

Girls Think Tank: A Consensus Organizing Model

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If, upon finding out what Rachel Jensen and Girls Think Tank (GTT) is doing, you offer a suggestion for the homeless, a good idea of what you think they need, she'll demure. That is when you know she is a consensus organizer. She has come to understand a process, has been changed she said. She no longer believes in setting an agenda or offering a resource. She now believes the way to really make an impact, is to get everyone together, homeless, people with money, time or clout, business owners, politicians, anyone who will come, who sees it in their interest, put them all in a room, and ask them to set an agenda.

“When I look at it and see it happening from beginning to end, the model has been like a diamond,” Jensen said. “It’s a process you go through when interacting with social issues, people outside of your community.” What Jensen is describing is both shape and refinement. Academics call it community organizing. This paper will describe the process and the success of Girls Think Tank, co-founded by Rachel Jensen, in addressing the sanitation and clean water needs of San Diego’s homeless.

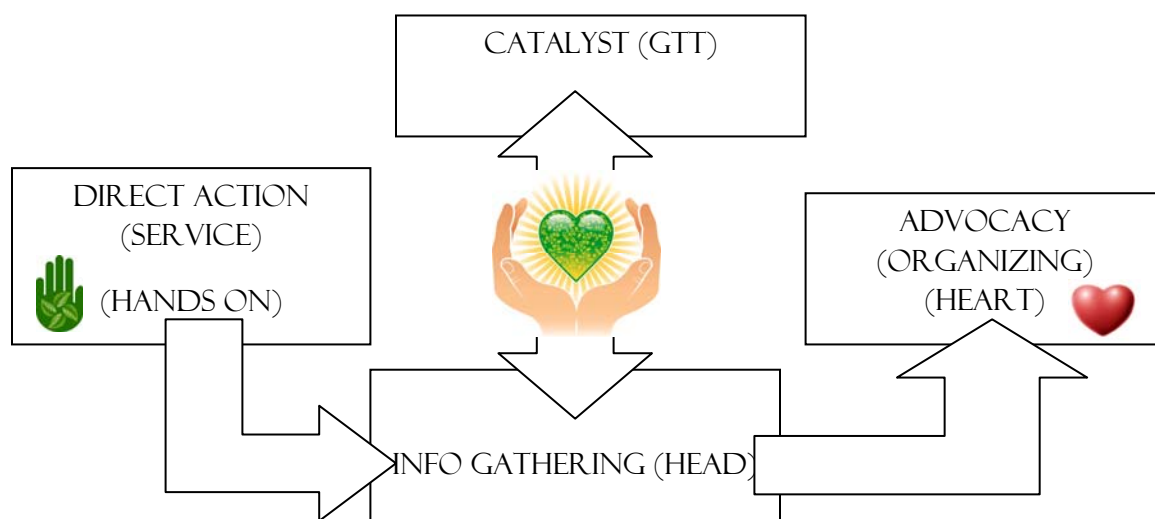


Figure 1. Girls Think Tank Model

Jensen begins the story with a dinner party. A young attorney, living in the Ocean Beach area of San Diego, every day she passed a homeless man on Rosecrans. “I couldn’t get this guy out of my mind,” Jensen said. “I was dreaming about him.” She decided to invite eight friends for dinner and asked them to help her come up with an idea of what they could do. “All the women were very busy,” Jensen said. “They were all from a law firm. We were looking for something tangible to do with our hands that did not involve shuffling paper and that we could see concrete results from.” A consensus organizer calls this looking for the easy win.

That was five years ago and Jensen remains the anchor of the organization that now has a Board of Directors and recently hired their second employee. “There is only so much you can do as volunteers,” Jensen said. The other founders remain connected to the organization and their original idea of filling backpacks continues – the fifth annual distribution happened on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 2010, with winter clothing and other warm items stuffed in backpacks and handed out to San Diego’s homeless residents. This centerpiece of their work continues to connect the housed with the homeless, creating bridges for others in the community to experience what the founders have. It does not prove a “get in and get out” process.

Although Jensen is not a trained organizer, I am not the first to label her as such. When she heard about their process, Jun Chong, a nationally recognized community organizer, brought in by the Basic Dignity Coalition, told them, “What you guys are doing is organizing.” Their first project followed the simple steps of organizing like-minded individuals into a group, believing ordinary people could accomplish things, and doing something tangible and specific. Eventually they found expertise to transfer to the group (Eichler, 2007). In issue analysis, program design, strategy and tactics, developing relationships, forming partnerships, and building personal and

institutional relationships, Girls Think Tank (GTT), has approached homelessness in the consensus organizing tradition.

Alchemy

When they sat down for dinner that night, Jensen said they did not know anything about the needs of San Diego's homeless community. They assumed they needed a coat. They decided to gather warm items, put them in backpacks, and distribute them. They had in mind something simple and episodic. However, "in the transaction of giving the backpack," Jensen said, "there was a human on the other side." The women couldn't help but ask questions, hear feelings, and come face to face with the faceless problem of homelessness. "We didn't realize we would get information back," Jensen said. "The interactions of meeting humans transformed us. It was that alchemy that happens in a hands on project."

They wanted others to see what they had seen, hear what they had heard, believing they too would be moved, so they began to document. They listened and began to learn what people needed on the streets. A SDSU MSW graduate student, Maggie Gurman, compiled the data they were gathering and ran statistical analyses on it (Gurman, 2010). They held a community picnic and invited people with homes and those without. They met and had lunch together. Now GTT was becoming an alchemist. They began to stir the mix. "The line started to dissipate," Jensen said. "The curtain was lifted." City Councilor, Donna Frye, came. They had entertainment, and some brought donations people could take. Internal and external relationships were forming.

Trust and Expertise

A key part of this experience, according to Jensen, was gaining the trust of the homeless community in San Diego. She credits David Ross for bringing them into the circle on the streets,

transferring the trust he had built as the “water man” (Ross, 2008) to GTT. Ross vouched for them, as they went on their backpack crusade. “They’re cool,” he said. Ross had been working on homeless issues for years, and Jensen said she cannot overemphasize the importance of the bridge he built for them to crossover on.

By the second annual picnic, GTT was more sophisticated. Jennifer Lai, a union organizer, now sat on their board. She brought technical skill. She knew what organization was and how to reach out to the community. She brought in an expert, a community organizer, Eileen Ma, Campaign Director for the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA, 2010). Having already obtained 501(c)3 status, the winter of 2007, they began to make mini-documentaries, filming their conversations with people, developing a mailing list and a website, and posting the mini-documentaries there. They found out more and helped where they could, especially with legal complications.

One-on-one meetings are a first step in issues analysis in consensus organizing (Eichler, 2007). Ma asked people from the streets, “What does it feel like to be homeless?” She taught a story circle tradition, popularized by the Civil Rights movement. She asked people to draw what it was like to be homeless and to describe the problems they face. This word, homelessness, moved from invisible to lines on a page. “Through that process,” Jensen said, “issues just started bubbling up.” GTT followed with a session on solutions, asking homeless people to draw what it would be like to have a solution. People drew a laundry, showers, and bathrooms.

A mandate was forming and the initial process of backpacks had proven a catalyst to developing a program (Eichler, 2007). Social capital was forged, as interactions increased. GTT learned to frame the issue as they spoke with business owners, politicians, service providers, and

institutions. They began to understand how to utilize each person's special skills to maximize the success of the group. They developed crucial relationships. People with different skills coalesced.

“We decided to start a committee of both homeless and not,” Jensen said. “We were going to invite people to come to our law firm, sit in a fancy board room, and talk about what is going on, on the streets.” The fancy board room provided an opening, credibility for the homeless to feel taken seriously and a comfort level for community power brokers. “From there,” Jensen said, “it just kept picking up steam.” By Fall, 2009, “suddenly a bunch of people were coming: judges, police, city council people,” Jensen said. A broad coalition with a shared vision formed. In consensus organizing parlance, it was time for issue strategy and implementation. People were ready to make a commitment.

Strategy and Implementation

Jensen described a meeting that fall where everything crystallized. There was a feeling of “we want to do something.” Jensen said they brainstormed priorities and then called for an up or down vote. “We decided to take a vote and identify one priority,” Jensen remembered, “and to make sure everyone was on board for this one priority. Everyone said bathrooms and water, and the Basic Dignity Coalition was born.” Again, Jensen said, David Ross was key in setting that agenda and had already been working on portable bathrooms.

Homeless people saw an opportunity to have their quality of life improved, politicians and business people saw an opportunity to improve the image and safety of the city, while also providing convenience for tourists, GTT saw San Diego moving forward on a basic human rights

issue, as defined by a recent UN General Assembly resolution establishing sanitation and water as basic human rights.

All the work they were doing, Jensen said, was heavily supported in surveys of people on the streets compiled by Gurman (2010). They were not looking to establish the root causes of homelessness. “We were not really that concerned about root causes,” Jensen said. “We’d all be dead by then. For us, it didn’t matter what the cause is, we felt there are basic human rights granted to you as a homeless person. We were interested in helping individuals with individual issues, not why they were homeless. Service providers can be more interested in root causes. You would really need to make it your life’s work. To get to root causes was not our deal.”

They considered various demonstrations, one idea was a “shit-in”, but according to Jensen, they didn’t have to get there. “[City Councilor] Marti Emerald came to us,” Jensen said, “and as soon as we told her what we were doing she was on board and able to get it on the city council’s agenda. It came together within a month of the launch event in May,” Jensen said, “after putting the coalition together. We had to get consensus among stakeholders, and once the city council saw that, it was all they needed. Superior Court Judge Robert Coates said it was an idea whose time had come. The city council needed to see diverse support to put it through and we were able to bring people around a table to have the conversation.”

Downhill

Consensus organizing, when done right, should have a point where it all feels downhill. The next step was to get everyone in a room and get all the ideas on the table, discussing them early in the process. Rather than creating strategy, they created a process that involved everyone. They had an honest, straightforward, detailed discussion and reached a strategic conclusion.

They took real pieces from each perspective and wove them into one supportive perspective, and found the self-interests. They got specific.

Petitions went out. The coalition framed their message, building on those petitions with the city council. They surveyed community groups and business groups. They gathered letters of support from established service providers in the area, i.e. The Alpha Project and St. Vincent DePaul, the police, other homeless advocacy organizations, churches, labor organizations and other non-profits. The grand jury, independent of GTT, but with perfect timing, released a report right before the City Council vote. The lawyers went to work, perhaps a bit too much, Jensen said, as policy efforts came so naturally to them.

“One mistake was not growing leadership in the homeless community enough,” Jensen said, already in the evaluative mode, and again showing an understanding of consensus organizing. “We did, in the petition drive, build leadership. People on the streets themselves got 2000 petition signatures. There were always homeless people cheerleading and speaking at city council meetings. In some ways we tried, but we moved so fast. The board, the professionals, were not patient enough, and left others behind. It was really easy to do the expedient thing,” Jensen said.

Part of the problem, Jensen believes, is lack of staffing. “Growing leadership takes a lot of time and a lot of patience. That is probably why they pay organizers. They need someone on the ground.” As for the basic dignity campaign, they looked to Jun Chong as an advisor. “She was amazing,” Jensen said. “She had certain things set out for us for us to accomplish.”

From June 26 to October 18, 2010, after the City Council approved purchase of Portland loos, coalition representatives met almost weekly with community groups to get buy in for

specific locations and the design. To accomplish placement in locations around the East Village, plans needed to be developed. “We had to get support from those in the location areas,” Jensen said. “We were really focused on sustainable change. If you force a location, people have so many ways to screw it up. We had to have the community’s buy off, to convince them it was in everyone’s interest.” Jensen said it took a diverse group of people to convince everyone it was in their self-interest, including homeless advocates and people with marketing skill who engaged community businesses, politicians, and residents.

With the placement of the Portland loos so recent, you might think Jensen would point to that as their biggest accomplishment. There have been other successes too, like one homeless woman who spoke at city council meetings, felt empowered and started a brownie collective. She had access to a kitchen, and through this project, she and another woman were able to get off the streets. Three homeless people, working with the coalition, have begun college. As significant as those accomplishments are, Jensen does not sight them as GTT’s biggest accomplishment. Rather, she said, “letting ourselves and purpose be transformed,” is the most important thing that happened. “It’s amazing how a dinner party turned into a second career,” Jensen said. “To really see the power of grassroots, banter amongst friends, no real formula. It was more beautiful when you see it, more organic.”

Jensen is thoughtful when asked about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats ahead for GTT. Since the beginning, they have had a saying, a motto of sorts: heads, hearts and hands (see Figure 1). Jensen thinks the current membership is strong on all three. “We really have thinkers and doers and believers,” Jensen said. “There is a great synergy of resources in our people. They are very intelligent and will jump in and believe in this thing we are doing.” She reiterated it is all about community. “People are doing it because they think they need to

and really want to,” Jensen said. “The volunteerism has been incredible.” She cited their fundraiser, which an established organization might have paid staff to stage, but for them, was put on by volunteers, and raised \$40,000.

“We have a core group,” Jensen said. “We don’t always have the same exact vision but we have enough in common that it carries us. All the women are good supporting each other’s vision.” They have embarked on other projects the past five years: a leadership academy, collecting baby items, a race for literacy, and development of a violence against women curriculum they would like to see college freshmen take part in. Some projects were done for a year, some they hope to put more effort into as they gain staff, some Jensen is not sure if a community organization approach is the right tool.

Their weakness, Jensen felt, is there is only so much they can do as volunteers. “To be a proper think tank,” Jensen said, “we need people to think – to work on original surveys, collect actual data, and do more strategic policy work. We have had no infrastructure really. We have had policy and procedures and volunteers. Now our goal is to have a building and staff. For a long time I did not want that, I did not want to become like an institution. I liked being lean and mean and nimble and being like the cause we were serving. But that has its drawbacks. We push until we are done, and then relax, and then push again. Staff will give a more sustained effort.”

Jensen said it was funny, she had always been in the position of criticizing distribution chains. Now she sees GTT’s opportunity is as a middleman. She has seen that even in advocacy, there is a need for middlemen and women. “We can talk to the homeless population, but we can also talk with community leaders. With politicians, that is really our opportunity. As lawyers we

have a tremendous opportunity as advocates for San Diego's homeless. We had to go there because no one else was doing it. We felt we had to do this, we girls had to do this."

As is so often the case, opportunities and threats are two sides of a coin. The flipside of their professional skills, Jensen felt, is a fear they would lose credibility on the streets, now they had accomplished a big goal. "Hopefully we can get all those people around a table again," Jensen said. "I don't know that we will." Jensen said, however, she has seen a resiliency over the years. Lulls and then shaking awake. She trusts this will be the case again.

The board has matured, and is not the same as the original nine. Jensen said, board formation has not been an ordered process, but "totally random." She said they work to attract people who are smart, articulate, and committed, with a diversity reflective of San Diego's population. "We are always trying to look for skills," Jensen said. They now have people who know fundraising, marketing, and social media. Their board expertise includes lawyers, a former community organizer, businesswomen, a social entrepreneur, non-profit leadership, education endeavors, and advocacy.

Original founders are still involved with the backpacks, but many did not participate in the entire process of securing the Portland loos. All founders are part of an advisory board, but Jensen is the only original member still on the board. "I feel like it's my baby," Jensen said. "I'm not going to let it go until I'm sure it is okay. I am looking for a replacement. I would like to move on to the bigger vision and not be so much in the day to day, answering email, creating the newsletter, and directing board meetings."

Jensen said the main thing she has learned is "to have a plan but not too strict of a plan. I have learned a lot of flexibility and that the collaborative process actually works. This has been a

truly collaborative process, and tremendous things were done without hierarchy or a strategic plan. I'm a believer now." A key strategy has been to surround herself with the right people. "Far smarter women than me have been informing this process, teaching us how to do community organizing, how to fundraise, how to run a non-profit, and how to campaign." Working to identify wide support within the community and locate friends in the right places, they have grounded their priorities in the community.

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