

COPS/Metro powerful behind the scenes

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For as much noise as COPS/ Metro has made before City Council meetings, school boards, on the streets and at the ballot box over the years, the community organizing group loves the quiet.

That's when it does its best work. You might even swear you've heard the group's death knell. But that's just when the powerful citizenship group — to which San Antonio

owes so many improvements in both infrastructure and leadership development — is quietly organizing.

It recently rose from the quiet to engage in two major campaigns. In February, COPS/Metro was among the groups that pushed for a living wage of \$13 to \$15 an hour for the lowest-paid school-district workers across the city.

Trustees of the San Antonio Independent School District agreed, vowing to support the goal of a phased minimum-wage increase to \$15 an hour. COPS/Metro has pledged to make the same arguments for a living wage before other boards.

Then last week, COPS/Metro surfaced again, this time before the Bexar County Commissioners Court, which heard arguments for maintaining some roads in impoverished, unincorporated areas that even emergency vehicles have had a hard time reaching. The county agreed to dedicate \$2.3 million next year to the Highland Oaks subdivision.

In both of these cases, COPS/Metro seemed to fly just under the radar, coming out of nowhere to remind us to attend to the least among us.

That's when it does what it does best: Change San Antonio for the better.

Now in its fourth decade, COPS/Metro can point to a lot of similar accomplishments — from getting the city to install stop signs at school crossings to improving drainage on the West Side; from pushing for new or improved library branches to additional senior citizen housing; and from rallying behind all the major school district bond issues to closing bars near churches, all in the name of bettering communities for San Antonio families.

In all its work, ordinary citizens have been empowered and organized behind their own self-interests. They're the ones doing the actual work. COPS/Metro facilitates as people of all faiths and colors tackle the issues that most affect them and then organize to challenge the

status quo. It's revolutionary work.

Sometimes, these citizen leaders surprise even the most experienced professional organizers, coming to them with their most pressing needs first — like a simple-to-address traffic congestion issue that endangers their school-age children — before such parents can begin to focus on other pressing matters, such as their children's math test scores. It's all about first things first.

COPS/Metro has taught its citizen leaders to galvanize, not in red-hot anger, like that of Donald Trump supporters, but with what's called "cold anger." It's the more intelligent, more powerful place from which to address a problem. Cold anger motivates groups to effect positive change and, more importantly, thoughtful compromise.

"It's OK to be angry about how things are going," says COPS/Metro lead organizer Jorge Montiel. "Cold anger to show grief or loss or injustice is vital, but we distinguish between hate to destroy or hate to scapegoat."

"Controlled anger is what motivates us," he says. "It's productive."

COPS/Metro can accomplish a lot with cold anger.

The group has much to celebrate as it looks back at its accomplishments, which can be seen all over the West Side. There's the city natatorium, the Bazan Branch Library, the Texas Diabetes Institute, the workforce initiative called Project Quest and the San Antonio Education Partnership.

So, in April, its beloved leaders and associates — young and old, active and inactive, from San Antonio, statewide and around the country — will gather here to remember its noisier, formative years and those who waged those important battles. They'll also discuss how to forge a path to the future now in a far different political landscape.

While its mission is unchanged — to organize communities to serve their self-interests, concentrating on schools and congregations — COPS/Metro is stretching to other parts of town, partnering with North Side communities and suburbs that need to develop leaders, too, and to mosques as well as churches, to build a new army of organizers.

The goal is always to give ordinary people a voice and a taste for organizing, "a taste of winning," said Andy Sarabia, one of its founding leaders. He reminds people that Citizens Organized for Public Service formed at Holy Family Catholic Church after successfully getting a stop sign installed near Loma Park Elementary.

Montiel says that even wealthier areas of San Antonio need citizens who are organized for the common good. They too are experiencing frustration with the status quo, with public education, for example, and with who's getting elected.

COPS/Metro owes much to the leadership of Ernie Cortes and his formative work with the Industrial Areas Foundation, from which COPS emerged. The model has spread to all parts

of the country and even to places in Britain and Germany, Montiel said.

And it started in San Antonio, he said.

Even with four decades of work to commemorate, COPS/ Metro is not likely to rest on its laurels. More likely, it will go back to its quiet work behind the scenes, back under the radar, then rise for the next big move.

Because there's still so much work to be done, Montiel said. There's still so much citizenship to be taught. eeayala@express-news.net Twitter: @ElaineAyala