everybody else. Now the state’s six-degrees-of-separation culture seems normal to me—and useful. When you know you may well see someone again around the next bend, you want that person to be a friend, or at least not an enemy.

Our legislators know this too. Each of the state legislature’s house districts contains only about 8,500 residents. Each senate district has just 16,500 residents. The high constituent to representative ratio means that candidates for office can, and in many cases do, go to every door in their districts to seek support and get to know their constituents personally. Constituents and activists can use these relationships to impact the way their legislators view pro-choice issues.

At the height of organizing against an earlier “ultrasound” bill in 2009, NARAL Pro-Choice Wyoming board member Lorraine Saulino-Klein emailed members of the House Labor, Health and Social Services Committee to contest the medical assumptions of the bill. “I’ve been a nurse for 38 years,” she wrote, “and I can’t read an ultrasound. It is hard to make out an early term ultrasound [even] when a doctor or highly trained technician is telling you what you are looking at. What makes anyone think a non-medically trained person could get anything out of looking at an ultrasound is beyond me.” The committee chair referred to this email during the hearing. Episcopal clergyman Reverend Tim Solon testified that “the seven times the word ‘child’ is used makes the bill an establishment of religion in that it codifies a religious doctrine. There [are] a wide variety of teachings about when the conception of a human being becomes...a person.” On the House floor and in committee hearings, Republican Representative Sue Wallis shared her story of how she chose an abortion in order to better care for her existing children.The committee chair referred to Saulino-Klein’s email in the course of hearings on the ultimately defeated bill. The basic concept of freedom underlying reproductive choice is not hard to grasp, especially when offered by involved and articulate pro-choice advocates.

Staying low-tech and personal

Some of our strategies are decidedly low-tech in an increasingly high-tech world, but they get results. If volunteers don’t use the internet, we get on the telephone with updates, requests and a word of thanks. Those volunteers don’t hesitate to pick up the phone themselves and call their legislators. We are also willing to hit the road. NARAL Pro-Choice Wyoming used road trips with Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains and the Abortion Access Project to expand women’s health services in Wyoming and Colorado. Our first trip took us through Fort Collins, Colorado, and Caspar, Jackson and Laramie, Wyoming over the course of four days. This entailed as much as seven hours of driving to get to one cocktail party, with another seven hours the next day for the next meet-and-greet—with no guarantee that anybody would even show up at our events. The road trip allowed us to connect with doctors, clinicians, political activists, elected officials, major donors, students and others who continue to help us with our work—one city councilwoman ultimately joined our board of directors!

A measure of hope

Wyoming’s 2011 legislative session brought other regressive social legislation to the fore, too. Progressive activists narrowly defeated an anti-gay “validity of marriages” bill, which defined marriage as between a man and a woman, as well as a proposed amendment to the state constitution denying recognition of gay marriages. Wyoming Equality and Wyoming ACLU worked hard on these issues with many thoughtful legislators, including Republicans. Some of our Republican legislators oppose any kind of government interference with personal freedoms, whether these concern reproductive freedom, same-sex marriage or government regulation of guns. And as with pro-choice organizing, personal relationships influenced the result. Republican legislators have daughters and wives, as well as gay family members, friends and constituents who were targeted by regressive social bills. The experiences of Wyoming activists should provide a measure of hope to organizers everywhere. Don’t despair. If we can organize in a conservative state like Wyoming, so can you. Onward and upward, fellow organizers!

Sharon Breitweiser is the Executive Director of NARAL Pro-Choice Wyoming, a RESIST grantee and statewide organization which works to protect and promote the full range of reproductive health care options.
Turning Point
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created a community garden. They asked people to stand with them for a blessing ceremony of the garden, and asked for food to grow strong and the land and community to heal and be healthy. They told the story of their journey to the 2010 US Social Forum, and how they had toured a community garden created by young people in Detroit, and been inspired to create a similar project in Boston. Right to the City supported their vision and tied it to a movement building action about the banks and the political moment. It was indeed a powerful occupation.

Movement momentum: harnessing the psychic break

What was different about this action was that it was organized and led by community-based organizations, led by people of color, and rooted in communities of color. This leadership shaped the message, the coalition building strategy, and the demands on Bank of America and other corporate targets. The march was organized long before the occupation of Wall Street or the hastily planned takeover of Dewey Square next to the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. The community organizations that planned it are deeply rooted, with long experience uniting people around similar issues. After this action, they’ll continue that work.

Two days later, the Greater Boston Labor Council appeared at the General Assembly of Occupy Boston. They pledged their solidarity and invited the group to meet with them to discuss how to build together.

At smartMeme, we have always been interested in “Psychic Breaks:” moments when the dominant narrative unravels and there is an opening for a new story to take hold on a massive scale. We saw this opportunity come and go in 2008 when the stock market collapsed and $700 billion was given to financial giants. Under prepared and shell-shocked progressives mostly stayed home and kept quiet while the Tea Partiers harnessed common sense opposition to bailing out the rich into a movement that was cynically designed to support the status quo.

But we believe that Occupy Wall Street is re-opening that window and provoking another such psychic break moment, one that can amplify common sense progressive demands for structural change. At least we hope so.

We have an opportunity to offer a narrative explaining what has happened, how we got here, and how we can move forward together. We are faced with the potential of rooting this insurrectional energy into a strong social movement that can rival the Tea Party and change the story about our economic system—a movement that could unite behind real solutions to the economic and democratic crises we face. The actions by Right to the City at the end of September in Boston offer us an instructive model on the kind of analysis and organizing strategy that is necessary now.

But we must be agile and graceful and bold enough—like the ballerina on the bull of the Occupy Wall Street poster. We must be visionary and courageous and tenacious enough—like the youth of Roxbury blessing their occupied garden. And we must be brave enough, like Presley Obasohan, to put our bodies on the line and commit civil disobedience against the banks and for the people and planet that we love.

If we can do this, and build in good faith together to harness this moment and channel the momentum towards fundamental, structural change in how our economy and political system function, we just might be witnessing the stirrings of the new world that beats in our hearts. Let us dance to that beat, sing to the beat and march together to the beat, all the way down to Wall Street. #OccupyTogether!

Doyle Canning is co-director of the narrative strategy center smartMeme and is co-author of Re: Imagining Change— How to Use Story-based Strategies to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World. She lives in Boston. This article was adapted from YES! Magazine.

Christy Pardew is the outgoing editor of the RESIST Newsletter.
Welcoming Saif Rahman to RESIST

By Christy Pardew

RESIST is delighted to welcome Saif Rahman as our new Director of Communications. Saif brings a strong background in both communications and organizing work to his new position here at RESIST.

Saif spent years working for the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) in Washington, DC, where he served as the Movements Coordinator before becoming an Associate Fellow. He was also an editor of Foreign Policy in Focus, IPS's esteemed online publication.

"It was fascinating to look at the nexus between organizing and communications," says Saif of his years at IPS. "My work there focused on trying to find ways to work with allies to improve not only the way we organize, but the way we communicate about how we organize."

Over the past year, Saif lived in Oakland, California, where he coordinated research with author Antonia Juhasz for Black Tide: The Devastating Impact of the Gulf Oil Spill, the compelling and heartbreaking look at the human failings and human impact of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon BP Gulf oil spill.

The son of immigrants from Bangladesh and Pakistan, Saif relocated to New England this month, where he spent his childhood years and where his family still lives.

Now living in Somerville, a short distance from the RESIST office, Saif noted, "It's incredible to move from the backyard of Occupy Oakland to Occupy Boston. Exciting things are happening. It feels like all of the amazing work people across the country have been engaged in for years is coming together in innovative and ground-breaking ways."

Saif has known of RESIST since 2004, when an organization he worked heavily with, the National Youth and Student Peace Coalition, received a grant from RESIST. Since then, he has steered many friends involved in organizing towards RESIST.

"Movements need to continue to improve organizing strategies and tactics," says Saif. "I'm excited about and inspired by how this communications position at RESIST really focuses on how we as a movement tell the stories with and about people on the front lines."

"It's really nice to come to a place where you feel like your beliefs and politics are at home—and whose beliefs you respect," he added.

Saif is filling a position left empty by my transition this summer. I was honored to serve as RESIST's part-time Communications Director from January of 2008 until this past August. Saif will join RESIST as a full-time staff member. Saif and I have been able to work closely together on this issue of the Newsletter (in other words, trial by fire!), and we both look forward to continued collaboration. I'm thrilled to be connected to the ongoing work of RESIST.

"This is an exciting time in history," says Saif. "And the work of RESIST is needed now more than ever. As we watch the continued growth of the Occupy movements, RESIST is steadfastly there, doing what it does best: funding grassroots organizing."

Christy Pardew is the outgoing editor of the RESIST Newsletter. Reach Saif Rahman at saif@resistinc.org or here in the office at 617-623-5110.

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RESIST Newsletter, November - December 2011
RESIST awards grants six times a year to groups throughout the United States engaged in organizing for social, economic and environmental justice. In this issue of the Newsletter we list a few grant recipients from our most recent allocation cycle in October of 2011. For more information, visit the RESIST website at www.resistinc.org or contact the groups directly.

9 to 5 Los Angeles
630 Shatto Place, 4th Floor, Los Angeles, California 90005. www.9to5california.org

9 to 5 Los Angeles was formed in 2006 to build a movement for economic justice by and for low-wage and no-wage women impacted by the lack of living-wage jobs, benefits, rights and respect in the workplace. Their history of working to improve conditions for low-income women has centered around an understanding that they must first eliminate the roots of poverty and oppression.

RESIST’s grant of $3,500 will help 9 to 5 Los Angeles’ work demanding paid sick days for all Californians, expanding paid family leave, protecting caregivers from workplace discrimination and strengthening laws against the widespread practice of wage theft by passing a statewide Wage Theft Prevention Act.

Carolina Justice Policy Center
PO Box 309, Durham, North Carolina 27705. www.justicepolicycenter.org

The Carolina Justice Policy Center (CJPC) works to restrict the use of death penalty and build a community corrections infrastructure that can decrease recidivism and reduce reliance on prisons. Some of the activities of the CJPC range from advocating and supporting pre-trial programs to reforming the death penalty.

RESIST’s $3,500 grant will help CJPC’s work with local leaders in multiple districts to assess the impact of budget cuts, work with coalition partners to increase the juvenile age and continue support for the Racial Justice Act.

Direct Action Welfare Group
PO Box 20079, Charleston, West Virginia 25362. www.wvdawg.org

A small group of welfare mothers who met to discuss concerns in their own lives as they struggled with the realities of welfare reform and the “work first” model birthed the Direct Action Welfare Group (DAWG). The group, the only organization in West Virginia working on poverty and welfare issues from the perspective of people who are living it every day, organized in 2000 to change state policy regarding welfare and higher education.

A $500 emergency grant from RESIST will enable DAWG to organize poor people to actively participate in the Occupy movement events in West Virginia.

Courage to Resist
484 Lake Park Ave. #41, Oakland, California 94610. www.couragetoresist.org

Courage to Resist was formed to support troops in the military refusing to fight the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. By supporting GI resistance, counter recruitment and draft resistance, they hope to diminish the number of troops available for unjust wars and occupation. Today, they are taking on critical campaigns — some very public, such as that of accused Wikileaks whistleblower Army PFC Bradley Manning to the behind the scenes day to day of work of supporting conscientious objectors and others refusing to fight the unjust wars.

RESIST’s grant of $3,500 will help Courage to Resist continue building campaigns to bolster the GI resistance movement, raise support for resisters and continue the work of supporting resisters as their needs arise.