

Something Worth Worrying About

Molly: You have helped create many organizations over the years, including the Aspen Center for Physics, three different schools, a political caucus, a local tavern, and a store and art gallery. I realize now that what you were really doing was founding communities—communities focused on scientific inquiry, education, and neighborhood camaraderie. Was it, in fact, your intention to create communities?

George: I hoped that the organizations I helped start would create community—which I define as a group or class having common interests and sharing care, concern, and connection. But strictly speaking, no one person can create a community. Communities organize themselves, and, almost always, there are a few key players without whom the organization would not take place. I call them the “chief worriers,” though the word “organizers” works too.

Molly: How did you come to be a chief worrier?

George: I have often wondered that. What unconscious need of mine is met by being a chief worrier? Surely I take no great joy in worrying. Nor do I particularly enjoy being a chief; it’s kind of a burden. However, I do enjoy the sense of belonging—and the care, concern, and connection that is possible in a true community.

I was relatively lonely as a child. I didn’t feel a sense of belonging in my family or my school; I didn’t belong to any neighborhood group of kids, and I was not good at reaching out further to find belonging. I learned to live with my loneliness.

Using Money to Start a Community

An Interview with George Stranahan

Interviewed by Molly Stranahan



George and Molly Stranahan (father and daughter) have served together on the board of The Needmor Fund for the past 28 years, currently as chair and vice chair, respectively. The Needmor Fund is a family foundation that funds community organizing in low- and moderate-income communities.

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As an adult, I became aware that I had my education, my money, and my family name; and these permitted a certain influence, if I chose to use it. I decided to use that influence to “tickle” communities into existence.

Immediately I discovered that “tickling” was not the same as “organizing,” and that if I really did want the community, I would have to become a chief worrier. There comes a moment when one plunges in—or perhaps is sucked in—and the venture begins. When it succeeds, the rewards are great: One belongs and is included. Having succeeded the first time out, with the Center for Physics, I had the confidence, and perhaps the chutzpah, to try a few more.

How do you create a community?

“I begin with a vision of what the community might be and how I might feel within it. That vision and feeling become compelling, and they draw me into them. Do the communities fulfill that vision? Never. Do they fulfill the feeling? Always.

“The communities I help create have to organize themselves, not into my vision, but into their vision. Therefore a good bit of the organizing, both early and late, is in arranging the conversation so that it creates that communal vision. By including myself in that conversation I discover that others’ vision becomes my vision. A community that met just my vision would be a community of one.”

—Dr. George Stranahan

Molly: How has money helped you to organize communities?

George: Having money has made a difference. First, it has allowed me to risk failure. I always knew that food would be on the table, whether or not one of my ventures succeeded. Therefore,

greater risk was possible for me. There are, of course, other potential consequences of failure besides financial ruin, but those have been of little concern to me. In my mountain-climbing days it was never a failure not to summit a peak; it was the attempt that was the reward.

Second, there is the practical matter that if a community organizing venture

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required money in order to become reality, some or all of it could come from me. It's easier to get started if the community being organized is assured early on that a failure to raise sufficient money will not mean the failure of the organization. The community benefits from having financial security from the outset.

There is a downside to being both the organizer and the funder, and that is that the community can become over-dependent on one person, with the consequent possibility that others neglect their own responsibilities for the community. It also becomes easier for others to pick one person to blame for weaknesses and failures within the community.

Molly: If you are a chief worrier and funder of a community, can you belong to it in the same way that everyone else does?

George: It took me a long time to get over being angry about being included differently in the community just because I was the chief worrier. I thought it was a form of prejudice: that because I was the chief worrier I couldn't belong to the community in the same sense as the others. I've gradually come to accept that even within communities there are times when I am still lonely.

Molly: What advice would you give to someone who wants to help organize a community?

George: I would say the following:

Don't try it alone. Look for a partner early on and continue expanding your relationships, like ripples on a pond. And don't start until you know you have the right partner.

Timing is everything. The community should be just about ready to form by itself, needing only pushes, nudges, and good judgment to be tipped into being.

Ignore early setbacks. Don't be surprised if some people are threatened and are therefore opposed to the community you are organizing.

Molly: Why don't you use the word leader, instead of organizer or chief worrier?

George: I am careful to use words like organizer and chief worrier, rather than the word leader, which I reserve for one who has done something before and is acting as a guide to those who follow. In the formation of a new community, nobody has done it before. We are “making the road by walking.” Yet leaders *are* needed within a community and it is the chief worrier's job to see to it that leadership is developed within the membership. It's a matter of appropriate sharing of the responsibilities of the community. The Iron Rule of community organizing is: *Never do for others what they can do for themselves.* Never.

Molly: I imagine that some of the lessons you have learned about organizing communities have come from bumps in the road.

George: I remember several notable failures. For instance, years ago, several of us had a vision of creating a teen drop-in center in Michigan that would include, besides the usual services, retail sales, and that the center would be owned and managed by the teens them-

The Aspen Center for Physics

As a graduate student who had spent a summer in Aspen, Colorado, George Stranahan realized that the field of physics was advanced through talking—through the give and take of ideas with other scientists. Recognizing that the natural beauty and serenity of the Rocky Mountains would be a draw to physicists, in 1962 he proposed a partnership with the Aspen Institute to create a center where physicists from around the world could gather, share ideas, write, and hike.

From the outset, the community space and common practices have been intentionally designed to create community. Offices are shared. Weekly picnics allow families to meet and spend time with other families. Scientists and their families are assigned to housing units based on family size, not on a scientist's prestige in the field.

Rather than contribute the full cost of the first building, Stranahan knew it was important for other funders—and fundraisers—to be involved and committed, so he promised instead to contribute whatever couldn't be raised from other sources.

Dr. Stranahan stepped down from his position of chairman and president of the Aspen Center for Physics in 1972. It is still a thriving community today, where leading physicists from around the world come together. (See “In Aspen, Physics on a High Plane” by Dennis Overbye, *The New York Times*, Science Times section, Tuesday, August 28, 2001.)

selves. It never happened because the partners were more talkers than walkers.

Another failure was when a number of us wanted to charter continued on p. 17

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an alternative high school that would serve the needs of alienated students as well as students who were already building professional careers (in sports or music or other areas). We vastly underestimated the political skills of the district superintendent, who felt threatened by such a school. He deployed an attack in a public hearing that torpedoed the project in a matter of hours.

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I’ve learned from experience that there is a flip side to organizing a community into birth, and that is accepting its death and finding an appropriate way to memorialize it. This, too, requires a common vision: the vision that the community has served its purpose. This, too, requires organizing: organizing a celebration of the community’s existence and its demise. Doing that is just about as hard as starting a new community. Folks are invested. Some find their identity and/or power in the community. But the burial cannot be neglected. The unburied dead have a stench that demoralizes and stops progress.

There is a logical consequence to becoming identified as someone who is good at community organizing: Lots of people will bring their particular ideas to your doorstep and leave them, like foundlings. I advise a great deal of discretion in deciding which of these to adopt. We all belong to multiple communities, but organizing them should be done one at a time. ■