

Life Lessons with POWER:
Strengthening Economic Rights in the Community

A woman walks with a child clutching her hand, as she makes her way to an organization that she heard stands for the rights of people facing economic difficulties. She's just had a rough time at the welfare office and is having little luck finding childcare. Work and returning to school feel like urgent goals, but only remotely possible right now. She finds the office of POWER – Parents Organized for Welfare and Economic Rights -- in the center of the community, around the corner from the library, near the post-office. She finds herself quickly in a quiet conversation with Monica Peabody, a founding member of POWER.

The POWER office is a meeting place, a welcoming place for the many folks who come in and out through the day. Another person comes in looking for a safe haven, a refuge from the street. Someone else drops by with an urgent question about welfare benefits. Another mother is looking for childcare. Quiet conversations turn into a strategic meeting. A phone call from someone else trying to find a way to return to school. A community activist from another organization drops by for a quick exchange about an upcoming event that a coalition of groups are working on together.

POWER lives in this meeting room. And in the streets, in dramatic, positive demonstrations of self-determination and public support for those struggling with poverty and the welfare system. POWER also makes its way to the legislature where delegations visit lawmakers to talk about what it's like to live on very limited means and how the laws could/should change to be more supportive and inclusive. POWER is a network of people – staff, members, student interns and other community supporters – who are “advocating for a strong social safety net while working toward a world where children and care giving are truly valued, and the devastation of poverty has been eradicated.”

In 1984, the Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition (WROC) was launched as a King County organization. Another WROC office opened in Olympia in 1998. Now, having recently gone through some major changes in governance and funding, the group restructured itself as POWER, with the central office in Olympia, but available and responsive to folks around the state. (The Seattle WROC office is no longer open).

POWER's work is based on certain core values: **self-determination** (“the right of every person to determine the course of her own life, regardless of her class, race, gender identification, sexual orientation or ability level”); **solidarity** (“value knowing our own communities and working to build coalitions”) ; **children and mothering** (“honor the presence of children and caregivers”) ; **social justice** (“the equitable distribution of social and natural resources”); **woman-centered** (“women's full participation at all levels of society”) and **anti-oppression** (“to create a world in which all people are

valued, empowered and have quality of life”).

For many years, students at The Evergreen State College have had the chance to be interns and volunteers at POWER. Ellen Shortt-Sanchez, Director of the college’s Center for Community-Based Learning and Action, offers this profile of links between the college and the organization:

“With the clear mission to empower parents to challenge economic and welfare injustice, the organization has been thoughtful to build a role for students and campus connections that really works for their mission. It is an important reality for students to join a democratic organization that asks students, faculty and campus partners to earn trust, demonstrate respect and offer contributions. POWER has helped us craft reciprocal exchanges of student learning and community capacity building. POWER has expertise rooted in the community that they share with student interns on site and by joining campus discussions in academic programs about the roots and results of poverty in our community. Monica is a community educator and a partner in community-based learning in the Olympia area. I have seen students’ education grow as they participate with POWER and most importantly become the enthusiastic liason to involve other students in the organization. Interns, work study students, volunteers and Americorps staff members at the Center join together for POWER events and see their involvement from many angles, coming from Evergreen to the community and back.”

Rosie Math, having interned there over this past year, talks about her experience:

“Most importantly, my time with POWER has taught me the power of advocacy. Working with POWER has been a tremendous leap in my education. POWER has helped me find my voice. This experience has given me the opportunity to do outreach for the first time and actually see for myself that I can advocate for people... I am able to take the knowledge I gained from POWER and help implement change in people’s lives. Working with power has helped shape who I am today. My work at Evergreen has helped me develop my passions surrounding poverty and social justice.”

POWER provides a learning center for many community members and people from around the region. It’s a place where there is intensive learning about poverty, the impact of the shifting terrain of government bureaucracy and regulations, about how people strive to take care of their families in hard times and how the community can be more supportive. Some of the approaches that POWER takes to affect change include the following:

- community advocacy through participatory educational classes and workshops that build on people’s experiences.
- education of the broad public about the current conditions facing their neighbors

who are of more limited means and struggling with childcare, housing, education and jobs.

- “witnessing” where POWER members and volunteers accompany and support people as they go to DSHS (Dept of Social and Health Services), apply for benefits, and exercise their rights.
- Poverty Summits and Lobby Days when people from around the state gather in Olympia to learn from each other and join together in a public procession to the Capitol, where they rally on the Capitol steps and make their way to talk with legislators.
- Creative fund-raising and development to sustain POWER, so that the community has many opportunities to contribute and members learn how to strengthen the organizational base of their advocacy.
- Community-based research, when POWER joins witnessing to documentation and presents periodic reports on how DSHS is handling its responsibilities.
- Creating a presence with municipal governments, by participating in public processes that protect the rights of low-income people and resist efforts that marginalize people.
- Building coalitions of groups that work to support the rights of low-income people.
- Creation of community art and moving media pieces that inform and connect, allowing people to go beyond snap judgements and stereotypes.

Tovah Rudawski has had the chance to participate in all of these features of POWER’s advocacy.

“Right now, I am situated at an incredible period of my education. I have worked at POWER for ten months, and have spent the last ten weeks as an intern as well. What began as a summer work-study job at POWER has transformed into total involvement -- I feel as though I am now a part of the social justice community in Olympia...Through the process of doing community work and the more "academic" aspect of reflection on that work, I have come to truly care about my community and the work we can do here... On a daily basis, I am a welfare rights advocate, mostly over the phone. I participate in weekly outreach at the DSHS office in Tumwater, as well as other service providers like the Other Bank and the Thurston County Food Bank. I am an active member of CLIP, the Coalition for Low-Income Power, which meets weekly in the POWER office. I continually facilitate Know Your Rights Workshops at SafePlace, Olympia's domestic violence shelter. I train the new volunteers and interns in all of these activities. As a Spanish-speaker, I have helped begin the process of making our organization's services available to the Latino communities of Olympia and

Shelton, by translating our written materials into Spanish and providing advocacy over the phone for Spanish speakers. I have helped to create and implement an economics workshop for POWER to present to low-income people, social service agencies and students, which links local economic inequality to the global economic system, and aims to create dialogue around community solutions to bad economic policy. My education at Evergreen has come to revolve around anti-poverty work and social justice -- on that same token, POWER has come to trust and rely on me as a staff member and as an ally.”

Monica comments on working with Tovah and others,

“It’s been wonderful to witness Tovah go from a basic understanding of welfare and poverty to her more specialized, focused and dynamic work. Students bring new energy... a revitalization. They mentor each other, as they learn from us how to defend people’s rights and work toward the end of poverty.”

Emily Pieper found the experience vital to her involvement in social justice work.

“I started working with POWER my first year at Evergreen. I was interested in working with the group because of my own life experience with welfare and was connected to them through encouragement from my faculty, Therese Saliba and Anne Fischel, whose program required a community organizing component. The first time I came to a weekly volunteer meeting I was met with smiles, coffee and lots of questions. Although I was a new face in the group, I felt welcomed but I also got the message that as a new group member and as a college student, much of my role was to listen and help where I was asked. POWER showed me how to value each group member’s talents and skills in an organization. Members are constantly encouraged to put on workshops and lead discussions in their areas of interest. Members are also encouraged to share their stories and experiences with the larger community. I experienced this a lot during the legislative sessions when POWER members lobby at the Capitol. Everyone was encouraged to use their knowledge and skills to talk to their representatives. POWER has been a model for me of community-based research. Each year, POWER gives surveys to welfare recipients to rate DSHS. This information is compiled into a yearly report card that is presented to DSHS administrators. Monica Peabody continues to be a major mentor to me. The connections she has helped create between Evergreen and POWER are so valuable.”

Over the decade-plus of POWER’s work in Olympia and Washington State, several Evergreen faculty have worked with the organization and with Monica Peabody as a community partner. POWER has become one of our most valued sites for student internships and projects. Academic programs such as “Local Knowledge” and “Borders of Identity” have shaped collaborations with POWER as essential features of learning with and contributing to the community. Faculty member Anne Fischel comments:

“I’ve learned to rely on Monica Peabody as a wise and resourceful mentor for our students – a partner in our teaching efforts. Monica encourages students to learn, observe and participate in a way that develops their skills and talents. In winter quarter of 2007, Monica came to Mediaworks and talked to our students about POWER and the role media can play in the lives of low-income people. In response several of our students devised a project to record the stories of low-income women. The students worked with an Evergreen photography class to create large-scale portraits and audio recordings of POWER members and their families. They exhibited this wonderful project when POWER members went to the state legislature to talk to their representatives about problems with welfare policy. Throughout the long day of lobbying POWER members and their supporters stopped to visit the exhibit, view the images and listen on headsets to the recorded stories.”

Several other faculty have collaborated with POWER by sponsoring students, shaping collaborative projects and supporting the strengthening of long-term ties between campus and community. Ellen Shortt-Sanchez works with POWER and the broader Coalition for Low-Income Power (which also includes Bread & Roses Shelter, Safeplace, the Tenants Union, and Enterprise for Equity) to deepen the strategic work on community organizing around economic justice. Monica describes CLIP as “a watchdog for city politics, looking for and resisting anti-homeless politics.” In spring 2008, Evergreen’s CCBLA hosted an intensive on-campus training for students interested in affiliating with CLIP and its member organizations.

Monica and other advocates for low-income rights are vital partners in community-based education that links higher education to the daily struggles and challenges in neighborhoods, shelters, city councils and the legislature. The POWER website is rich with stories of people’s efforts to take care of their families and fight for economic justice, as well a great photo gallery that journeys with people from meeting room to community gatherings, helping to tell the story of solidarity-in-process. POWER’s myspace-blog also offers helpful resources like the “Guide to Acronyms and Abbreviations” that help the newcomer look into a system of offices and regulations that can be quite intimidating.

Working with POWER has enduring impacts, as students become partners in long-term social justice work. Chandra Kring interned at POWER in 2002-03.

“Working with WROC and lead organizer Monica Peabody was a great experience that influenced my future academic and career goals. I focused on learning the legislative process and the role that community members, specifically those directly impacted, play in influencing public policy. I prepared women to testify at state legislative hearings about their experiences with the welfare system, organized groups of women to visit their state legislators, and administered a Report Card project where current welfare recipients graded DHS on their service and ability to bring people out of poverty. Throughout this experience Monica was my mentor. Her level of knowledge, commitment and

connection to the community always impressed me. From Monica I gained a firm understanding of how the WA State Legislature works, who the players are, and how to navigate the system. Monica also taught me the principles of community organizing and how important it is for people to be empowered and play an active role in shaping policies that affect their lives. Interning with WROC now POWER... influenced my decision to focus my goals toward shaping public policy and working with people and communities who are consistently disenfranchised and seen as powerless. I went on to complete a Master's degree in public policy from New York University and am now doing policy work around incarcerated women's issues in New York City."

Another Evergreen graduate Cory Fischer-Hoffman looks back on what she learned through the organization:

"After spending my first two quarters at Evergreen analyzing the political economy of the welfare system in the US, I was ready to gain practical experience on how to contribute to changing a system that punishes poor women and families, simply for being poor. I began to volunteer with WROC (now POWER) in order to learn about how poor women were both surviving and organizing in the face of the disestablished welfare system and an unequal and unfair economy. My experience working with WROC entirely changed my Evergreen education. I found WROC to be a welcoming space in which the skills that I already possessed were nurtured and my autonomy to take on projects and make decisions about creative details were encouraged. At the same time, I was supported in developing new skills, including leadership development and active listening to those who had their voices silenced throughout their lives. The organizing culture changed how I organize. I learned to recognize how basic human and family needs must be central in organizing under a broader collective vision. I learned that childcare and food must be present at all events; if we are to demand that childcare and food are right, we must live that vision. There's room at POWER for diverse people and skills, for administrative tasks, to legislative work, to outreach, event planning and leadership development. It's a welcoming space to volunteer, intern and support. I'm grateful that my Evergreen education allowed me to successfully integrate academic work with political organizing. As opposed to sacrificing one for the other, I was able to enrich my experience by integrating the two."

POWER (and the broader CLIP network) offers many projects and ideas that invite the participation of faculty, staff and students – as part of the broader community. There's talk of a community radio show that would focus on the voices, experiences and plans of low-income people; support for this is very much needed and welcome. Another project would be the development of a thorough timeline of the work of POWER and CLIP to help convey the stories of struggle. Art-in-the-community is another feature of the work that is very exciting to get involved with. Monica speaks with great enthusiasm about the collaborative work with students and how it shapes their future.

“Unions and other organizations like to grab our former interns; in fact, one was told in her interview that her welfare rights work was a big plus in her favor. Many have gone on to graduate school and are continuing to try to change the system whichever ways they can.”

Making visible the invisible aspects of poverty is at the heart of POWER’s organizing mission. Nancy Parkes describes the organization’s impact on “What’s the Economy For, Anyway?” – a program offered at Evergreen in spring 2008:

“We needed to make the experience of poverty more visible and palpable to those of us who are more privileged. POWER brought a workshop into our program that helped students to examine their preconceptions about poverty, and to try and work out a series of family budgets in declining family and economic circumstances. I had a follow-up comment from one of our women students that said it all. She wrote, ‘I walked to the car and bawled my eyes out because for the past few years I have been very ashamed when I couldn’t make my \$546 go as far as my caseworkers seemed to expect it to go... Seeing a roomful of educated people face the same numbers and find themselves unable to make it work was a huge moment for me.’”

As a social justice organization and center for public education about poverty, POWER is crucial to the life of this community and to the region. POWER, Monica Peabody and the network of volunteers, students and community allies are engaged as part of a long-term struggle to do right by folks who are facing hard times and to “eventually eradicate poverty.”

POWER

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