

Giving a Voice to Communities of Color

Steve McDonagh,
UNION OF MINORITY NEIGHBORHOODS

A nonprofit committed to building power and leadership in black and brown communities is pioneering a multifaceted approach.

Since 2001, the Union of Minority Neighborhoods (UMN) has worked to develop leaders and build power in black and brown communities across Massachusetts.

The organization was started by Horace Small, a lifetime activist and veteran of Philadelphia city politics, the 1970s antiwar movement, and the South African antiapartheid movement. Among the issues his Boston-based nonprofit has tackled are efforts to change laws that keep ex-offenders from a reasonable chance at employment and an initiative to plumb the lingering pain of 1970s court-ordered school busing. In addition, UMN fosters leadership-development programs and initiatives aimed at building opportunity for people at the bottom of the ladder and creating real democracy.

Public School Engagement

Four years ago, UMN's Black People 4 Better Public Schools was organizing to increase black parents' involvement in their children's education in the Boston Public Schools.

Given that black students, particularly boys, were being diagnosed as "special needs" at much higher rates than their white counterparts and being funneled out of mainstream classrooms, suspended, and disciplined more often than whites, UMN saw a need to help parents build their influence in the school system.

In speaking with many parents, UMN surfaced a consistent theme. One of the biggest impediments to parental involvement—and a prominent cause of their lack of faith in the school system—was their experience during the school desegregation crisis of the 1970s. Across all racial groups, layers of trauma festered, unaddressed and unacknowledged by the City of Boston itself.

Realizing that organizing for parental involvement in schools would be fruitless until the root causes were fully addressed, UMN shifted focus and launched the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project (BBDP). For four years, BBDP collected desegregation stories from members of every community in Boston in an effort to craft a new narrative of school desegregation (frequently called "busing" or "forced busing") and the challenges to race and class equity, democratic access, and excellence in public institutions that black and brown communities still face.

Though the Project's methods initially were based around story collection, in the last year, the focus shifted to analyzing and synthesizing what was collected. In September 2014, as a way to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the first day of school under the desegregation order, BBDP released *Unfinished Business: 7 Questions, 7 Lessons*. That accounting distilled hundreds of personal stories and interviews into seven fundamental questions that were heard over and over again from residents who rode the buses in the 1970s, as well as from younger people whose stories around race and class came from their own educational experiences. Among the questions were, "Was it about racism or about class?" "Whose story counts?" and "Why don't people just get over it?" They were formulated with the goal of creating greater understanding of the ways that race and class overlap, the way not everyone's story gets to contribute to public memory and policy, and how trauma can linger for generations.



Recently, BBBDP has been taking these questions back to community members and grassroots organizations in an effort to create a public-learning campaign that involves neighborhood workshops, the development and distribution of educational materials, and the creation of partnerships with other grassroots organizations to increase “race and class literacy.” Essentially, the nonprofit is engaged in a process to help people understand the ways race and class inform their everyday lives—and to investigate questions of governance on local, state, and national levels. The other purpose of the campaign is to enable those who become “race and class literate” to go back to their own neighborhoods and share their new lens with others. BBBDP hopes to develop a core of people of all races working throughout Boston who can address issues of race and class, push the conversation forward on a city level, and develop new solutions to decades-old problems.

One type of solution BBBDP aims for was seen in early 2015, when BBBDP director Donna Bivens and several longtime volunteers worked with Boston Public Schools to change the history curriculum to include the desegregation crisis. Before when students learned about this momentous period in history, the illustrative example of violent school desegregation was the one that occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas. Going forward, local children will learn of what happened in their own backyard to their neighbors and family members. And they will learn about the context in which the experiences occurred (such as redlining and housing segregation) and the race and class issues that continue to shape the city they live in.

Confronting Issues

The barriers between black communities and opportunity were also behind UMN’s involvement in work to reform Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI). Aware of the data covered in books like Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*—which shows that people of color are disproportionately represented in prison—UMN was concerned that men and women returning to neighborhoods from prison had few options for rebuilding their lives.

For ex-offenders, any job opportunity became a potential source of embarrassment, humiliation, and anxiety. Even wowing employers in an interview might just mean delaying rejection until after a background check. UMN took up the issue, first at the city level, getting Mayor Tom Menino to enact CORI reform within Boston, and then with the state, where more than 3,000 supporters came out to push the issue with the legislature. Eventually, they succeeded, and in 2010, Governor Patrick signed into law measures regulating who can access a person’s criminal record and allowing past records to be sealed in certain cases. That represented a step forward in expanding opportunity for ex-offenders, with the potential to generate positive ripple effects—economic and otherwise—throughout the communities they live in. Though UMN has shifted its focus since then, it continues the work by hosting CORI Sealing days, when people can come and get more information and guidance on how to get their records sealed, and by referring others to services that can help them.

In the last few years, UMN’s focus has been on developing new leaders in Boston’s black and brown communities. In the spring and the fall, UMN’s Institute for Neighborhood Leadership runs a series of workshops for people of color centered around skill and knowledge building, with experts from across the Boston nonprofit and legislative sectors. Sessions on topics ranging from public speaking to fundraising aim to identify community members interested in leadership and cultivate their talents.

In addition, UMN is graduating the second cohort of its Howard Rye Institute. Started in 2013, Howard Rye is an intensive nine-month leadership-development program for young people of African descent.¹ Twice a month, the class gathers with an invited guest for deep discussions and debate around the issues they face. Guests have included American Civil Liberties Union attorneys and local education activists. The goal is to meld thought and action, and the most recent class has taken that to heart, having been instrumental in Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker’s recommitment to affirmative action. They also started a political action committee to get more state fuel assistance to those who need it, to advocate for a special prosecutor in cases of police misconduct, and to push other issues important to black communities.

* * *

UMN likes to tackle problems from many different sides. With CORI reform, the organization was aiming to remove a barrier to economic growth for working-class people and people of color. With the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, they are working to develop a renewed historical understanding to tackle the inequities that the 1974 crisis revealed and that are still present. Through the Institute for Neighborhood Leadership and the Howard Rye Institute, UMN takes an intensely local approach, focusing on building individual leadership skills and awareness so that people can make their workplaces and neighborhoods work for them. However different, each method is aimed at creating powerful, self-sufficient communities of color that are able to create and implement their own solutions to problems. The multiple angles of the programs represent an acknowledgment that the issues black and brown communities face are complex and multilayered, and leaders who are willing to take a stand and even ruffle feathers must become active in neighborhoods, at City Hall, in the State House, and beyond.

The holistic approach involves a comprehensive awareness of history, economics, and race, and how all three impact people on an everyday basis. As a Frederick Douglass slogan posted in the UMN office states, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.”

Steve McDonagh is program coordinator at the *Union of Minority Neighborhoods in Boston*. Contact him at stevemcdonagh@umnunity.org.

Endnote

¹ Howard Rye was a lifetime activist and fighter for the black and brown communities of Philadelphia. He is a model for UMN Fellows when it comes to organizing effectively and living your values. See <http://www.philadelphiacontroller.org/page.asp?id=299>.