

## **Resident leaders bring COFI training to their community**

Moe Culbreath and Sarah Edgington are resident leaders determined to share what they've learned with their community to increase advocacy and power in their neighborhoods. Having attended a Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) training the year before, they decided to facilitate this same training for others.

COFI's "mission is to strengthen the power and voice of low-income and working families at all levels of civic life—from local institutions and communities to local, state, and federal policy arenas," says its website.

In 2017, Talor Musil, former Community Organizer at Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan and Tabitha Williams, a Parents for Healthy Homes leader, went to Chicago to receive training in the COFI method. They then invited COFI to come and train organizations in Grand Rapids. Culbreath and Edgington were at these trainings.

Edgington also attended a neighborhood training on the Neighborhood Match Fund from the City of Grand Rapids. She saw that the fund's goals and their upcoming COFI training goals were similarly aligned and got Culbreath and Musil on board to present the idea to the City.

As resident leaders who do not have a formal nonprofit, Culbreath and Edgington worked with Healthy Homes as their fiduciary to bring their idea to the Neighborhood Match Fund.

With the matching funds they received, Culbreath and Edgington were able to reduce many of the barriers which keep parent-leaders from being able to invest in themselves and their neighborhoods, especially on busy weeknights so they can attend COFI training.

"I think this is part of flipping the narrative, especially in Grand Rapids. In our charity model, or even frankly, around a lot of issues linked to families, we blame parents, 'They don't care enough.' or 'They don't show up,' people will say," says Musil from Healthy Homes Coalition. "Because we're working with families, we're not going to just see the parents, we're going to see the kids. We had childcare and brought in people with activities to interact with the kids. We also provided the meal because we know we're asking a lot of people, to give up an evening a week."

They also removed transportation barriers by coordinating carpooling between various facilitators and attendees. The classes were held for seven weeks on Tuesday nights for two hours.

"Another barrier we broke down is language. We had a translator available. And we were able to have bilingual training and that was a huge piece, too." Edgington adds.

"That was the part that was absolutely wonderful. We didn't have to have a certain dynamic for our class, we were able to invite everybody that was right here in this neighborhood," Culbreath says.

On the training's impact, Culbreath adds, "I think the people got the connections, the networking. Being able to see each other's face—everybody in the group has something they're also connected to in the community. So them being able to pass that information on and them being able to network with each other and just break those barriers was special."

Musil notes to Culbreath that the class was full of a lot of African-American and Latina mothers and grandmothers, folks who are not often sitting at the community's tables in Grand Rapids making decisions.

Culbreath responds, "It means a lot. Because for some women, they didn't think they had the power to do it. I feel like this class was teaching them that. And also they could see that the facilitators were mothers and grandmothers and in the same position they were in. So they could actually see, 'Hey, I can do this, too, they got the same position in the community as I do, so I'm just as important as the next person.'"

Edgington also talked about the importance of providing a web of support in community organizing and advocacy and how important it has been to her personally. “We figure out who needs support in a meeting because we’re not alone, and they learn to voice what they need to meet their goals.”

Those personal tools are then used for community tools to meet community goals.

“We make sure people are equipped and well before we ask them to jump into larger community campaigns. We’re practicing what we preach,” says Edgington.

She notes how both she and Culbreath have worked the same steps as their newest cohort and how powerful it is to come from a place where they are doing what they tell others to do.

“Last year I was diagnosed with cancer for the second time, two teenage daughters, house crumbling, sexually harassed in the workplace-huge obstacles to overcome-it’s cool to do community work, but it’s also cool to see your community come back and help you, too,” Edgington emphasizes.

Neighbors who participated in the classes agree on the important impact of the COFI training.

Darnell Gray says, “It helps you to get a better look out into your community. And wants you to reach out into your community. I mean when you have more than one person putting information in, you want to put it back out and this program helped me look into those things more and investigate them more.”

“What COFI means to me is a lot. You learn a lot, you dig deep into yourself and realize things that you really haven’t. I like the fact of giving parents ideas on how to better their lives and their family’s lives.” Sheila Ewing says. “It’s just a learning process, teaching and learning and sharing with others-to me-how to make the world a better place, really. And being in community organizing, seeing what’s going on, talking about it-you let us make the decisions and we’re being heard and that’s something that I really love. That it’s not just one person doing it, it’s all of us doing it together. I love that.”

Edgington thanks the Garfield Park Neighborhood Associations for allowing them to use their space for the trainings. She’s also grateful to Isabel Garcia and the Westside Collaborative for providing the translation piece and general partnership.

To other resident leaders in Grand Rapids, Edgington says, “I think the Neighborhood Match Fund is a really great opportunity to make a difference in the community. There’s a lot of compassionate people interested in being a part of that.”