

Austin American-Statesman

Commentary: Austin Interfaith, COPS and the Big Bang

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By Minerva Camarena-Skeith, Rev. John Ogletree, Rev. Davis Price - Special to the American-Statesman

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Friday, April 29, 2016

In 1974, when Communities Organized for Public Service, or COPS, burst onto the scene in San Antonio, religious leaders throughout the state sat up and took notice. Finally, there was a strategy for putting one's faith into action that produced results. Not only did COPS teach ordinary citizens to act on their interests through their institutions, creating a powerful vehicle fueled by people's stories, pains and aspirations, COPS would be the big bang that helped create the universe of the modern Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

On Saturday, leaders from across the state will convene to celebrate the network of Texas IAF organizations that COPS inspired: Austin Interfaith, Metro Alliance in San Antonio, Dallas Area Interfaith, Border Interfaith and El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization, Valley Interfaith in the Rio Grande Valley, the Metropolitan Organization/Gulf Coast Leadership Council in Houston; ACT/AMOS in Fort Worth, Arlington and Mansfield, the Border Organization in Del Rio and the West Texas Organizing Strategy in Lubbock. We plan to honor the lives and legacies of the Texas IAF's founders and launch a political strategy to keep ordinary people's voices relevant in modern politics.

Today, Texas IAF organizations are at the forefront of keeping politics from falling entirely into the hands of professionals and elites. This month, immigrant mothers living in blighted apartments of Dallas began rewriting their city's housing code to ensure dignified shelter for their children. Last week, interfaith clergy and parents in a once-marginalized unincorporated municipality — also known as a colonia — in the Rio Grande Valley broke ground for a new library — the creation of which required turning out 1,000 new voters. Two weeks before, a Lubbock bishop pointed out that when congressional representatives attack the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau they put at risk families that need greater protections from payday and auto title lenders.

In March, El Paso laity and religious compelled the city to pass an anti-wage theft ordinance that will revoke the business licenses of employers convicted of depriving workers of their earnings. Last fall and two weeks ago, Austin Interfaith won increased wages for city workers, including part-time, temporary, contract and now subcontracted and construction to \$13.03 an hour. All

over Texas, local affiliates are continuing the work COPS/Metro started by teaching ordinary people how to act in extraordinary ways.

The organizations of today certainly have big shoes to fill. In the 1980s, the Texas IAF was credited with doing the pragmatic politics necessary for passage of school reform House Bill 72. That same decade, when local Rio Grande Valley governments alone could not fund basic colonias water and wastewater infrastructure, the Texas IAF built the political power necessary to get \$2 billion in state and federal funds invested along the Texas-Mexico border over two decades.



Julie Chang

The Rev. John Elford of Austin Interfaith organizes a news conference about the organization's High School Youth Leadership Development Program in [... read more](#)

In 2007, when health care for children was under threat, the Texas IAF confronted the lieutenant governor to push a bill out of committee and expand health care access to 127,000 kids. Locally, organizations of the Texas IAF built the political will to establish award-winning labor market intermediaries like Project Quest in places including Austin, El Paso, Rio Grande Valley, Dallas and Houston. Amid the Great Recession, the Texas IAF convinced the Legislature to invest \$5 million to \$10 million in worthy workforce development projects.

The work of rebuilding community institutions is more important than ever today. Redistricting has resulted in an increasingly polarized political climate in which competitive legislative races are few and far between. Families have self-sorted not just by race and class, but by worldview, which makes conversations between diverse neighbors more difficult. Parents are also working longer hours, leaving less time for their children and neighbors. The Texas IAF will redouble efforts to teach leaders and institutions to form public relationships, have conversations across dividing lines and fight for a common agenda.

The challenge before us is great, and the race long. But the Texas IAF has a four-year plan to reshape the politics of Texas to build a better future for our children and grandchildren. This could be the second big bang.

Camarena-Skeith is a leader of St. David's Episcopal Church in Austin. Ogletree is pastor of First Metropolitan Church in Houston. Price is pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Lubbock.