

E-mailed to USP Staff December 17, 2010

Reflecting on the bright spots in a busy year

It is hard to believe that another year is drawing to a close. The year was full of inspiration and challenges (is there ever a year that doesn't have its share of each?). We all know what the challenges were – extreme partisanship and diminished hope in Washington, rising xenophobia, the growing impact of money in politics, the ongoing effect of the recession on our most vulnerable communities and our grantees. In keeping with my personal commitment to address challenges in a spirit of sufficiency and determination, I wanted to share just a few of the many bright spots from the year.

Our grantees made real progress on several issues, including the reduction of the crack/powder cocaine sentencing disparity, expanded protections for domestic workers, implementation of the federal transparency initiative, and groundbreaking federal regulations to ensure equality for the LGBTQ community (our fingers are crossed for the upcoming vote to repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell).

I am particularly inspired by the resiliency of advocates that had an especially tough year. The young immigrant “dreamers” continue to risk their own futures by coming out to organize in support of the Dream Act, despite so many setbacks. We all have much to learn from their sheer determination and innovative organizing tactics. (Fingers crossed for the Dream Act vote tomorrow.) And social justice and faith leaders from many traditions came together to condemn the attacks on Park51 and to promote tolerance, despite fear-mongering and hateful rhetoric.

Looking at the role many of you played in advancing open society this year, there are so many bright spots it is hard to highlight just a few. I remember clearly the moment during the February Board meeting when George Soros insisted on expanding the Campaign for Black Male Achievement ... we were all so proud! The CBMA team has dedicated so much time to building the field – in just the last 60 days they held major convenings in four cities! It's been astonishing to see the impact in such a short time –regular field calls, media outreach, activists building a collective vision and strengthening partnerships at regional and national meetings. The *Black Male: Reimagined* convening brought together a remarkable group of celebrities, media and business leaders and advocates. But I was most dazzled by the young leaders and their strong message that we must embrace compassion, empathy and love to achieve justice. Shawn, Rashid, and Hayley (and all your partners internally and externally), you are awesome.

I also recall Bill Moyer's impassioned commentary at the May Board meeting on the critical threat to our democracy posed by the decline of journalism. Thanks to Bill's rhetorical talents and Lori McGlinchey's strategic vision and leadership, we secured the Board's support to launch a new grantmaking portfolio to ensure

coverage of state and local government, to address the decline in international coverage for U.S. audiences, and to build the case for expanded public media.

In September, the Board recognized the transformative work of the Soros Justice Fellows in advancing criminal justice reform, thanks to the vision and dedication of Adam, Chrissy, and their predecessors. This year Soros Justice Fellows published several pivotal books that are expanding awareness of the over-incarceration epidemic. We're all eager to see what the new class of fellows will bring.

OSI-Baltimore's groundbreaking work to keep kids in school and out of the school-to-prison pipeline led to several stories in *The Baltimore Sun*, *The New York Times* and other key publications. Due to their leadership and innovative strategies, suspension rates have gone from 23,000 to less than 9,000 in just a few years. Congratulations, OSI-Baltimore.

It has also been rewarding to see so many cross-program collaborations flourish this year. Our colleagues in the Democracy and Power Fund, Transparency and Integrity Fund and Strategic Opportunities Fund did a phenomenal job developing a strategy and grants this year to ensure a fair and open redistricting process beginning next year. The docket (check it out on USP Central) is a model for thoughtful grantmaking in response to a pressing open society need. Special thanks to Cristóbal for his commitment and leadership on these important issues.

TIF, SOF and the Criminal Justice Fund brought together our open government and criminal justice grantees in New Orleans for the first time, illuminating the added strength they have working together to get residents the data they need to hold government accountable. They quickly formed a partnership to limit the city's plans to build a massive new jail, and their advocacy succeeded in drastically reducing the size of the planned facility.

The Special Fund for Poverty Alleviation and the Neighborhood Stabilization Initiative partnered on a pilot project with the Urban Institute and HUD to support innovative service delivery models for vulnerable families living in public and assisted housing. Building on a model seeded by CJF, SFPA also took the Civic Justice Corps to a whole new level with their support for the scale up of CJC's community-based service and support program for formerly incarcerated and disconnected youth, and leveraged major federal dollars in the process. And Lenny, Diana, Kima, and Daniel Wolfe collaborated to develop the vision for the Campaign for a New Drug Policy, with support from our colleagues in OSI-DC. We are delighted to welcome Andy Koh as the new Campaign Manager.

This year also saw the blossoming of art and culture as an effective strategy for advancing social justice across our programs. SOF alone now has 26 grants to groups using art and culture to advance change, many of them co-funded with

other programs; D&P continues to support key groups that bring together social justice organizers and artists; CBMA has embraced the role of culture in advancing opportunities for and shifting perceptions of Black men and boys; and the National Security and Human Rights Campaign is now supporting a consultancy to identify cultural strategies in connection with the 10th anniversary of 9/11 next year. Aryeh has expressed strong support for these strategies, and we got a new ally on our Board as well – none other than Robert Redford (okay, I admit it, another highlight in my year was meeting him)! Thanks especially to the arts and culture working group – Tim, Patricia, Erlin, Rashid, Debra and Jeronimo – for everything you’ve done to embed art and culture in our work.

I know that collaboration takes extra time in already overloaded schedules, and I deeply appreciate your commitment to strengthening connections across programs. Our bridge-building across issues and between communities is serving as a model in philanthropy for which you should all be proud.

Strengthening our internal structures to enable good, sustainable external work

As our staff has continued to grow and evolve, I am constantly in awe of the breadth of experience and talent among us. This year, we welcomed many fantastic new staff members: Nashay, Joe, Hayley, Susan, Victoria, Allison Joy, Michael, Maria, Eric, Luisa, Andy, Archana, and Chris and Kiera in Baltimore. Each one of them hit the ground running, and it’s impossible to imagine U.S. Programs without them. (We also welcomed several new members to the U.S. Programs extended family – thanks to Luna, Fei and Nashay! – with more on the way.)

The idea of the Finance and Administration unit became a reality this year, as Elisabeth, Aida, Victoria, and Joe took on a range of duties that improved our financial systems while increasing program staff’s capacity to focus on grantmaking. Meanwhile, Cristina, Fei, and Ellen partnered with program staff to make our grantmaking systems more efficient and effective, while facilitating more than a dozen training sessions that advanced staff development.

This year, we engaged in our most rigorous budget and planning process to date; everyone in U.S. Programs played an important role in mapping out our goals for the next two years and making sure we have the right resources to accomplish them. The template we developed has now become the model for the entire foundation.

We also committed substantial time and resources this year to strengthening our internal communications skills and processes. We learned about alignment during the all-staff retreat in May, initiated intensive one-on-one meetings to solicit feedback on communications needs, and took another step forward this fall

with terrific trainings by José Acevedo on leadership styles and giving effective feedback.

None of these groundbreaking internal changes would have been possible without Eric Ferrero. Eric, your quiet style, superior diplomacy, capacity to listen, and sheer productivity are tremendous assets to U.S. Programs. Words cannot begin to express my gratitude for your leadership.

I also want to give a special shout out to our terrific executive office support team – Jimmy, Gladys and Michael – for everything you do to support me, Eric, and all of U.S. Programs. From scheduling to Board prep to meeting planner to daily traffic cops, we couldn't be effective without you.

Looking ahead to 2011

2011 will no doubt bring more challenges and more inspirations. I am eager to jump in with all of you to tackle rising xenophobia and hate violence, to shrink the influence of money in politics, to ensure an equitable recovery, and so much more. I look forward to continuing to integrate and expand our work at the state and local level to further advance our vision of building power in communities, among those most affected by the policies we seek to change. Internally, I am also eager to implement the ambitious internal communications plan that virtually all of you had a role in developing. And I'd like to launch a collective conversation about work/life balance and a sustainable work environment.

Until then, I wish you all a peaceful and joyful holiday break. Enjoy your friends and family, and rest and replenish for the New Year!

Warmly,
Ann